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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Beyond the pendulum: situating Adam Watson in International Relations and the English School

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Abstract

Among the founding figures of the English School of International Relations (ES) and the British Committee (BC), Adam Watson is perhaps the least studied and researched. How, for example, did his past as diplomat informed his *Weltanschauung* and his understanding of combining theory and practice? How did his academic relationship and friendship with other members of the BC and colleagues shaped his outlook on international politics? What was his political theory and philosophy? And what have his contributions been, not simply to the ES, but to IR writ large? This paper offers an intellectual portrait of Adam Watson and his *persona*, making use not only of his published written production, but also of so far unexplored archives and materials. Specifically, the paper situates Adam Watson within the ES and the broader IR panorama, taking into account the professional, academic, and human material that the extensive research for this paper has uncovered.

Keywords Adam Watson · International relations · English school · Practice · Ideology · History

He was a diplomat, a theorist, a teacher, a writer, a commentator.
He was even more than that.
He was a sponge, who absorbed everything
He found interesting (Polly Watson Black)

Of all the founding figures of the English School of International Relations (ES), John Hugh 'Adam' Watson is perhaps the least known and scrutinised. The reason for this is difficult to pin down. Is it because of his non-academic background, as diplomat who turned to theory at a later stage in his life? Or is it because his disparate interests, which ranged from history to diplomacy, from international political economy to morality, from theory to practice, make it difficult to categorise him?

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After all, not only did Adam Watson chair the British Committee of International Relations (BC) (1973–1978) alongside three founding figures of the ES such as Herbert Butterfield, Martin Wight, and Hedley Bull, but his contribution to that group, and even more so to the theory and the wider IR discipline, has also been pivotal.

As has been recently noted, 'the major protagonists [of the BC] were Butterfield, then Master of Peterhouse College, Cambridge, Adam Watson, former diplomat and historian who followed Butterfield closely in thought and method, and Martin Wight, a medieval historian who had been teaching a course of the theory of international relations at the London School of Economics […] The junior was Hedley Bull' (Navari 2021: 144). The description then goes on, maintaining that 'all were people of extraordinary talent, but quite different intellectual orientation', before analysing the 'talent' and 'intellectual orientation' of Butterfield, Wight, and Bull. And Watson? He is simply not featured in the list. It is telling that in the paragraphs subsequent to this encomium, Watson disappears. The above passage epitomises how, like Schrodinger's cat, Watson is often easily acknowledged among the founding members of the ES, but at the same time his contribution is often not subject to deep engagement.

Of Watson, thanks to existing research, we know that he was interested in hegemony and hierarchical structures of international society across history (Ruacan 2018; Clark 2011) as well as in diplomacy (Watson 1984); that he was a comparativist and worked with Bull on *The Expansion of International Society* (1984); that he was and still is 'the pendulum guy',[1] one of the first to have provided the ES with a refined analytical tool to organise and describe different structural configuration of international orders across history, from anarchic to imperial—in Navari's words, 'the first typology of international systems (or societies of states)' (2021: 149; see also Diez and Whitman 2002). Yet, much is still left unearthed. How, for example, did his past as diplomat inform his *Weltanschauung* and his understanding of combining theory and practice? How did his academic relationship and friendship with other members of the BC and colleagues shape his outlook on international politics? What was his political theory and philosophy? And what have his contributions been, not simply to the ES, but to IR writ large?

Contributing to those few works engaging directly with Watson's life and his production (see, for example, Buzan and Little 2009; Waever 1996; Diez and Whitman 2002), this paper seeks to provide an intellectual portrait of Adam Watson and his *persona*, making use not only of his published written production, but also of so far unexplored archives and materials to bring to light his philosophy and approach to theorisation, as well as his less acknowledged contributions and reflections, such as those in International Political Economy (IPE), imperialism, and decolonisation; the ideological as well as political importance of the Soviet Union/Russia and its implication for pluralism and great power management; and the theorisation of subsystems as well as their underlying cosmologies.

[1] This is actually how a colleague of mine referred to Watson when I first mentioned the project for the Special Issue. Crucially, however, Watson mostly refers to a 'spectrum' of systems (1992: 13–18), forming the arc through which the pendulum swings.

What is important to note from the very beginning is that all the above-mentioned themes and the archival materials supporting them are indeed linked to Watson's most famous production, especially his works on hegemony and systems of states across history, but add a level of depth, complexity, and intellectual curiosity that were typical of his 'elasticity of mind' (Buzan and Little 2009).[2] Alongside the other papers contained in this Special Issue, this article thus intends to do justice to a pioneering character, and a true humanist, within the ES, without of course neglecting the aporias, idiosyncrasies, and tensions within his own work—something that will be thoroughly explored in the subsequent articles. The additional task is thus that of situating Adam Watson within the ES and the broader IR panorama, taking into account the professional, academic, and human material that the extensive research for this paper has uncovered.

The reader should know from the very beginning that this paper is ultimately the product of a journey, both real (across Virginia, Chatham House, King's College London, and the University of Cambridge) and metaphorical (across Watson's archives, papers, and books), and is also the product of encounters, for I was lucky enough to meet and converse with Watson's daughter and one of his two sons. These encounters have helped me to understand that, behind the most-known productions of Adam Watson, there was much more—diplomatic memos, theatrical productions, radio programmes, journals and letters, friendships, travels, and plenty of lecture and personal notes. If this paper manages to shed light on even just a fraction on the complexity—and the depth—of Watson, then that will be in itself a success. Also, this contribution is based on a strongly inductive research strategy by which the large amount archival material is organised—inevitably slightly artificially—in separate sections on the basis of the themes that progressively clustered in my analysis, which also justifies the focus on the above-mentioned themes. As a matter of fact, they are the subjects which the archival material sifted during the research revealed and are also those more neglected as mentioned above.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides the reader with an analysis of the complexity of the theory–practice relationship in Watson's work and intellectual persona as well as his position and positionality within the BC, taking into account his different identities: historian, theorist, practitioner. The second section, which builds directly on the first one, tackles the way in which Watson considered the system–society distinction within the ES canon, thus not only anticipating later scholarship on the subject, but also being in direct intellectual contrast with Hedley Bull. These first two sections, it should be noted, are divided for clarity purposes and better organisation of the text considering the amount of archival material consulted but should be seen as intrinsically interlinked as both rely on matters pertaining to science, knowledge, and theory. The third section looks at his contribution in terms of IPE, imperialism and decolonisation, while the fourth section considers his interest in ideology, Russia, and communism. The fifth and last section takes into account Watson's production and thoughts on sub-systems and regions, offering also some thoughts on his still unpublished cosmological work titled *God, Government,*

[2] Interestingly, 'elasticity of mind' is a compliment that Watson himself paid to Butterfield. See Watson's Introduction to Butterfield's *The Origins of History* (Butterfield 2016).

and Science. The conclusions sum up the various aspects of Watson's *persona* identified in the paper and make the case for considering him a true embodiment of what the ES was and is, as well as a prolific thinker who contributed directly to several of today's pressing questions within IR.

