Systems of states*

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One aspect of international relations which interested Martin Wight particularly was the functioning of what are called systems of states. That has also been an area of my special interest since the late 50s. It was the focus of the discussions of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics. The committee was organized in the late fifties to bring together people from different disciplines, practitioners as well as scholars. Herbert Butterfield and Martin were the founders and guiding spirits of the early years of the committee, and I was one of the original members. It was a collective enterprise: members submitted papers which left as questions those points on which the author did not feel certain of the answers. Martin told me that the most stimulating and interesting work he did during the 60s was writing papers for the committee and taking part in its discussions.

The papers which Martin wrote for the committee about the functioning of states systems were published after his death by Hedley Bull. Perhaps the most important is the general analysis which he called De systematibus civilitatum, from the essay by Pufendorf in 1675 which defined the concept and gave it its name. The paper followed several discussions by the committee and a number of essays, notably Martin's 'Why is there no International Theory?' and others by Herbert Butterfield, Desmond Williams and myself. 'My aim in the present paper', Martin began, 'is to offer some notes towards clarifying the idea of a states system and to formulate some of the questions or propositions which a comparative study of states systems would examine... the kind of issue which I believe we should discuss systematically.' The paper summed up the problems with Martin's unique combination of clarity, scholarship and thoroughness.

De systematibus greatly clarified our minds. It has also provided since then a focus for my own thinking on the subject of states systems, and in particular a point of departure for the book on that subject which I am now completing. I can best illustrate the continuity between Martin's work and mine by quoting Herbert Butterfield's first Martin Wight Memorial Lecture. 'When we decided to make a prolonged study of States Systems in various parts of the globe throughout the ages, [Martin] took a leading part in the discussions; and we hope that the stimulus of these will secure that Adam Watson will complete his own book on systems of states.'

Therefore we want to remind you of the questions which Martin formulated and the assumptions which underlay them, and to set out for you briefly some results of my subsequent work on the subject, indicating how I would now answer Martin's questions.

Types of states systems

First the scope of the subject. The European states system, leading to the present worldwide one, is not unique. There have been several others. We set out to compare the historical evidence, and see what the systems 'in various parts of the globe throughout the ages' have in common and how they differ. De systematibus listed three agreed examples of states systems: the Western, the Greco-Roman, and the Chinese of the Warring States; and mentioned the Indian and other systems. 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.

By states we conventionally mean sovereign states—indepedent political authorities which recognize no superior. For states to form a system each must, in Martin's formulation of the accepted view, 'recognise the same claim to independence by all the others'. The sovereigns of the European system did this, and so did the Greek city states and Hellenistic kingdoms. But Martin did not want us to stop there. He cited the ancient Chinese system, the Roman system, and even the British raj in India as examples of groups of states in permanent relations with one another, 'but one among them asserts unique claims which the others formally or tacitly accept'. Notice the phrase 'or tacitly'. Since the claim in such systems was to suzerainty, Martin suggested that we might distinguish them from international states systems by calling them suzerain states systems. He wanted us to look at both.

Level of cultural unity

Let us now turn to two more fundamental sets of questions. The first concerns cultural unity. 'We must assume', says De systematibus, 'that a states system will not come into being without a degree of cultural unity among its members.' If we accept the assumption, do the code of conduct and the institutions of each system reflect the distinct values and religion of its common culture, or are the agreed rules essentially regulative, conditioned by the same empirical pressures in all systems?

Now if by a system we mean any group of states or communities so involved with one another that each is obliged to take continuous account of what the others do, and therefore they are in regular communication and perhaps conflict with each other, then obviously the members of a system will sometimes belong to different cultures. The relations between the Egyptian and Hittite empires and their clients at the time of the Tell el Amarna tablets are an example. The diplomatic dialogue was

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2 Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.) Diplomatic Investigations (London, 1966), pp. 17-24. The essays written for the Committee are available in the library of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, St James's Square, London SW1.

