



Adam Watson and international relations: a contemporary reassessment—introduction

Filippo Costa Buranelli¹  · Yannis Stivachtis²

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Abstract

This is the introduction to the special issue 'Adam Watson and International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment'. In this short piece, the guest editors outline the genesis, development, and purpose of the project, offer a rationale for the special issue, summarise the papers in it, and reflect on the importance of Adam Watson within the English School and International Relations canons.

Keywords Adam Watson · International relations · English school · British committee on the theory of international politics · International society

Of all the founding members of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (BC) and the English School of International Relations (ES), John Hugh 'Adam' Watson (1914–2007) is certainly among the least scrutinised and assessed, let alone celebrated. This is despite his crucial contributions to International Relations (IR) theory, especially with respect to the concept of hegemony, the comparison of historical state systems, his practice-informed work on diplomacy, his sharp reflections on the consequences of decolonisation, and the importance of culture in world politics—all present in his multifaceted and encompassing production.

With respect to other BC/ES figures, such as Charles Manning, Martin Wight, Coral Bell, Herbert Butterfield, John Vincent, and Hedley Bull, Adam Watson and his legacy have yet to be properly situated in the broader IR theory panorama and reflected upon, with particular reference to the meaning of his production for current trend in world politics. After all, these are times in which world order seems to be undergoing profound transformations due to war and great power rivalry, climate

✉ Filippo Costa Buranelli
fcb7@st-andrews.ac.uk

Yannis Stivachtis
ystivach@vt.edu

¹ University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK

² Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, United States



change, and the structuring effects of the dynamics of uneven and combined development with countries and societies especially in the Global South advocating for more equity, equality, and fairness in treatment in global governance. These are also times when the discipline of IR has been called upon to make more room for interdisciplinarity, to pay more attention to the dynamics and the scholarship of the Global South, to be less Eurocentric and more inclusive and diverse, and to be more in sync with the actual practice of those ‘doing’ international politics (with specific reference to the ES, see Costa Buranelli 2020).

Yet, the reader may ask, why turning to a past author, instead of looking ahead? Why, specifically, considering Watson’s work instead of searching for innovative and fresh thinking to make sense of the deep ruptures and transformations in world politics and in the discipline studying it? As the articles in this special issue will hopefully make clear, the answer is that Adam Watson prefigured, reflected, and anticipated several of the abovementioned trends and dynamics, with an interdisciplinary, multifaceted, and comprehensive approach—an approach that, according to the contributors of this special issue, has not been paid the right attention and given the right appreciation so far. These range from the theorisation of ‘raison de système’ to the incorporation of elements of international political economy in the study of international society; from the analysis of the presence of multiple orders within a single international society to the role of marcher states in it; from the first problematisation of the system–society distinction to the consideration of the uneasy relationship between sovereign equality, great power management, and informal hierarchies; from the attention paid to non-state actors and (regional) international organisations in the functioning of international order to the call for considering ‘the practice’ and practitioners more seriously in the study, and conduct, of international relations. Thus, re-engaging with the work of Adam Watson and assessing its relevance for today’s world seems to us to be not only appropriate but necessary. For those keen on assigning numbers to relevance in academia, this is evident if one pays heed to how Watson’s work has been referenced and used recently, with more than 3000 citations in the last fifteen years only.¹

However, it is important to specify from this very introduction that this special issue does not intend to be a *Festschrift* honouring Adam Watson. Rather, all the authors contributing to this endeavour keenly explore and reflect on a few other aspects of his works than those mentioned above, including the Eurocentrism pervading some of his works, his ambivalent opinions on imperialism, and several historical aporias in his writings. Hence, the title of this special issue—a contemporary *reassessment*. Not a celebration, or a rediscovery. Rather, a consideration of the value, importance, and prescient character of Watson’s work, shedding light on his groundbreaking ideas and his neglected contributions to the together with some of what are perceived to be his scholarly weaknesses and contentious positions on some issues. All authors are much aware of Watson being a mid-20th-century English diplomat and intelligence officer, a white man working in a post-war then immediately postcolonial context with views that were very Eurocentric, even if—as

¹ Google Scholar metrics for Adam Watson from 2009 to 2024, checked on 20 May 2024.