Theory, practice, and philosophy of science in Watson's thought

This first section intends to shed light on Watson's philosophy of science, as well as his methods and his different types of knowledge which, rooted in history, theory, and practice, were both inductive and deductive (Buzan and Little 2009). Adam Watson was officially invited to join the BC on 10 March 1959. In a letter from Herbert Butterfield (who was still addressing him as 'John'), we read that the BC was looking for 'a representative of the Foreign Office' and that he, alongside Martin Wight, 'thought that you [Watson] were just the person to be interested in the deeper principles as well as the larger historical aspect of the whole question [of international order]' (Butterfield 1959). It is interesting to note here, from the very beginning of the relation between Watson and the BC, his identity as a 'representative of the Foreign Office' for it will create a musical-chair-like pattern of perceived identities (official, diplomat, historian, theorist, practitioner) which will impact on how Watson's and his production have been received and interpreted to a large extent.

In fact, Watson was a representative of the Foreign Office, but he was first and foremost a *historian*. As a diplomat who was also disciple of Butterfield, and as a historian in the British empirical tradition also familiar with von Ranke's historical positivism and Heeren's work within the Göttingen School, he had direct access to international society *as a practitioner within that tradition*. This meant that Watson was aware not only of international society per se (understood as rules and institutions between states), but also of its proneness to change, thus approaching international society as a *historical subject* that could be investigated *empirically*. As Buzan and Little put it, Watson combined his historical sensitivity with 'the accumulated lessons of practical experience on top of rules and institutions' (2009).

According to the minutes of one of the earliest BC meetings, Watson 'said he came to the Committee as a student or observer of events who wanted to examine the patterns that were produced, and the correlations that could be made. He liked the idea of going below the surface of and not merely analysing, e.g. the failure of the Suez affair, but seeking an analytical theory of international politics' (BC minutes 1962). This is a crucial statement for two reasons. First, it tells us that Watson was drawn to theorisation, to patterns. He was, after all, willing to make sense of elements of change and continuity across international societies through the centuries, especially with respect to hegemonic and hierarchical rule, alongside understanding the long-term goals of diplomacy. Second, this is where we first read about his philosophy of science, which seems to be very analytical and indeed theory-based. Yet, Watson would soon start struggling with pure 'analytics'. To understand Watson's positioning on the matter as to how theory and practice are linked (and which one comes first), it is perhaps worthwhile to look at how he pondered such questions in

regard to his teacher and mentor, Herbert Butterfield. In the introduction to Butterfield's The Origin of History (2016: 7), Watson maintains that

> Butterfield was against the Whig interpretation of History, as well as Marx's, and such personal simplifications and diagrams of the historical process as Spengler's and Toynbee's. The trouble was that in all of them the theory or interpretation or diagram came first. They were *a priori* intuitions. Sometimes, as he once said to me, it was a grandiose and imaginative one, but derived only very partially from the facts and owing more to other beliefs and other purposes in this world.

Watson agreed wholeheartedly with this, especially considering what may be termed the 'crisis of historicism' in those years (Buzan and Little 2009). He, as we shall see below, was sympathetic to abstraction and theorisation, and he himself adopted elements of methodological analyticism—after all, is not his pendulum an example of the latter? Yet, ultimately, he knew the complexity of reality could not really be captured by any schema or framework, and that his historical pedigree rooted in British empiricism and his years 'in the practice' taught him that the world worked differently from 'the theory'.

As a matter of fact, Butterfield aside, another historian who vastly impacted his way of studying and looking at world politics was Polybius, whose words often served as a guide to Watson. In his notes, one can often find Polybius's quote, 'history will never be properly written, until either men of action undertake to write it […], or historians become convinced that practical experience is of the first importance for historical composition' (Polybius XII, para. 28, undated), which would inform Watson's writing until his late period. This is evident in his foreword to James Der Derian's book *Post-theory: New Thinking in International Relations Theory*, arguing that 'The process of "holding a society of states together," of managing change and of providing a mantle of gradual legitimation for adjustments to the rules and institutions, is largely determined by the *practice* of the member states' (1997a: xvii, emphasis added).

But let us see this in a more diachronic way. Already in *Emergent Africa* (1965, published as 'Scipio') we read several times that 'in diplomacy' things worked one way, while 'in academic pursuits' they would be different, thus hinting at a dichotomy, a separation that can converge at times, but is mostly to be found as stark. In the preface to *The Limits of Independence*, we read that the book is about 'the practice *and* the theory of relations between states' (1997b: xi, emphasis added), with the practice coming first and in fact 'outrunning the theory' (2006: ch. 8). In this book, Watson explicitly draws a very clear line between 'practice', understood as 'the work of diplomats' and hence the (then) Foreign Office, and 'theory', which he identifies with academic and scholarly pursuits, and exemplifies if with a reference to Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* (1997b: xii), as will be discussed in the next section in regard to the system–society distinction. He indeed remarked this on multiple occasions, and once again in *The Limits of Independence* when arguing, for example, that he produced his study 'in the light of [his] experience in the twentieth century' (1997b: 1). On page 69, Watson's position is even stronger: 'The concept that states are sufficiently alike to

be treated as members of the same set is more than a fallacy. It is a myth which influences our concept of international *reality* and distorts our judgment' (emphasis added). After all, he often identified himself as a 'practitioner' (Vigezzi 2014: 32, fn. 45) and was equally seen as such (see letter from Butterfield to Thompson in Vigezzi 2014: 170).

Yet, exactly as he did not fully reject abstract theorisation, his identity within the BC was far more difficult to grasp. As Butterfield said to RJB Miller in a letter of recommendation for Watson to get a fellowship at the Australian National University, (W60 1 June 1971),

> He could have easily established himself as a scholar, but, from the very first, it had been made clear to everybody that he was going to have a diplomatic career. I have never known anyone in our Foreign Service (or in any other of our services) who so managed to add to his practical knowledge of affairs those advantages of perspective, of analytical procedure, and of long-term thinking etc., which historical scholarship can bring. Many of his ideas are perhaps more relevant to the historian than to the political practitioners. His desire to see contemporary events with the eye of the historian.

Historical knowledge, practical knowledge, and analytical knowledge all coexisted in Watson's production, at times with one privileged over the other two, but constantly informing his thinking, which was never satisfied with anything that looked simple or, worse, simplified.

The theory–practice divide would thus continue over the years, as we can see in both *The Limits of Independence* (1997b: 118, 'as we move along the spectrum from the theoretical absolute into the realm of practice') and in *Hegemony and History* (2006: 57, 'The actual practice of the contemporary international society is very different from the theoretical legitimacy'). At times, he tried to reconciliate these opposites. In *Hegemony and History* (2006: 92), he tries to bring theory back. Asking 'why do we need theory?', Watson offers two answers:

> First, it is impossible to understand any set of connected events without some general idea, a working theory, about how those events relate to one another. And as new facts are established, they either fit the theory or you must modify the theory to accommodate them. Second, in real life, governments and ministries of foreign affairs have assumptions about how international affairs work. If they are wrong, the consequences may be serious.