3 Systems of States, p. 22.


conducted in cuneiform Aramaic, and indeed the negotiations seem to have developed in an Aramaic, that is a Syrian, context; yet neither Egypt nor the Hittites belonged to the Aramaic culture. On the other hand we have what Hedley Bull calls an international society, with consciously formulated rules and institutions reinforced by shared assumptions and values, the historical evidence fully supports Martin’s assumption. Indeed I know of no international society that did not originate inside a single dominant culture.

Hedley Bull formulated his seminal distinction, between the impersonal pressures of a system and the consciously formulated rules of a society, after and as a result of De systematibus. Martin’s use of the term ‘states system’ reflects an older, and wider usage. His assumption about cultural unity is shared by previous scholars, from Pufendorf to Spengler and Tonnies. Heeren’s classic formula in the preface to the Geschichte des Europäischen Staatsysytems, quoted by Martin, defines a states system as ‘the union of several contiguous states, resembling each other in their manners, religion and degree of social improvement, and cemented together by a reciprocity of interests’. That definition of a states system is close to Bull’s definition of a society, specifically limited to a single culture. Voltaire in the striking second chapter of his Siècle de Louis XIV called Europe, give or take Russia, ‘une grande république’—one great commonwealth—divided into several states; and he described its shared cultural practices, which excluded the Ottoman Turks.

While families of states (to use a biological metaphor) like Hellas and the European grande république developed complex inter-state societies within the framework of a culture, some more purely regulatory machinery, on what we might call Tell el Amarna lines, is also necessary for the operation, the orderliness, of a system that extends beyond a single culture. The most striking example is the arrangements between the grande république and the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire controlled about a quarter of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and it was militarily so powerful, and economically so interesting, that every Christian state had to take it into account. Its informal co-operation with France and the Protestant states broke the Habsburg hegemony and made Europe safe for protestantism, and its later policies contributed to the defeat of Louis XIV and Napoleon. Yet it was not part of the European international society, and disindied that society’s rules, institutions and peace settlements. Instead the Ottomans developed a separate regulatory code of conduct with the European states, known as capitulations; which were largely prescribed by the Ottomans in the heyday of their power, but later modified by the Europeans in their own favour when they became stronger.

When the nineteenth century European expansion involved the whole world in a single system of economic and strategic pressures, we find the Europeans using the capitulations with the Ottomans as a model for dealing with countries with different cultures like China and Morocco, more than the arrangements of their own much more closely knit Grande République. The difference between the culturally conditioned rules and institutions of the European society and the capitulatory arrangements with the Ottomans seems to me to deserve more careful study, because it provides a valuable clue to our understanding of states systems and their relation to a cultural framework.

However, the position is more complicated than that. Once an international society in Hedley Bull’s sense has come into being within the matrix of a culture, its regulatory rules and institutions, and to a much less extent its values, can and do spread beyond its original members. The transformation of the European system into our present global one offers many examples of states from other cultures graduating, so to speak, from capitulations to accepting the rules and being admitted to full membership of the international society that originated in Europe. But it was the states of the enlarged Grande République, which by now included Russia and the United States, that decided who should be admitted to membership of their club.

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.

Degrees of hegemony

The second set of questions raised by Martin concerns hegemony. This issue particularly interested him and me. We both wanted to look beyond systems composed of equally independent states, to hierarchy and hegemony, because that is how most systems actually function much of the time. ‘Is there always a hierarchy between states in a system?’ Martin asked in De systematibus. Are there always great powers with recognized special rights and responsibilities? He suspected that hegemony by the power or powers at the top of the hierarchy was usual and perhaps ubiquitous. He called the European system ‘a succession of hegemonies, in which one great power after another tries to transform the states system, or even to abolish it’. One answer to hegemony is a balance of power; and he asked ‘Does the balance of power system arise only in response to the threat of hegemony?’

