

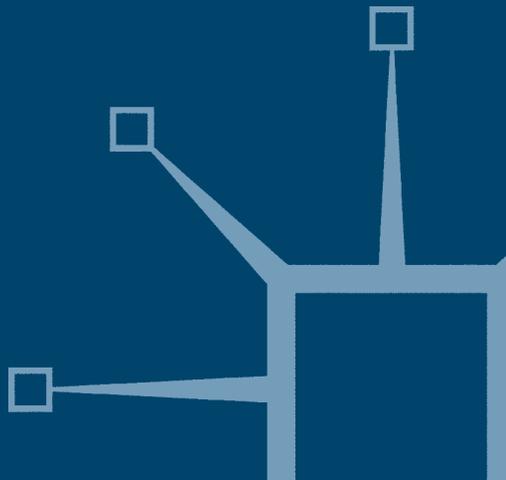
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# The Cultural Construction of International Relations

The Invention of the State of Nature

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Beate Jahn



# The Cultural Construction of International Relations

*Also by Beate Jahn*

POLITIK UND MORAL

# The Cultural Construction of International Relations

The Invention of the State of Nature

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palgrave



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*To my parents*

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 Culture, Nature and the Ambivalence of International Theory	1
<b>Part I Historical Origins of the State of Nature</b>	
2 The ‘Discovery’ of America as a Culture Shock	33
3 Reinventing the State of Nature	51
4 The Politics of the State of Nature in the ‘New’ World	72
<b>Part II The State of Nature and the Reconstitution of European Thought</b>	
5 The Tyranny of the European Context: Reading Classical Political Theory in International Relations	95
6 The State of Nature as the Basis for Classical Political Thought	113
7 The Politics of the State of Nature in the American and French Revolutions	132
8 Conclusion: the Consequences of the State of Nature for International Relations Theory	150
<i>Notes</i>	170
<i>Bibliography</i>	172
<i>Index</i>	177

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# Introduction

This book tells a story, a story about the role of culture in International Relations. It is not, however, a straightforward story to tell, for mainstream International Relations theory, although it recognizes cultural diversity within humanity as one of the fundamental and defining problems of the international, nevertheless constructs the theory of International Relations on the basis of an apparent abstraction from that cultural diversity, namely the concept of the state of nature. Liberal as well as Realist International Relations theory attempts to cut across the problem of the cultural diversity of humanity not only by deriving its explanatory categories from this concept of the state of nature but also by grounding its policy advice on the assumption of a state of nature. This strategy is meant to achieve a theoretical as well as a practical aim. Any theory which aspires to making general statements about the interaction of culturally diverse actors in the world will confront the tension between its own claim to universal or general validity on the one hand, and the diverse, non-universal character of its subject matter on the other. The use of the concept of the state of nature, however, which presupposes a common, universal nature of human beings beneath their particular cultural identities, thus enables International Relations theory to make statements of general validity despite the cultural diversity of its subject matter.

Once posited, however, the assumption of a universal human nature also allows the discipline of International Relations to formulate practical political solutions to the problems generated by cultural diversity in the world based on nature. Hence, we find that for both Realists and Liberals *the* most important feature of human beings in the state of nature is reason. Reason, they assert, is common to all human beings irrespective of their particular cultural identities and can, therefore, be used to overcome the particularities and conflicts generated by cultural diversity. Reason, in the Realist account, does not only allow the scholar of International Relations to uncover and analyse the general and universal laws of international politics underneath their particular appearances, but it is also the means by which statesmen assess the international situation they are confronted with and on this basis interact with their counterparts; in this political practice, the statesmen, so to speak, rise above the cultural identities of their respective political

communities and meet on the common and universal ground of reason. For Liberals, too, reason is the universal means inherent in and open to all human beings who can, therefore, by applying reason to the nature of human beings, derive certain universally valid principles of political organization. The realization and embodiment of these principles in the political organization of humanity, thus, will gradually overcome conflicts arising out of cultural diversity.