For him, therefore, a theory was best understood as a way to organise knowledge, as opposed to make it abstract or simple, and he was aware that 'practitioners' were not removed from theory. Rather, the question was what theory, *on the basis of historical record*, best approximates and directs what practitioners do. The relationship between theory and practice was something that interested Watson for most of his life, especially since he strove to make the ES relevant for contemporary policymaking. For example, in one of his last articles on Latin American politics published in a newspaper for the general public (Watson in The London News: 1983) he referred to states looking for a 'modus vivendi' to

stabilise regional politics. 'Modus vivendi' was a locution that Watson often used to indicate 'international society', as is found also in some of his BBC transcripts of radio interviews.[3]

Finally, another important locus where Watson reflects on the theorist–practitioner dichotomy is in a private document, namely the feedback he offered to Geoffrey Wiseman on his paper Adam Watson on Diplomacy, presented at ISA New Orleans in 2002 (Watson, undated).[4] In it, Watson argues that he does not have a dedicated chapter in Dunne's *The Invention of International Society* (1998) because 'while [I] was in the diplomatic service until 1968 [I] did not publish anything on international theory under [my] name'. The same, he argues, was for other practitioners (he actually uses this term) within the BC, 'such as Robert Wade-Gery and Noel Dorr'. Commenting on how the important work of practitioners is neglected, in the same document Watson remarks that 'the sherpas do not get the public credit for climbing the mountain' (Watson, undated; see also Watson 2001). The contribution of practitioners to international theory, and the fairness in acknowledging it, would come back later on in *Hegemony and History* (2006: 10), where he stated that

> the contribution of practitioners is less visible because they do not normally publish papers on international relations theory. In selecting future practitioners it will be well to remember that the role of conventional diplomacy…is declining with the development of technology and the transformation to an ever less Westphalian system. Future study groups will need to extend the range of practitioner experience beyond diplomacy to cover economic globalisation and other effects of increasing interdependence.

Once again, what is stressed is experience, human experience, which for Watson—as was for Butterfield—was ultimately the cornerstone of every possible theorisation. Notwithstanding the merits and usefulness of analyticism, which Watson appreciated, the basis of knowledge remained for him direct and indirect observation or experience.

The international system–society distinction

Another consequence of this practice-theory dichotomy, central to the work of Watson, is the fact that he was among the first, if not the first, to question the analytical distinction between system and society within the notorious ES tripartition. Often credited to Alan James (1993), and later systematised by Barry Buzan in his landmark *From International to World Society?* (Buzan 2004, who on page 99 does recognise the pioneering work of Watson in this respect), the problematisation of this

[3] Interestingly, 'modus vivendi' was the expression used by Herbert Butterfield in his presentation at the 'Theory of International Relations meeting', held at Columbia University on 12 June 1956 (Butt/28). Hence, we cannot exclude that Watson borrowed that expression from Butterfield himself, especially given how close they were personally and intellectually. Yet, there is no archival confirmation for this hypothesis. Incidentally, the rapporteur of that meeting at Columbia was a certain Kenneth Waltz.

[4] The document was given to me by Polly Watson Black while meeting her in Blacksburg, VA, USA, 4 April 2023.

stark distinction between the anomic, the physical, the mechanical and the social, the normative, and the reciprocal is to be first suggested in the writings and thoughts of Adam Watson.

This problematisation, in fact, begins all the way back in 1961 when, in the course of a discussion within the BC, Watson, quite imaginatively,

> supported [that rules are necessary conditions of all regular human interactions] by reference to relations imagined between present sovereign states and a community of men on the moon. If we suddenly discovered such a community, and sought not to exterminate them […] but to do business with them, then in the absence of any cultural tradition we should find ourselves practising with them rules [of coexistence] (BC minutes, 8 October 1961: 7).[5]

Once again having issues with the theory-reality gap in Bull's work, for 'in the real world nothing except a yardstick is exactly a yard long' (1987: 147), Watson clearly recollects his conversations with Bull on where to draw the line between system and society, and what exact criteria for membership should be satisfied. For Watson, for example, '[the Ottomans] and the European powers they dealt with did conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations and shared in the working of common institutions, while Bull was inclined to regard Ottoman relations with European states as little more than the relations between states belonging to different international system' (1987: 144).

Watson understood that *reality* was made of gradients, nuances, uncertainties, and grey areas, all things that a fixed analytical schema would not capture. In looking at the shared understandings and practices that informed relations between Ottomans and Europeans (as well as Persians and Greeks, and even Soviets and Americans) Watson anticipated by a few years the epistemological and ontological debate on the system/society distinction. In his view, which in a way predates also the regional agenda of the ES,

> I therefore now think it more accurate to say that the formal rules and institutions of a society of states, and even more its codes of conduct and its unspoken assumptions, are formed within the matrix of a single culture; but states belonging to other cultures that find themselves involved in the pressures of the same system can become members of the society or be associated with it, provided they accept its rules and assumptions, perhaps with marginal modifications (1990: 102).

As discussed in the previous section, Watson was an analyticist (Jackson 2010), but with a strong proclivity to diplomatic history and (historical) sociology. Or, as Buzan and Little maintained, Watson understood the need to complement diplomatic history with historical sociology (2009). It is not difficult to identify in his discussions within the BC, *passim* in his solo works, and even in his private lecture notes references ('the theory assumes anarchy, but reality is a hegemony of the leading

[5] The reader may note that the argument of 'extermination' as litmus test for the absence of any social rule within interactions is exactly the one used by Buzan in his theorisation of different kind of international societies (2004: 100).

states', undated, underlined in the original) to a 'reality' out there, which theory was tasked to systematise and explain but certainly not *constitute*. In this respect, he shared several epistemological positions with Bull, himself an analyticist, but was more aware of (and at times frustrated by) the limits of the analytical tools themselves underpinning theoretical constructs than his colleague and co-editor—most likely because of the large and long experience as a diplomat and practitioner, as well as his training as a historian. As Bull often remarked in conversation with Watson, 'I am not a historian, I am a political scientist' (2006: 36).[6]

Differently from Bull, and in close alignment with Butterfield, Watson ultimately saw international society as a *historical creation*. It is in this framework that his doubts about the tenability of the system–society distinction should be taken into account. The similarity, yet the difference with Bull is visible in the following quote extracted from a letter from Watson directed to Bull: 'the system approach to our subject […] has helped me to understand certain aspects of it much better, but it needs to be used more critically and with a greater awareness of its limitations' (in Vigezzi 2014: 68). Yet, this median way, or at least sympathetic position, morphs into quasi-frustration a decade later or so, when in a paper titled *From a European to a Global International Order. Some Comments on Our Theme* (1979: 1) Watson argues that 'this distinction between a system and a society of states is thoroughly discussed in *The Anarchical Society*; but it seems to me in formal terms, without resolving the issue Hedley Bull has raised again for us here, how far the formal distinction reflects a significant reality'. In the remainder of that paper, Watson makes the case to substantiate the analysis of the impact of technology and various industrial revolutions and, in a move that very much signalled his willingness to look at actors other than European ones, to pay more attention to the history of indigenous elites, considered to be an extraordinary key to understanding 'the emerging global order and international society' (1979: 2–3; see also Vigezzi 2014: 84). This is more broadly captured by Vigezzi, for whom 'the scholars of the British Committee […] are not very fond of over-detached theorisation. The "fundamentals" that they analyse imply myriads of "events". Seen in this light, international life can be shown to have exceptional substance and richness' (2014: 130–1), and this is where 'the subjective' and 'the objective' blur (Vigezzi 2014: 129–130).

A richness and substance that Watson, for all his willingness to rely on abstraction and analytical schemas, is too eager to accept and incorporate in his theorisation. It is at the end of his tenure as Chair of the BC, and at the end of the 'ethics phase' of the BC, that Watson stressed his awareness of the limitations of Bull's analyticism. In his works on ethics such as *No Criticism Please: We are Fighting for Justice* (January 1976) and *Distributive Justice between States* (October 1977), he ultimately describes system and society as 'symbols' of the 'various possibilities which, over the centuries, opened up to international life' (Vigezzi 2014: 291).