Furthermore, Martin said, once you examine the workings of hegemony, and the historical record, you come up against the prospect that sooner or later the strongest power in the system will tighten its grip beyond hegemony, and establish an empire. That is what happened in the China of the Warring States; it is what happened in the Greco-Roman system, and nearly happened under Alexander; it is what happened in ancient India when the system of independent kingdoms described in the Arthashastra was unified into the Maurya Empire. Martin feared that the mechanism of the balance of power, and substitutes for it like the League of Nations, were bound to fail sooner or later. In De systematibus he stated that ‘most states systems have ended in a universal empire, which has swallowed all the states of the system’, and asked whether we knew of any states system which did not. He saw this as an unconventional and pessimistic question. He intended to write a paper for us describing how the Hellenistic system of independent states was gradually transformed into a Roman suzerainty system and finally into an empire. It has been a real disappointment to me that he did not write that paper.

If hegemony is so prevalent in systems of independent states, how do they differ from suzerainty systems? In suzerainty systems, Martin said, one power makes a unique claim, to determine the rules and institutions of the system—or as we would now say,
the society. But that is also the claim of the hegemony power of the day in the European society and in city state Greece. The difference which we had in mind was that in suzerain societies the suzerain is the legitimate source of hegemonic authority; that is to say, the other states formally or tacitly accept the principle that there should be a suzerainity, though they sometimes reject the claim of a particular ruler to exercise it. By contrast, the other states in the European and Greek societies reject the principle, though they may acquiesce in a hegemony in practice.

In the 60s we attached great importance to this distinction. Herbert Butterfield said that once the states in a system ceased to assert their independence and accepted a hegemony, the system ceased to be interesting; and Hedley Bull’s classic work, The Anarchical Society, which grew out of papers written for the committee, stops at the same dividing line. The distinction still seems fundamental to many scholars today. Martin called our attitude a matter of judgement. ‘Why’, he asked, ‘are we inclined to judge a system of independent states as a more desirable way of arranging the affairs of a great number of men than the alternatives?’

There were perhaps three reasons for the way we thought at that time. First, it was the conventional wisdom, from which we were only beginning to free ourselves. Second, the European system since Westphalia—that is, during most of its existence—has theoretically been a society of independent states which all recognize each other as such. The committee accepted the theory. We thought of the hegemonic practice as a series of violations of the legitimate state, which the anti-hegemonic coalitions were each time fortunate enough to defeat. Third, in the world as a whole the 60s were the culmination of the historic drive for the independence of dependent states, the wholesale decolonization of the Western overseas empires, what Professor Kedourie has called the Chatham House version of history. Multiple independences seemed to us legitimate and desirable, and also assured in the short term. Martin’s pessimistic question about all systems ending in empires referred to developments beyond the horizon.

I would like to offer you here a comment on what I have just said, by Professor Inis Claude, one of the most distinguished American thinkers on the subject. ‘This seems to me’, he writes, ‘a quintessentially European view’. I was nurtured on the Wilsonian critique of the European states system and the accompanying conviction that a multistate system is incorrigibly productive of catastrophic disorder. In my setting and my generation, the conventional wisdom had it that “One World” was essential, and that a system of multiple sovereignties was a recipe for disaster. Other words, we really do need some supranational machinery for maintaining order, for managing international society, more than just law and balance between independent states.

A spectrum of systems

The discussion so far has assumed that there is an important dividing line between independence and hegemony. I have since become increasingly doubtful about sharp distinctions between systems of independent states, suzerain systems and empires. I now prefer to define the wider subject by saying that, when a number of diverse communities of people, or political entities, are sufficiently involved with one another for us to describe them as forming a system of some kind (whether independent, suzerain or whatever), the organization of the system will fall somewhere along a notional spectrum between absolute independence and absolute empire. The two marginal positions are theoretical absolutes, that do not occur in practice.