several of the contributions note—they were more expansive. This is accounted for and discussed in all the contributions in this special issue. What all the articles seek to do is, on the one hand, exactly to examine how this impacted on his theorisation of and approach to world politics offering critiques and problematisations. On the other hand, they analyse how, also considering the issues attached to his positionality, his work and ideas have had an impact on IR, discussing elements of originality, underdeveloped potential, and prefiguration.²

The original idea behind this project was the consideration that 2022 would be the 30th anniversary of Adam Watson's ground-breaking monograph, *The Evolution of International Society*. We therefore thought that a collection of essays to celebrate the book and Watson's overall production, investigating the importance and the relevance thereof for today's international order, would be a compelling way to revamp and reignite the debate and the scholarly discussion around this author. Yet, the more we reflected about this, and the more time was passing, the more we thought that not only could our collection serve as a celebration of *The Evolution of International Society* in the year of its jubilee, but also constitute a timely and needed exploration and critical enquiry into the broader work of Adam Watson, his contributions to both ES and broader IR theory, as well as the blind spots and scholarly weaknesses that marked his activity as a 'gentleman scholar' (Buzan and Little 2009).

Hence, these reflections led to the formation of an outstanding team of rising and established scholars, all versed in IR theory with a particular ES bend, who discussed the foundational ideas of this issue at a roundtable titled 'How is international society evolving? Reflections on the work of Adam Watson' at the 2021 International Studies Association (ISA) Convention (Las Vegas, online).

Building on that roundtable, the contributions that this project seeks to offer to the field of IR theory and, more specifically, to those interested in the origins, developments, and future trajectories of the ES, are the following: first, to review and critically scrutinise the intellectual *persona* of Adam Watson, as a theorist, as an academic, and as a practitioner; second, to discuss Watson's place in the ES and in the broader IR panorama, analysing the strengths as well as the shortcomings of his production; and third, to shed light on his theorisation and conceptualisation of IR as well as his interpretation of international politics, diplomacy, and history, with particular attention to their relevance for how both the discipline and world politics are evolving nowadays. The final outcome of the collective endeavour that started in 2021 is the publication of this special issue of *International Politics*, which contains twelve (12) articles and was polished and refined on three occasions—at European International Studies Association's 15th Pan-European Conference on International Relations, 1–4 September 2022, in Athens, Greece; at an online authors' workshop held on 28 October 2022; and at ISA's 64th Annual Convention, 15–18 March 2023, in Montréal, Québec, Canada.

Overall, we are confident to state that this is a unique issue. As a matter of fact, not even after Watson's death in 2007, a substantive piece of work on him

² We are grateful to the journal editors, in particular Mike Williams, and to an anonymous reviewer for inviting us to elaborate more on this point.



and his work has been published so far. This, as will be discussed below, is in stark contrast with other founding figures of the ES. Apart from a very detailed and comprehensive account of Watson's biography and scholarship offered by Barry Buzan and Richard Little in their Introduction to the second edition of *The Evolution of International Society*, to which we direct the reader for an excellent account of Watson's life (Buzan and Little 2009; Watson 2009), and apart from discussions of his works in Brunello Vigezzi's history of the BC and Ian Hall's compelling account of post-war British international thought (2012), the only contemporary discussion that we have found on part of Adam Watson's work is in the magisterial volume *The Globalisation of International Society* edited by Tim Dunne and Christ Reus-Smit (Dunne and Reus-Smit 2016). Yet, that volume provides a thorough engagement with and critique of only one output of Watson's production, and a co-edited one—*The Expansion of International Society*, with Hedley Bull.

Therefore, while acknowledging the connection and the synergy that this project has with the existing accounts, there is still a vast array of themes and topics that this issue covers, not least the figure of Adam Watson himself, his political thought, and its importance for the ES canon. As a matter of fact, although it is evident from the titles of the articles hereby included that *The Expansion of International Society* and *The Evolution of International Society* will constitute the bulk of the discussion, we do not aim to focus on one or two books only. Rather, when appropriate, in our volume attention will be paid to other crucial works of Adam Watson, such as *The War of the Goldsmith's Daughter* (1964), *Emergent Africa* (1965, published as 'Scipio'), *The Nature and Problems of the Third World* (1968), *Diplomacy: The Dialogue Between States* (1982), *The Limits of Interdependence* (1997), and *Hegemony and History* (2007) alongside several unpublished works and previously unheeded archival materials with the exact purpose to capture the complexity and the dynamism of Watson's thought.