In fact, while he did accept at the philosophical level a modicum of analyticism (with a strong awareness of the caveats that are attached to it), Watson was far more inclusive in his ontological positions, and if we are to understand which of Bull's

[6] Yet, quite ironically, we know that Watson received Heeren's seminal *Hanbuch der Geschichte des Europaeischen Staatensystems* from Bull himself (2006: 31).

analytical categories he mostly embraced, it would not be international system or society, but the far less debated one of 'global political system' (Bull 1977), which indicated the totality of actors and relations and emphasised the role of non-state actors and technology in world politics—something in which Watson became interested thanks to the work of Desmond Williams. He hints at this position when, publishing *The Limits of Independence*,[7] Watson dedicates the book to his friend the Indian scholar A.P. Rana, mentioning his 'Indian gift for coherent overview of the complexity of the international scene'.[8] This is even clearer in the above-mentioned paper *From a European to a Global Order*, in a passage which is worth mentioning *in toto*:

> I should like us to grope for a concept of international order which gives due weight to membership to the UN and corresponding bodies in earlier times, but also to other activities which promote international order. Constituted regional bodies, even if not universal in their region, like NATO, the OAS, ASEAN, the Organisation of African Unity, the Lomé Convention, play their parts in the global order. In trying to discern how the transition to a global order is actually taking place, I should like us to pay special attention to bodies where voting rights or other forms of say-so are linked to capacity or strength in a given field, like the World Bank, the Monetary Fund, and OPEC, in contrast to the gross disparity between the votes of many statelets at the UN and their capacity to deliver anything but their vote (1979: 3).

It is evident that the above is an attempt to build ES theorisation of order in line with the more recent literature on regionalism, international institutions/regime theory, and global governance more broadly. Decades earlier, through his problematisation of Bull's system–society distinction, Watson was elaborating on the crucial role that constructivism would play in fostering ES research and sharper theorisation (Buzan 2004; Adler 2005), as well as how regions and organisations played and would play in maintaining and changing world order, anticipating de facto the ES programmes on regions and on the relationship between primary and secondary institutions (Buzan 2004; Navari and Knudsen 2019).[9]

[7] Which, incidentally, was the title of a paper offered at the BC by Robert Wade-Gery, another practitioner and friend of Watson (September 1972).

[8] Unfortunately, it was not possible for me to find public or private archival material on the intellectual friendship between Rana and Watson. Yet, more research should be done in this respect, especially to trace the influence that the ES started having abroad already during the Cold War. Bharti Chhibber (2007: 171) clearly depicts Rana as an ES scholar, stating that 'Rana's understanding of international society is based on the theorisations of the English School of International Relations represented by Adam Watson, Hedley Bull, Barry Buzan and Timothy Dunne'.

[9] Surely, the notion of a regional international society is of course implicit in the very concept of a European international society that goes global in *The Expansion*; and 'the regional' was anticipated by earlier international thought on civilisations. What is meant here is that Watson foresaw the regional level of analysis as fundamental within ES theorising, and not just historically, but very much in present days, too, as *coexisting* with global dynamics. I am grateful to Thomas Bottelier for suggesting this point.

International political economy, imperialism, and decolonisation

The previous two sections discussed Watson's different identities and how they impacted on the theory–practice nexus at the heart of his work and on his philosophy of science, with important consequences for the system–society distinction within the ES. We now move to another neglected aspect of his production, that related to IPE, imperialism, and decolonisation, understood in both its political/legal and epistemological meanings. As will be evident, these aspects of international politics are vastly inherent to one of Watson's major contributions, i.e. the theorisation of hegemony and (informal) hierarchies.

His interest in these subjects began in the late 1950s, and hence even before he formally joined the BC (Vigezzi 2014), while he was a diplomat posted in sub-Saharan Africa, an experience which would lead him to be the Head of the African Department at the Foreign Office. In a letter sent to Herbert Butterfield on Boxing Day 1955 (W40), Watson wrote that the evolving dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa, including the impact that the process of decolonisation and the incorporation of new economies within the increasingly global economic system would have on world order, were of 'great interest' to him. While, as a matter of fact, one may say that books such as *Emergent Africa* and *The Nature and Problems of the Third World* were not written strictly speaking with the jargon and the analytical categories of the ES, still he displayed sharp acumen in foreseeing some of the most defining themes of the future order in terms of structural inequalities, hierarchies, exploitation, and dependency. And later on in his life, it was in *The Limits of Independence* that Watson fleshed out some of his most radical, and quasi-realist, ideas on international society and the economic dimension thereof. Here, we can see how in fact Watson reflected on one dimension of the ES that Barry Buzan, correctly, lamented as underdeveloped, that of IPE (2014).

Once again, and linked to the previous section, it was thanks to his experience as a diplomat and his professionalism in the 'real world' that he was able to theorise about the above, and to focus on the legacies of imperialism as well as the potential (both economic and epistemological) of decolonisation through the prism of IPE. For clarity purposes, the section is divided into two subsections: the first one about imperialism, inequality, and dependency, and the second one about decolonisation.

Imperialism, inequality, and dependency

It should be noted that Watson's relationship with imperialism was, at best, ambivalent. After all, he was a civil servant and an employee of the Foreign Office, with important duties and missions which included, as noted above, delicate diplomatic posts in sub-Saharan Africa to oversee the process of decolonisation. In his books, as well as in his personal recollections and cables sent back to London from his missions and in the letters he would send to the Butterfields from, e.g. Senegal, Togo, Nigeria, and Mali (e.g. W45 2 December 1959), there is an inherent tension between what he considered to be the positive legacies and heritage of the British Empire in

those territories, and the legitimate, overdue, and rightful campaigns for independence of the former colonies.

Yet, while at times this tension ends up in fairly patronising tones, and in a justification for the presence of imperial forces in the African continent, his thinking over the years morphs into a more pessimistic and critical outlook of what he calls 'Western imperialism', in which 'the restraints [on development] are both economic and political. But they are mainly pragmatic rather than theoretical, and they leave intact the key legitimacy principle of nominal independence' (1997b: 67). He goes on to the extent of claiming that 'there are growing resemblances between these Western patterns and the Soviet imperial system. They are likely to be obscured by the major differences, especially on the political plane, and by the truly exploitative policy of Stalin's impoverished Soviet state towards the territories it occupied at the end of World War II' (1997b: 72).

Once again, the influence of Rana is noteworthy here. A student of Martin Wight at the LSE, Rana developed the idea of a *New Northern Concert of Powers* which informed Watson understanding of collective hegemony, described as benefitting from an 'unassailable' homogeneity, enabling them to function collectively as an international hegemon in the wider anarchical system against the 'Developing South' (1997b: 133). In sum, especially after the end of the Cold War, it seems to me that Watson veers towards positions that, despite crucial differences, resemble those of scholars such as Robert Cox (1981), in that specific social forces and the structures that they generate lead to hegemonic, when not blatantly hierarchical, relations between the haves and the have-nots, perpetuating in practice the imperial relations that were present only a few decades before.[10] The following quote may help elucidate this:

> The formal legitimacy of independence is a status: a category in diplomacy, at the United Nations and in international law. But it does not describe absolute control of foreign and domestic policy. The interests and pressures of the state system continue to operate. The rules of the international society, and most pertinently the conditions of the assistance which weak states need, are determined by the great and rich powers and the organisations which they substantially control, especially the economic ones (1997b, 61).