It is convenient for purposes of comparison to divide the spectrum into four broad categories of relationship: independence, hegemony, domination and empire. In practice these categories are not watertight, with an abrupt transition from one to another. The range of states systems is rather a continuum, like wavelengths of light in a rainbow, which we find it convenient to divide into different colours. As the wavelengths of green light get longer, the light gets blues; and so, as the external freedom of action of communities in a system decreases, the more hegemonic the system becomes. But there is no clear dividing line. We must be careful not to give more importance to the distinctions we make between colours or categories than they really have. But we should also be careful not to say that the complexity of history makes the enterprise of drawing distinctions a useless one.

Independent states in a system indicate political entities that retain the ultimate ability to take external decisions as well as domestic ones. But we all agree that in practice freedom in external decisions is limited by two factors. First, the constraints which in combination in any system imposes; and second, the voluntary commitments that states assume in order to manage their external relations more effectively. The greater the constraints and commitments, the tighter the system will be, and the further along the spectrum away from absolute independences.

The more closely so-called sovereign states are involved with each other, the less they feel able to operate alone. The impersonal net of strategic and economic pressures that hold them together in a system induces them to make alliances, trade treaties and so on. Alliances and other agreements bring a form of order to what would be an inchoate system by coordinating, and thus modifying, the behaviour of their members. That is an aspect of what the European system called raison d’État. (Herbert Butterfield’s first Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, entitled ‘Raison d’État’, was addressed to the development of these ideas.) Order is further promoted by general agreements and rules that restrain and benefit all members of the system, and make it into a society. That is an aspect of raison de système, the belief that it pays to make the system work. Insofar as such agreements are truly voluntary, and are not laid down by a victor power or group of powers, they fall within the multiplicity of independences area of the spectrum.

But the freedom of action of independent states is not only limited by the pressures of interdependence and by voluntary choice. Usually it is also limited, more effectively, by hegemony. By a hegemony I mean that some power or authority in a system is able to ‘lay down the law’ about the operation of the system, that is to determine to some extent the relations between member states, while leaving them domestically independent. Some scholars like to reserve the term hegemony for the exercise of this authority by a single power; but it is obvious that the authority can be exercised either by an individual power, or as is often the case by a small group. An example of dual hegemony is the Athenian–Spartan diarchy after the Persian wars. Kimon told his fellow Athenians that they and the Spartans were like a pair of oxen yoked together for the task, and warned them not to kick against their yokefellows.
The five great European powers after 1815 exercised a diffused hegemony, which I will discuss in a moment. Indeed the rules and institutions of the European international society were far from purely voluntary; they were to a large extent imposed by the principal victors at the great peace settlements like Westphalia, Vienna and Versailles, and to that extent hegemonic. I therefore prefer the wider use of the term hegemony, rather than ugly words like para-hegemonial. Moreover, I want to use the term hegemony in an objective rather than a pejorative sense. A hegemony is not a dictatoral fiat. The hegemonies which I have looked at, whether exercised by an individual power or a small group, involve continual dialogue between the hegemonial authority and the other states, and a sense on both sides of the balance of expediency.

Further along the spectrum dominion covers situations where an imperial authority has some extent determines the internal government of other communities, but they nevertheless retain their identity and some control over their own affairs. Examples are Soviet relations with Eastern Europe before Gorbachev, the relation of the Emperor Augustus to Herod’s kingdom, or the relation of the British raj to the Indian princes. Here the part played by the ability to coerce becomes more obvious.

Finally empire means direct administration of different communities from an imperial centre. It is no more absolute in practice than independence: the freedom of action of imperial governments is limited by the constraints which any involvement with other communities imposes.