And this is the reason why the story about the role of culture in International Relations is not a straightforward one to tell. Because no sooner have we established that mainstream International Relations theory, indeed, takes the cultural diversity of humanity as a defining feature of its problematic, we find it leaving culture behind and grounding itself instead in a variety of versions of the concept of the state of nature. The starting point for my argument in this study, however, is the assumption that culture is an integral part of human nature – is, in fact, constitutive of human nature. If this assumption is correct, it follows that there cannot be a human nature apart from, or even in contrast to, culture. Any conception of human nature would then have to be taken as the expression of a culturally particular belief rather than as the universal roots as well as the universal *telos* of humanity, that is as an alternative to its cultural diversity. And as such, as a culturally particular discourse on human nature, it cannot be given *a priori* but must have been developed within a particular context as the answer to a concrete problem.

In Part I of this study I will trace the roots of this particular discourse on the concept of the state of nature, which plays such a crucial role in International Relations theory, back to the concrete intercultural encounter in the course of which it was developed in its modern sense. The encounter between Spaniards and Amerindian peoples in the course of the discovery of America challenged Spanish-Christian conceptions of human nature, history and destiny in their very foundations and forced the Spaniards to adjust their culturally peculiar conceptions in such a way that they could accommodate the existence of the Amerindian peoples. It was during this discourse on the nature of the Amerindian peoples that the Spaniards eventually used the old religious concept of the state of nature – namely the condition of human beings in the paradisaical period before the fall from grace – and gave it new meaning by identifying the Amerindian peoples with that state of nature. This move, however, amounted to a considerable reinterpretation of the concept of the state of nature in that it now came to describe a secular and historical condition as the first stage of existence for all of humanity.

As I will demonstrate in Part II of this study, this explanation for the cultural difference between Amerindian and European societies, namely that the Amerindians represented human beings in the state of nature, went on to have far reaching implications for European social and political thought. First of all, since the discovery of the Amerindian peoples directly contradicted various biblical statements about the nature and history of humanity in the world, it gradually led to a relativization and, eventually, replacement of the traditional modes of constructing knowledge. Whereas traditionally knowledge was validly constructed by reading and interpreting an accepted canon of authoritative texts, social and historical knowledge were now to be gained through an empirical study of the nature of man and society. This, of course, meant the study of the Amerindian peoples who were thought to exhibit the nature of man and society in their purest, original form. Secondly, the assumption that the Amerindians represented the state of nature or, at any rate, an earlier stage of the historical development of humankind led to the construction of philosophies of history 'explaining' not only how and why human beings had moved out of this state of nature and developed cultures, but also justified this development as in the interest of all of humanity and, therefore, morally valid and necessary. Thirdly, however, since Europeans traditionally grounded their own societies on natural law and the Amerindian societies were taken to be governed almost entirely by nature, it was possible to derive some insight into the original natural law which might have been lost during the particular historical and cultural developments the European societies had taken. Since in the eyes of the European authors Amerindian societies were characterized by freedom and equality, based on the absence of government and private property, men were taken to be free and equal by nature. Political freedom and social equality, however, were conspicuously absent from European societies and were now taken as universally valid natural rights of human beings which had to be realized in any society claiming to be based on natural law. Thus, European reformers set out to criticize those aspects of their own societies which they took to be against natural law and developed blueprints for the organization of society in accordance with natural law. These blueprints, in turn, came to play an important role in the American and French Revolutions. The discovery of the Amerindian peoples and their identification with the state of nature, then, had gradually over a period of some three hundred years led to a redefinition of valid knowledge, the history of humanity and its destiny in the realization of commonwealths based on the newly discovered 'real' nature of man. Classical

European political and social thought, then, is based directly or indirectly on a variety of interpretations of the state of nature identified with and to be empirically studied among Amerindian peoples.