More specifically within the ES literature, if one looks at the scholarship produced on the founding figures of the BC and the ES, the relative absence of Watson is even more evident. With respect to Martin Wight, for example, scholarly works abound. One could mention the volume by Ian Hall, *The International Thought of Martin Wight* (Hall 2006) and that of Michele Chiaruzzi, *Martin Wight on Fortune and Irony in Politics* (2016) as well as a plethora of scholarly articles and chapters on his work and worldview (for example, see Bain 2014; Hall 2014; O'Hagan 2015; Porter 2007). On both Charles Manning and Coral Bell there is a significant scholarly production, too (Aalberts 2010; Jackson 2020; Long 2005; Wilson 2004; Richardson 2005; Ball and Lee 2014; Miller 2005; Taylor 2005). On Herbert Butterfield, the mentor of Adam Watson, there has been a consistent and prolific production, both in terms of articles (Bentley 2005; Sharp 2003; Ian Hall 2002; Jardine 2003) and books (Bentley 2011; McIntire 2008; McIntyre 2014; Sewell 2005). Finally, on Hedley Bull, the available scholarship is incredibly vast and too extensive to be summarised here. As a reference, one can name the already mentioned *The Anarchical Society At 40* (Suganami et al. 2017) as well as *The Anarchical Society in a Globalised World* (Little and Williams 2006), in addition to many other scholarly articles (works produced in the last decade only include, among others, Jankovski 2016;



Orakhelashvili 2015; Williams 2010; Hurrell 2013). In the light of all the above, we do believe there is a very promising gap for this special issue to fill.

The special issue is divided into three sections, or parts, although not rigidly and formally. This is because we find the contributions from the authors to be coherent along three well-identifiable lines: *the intellectual persona of Adam Watson; the blind spots of and the critique to his work; and the contributions and relevance that his production has or can have for today's international relations*. We believe that this simple tripartite structure is the best one to convey to the reader the three main contributions that this special issue seeks to accomplish: a contextualisation and a reflection on who Adam Watson was how he thought; an informed discussion of the shortcomings of his intellectual production; and a thorough reflection on what elements of his scholarship can shed light on today's international relations. Specifically, the three sections want to target those areas and aspects of Adam Watson's scholarly production that the editors, as well as the authors, think need fresh critical engagement and research. The first part contributes to existing scholarship by reconstructing the system of thought of Adam Watson, his political theory, his view of history, and his understanding of practice. This is done by looking closely at the way in which Watson's life and Watson's work have interacted over the years. The second part discusses and examines some of the crucial topics that Watson did not discuss but that one would have expected to find in his works. These are development, ideology, Eurocentrism, colonialism, and the interplay between different political orders. The third part, conversely, brings to light those elements of Adam Watson's theorisation of IR that have great potential to speak to contemporary dynamics in world politics: capitalism and inequality, war, humanitarianism, systemic interest, and change.

Moving now on to the article themselves. In the first contribution, Filippo Costa Buranelli begins with the observation that among the founding figures of the ES and the BC, Adam Watson is among the least studied and researched. He then poses a set of important intellectual questions such as how Watson's past as diplomat informed 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? Responding to these questions, Costa Buranelli 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, Costa Buranelli's paper situates Adam Watson within the ES and the broader IR panorama, taking into account the professional, academic, and human material that the extensive archival research for this paper has uncovered.

Jacinta O'Hagan's article investigates Adam Watson's contribution to 'decentring' the ES. She suggests that two dimensions of Watson's work speak to this objective. The first is his development of a more inclusive comparative historical sociological analysis of states-systems. The second is his development of a more generic concept of systems as complex, variegated and shifting relationships of authority, highlighting the prevalence of hierarchy and hegemony in states-systems. Yet, O'Hagan argues that Watson's work remains inflected with Eurocentrism in



several important respects. These include his narrative of the evolution of the contemporary states-system, which largely remains one of the autonomous development and expansion of Europe, and the limited ways in which his narrative includes the agency, voices and experiences of non-European peoples.