No known system remains fixed at one point in the spectrum. Systems tighten and loosen, and the relation of the various communities to each other shifts constantly to and fro along the spectrum over time. There is also a variation in space. Political entities— that is, communities held together by a common government—in the system do not all stand in the same relationship to one another, or to an imperial power. When looked at closely every relationship between two communities has in practice a special nature of its own. In addition the political entities which compose systems are far from being either all alike, or constants in themselves. The members of the European society, for instance, ranged from the nebulous presidential authority of the emperor and the many communities under the very real sovereignty of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and of the Habsburgs in Vienna, to states like Parma and Schaumburg-Lippe that were no more than the estates of petty princes. We must use terms like state and community also in as neutral a sense as possible.

We could represent our spectrum as vertical, with a gravitational pull from multiple independencies at the top down through hegemony to dominion and empire. Martin might have seen it that way. I find that a more useful metaphor for understanding systems is the pendulum. Imagine the spectrum laid out in the form of an arc, with its midpoint at the bottom of the pendulum’s swing, somewhere between hegemony and dominion. Was there in former systems, in there now, not merely oscillation to and fro, but a noticeable pendulum effect, in the sense of a gravitational pull on systems away from both the theoretical extremes and towards some central area of the spectrum, even though the momentum of change and other factors may carry the pendulum past that area? I am now (after twenty years of looking at the evidence) inclined to think that there is a pendulum effect, though the pattern varies from one system to another. We need to compare the pressures towards greater autonomy that make empires and dominions loosen and break up, with the corresponding tendencies towards hegemony in systems of independent states (which is what interested

Martin). In the practical operation of states systems, as opposed to their formal legitimacy—de facto rather than de jure—the midpoint tends to be a varying degree of autonomy or domestic independence, ordered by a degree of external hegemony or authority, individual or joint.

The image of the pendulum is a way of illustrating the tension between the desire for order and the desire for independence. The desire for a balanced system, that is neither too tight nor too loose, causes the gravitational pull on the pendulum.

The emergence of rules

Why do political entities locked in a system obey rules? Coercion or the threat of coercion is a quite insufficient explanation. An important factor in the functioning of a states system is the degree to which its arrangements are accepted as legitimate. By legitimacy in this context I mean the acceptance of authority, the right of a rule or a ruler to be obeyed, as distinguished from the ability to coerce. Authority is determined not by those who wield it but by the attitudes of those who obey it. The historical evidence is that all systems, and especially international societies of states, operate largely on the basis of what members consider legitimate authority, as opposed to compulsion or the threat of it, and that all member states or communities usually, and most of them all the time, abide by the rules. Legitimacy facilitates the exercise of authority in a system, and makes it more acceptable. It is not the motive force of the system, but it is perhaps the lubricating oil.

What are these rules, that enjoy the authority of legitimacy? Unlike the constitutions promulgated for the domestic government of some states, in international societies the practice occurs first. And the practice always has some element of hegemony in it. The practice is then codified into rules, and ad hoc arrangements are institutionalized. Time and custom legitimate practice. And so, in a different way, do the declarations of peace settlements. Inevitably the practices which were innovative and expedient at one phase of the system become rigid when they are codified and institutionalized. The legitimacy of the day-old practice and facilitates the functioning of the system within its accepted rules; but it holds back changes in the rules. Practice is fluid, and runs beyond the legitimacy. It tries out new expedients, some of which are discarded while others become legitimized and institutionalized in their turn. Grotius, the lawyer and professional diplomat, set out to codify and to make acceptable the unduly practice of his time, and found the practice changing as he formulated it. Professor Rosalyn Higgins is entirely in accord with my understanding of the working of international societies when she recently wrote: ‘The task of the international lawyer over the next few years is surely not to go on repeating the rhetoric of dead events which no longer accord with reality, but to try to assist the political leaders to identify what is the new consensus about acceptable and unacceptable actions.’