But this radical development did not only have implications for the 'domestic' European social and political thought but for its emerging conceptions of the international, too. For this philosophy of history starting from a universal state of nature and culminating in a particular form of political and social organization based on principles derived from this natural state posited the normative validity of the latter for all of humanity. As a result, different cultures were ranked on a linear scale of development according to their respective realization of and approximation to the universally valid form of political and social organization. That is, cultural differences were reinterpreted as developmental stages. The assumption of the universal validity of a certain form of domestic political organization derived from a universal state of nature, consequently, led to a conception of the international based on a hierarchy of cultures. And this, as I will demonstrate in the conclusion to this book, is still the case in contemporary mainstream International Relations theory.

To tell the story of the role of culture in International Relations in this way means to argue against two commonly held beliefs. Firstly, in tracing the origins of the modern concept of the state of nature back to its roots it becomes apparent that the common representation of modern political and social thought, domestic and international, as an endogenously European cultural development denies and suppresses – often unconsciously, to be sure – the impact which the interaction with non-European cultures has had on its constitution. Whereas generally these ideas are taken to have originated, developed and, eventually, also to have been practised within the European context from where they were subsequently exported into the wider world, this study argues that there is a definite reverse undercurrent in which these ideas and the resulting practices have actually been developed in the context of the systematic interaction between European and non-European cultures, that is imported from an international encounter into domestic political thought and practice from where they were subsequently exported again into the international realm. Secondly, in reconstructing the definite course the concept of the state of nature has taken from its identification with the Amerindian peoples through domestic European political and social thought to the theory of International Relations, this study contradicts the commonly held belief that the distinction between political and international theory is based on, and justified

with respect to, a basic difference between the 'nature' of international politics and the 'nature' of domestic politics. Not only does this study demonstrate that both political and international theory are derived from the same conception of the state of nature but also that a key element of the separation between the two disciplines is historically the result of different kinds of moral and legal principles which the Europeans applied to the different 'stages of development', in the form of culturally diverse societies, with which they found themselves coexisting in a single historical time.

In telling this story about the cultural origins of the concept of the state of nature, however, another story unfolds before our eyes. And this is a story about the power of culture in the theory and practice of European politics. For the development sketched out above led to a radical transformation of European political thought, domestic and international, whose origins and concrete political meaning is not open to reflection and examination any longer. That is, the assumption of a natural state of man devoid of cultural development has, as the basis for a new epistemology, pervaded European political thought so thoroughly that it is not even any longer identified with concrete peoples or historical events. It has become a theoretical device, a hypothetical state of nature which is considered to be 'neutral' and, above all, independent of any concrete historical contents. However, in going back to its origin in a concrete intercultural encounter which was itself highly charged with political, social and moral meaning, it is not only possible to examine its validity, that is to examine whether Amerindian peoples could with any justification be described as peoples without culture. But, more importantly, this historical analysis demonstrates that at no point in time was this concept only a theoretical device. It was developed in the course of the concrete interaction between Spaniards and Amerindians, it played a crucial role in European and North American domestic as well as international political practice and, as I will show in the conclusion, it still does so in Western foreign policies.

The power of culture consists, then, of two different but closely interrelated processes. On the one hand, it is the culturally peculiar definition of human nature, history and destiny which defines the framework, the outer limits and the internal possibilities of our understanding of the world and of ourselves and our role in it. And in the case of the discipline of International Relations this understanding is clearly based on a universal conception of human nature and, because of the hidden origins of this concept, a blissful unawareness of its particularist cultural identity and, therefore, its limited validity. On the other hand, then, the

power of culture consists in political practice, not caused by but based on this particular cultural framework, its possibilities and limitations. The limitations of this cultural framework do not lead only to the reproduction of contradictory accounts of the 'nature' of international politics but also to a cyclical reproduction of international politics in practice.