Crucially, however, and typical of Watson's holistic view of international relations, these structures and hegemonic patterns go well beyond the state-to-state dimension are in fact perpetuated and supported by non-state actors, in particular economic investors and donors, and élites, thus anticipating crucial research on world society in the ES. In fact,

> it has suited both the new ruling elites and the industrially developed donor powers to continue the investment and the administrative and technical underpinning of the newly independent states. The donor states and their corpora-

[10] Yet, it is important to note that Watson seems to take a top-down view (Great Powers and great corporations v. 'weak states'), while Cox took a bottom-up one (social forces). This is on top of their different background and IR outlook. Again, I am indebted to Thomas Bottelier for raising this point.

> tions have the same interest in the products, the labour and the markets of the new states, the same interest in order and security, and the same humanitarian impulses, as before: but in a more generalised way than when colonies belonged to individual empires. The concern of the developed North for the welfare of the ex-colonies has extended from raison d'état or raison d'empire to raison de système (1997b: 76-77).

The passage above resembles in many way the arguments advanced by Gramscian and critical scholars alike, not just like Cox but also Justin Rosenberg and his *Empire of Civil Society* (1994) in linking the current form of the international system (or, in ES parlance, international society) to a specific economic configuration that depends very much on interests, practices, and power imbalances between organised communities and transnational actors: 'The identity of a state, and its nominal independence, can be preserved, while the donors insist on action in areas that particularly concern them, like human rights. They do so directly and through multilateral bodies like the UN or the World Bank: which in practice means the collective hegemony of the great powers' (1997b: 93).[11]

These are all themes that, in several respects, brought Watson closer to the position of scholars like Susan Strange in her *States and Markets* (1994). Without necessarily using her notion of structural power (see also Barnett and Duvall 2005), on multiple occasions Watson refers to the Bretton Woods system and the international financial architecture as a new 'standard of civilisation', markers of insiders and outsiders (Watson in Der Derian 1997; see also Watson 2001: 469).

Decolonisation

At the same time, as noted, Watson held warm and genuinely sincere interest in decolonisation movements and spent a considerable amount of time both as a diplomat and as a theorist to study how newly independent states could play their role in international society without necessarily being marginalised in a position which would be nominally independent and factually subjugated.

In fact, he proposed to the BC a paper titled *Anti-Imperialism and the International System* for the *Project on Second Volume of Essays*, which was agreed in January 1965, rediscussed in April 1967, and then ultimately abandoned. Furthermore, in *The Nature of The Problems of the Third World*, Watson made the bold move of arguing that ultimately, true independence can be achieved only through 'decapitalisation' and 'economic justice' (Watson 1965; see also Watson, lecture notes, undated) by which he meant a detachment from the capitalist system managed by the Global North in favour of the development of regional trade systems, autonomous currencies, and a preferential treatment from the newly independent states.

In a more epistemological and methodological understanding of decolonisation, despite several problematic aspects of his works noted by other authors in this

[11] Once again, Watson spoke in both theoretical and practical terms, for he worked for influential NGOs such as the *Association for Cultural Freedom* and *The Swiss Foundation pour une Entraide Intellectuelle Europeénne*.

special issue (see also Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017) Watson distinguished himself for an attention to local sources and practices which, if not always consistent, nonetheless underpinned several aspects and phases of his work.

Already in his first opus, *The War of the Goldsmith's Daughter*, Watson sets out to somehow decentre Europe, by noting how this war 'began in 1406, nine years before Agincourt' (1964: 93) and by advocating to pay more attention to Islam and IR: 'the history of Islam in India, and particularly that of the Bahmani Sultanate and the Vijayanagar Empire, throws a revealing light not only on Ottoman but also on Iberian and even Russian history' (1964: 226) thus somehow anticipating recent arguments made in IR with respect to Eurasia (see, for example, Zarakol 2022) by pointing at the importance of what Watson calls 'the Indo-Saracen civilisation' for south Asia and part of Eurasia. He did so by relying on primary sources and even on archaeological material, here too anticipating some of the most recent trends in using sources interdisciplinarily (Neumann and Glørstad 2022). It is in fact in this first book that we can see some of the defining features of his work, such as the attribution of importance to context and the crucial character of adaptation (1964: 220) and localisation (1964: 223) of practices, the fact that historically speaking suzerainty was far more pervasive than anarchy as an organisational structure for different polities, and the idea that 'sovereignty' and 'state' were two conceptual and analytical straightjackets when it comes to analyse historical international systems (see also Costa Lopez et al. 2018).

On two occasions, in correspondence with Bull, Watson lamented this, first by stating that he is 'not sure that the term "sovereignty" as generally used is of much help' (Vigezzi 2014: 45, fn 39), and second by arguing that 'much of our thinking [on IR] is conditioned by our assumptions about the state' (Vigezzi 2014; 58, fn 27). In fact, he argued,

> sovereignty […] may be a hindrance to our understanding of societies and systems that did not have such a legal and atomic idea of states and powers as we…terms like sovereignty and systems of states hardly fit the relations between lay princes themselves…How far do we miss the medieval reality if we say that [a prince] was sovereign, or that the lands he held constituted a sovereign state…? (Letter to Bull, 6-9 October 1967).

Sometimes these issues led to discussions within the BC itself, for example, when Watson had to remind the other attendees how in Africa there were pre-existing states before colonisation (Butt/29: 2, 19 Sept 1959). In this respect, the sensitivity to the tension between idiography and the general pattern, the specific and the big picture continued throughout his life, as we can see from his American lecture notes (Watson undated) in which we read that 'Clio [the muse of history] is blonde' and 'history itself [is] Eurocentric'.

The attention to context, to local practices and local epistemologies would develop in the subsequent years, as can be seen in papers such as *The Nature of state systems* (1967) where he reflects on the limits of sate-centrism by elaborating on the *Arthashastra* (something on which he will develop in his paper on the Indian sub-system, which built much on his *Goldsmith's Daughter*), and *The Dark Ages* (1972), a much-neglected work where Watson problematises Western sovereignty

as a defining principle to organise inter-polity relations, stresses the importance of local sources and practices, and paints an interesting understanding of 'order' based not on necessarily territorial polities but in fact on 'inter-houses' relations, again de facto anticipating recent arguments made about Eurasia (Zarakol 2022).

He would also stress the importance of the local context and local ideas in *Emergent Africa*: 'by African values [it is meant] expressing the generally accepted values of civilisation in an idiom and with an emphasis more acceptable to Africans than the formulations we have evolved for ourselves in the West or others elsewhere' (1965: 111). And crucially, this 'idiography of practices' would take Watson to consider how '"international legitimacy" acquires forms and content within distinctly marked historical events. In order to talk about aspirations to "international justice" and its diverse forms […] Watson refers to antiquity, to the values of "dike" and "the king's peace" in Greece and Persia' (Vigezzi 2014: 275).

When in *Hegemony and History* (2006: 11) Watson argued that 'by now the battle against ahistorical and Eurocentric limitations on international theory has largely been won' he was perhaps being optimistic and exaggerated, for Eurocentrism continues to permeate much of the IR discipline. Yet, it is undeniable that, although with mixed results and shortcomings (see also Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017), Watson was far more sensitive and attentive to issues pertaining to epistemic and historical pluralism than most of his colleagues and would engage in reflections that would ultimately push ES research on non-Western domains and Global IR (Costa Buranelli and Taeuber 2022).