The evolving European system

With these ideas in mind let us look again at the European society of states. Martin called it a succession of hegemonies. That is so, in the sense that the propensity to

h egemony, the tendency to move away from the extreme of multiple independences, was always present: not as an aberration but as an integral feature of the system. First there were the Habsburgs, based on Spain and the Empire. They operated strictly within the legitimacy of the time as they understood it, and in particular the accepted rules of inheritance, which put their family in a hegemonic position. The anti-hegemonic coalition that destroyed the Habsburg hegemony operated on the basis of the de facto independence of its members; and the aims and practices of the victorious coalition became the public law of Europe. But the victors did not want an anarchic free-for-all; they wanted to replace the Habsburg hegemonic order by an anti-hegemonic order which operated by means of international law and a diplomatic dialogue. This was an imaginative and seminal concept, the basis of today's international legitimacy. But the new legitimacy of a commonwealth of sovereign states established at Westphalia leaned considerably further towards multiple independences than was warranted either by the distribution of power in Europe or by the innate propensity to hegemony and order in the system. Into this gap between the legitimacy and the reality stepped the hegemony of Louis XIV, himself half a Habsburg, married to a Habsburg wife and sovereign of the most powerful state in the system. Louis XIV managed his hegemony within the framework of the new Westphalian legitimacy, though not its spirit. He did this by a network of client allies which he subsidized, as the Persians did during the King's Peace in ancient Greece; by an unprecedented continuous diplomatic dialogue of threat and inducement; and by that ultimate argument, the actual use of force.

Between Louis and Napoleon, from the Utrecht settlement of 1714 to the French Revolution of 1789, the European sovereigns' club translated into practice the anti-hegemonic concepts of Utrecht and Westphalia. During those exceptional seventy-five years there was no hegemony in Europe, but an effective balance of power consciously operated by statesmen. Martin's question in *De systematibus* about the balance of power in other states systems led Herbert Butterfield to write his masterly paper on the balance of power, which shows that though a de facto equilibrium existed from time to time in other systems, the conscious aim of a general balance was present in the minds of statesmen for the first time in the European society of states. And we should note that the weights in the balance extended beyond the European sovereigns' club to include the Ottoman Empire.

Napoleon's imperial authority took the European society of states further away than ever before from the anti-hegemonic balance of power towards the empire end of our spectrum; and it altered men's ideas about managing that society. It is true that his defeat restored anti-hegemonic legitimacy. The Treaty of Vienna confirmed that all states in the grande république were to be regarded as juridically equal. But the statesmen who congegarated at Vienna understood, more clearly than they are sometimes given credit for, the advantages of domestic and international order which Napoleon's empire, in spite of incessant external war, had brought to the great areas of Europe which he controlled. They thought it undesirable as well as impracticable to revert to the eighteenth-century practice.

Hitherto the most powerful state in the system and its allies had been opposed by a coalition led by the second most powerful state. Now the five most powerful European sovereigns (including a restored France) agreed that some authority was needed to maintain and modify the Vienna settlement. The five great powers did not trust each other to exercise a unilateral authority. But instead of opposing each other, as had hitherto been the anti-hegemonic practice, they formed a single partnership, sustained by concerted diplomacy, in order to arrogate to themselves the duties and privileges of operating a joint authority. That was what I think Martin had in mind when in *De systematibus* he asked the committee to examine the institutionalizing of the special role of great powers after 1815. Where the five powers agreed to act together, checking and balancing each other, or at least acquiesced in action after consultation, they could collectively exercise a diffused hegemony which none would agree to another exercising alone. Acquiescence was a felicitous device of the shared hegemony. It enabled a great power to judiciously abstain from certain decisions and their enforcement, and so to maintain intact both its principles and its partnership in the concert. Harmony between them, when it was achieved, orchestrated the *Concert of Europe*. In a sense the concert was a synthesis between two opposing ways of organizing Europe: it combined the hegemonic laying down of the law with the balance of power.