For if it is true, as suggested in this study, that culture is constitutive of human nature rather than a deviation from it, meaning that human beings are for their interaction with each other, as well as with their natural environment, dependent on culture which organizes and directs and gives meaning to these activities in specific ways, then the discipline of International Relations would indeed do well to get rid of the concept of the state of nature and the theories based on it. It may well be necessary, then, to attempt the construction of a theory of International Relations on the assumption that there is no human nature without culture and that, consequently, a theory of International Relations has to inquire into the conditions of conflict and cooperation between cultures and into the political implications of a world in which cultures are, indeed, mutually constitutive and subject to change, rather than on the assumption that nature will one day overcome culture.

Before I can start to tell the story of this book itself, however, I would like to clarify two points which might otherwise provide ground for misunderstanding. The first one is the frequent use of terms like 'the Amerindians' or 'Amerindian peoples' throughout this book. These terms do not express either my ignorance of the fact that there were and still are a multitude of native American cultures, nor a conscious or unconscious denigration of the dignity of these peoples and their cultures. In fact, this whole study is a passionate plea for the reversal of a theory and practice which abstracts from, and thus denigrates, cultural identities, be they native American, European or Chinese, as more or less grave deviations from true, that is natural, humanity. If I use these terms, it is because they do express precisely those abstractions which have flown into the concept of the state of nature. Indeed, it was not the case that either the Spaniards or classical thinkers were not aware of the existence of a multitude of cultures in America. Yet, the various definitions of the concept of the state of nature rest invariably on certain societal features which, if they existed in the first place, were abstracted from the roles they played in a given society and subsequently applied to Amerindian societies in general, with the notable exception, that is, of the Aztec and the Inca Empires.

And there is a second set of terms that can give rise to such misunderstanding, namely 'man', 'men', 'mankind'. In the beginning of my research on this topic I intended to devote considerable space to the analysis of the gendered definition of the state of nature, that is to the fact that classical thinkers have actually consciously and openly defined 'true' humanity, the natural essence of humanity, as male. In addition, the fact that the contemporary authors I am going to quote in this study nevertheless use 'nature' as a neutral and universal concept over and against culture or gender, only demonstrates that my argument about the relationship between nature and culture has much deeper and wider implications. However, lack of space, unfortunately, has prevented a thorough analysis of the gendered contents of the state of nature. I have chosen to use the terms 'man', 'mankind' throughout this book on the one hand because they are the terms frequently used in the quotations by classical as well as contemporary authors, and on the other because they describe exactly what the authors mean, namely men.

*The most happy of mortals should I think myself could I contribute to make mankind recover from their prejudices. By prejudices I here mean, not that which renders men ignorant of some particular things, but whatever renders them ignorant of themselves.*

(Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*)

# 1

## Culture, Nature and the Ambivalence of International Theory

For Francis Fukuyama the ‘universalization of Western liberal democracy’ after the end of the Cold War marks the end of history understood as ‘mankind’s ideological evolution’ (1989: 4). This statement does not, however, imply that ‘all societies become successful liberal societies, merely that they end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society’ (1989: 13). There will, therefore, still be international conflicts among those who have not yet become successful liberal societies as well as between the latter and those who have already passed into the post-historical phase; but we do not have to concern ourselves with ‘every crackpot messiah around the world, but only [with] those that are embodied in important social or political forces and movements, and which are therefore part of world history’ (1989: 9). International conflicts, on this reading, are at least partly caused by different ‘ideologies’, different ideas about how society should be organized. Yet, we do not have to analyse these ideologies or their role in international politics as long as they are not embodied in powerful social and political forces.

Samuel Huntington, meanwhile, proclaims that the end of the Cold War marks the beginning of a period in which clashes of civilizations will be the major form of international conflict. He, too, then identifies civilizations, ideologies, belief systems as a major source of conflict and, unlike Fukuyama, insists that the discipline of International Relations should pay more attention to the cultural and religious beliefs, sensibilities and interests of other civilizations (Huntington, 1993: 49). But since, according to Huntington, the power of non-Western civilizational blocs, in particular that of the Islamic–Confucian bloc, has risen