Communism, the Soviet Union and Russia: ideology and great power management

Having delved into Watson's interest for the economic as well as the (de)colonial aspects of IR, this fourth section moves on to shedding light on Watson's attention paid to Russia and the USSR not simply in terms of great power competition and balance of power, typical of the years in which the BC operated, but more in terms of ideology, norms and institutions, and international society. Once again, to fully appreciate his thoughts on this matter it is vital to understand that his biography profoundly shaped his outlook on Russia.

Already in the 1940s, Watson was an avid reader of Russian history and politics, and in his correspondence with Butterfield we can find that the latter asked him to renew his subscription to the journal *Vopros Historii* (W28, 3 March 1947) after Watson sent him a volume on Soviet History (W18 1947). Even before that, one should not forget that Watson operated in Russia as member of the Foreign Office during the Second World War and had the chance to travel across the Soviet Union from Moscow to Afghanistan across Central Asia in 1946. These experiences placed him in direct contact with the Soviet Union's rule within societies (Watson Black 2011 [1946]).

Once he joined the BC, Watson's interest in communism fit within the sympathetic atmosphere of the group in terms of exploration of the theme, especially in the early years. As a matter of fact, Donald MacKinnon presented the paper *What is the*

attraction of Communism today? in April 1959, preceded by a discussion by Michael Howard on *What is the threat of communism* in January of the same year, while Geoffrey Hudson delivered *The Communist Theory of International Relations* in October 1962 (Vigezzi 2014). Butterfield himself, when coming up with some titles for papers for common projects within the BC, listed *Do the claims of communism suggest that there can be a conflict between two international orders [or between two views of international order]?* (Butt/31). Such was Watson's interest for communism and Marxism that, when wanting to edit a volume on international ethics at the end of his tenure as Chair of the BC, he thought of including a chapter on Marxism. Yet, the volume was then aborted.

His interest in communism gave him even some headaches. As a matter of fact, Watson had to face some rumours within the Foreign Office about him being a communist sympathiser, with Sir Colin Crowe (then Chief of Administration of HM Diplomatic Service) seeking out explanations from Herbert Butterfield. The Master of Peterhouse's reply, however, was very poignant in case and shed light on Watson's deep scholarly and intellectual interest for ideologies and regimes other than democratic ones:

> though he was interested in the totalitarian systems, it never occurred to me for a moment to think that Adam Watson could be linked with any of the totalitarian parties or theories […] I do not know whether [Watson] has not throughout his career distinguished himself a little by his insistence that the student of international politics should seek an internal knowledge of the formidable types of regime with which business has to be conducted. But all the members of my Committee would find the present misgivings about him very strange (W56, 13 Feb 1967).

These comments would then be reiterated to Kenneth Thompson a few years later, when Butterfield recommended Watson's work to him: 'I think you will be aware that Adam Watson is an unusually able man—very much given to the academic approach, and perhaps too disturbing intellectually to please everyone in a Foreign Office' (Butt/28, 13 April 1971: 3).

Following this brief biographical background, let us now move to the two themes which the interest in Russia/Soviet Union spurred in Watson: the first subsection is about ideology (and its impact on his pluralist approach to international society), while the second one is on great power management, once again inherently linked to his underlying interest in hierarchy and hegemony.

Ideology and pluralism

As noted above, Watson's interest in Russia and the Soviet Union was not merely a political and diplomatic one, but also ideological and historical. He was a sharp analyst of Russian politics and society, and often disseminated his takes on Soviet society to the public to work towards a larger détente which would involve all sectors of the West (Watson 1953).

Watson was always very careful in noting that understanding of ideologies underpinning international societies was crucial, and for him the communist world

represented one. Communism was for him a source of threat but also an unavoidable ideological force in international politics, which it was better to study than to reject aprioristically. In a letter to Butterfield, Watson in fact stated very clearly that 'I have incorporated in my work the political aspects of Russia and that is something that really interests me' (W33, 27 Apr 1955).

In broader terms, Watson was very much concerned about the progressive 'ideologisation' of international politics in general, and especially in times of Cold War. Already in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in his epistolary exchange with Butterfield, we read that ideology is not the best case for diplomacy (W23, 2 May 1949), and that, in a 'Burkeian' fashion, it was mostly 'the revolution', and not Russia or communism, the force to fear (W29, presumably 1953). Most importantly, 'if we are out to make an international order the ideological issue must not be allowed to spoil our diplomacy' (W30, 25 Aug 1953). It is perhaps not by chance that, among the post-war leaders that most impressed him, Watson mentioned to Butterfield Jawaharlal Nehru, as an example of a leader guided more by pragmatism than ideology (W24, 2 June 1949).

Also during his stay in the US, Watson had the chance to carry forward his conversation with Butterfield on the force and danger of ideology as a spoiler of diplomacy (W25, 4 Nov 1950), and seemed to be pleased that in the US ideological thinking was less prevalent than in the UK (although McCarthyism was, ironically, about to start). Here, the influence of his very good friend George Kennan was paramount,[12] for Watson had the chance to discuss the impact of ideological thinking on world politics with the American diplomat too, who agreed on the 'danger of the legalistic, moralistic approach to politics' (see W32, W33, W42).

This would make him closer to Wight and Butterfield than to other exponents of the BC and the ES more in general. Watson was, ultimately, a pluralist, influenced by the pessimism of Wight and Kennan, and very much a proponent of order over justice, despite his focus on ethics and normative politics during his chairing of the BC. As he had the chance to say later in his life, 'what is right and reasonable is more preferable than justice and adjustment' (2006: 45). He would be interested in voices advocating for progressivism, liberal developments, and cosmopolitanism, but would maintain a sceptical outlook. When American scholar Miriam Camps, a liberal internationalist, contemplated presenting a paper to the BC with her husband, William Anthony Camps, about the positive role of the UN in restraining 'the disruptive forces coming from the superpowers', Watson argued that 'I cannot help thinking that the sort of things our committee has sometimes talked about…would be very useful to the Camps team, if only as irritants to make them think afresh themselves. But they tend to think of the experience of the past as junk, and that a

[12] Once more, the *trait d'union* between the two seems to have been Butterfield, albeit indirectly. Kennan and Watson became particularly close after the latter gave the former a copy of Butterfield's 'Christianity and History' in the course of a seminar at Princeton University in the early 1950s (W26, 27 Feb 1951), which Kennan reviewed for the New York Times in 1951. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Watson wrote enthusiastically to Butterfield about Kennan, stating even that the latter presented 'several similarities' (presumably intellectual) with the former (W42).

fresh start needs to be made. A way of thinking that I always associate with classical Greece' (W66 15 June 1972).[13]

Russia/Soviet Union and great power management

Watson linked his interest in hierarchy and hegemony—a fundamental aspect of his research and indeed legacy—to his passion for Russia and the Soviet Union. As he recollected, 'I first grasped the idea of a collective hegemony operating behind a façade of multiple independences when serving as a junior member of the British team in the long US/UK/Soviet preparatory negotiations for Yalta in the Kremlin in 1945 on, among other things, a new international order—or as Bull would put it, reshaping the rules and institutions of international society' (2006: 107).