The great powers soon found that their interests and—more difficult—their principles diverged. They began to kick against their yokefellows. But they shared an interest in the successful operation of the new concert. The other member states of the European society resented their exclusion from the hegemony of the great powers, but they tacitly accepted it. The concert achieved a certain legitimacy, which remained in existence even when the practice gradually weakened. This most diffuse of Martin's succession of hegemonies was the climax of European constructive achievement in the managing of a states system.

I need not elaborate the relevance of hegemony to the very different world of today. The five permanent members of the Security Council are an inadequate survival of the formal legitimacy of five great powers. In practice the global system from the end of the Second World War until today separated out into two main opposed hegemonic systems. But it seems to me that after our half of the system moved to extremes of decolonization and theoretical multiple independences in the 60s, the pendulum is now swinging back towards more hegemonic forms of order. This is particularly visible in the economic field. A majority of the member states of our international society are politically autonomous but economically dependent, in the sense that they cannot and do not want to manage without considerable outside aid. We are witnessing the experiments of managing the economic affairs of the non-communist world by the collective hegemony of the Group of Seven, which includes all the great powers of our economic system. Of course the composition of the group may change, particularly if the four European members become more closely integrated. This economic hegemony is legitimated by operating through established collective machinery like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as through client alliances like the Lomé conventions which are more reminiscent of Louis XIV's practices.

A political and strategic order would have to be worldwide. One way of managing it would be to extend the concert by bringing in the Soviet Union and China. A global concert on these lines, using United Nations machinery to make its decisions more acceptable, is now politically conceivable. Some would say that in places like Angola and Indochina it is already in operation. Alternatively, I suppose the political hegemony of our global system might take the form of a diarchy of the two superpowers, maintaining an order agreed between them; which would be similar to the Athenian-Spartan diarchy after the Persian wars. Perhaps the Americans and the
Russians are no longer strong enough, relative to the rest of us, to operate an effective diarchy; but where they agree, their combined weight is likely to prevail. In any case the question is not whether there will be some degree of hegemonial direction in our international affairs, but how much. In order to mitigate resentment, the practical arrangements for forms of joint hegemonial order are likely to be cloaked in the rhetoric of individual independence for every state, and are likely to use established omnilateral machinery where possible to implement hegemonial programmes. For, as I said, legitimacy is the lubricating oil of the society.

The way forward

I have said enough to show that Martin’s questions about the nature of states systems brought a fresh wind of original and penetrating thought to the subject. By putting these questions to our committee, which included some of the most inquisitive minds in the field, and by helping to work out some answers, he carried the subject a significant stage forward. He was convinced, and confirmed my suspicion, that in order to achieve anything worthwhile, we must free ourselves both from the conventional historiography which imposed blinkers on our angle of vision, and did not ask the right questions; and also from the fashionable ideology of the day. As he put it, “the intellectual and moral poverty of international theory are due first to the intellectual prejudice imposed by the sovereign state, and secondly to the belief in progress”. The search for detachment made him value the comparison with other states systems. Comparative analysis might help us to work out a general international theory, valid not only for the European but for all systems.

Of all Martin’s questions, perhaps the most seminal for me were the ones which took us beyond systems made up only of independent states, to include hegemonial and suzerain systems. This enlargement of the horizon brought him to the realization that the European system too was not a system of free states operating in a balance that could put down periodic bids for hegemony but, in his illuminating phrase, a succession of hegemonies. We all felt the impact of this insight. Some years after Martin’s death I showed Hedley Bull a draft of my work on states systems, and his comment was that what scholars would seize on as the outstanding feature of the work was the central role of hegemony in all systems. When I pointed out that the idea was originally Martin’s, he said that seeds planted by Martin had developed also in his case into the Anarchical Society. I want in this lecture to place my debt to Martin on record. And also to record the hope that some of the younger scholars here will look again at De systematibus and ‘Why is there no International Theory?’, and also at the work which Hedley Bull and I among many others have done since in this field. I hope they will take a stage further the search for answers to our questions, and perhaps work out a general theory covering the range of relations between political entities.