In the next article, Yannis A. Stivachtis argues that nowhere can Adam Watson's contribution to ES literature be observed better than in his seminal work, *The Evolution of International Society*, in which he argued that Cold War global international society included two separate sub-global international societies led by the United States and the Soviet Union, respectively. Stivachtis goes on arguing that despite Watson's own acknowledgement that the newly established states that emerged from colonialism constituted the majority of the members of international society, he nevertheless did not consider the 'Third World' as constituting a third, separate sub-global international society thereby providing an incomplete picture of the social structure of global international society. To address this omission, Stivachtis' essay examines the social structure of Cold War international society by focussing on the role of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). He argues that during the Cold War, the NAM reflected the existence of a sub-global international society in the sense that its member states were conscious of certain common interests, common values and conceived themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and shared in the working of common institutions, such as sovereignty and non-intervention, diplomacy, human equality, development and trade, anti-hegemonialism and disarmament, and nationalism and self-determination.

Iver B. Neumann's article begins with praising Watson's historical work and goes on to criticise it for downplaying the agency of agents other than European great powers and the United States. Neumann's key point is that entrants from Europe's periphery and beyond were not only 'expanded upon' by a growing international system but came to it with their own experiences of having been part of other systems. According to Neumann, the historic memories of life before entry were kept alive by mnemonic techniques that also changed as a result of interaction with other members of the system. He suggests that what ensued was not an effortless expansion of the international system, but a meeting of cultures that may be conceptualised as the intertwining of different narrative sociabilities emanating from different memories. Neumann argues that this matters today, for entrants like China and Russia preserve memories of previous experiences, and these memories inform how these states read ongoing political developments.

Tristen Naylor seeks to offer a means of conceptualising and analysing international society as an assemblage. To this end, his article reflects on Adam Watson's *Evolution of International Society* and demonstrates how an assemblage theory approach allows us to undertake Watson's general aims to engage in broad, comparative analyses of international societies historically and produce a history of contemporary international society, but without the problematic biases and omissions that plague the empirical dimensions of his work. Naylor argues that understanding international society as an assemblage affords an ability to see that the endurance of so much of Western European international society in contemporary, global international society is owing to its particular form of assemblage. According to Naylor, in a highly adaptive form of assemblage, what changes there might be in the



international domain tend to occur within the assemblage, as the assemblage's form renders both a substantive change of the assemblage and the establishment of any rival assemblage unlikely.

In the next article, Rowan Lubbock offers a re-reading of Adam Watson's *The Evolution of International Society* through the work of Giovanni Arrighi. In doing so, Lubbock purports to make two contributions ES theory: first, he seeks to offer a more grounded analysis of Watson's 'succession of hegemonies' from the seventeenth century onwards; and second, and relatedly, through closer attention to the dynamics of capitalist international society, he attempts to enable us to better apprehend the current contradictions and challenges facing contemporary international society. Rather than replacing Watson with Arrighi, Lubbock argues that Arrighi's framework of 'systemic cycles of accumulation' complements and extends the insights offered in Watson's *magnum opus*. It is Lubbock's hope that this dialogue between the ES and critical political economy may open the way for further ES research on the (dis)orderly dynamics of capitalist international society.

Charlotta Friedner Parrat's article revisits Adam Watson's use of ideal-types in order to first distinguish between various kinds of international orders over time; and second, to address the different types of war which are logically possible in relation to those orders. Her argument is that war differs between ordered and disordered circumstances, as well as among members, or between members and non-members of a given order. She then points out first, to the necessity of analytically distinguishing between various types of order, which all happen to include organised violence between political entities, and all are called war; and second, to the need to demonstrate the utility of abstracting far enough from actual history to be able to apply analytical categories. According to Friedner Parrat, this contributes to freeing theorising about war from its Westphalian and Eurocentric straitjacket.

Nicolás Terradas's article begins with the observation that although he is one of the classical figures of the ES, scholarly appreciation of Adam Watson's contributions has almost exclusively focussed on his comparative work on historical regional 'systems of states,' the role of 'hierarchy' within an anarchical society, and the 'evolution'/ 'expansion' of international society. Terradas argues that although the concept of *raison de système* is widely acknowledged as one of Watson's main conceptual contributions, the concept has received comparatively little attention from fellow members of the ES. In this context, Terradas' article reassesses the relevance of *raison de système* in Watson's overall thinking by rooting it in a number of earlier intellectual influences emanating from the collaborative efforts of the British Committee. According to Terradas, the term *raison de système* must be understood as a richer concept giving substance to how all classical ES thinkers collectively came to conceive of international society, thus giving this theoretical tradition its distinctiveness in the larger spectrum of international thought.