Furthermore, such was his desire for knowledge about the communist world that he would secure a visiting period at the Imperial Defence College to study Russia's capabilities, and this was only a few years before he would go to Cuba, on which more will be said below (W38, 17 Oct year missing; W55 30 March 1966). Building on Kennan's approach to the Soviet Union, 'we need not to be enemies, we cannot be friends' (quoted in Watson, 'New Lights on Russian Foreign Policy', undated), Watson endeavoured to understand the motivations, the workings, and the goals of Soviet's foreign policy in the most analytical way possible, trying as much as he could to stay away from ideological considerations and to build those bridges, however short and small, which would facilitate détente and open up avenues for cooperation to guarantee a smooth functioning of great power management and hence of raison de système.

For example, while in Cuba, Watson lamented the destabilisation of the balance of power in the area and the 'loss of stability' because of the tensions between the great powers and started working on Palmiro Togliatti's idea of polycentrism for the Foreign Office (Letter, 20 May 1965).[14] This approach found its professional embodiment in the position of diplomatic advice to the British Leyland Motor Corporation and in his publications on sharing technological know-how with Moscow, where Watson would even argue for 'Anglo-Soviet friendship' (Watson undated, 4). In the above-mentioned feedback sent to Wiseman, Watson argues that 'not only I but many members of the British Committee and other pluralists thought and still think that the richest and strongest powers are capable of solving the problems if they act responsibly, but fear they may not do so' (Watson, undated), thus sharing his reflections on how great power management would contribute to raison de système.

Watson remained interested in Russian and Eurasian affairs until very close to his death, especially to the extent that they pertained to great power management. In particular, he commented on Russo-Ukrainian relations, especially the 2005

[13] Yet, in the same document, Watson shows deep appreciation for Miriam Camps's work, 'directed at modifying US policy so as to produce a more moderate and more polycentric world'. For an excellent overview on Miriam Camps, see (Seidel 2023). On 'polycentrism', see footnote 14 below.

[14] According to Togliatti, 'polycentrism' meant that 'communist parties with geo-political affinities should reinforce their links […] and coordinate their strategies'. This was clearly a line of reasoning that brought Watson close to the identification of communist states as belonging to a sub-system on its own.

election, right before the Orange Revolution. For him, the persistent problems between Russia and the US were lack of respect, of consideration and, as put when talking to Alexander Vershbow, US ambassador to Moscow, 'lack of reciprocity' (Watson 2005). In his analysis, we can find once again the arguments and the reasonings that informed his talks for Personal View thirthy years earlier, where the justification for a concert of great powers in détente was to be upheld 'in the interest of order and peace' (BBC Personal View 1973a). What Watson was mostly interested in, and frustrated with, was the fragmentation of a pan-European security architecture that, in his opinion, should have included Russia.

In more analytical terms, the study of communism and the incorporation of Russia/Soviet Union into his thinking about great power management brought Watson to studying Latin American regional politics, the importance of social movements, of political parties and revolutions, and the relationship between great powers and continental states, in particular how the US and the Soviet Union were carving out different spheres of influence according to different principles and norms (Keal 1983). It is exactly the regionalisation of great power management that led Watson to theorise more about sub-systems.

Sub-systems

The previous section on ideology and great power management as studied through the prism of Russia/Soviet Union, especially in its consideration of a distinctive international society among communist states, leads to the fifth and last one, that on Watson's theorisation of sub-systems. Again, for the purpose of clarity, this section will be divided into two subsections: one on past and present sub-systems, and one on cosmologies.

Historical and contemporary sub-systems

It was in his initial work on the USSR and communism, as a matter of fact, that Watson started observing differences in obligations and reciprocity between states. In a BC discussion on 7 October 1961, we read that for Watson 'all Western politics is based on morality, [while] Russia does not recognise some obligations to bourgeois states' which was the point of departure to theorise about different logics of socialisation. The day after, on 8 October, he develops this position in crucial terms by stating that to him, while Grotius spoke of 'concentric societies', it was more accurate to speak of '*eccentric* societies', all situated within 'a global, common *system*'. This is then exemplified, once again, in his reflections on the communist world, when he argued that the disagreements between Russia and Yugoslavia were 'an internal quarrel on what the common interest is' (BC discussion, 6 October 1962).

As was typical of his polymathic interest and openness to dissemination, Watson discussed several times the importance of communism in structuring and defining not simply European relations (BBC Personal View 1972) but also Latin American ones (BBC Personal View 1973b). The latter was in particular entrenched by his

experience as an ambassador to Cuba, where he was able to meet in person several times with Castro.

The interest in the communist world was brought more substantially into the BC through a paper on Cuba, which Watson delivered upon his return from that diplomatic mission (Butt/31).[15] Although perhaps not in the full theoretical and academic style of other papers delivered within the BC, being more a diplomatic report and synopsis of Castro's Cuba, the paper by Watson emphasises very much how mutual expectations, norms of coexistence and cooperation, shared principles, in other words an international society, were developing between Cuba, Central and Latin America, and the USSR. Plus, it allowed him to elaborate further on his first thoughts on hegemony and ideology, for in the paper there are interesting comparisons between the forms of 'imperialism' of the US and the USSR (Watson 1997b). And it was in those years that Watson, in correspondence with Hedley Bull (6–9 October 1967: 2), makes a reference to George Modelski's essay *The Communist International System* and the influence that it has had on his thinking about communism in IR, to the point of identifying the 'Communist Internationale' as a subsystem on its own. Watson did want to come up with a volume about Russia and the Soviet Union *as a system in itself* in international relations and even discussed the matter within the BC (Watson undated) but in the end the project was abandoned for lack of in-depth knowledge on what happened behind the iron curtain.

Watson understood that even within a global international society (the birth thereof Watson traced with Bull in *The Expansion*, 1984) one could identify several sub-global international societies (Vigezzi 2014: 66). In other words, Watson found 'that all in all it was right to talk about one great international system and various international societies, each with their own different cultures: "the Western, the Communist, the Afro-Asian"' (ibidem).

Here, a few things are noteworthy. First, the fact that once again the intellectual proclivity seems to be towards Wight, despite the co-authorship with Bull.[16] Not only did Watson share with Wight the importance attributed to the idiographic, the 'sub-' in terms of international societies, but also one may notice how in the quote above particular importance is accorded to culture, something that was pivotal in Wight's analysis of international relations and that informed Watson's interest for cosmological beliefs, as will be discussed below.

Second, and in line with the objective of this paper, Watson's attention to the sub-global was de facto a pioneering insight into the importance of the regional level within ES scholarship. Once again, far from seeing the Cold War setting of international politics in pure bipolar terms, thanks to his experience as a diplomat and to his sensitivity to non-Western scholarship, history, and materials, Watson elaborated and reflected on several issues—theoretical and epistemological—which would be at the heart of the regional turn of the ES which would happen a few decades later (Costa Buranelli 2014), as evident in his paper *Sub-Systems within State-Systems* (April 1967).

[15] Yet, the paper was written while in Cuba, precisely during the winter 1966–1967.

[16] Whom, however, Watson defined as 'perhaps the brightest [among us in the Committee]' (Watson's undated lecture notes).

These interests were so much developing over the years that Butterfield, at the beginning of the 1970s, wrote to RJB Miller about them:

> I think it would probably be true to say that a basic study of the European States-Systems has had the principal part in the shaping of his [Watson's] mind. But his classical interests and his concerns for non-European fields – as well as his practical preoccupations as ambassador in recent years with the newest forms of agglomerations between states – enable him to envisage the problem of the very existence of such a thing as a states-system from a wider and more radical point of view (W60 1 June 1971).

In this quote, we see the two main drivers behind Watson's interest in sub-systems. First, the 'concerns for non-European fields', both historically and contemporarily. Second, 'the newest forms of agglomerations between states', which refers to sub-global international societies and regionalist projects—in Latin America, as discussed above, but also in Africa and in the Middle East. And in fact, a year later, Watson would announce his book project on states-systems to the BC (22–24 Sept 1972). In it, he would emphasise the 'distinguishing characteristics' of *past* and *present* systems, elaborate on the role of *culture* in defining systems and societies of states, examine whether the 'communist world is both a single and a separate society', and offer a Marxist interpretation of states-systems. At the heart of this project there was, ultimately and once again, a certain dissatisfaction with Eurocentrism.

This research project would also ultimately form the basis of *The Evolution* and draw the basis for a comparison across areas and across times to highlight unique peculiarities of specific sub-systems as well as to underline those similarities which, perhaps, were not immediate. As Watson had the chance to reflect in his *Hegemony and History* (2006: 15), 'The European states system, leading to the present world-wide one, is not unique…The opinion of some scholars, that no other system is comparable to the European one, seemed to us to be based on too narrow and parochial a concept of what constitutes a state, and of what constitutes a system'. As an example of this is the analysis of the debates over European integration offered by Ole Wæver (1996), in which Watson's work on the Sumerian sub-system is convincingly used to shed light on the hierarchical tensions idiosyncratic within the European project, which he labels 'neo-Sumerian' (1996: 246; 250) in light of its 'socially constructed centre which emerges from the political will to have a centre'.

Cosmology

In his final years before passing, Watson went back to his work on sub-systems to add an additional dimension to it, the cosmological one. Watson was not simply an historian, IR scholar, or a practitioner, or an unusual hybrid of the two. He was, most of all, a humanist, understood as somebody who is interested in the fundamental aspects of humanity and human societies, drawing avidly from history and politics, but also from sociology, religion, and anthropology. All his academic and intellectual production was, after all, concerned with the crucial role that human

interactions played in informing culture, ideas, morality, and philosophy. This late work, which is an unpublished manuscript called *God, Government, and Science*, builds naturally on his previous work on sub-systems, on culture and on history, as is evident already in *The War of the Goldsmith's Daughter* that cosmological elements were considered important in his analysis of the 'Indo-Saracen' order (or 'civilisation', in his words).

In his typical interdisciplinary fashion, in this work Watson also reflects on deep structures, on ideology, on the link between religion, knowledge, and order in what is perhaps the utmost synthesis—an incomplete one as he passed away before completing it—of his lifetime work. As he often maintained, again in a position closer to Wight than to Bull, the most resilient international societies across history were those with *shared assumptions and theories* about how the world works (Buzan and Little 2009), a clear nod to the importance of cosmological beliefs, which somewhere else he called 'the intangible' of international societies (1997a).

As a matter of fact, the book seeks to study 'the relation between the belief that the universe has a purpose, and the ways in which men organize and govern themselves and explore their own nature and that of the world around them' (Watson undated). He then proceeds by writing that 'if such beliefs, when sincerely held, were useful at a certain stage of human development, it is reasonable to ask how far this is still the case for us today and how we should relate our belief in purpose to government and to the sciences'. The reference to 'the case for us today' is an adamant sign that Watson believed that to-day international politics and societies are still based on cosmological understanding of order and 'the good', and more broadly that change in such cosmological views in the past generated changes in the corresponding orders. The same is reiterated in a handwritten note at the end of the introductory chapter, where we read that 'the introductory chapter will then explain the place of the four central and historical chapters in the enquiry, *and their relevance to our assumptions and conduct today*. Government of human societies as the reflection of a cosmic order. The understanding of the environment and of ourselves as understanding of that order'.

It is therefore in this work that Watson started grappling with one of the sources (if not *the* source) of variety of orders across history, the theme that had been of interest to him since the 1960s. Also, it is not by chance that this work mirrors in several respect the sequence of themes and line-up of chapters of the very project he first developed, and that one would then find partly in *The Expansion* and partly in *The Evolution* years after. For example, *God Government and Science* begins with a review of the cosmological beliefs of the Egyptians, the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Hebrews and the Greeks, with strong echoes of Toynbee and Curtis. Yet here the focus is very much on the constitutive beliefs that would underpin the very institutions, practices, and norms of the above-mentioned orders. Moreover, what this manuscript shows is that by relying on the British internationalist tradition, Watson started to reflect on themes which would then be the object of scholarly enquires in IR, such as the recent works on cosmology by Bentley Allan (2018), Will Bain (2020), and Milija Kurki (2020).

Perhaps most ironically, *God, Government, and Science* is a work about order and ethics, thus bringing Watson back to that short parenthesis of ethics-driven activity

within the BC with him as Chair. In the introduction one reads 'in symbolic language we can say that I have opened Pandora's box of Purpose, or bitten the apple of knowledge of good and bad' (Watson, undated). Overall, although perhaps not as epistemologically and methodologically sophisticated as the new agenda on cosmology in IR, Watson's work on the topic was—in his typical fashion—an attempt to grand theorisation deriving from a synthesis of all his previous interests.

Conclusions

This paper had a precise goal, that of bringing to light the less known contributions and interests of one of the less known founding figures of the ES. By sifting the archival documents at my disposal and reading his personal writings, the picture that emerges is that Adam Watson was a polyhedric, multifaceted, organic and enthusiastic pursuer of knowledge, broadly understood. His work, while perhaps not always theoretically sophisticated or elaborated when compared to today's disciplinary standards, contained important and original reflections on many of the trends in IR which would become important in the following decades, such as the problematisation of state-centrism and sovereignty, the emic-etic distinction in epistemology, the uncomfortable legacies of colonialism, the importance and the dangers of ideology, the rise of regionalism and international organisations, the increasingly hierarchic character of IPE, and much more.

On top of this, Watson elaborated on current affairs relying on his decade-long expertise acquired 'in the field', while also elaborating on the cosmological fundamentals of historical societies and, as one does, writing scripts for theatrical productions (Watson 1968). This enthusiasm, hunger, and desire for understanding, for getting 'beyond the surface' of things, for finding connections between all the aspects of the international (the 'world political system' which Bull, unfortunately, did not expand on) derived from life experiences and encounters, from trips and discussions, which shaped and informed his *Weltanschauung*. This is nothing exceptional, for it can be said for any scholar. Yet, the point here, and more broadly of this paper, is that the richness and complexity of thought of Adam Watson is far less credited and far less engaged with than perhaps he deserves, beyond the pendulum and the *Expansion/Evolution*.

As he himself said in his feedback to Wiseman, the sherpas do not often get credit. Yet, as Butterfield said to RJB Miller more than half a century ago,

> Watson is eminently the historian, excited by the kinds of questions that interest the historian—his practical experience having the effect sometimes of keeping him close to earth, close to the reality of things, though at the same time there is something electric about his mind, and our historical colleagues find him almost more stimulating than anybody else (W60 1 June 1971).

The hope is that this paper and this special issue will prompt more attention, consideration, and engagement with a theory-practitioner who, ultimately, contributed to planting the seeds for the big picture that many IR scholars are looking at today.

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