Taking the baton from Terradas, Olivia Nantermoz and Aslihan Turan argue that humanitarian logics have been integral to the constitution and historical evolution of international society and its primary institutions. They suggest that whilst Watson was chiefly interested in the *raison de système*, which brought states together in the consolidation and preservation of an international society, he did not dedicate as much attention to how humanitarian concerns have historically been embedded



in the structure of both statehood and international society. In response to this observation, Nantermoz and Turan introduce the concept of *raison de l'humanité* to capture this fundamental concern for protecting human lives, alleviating human suffering, and mobilising compassion and solidarity in politics. They demonstrate how this *raison de l'humanité* has historically complemented and reinforced (rather than undermined) the workings of international society and its *raison de système*. They illustrate this argument by examining the humanitarian responsibilities historically associated with sovereignty and their contemporary expression in the responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine. Instead of uncritically celebrating this *raison de l'humanité* as a universal and morally progressive force in global politics, however, Nantermoz and Turan stress the need to attend to the hierarchies, exclusions and sacrifices produced by appeals to humanity and humanitarian logics. For Nantermoz and Turan, taking this *raison de l'humanité* seriously requires tracing how throughout history, appeals to humanity have oscillated between solidarity and violence, inclusion and exclusion, equality, and hierarchy. They suggest that this effort brings us back, in turn, to Watson's project of historical documentation of the varying workings of international society.

In his article, Aaron McKeil makes the case that the literature of hegemonic orders and debates on the crisis of US hegemony have been shaped and up to a point intellectually confined by a tradition or idea of world history understood as a series of hegemonic powers. He suggests that this tradition of history as a succession of hegemonic powers, which is traced from ancient to modern sources, has been later reconstituted as a theoretical discourse. According to McKeil, in drawing attention to the historical traditions underpinning this literature, these findings contribute to advancing the historiography of International Relations and to studying the role of multiple contemporaneous histories in the emerging international order.

Ipek Z. Ruacan's article focuses on Adam Watson's concept of 'marcher states' used in *The Evolution of International Society*. She argues that with origins in the historical sociology literature on state formation, marcher states are distinguished by their innovative nature and have characteristically exerted a significant influence on another international system in history. Ruacan traces this concept across Watson's work and discusses it in relation to the themes of culture and upward mobility, economy, and ethical values. After pointing out that overlaps between the ES and world-systems theory have so far not been examined thoroughly, she proceeds by reviewing Watson's discussion of marcher states and comparing his ideas with the main concepts in world-systems theory.

In their concluding article, Julie Bunck and Michael Fowler discuss the scholarly legacy of Adam Watson. In doing so, they address the main points and arguments made in the previous articles. They argue that setting aside for future investigation the issue of Eurocentrism, other common criticisms levied against the ES do not attach so readily to Adam Watson's scholarship. For example, they suggest, while ES scholarship is sometimes unduly state-centric, Watson took pains to bring non-state actors into his analysis of international societies, examining the functioning of organisations, regional and non-governmental alike. Yet, according to Bunck and Fowler, if the ES might do a better job of delving into topics of political economy, that shortcoming, again, does not fit Watson so readily. Instead, they argue, drawing



on his diplomatic background in Africa, Watson repeatedly analysed how the economies of new states, gaining their independence after decolonization, and looking to avoid being marginalised, might best be incorporated into the international economic system. They further argue that Watson also stands out in his efforts to peer beyond the present and consider likely future changes in international affairs. They conclude that Adam Watson left a rich and varied scholarly legacy and his publications provide us with continuing insights, understanding, and inspiration, as well as ongoing questions. By pointing out that scholars in the social sciences tend to be largely macro or largely micro thinkers (they are attracted either to fashioning broad, sweeping theories or to analysing narrow case studies and other detailed specifics), they suggest that Adam Watson, drawing on his different personas as a scholar-theorist and a diplomat-practitioner, was equally adept at and equally fascinated by the macro and the micro.

Before concluding this Introduction, we would like to acknowledge our gratitude to all the contributing authors and to other people who made this project possible. As a matter of fact, one additional aspect of the special issue we are particularly proud of is the very diverse and complementary nature of the line-up of authors—not only in terms of career stages and gender, but also in terms of geographical location, understandings of IR and ES, and interdisciplinary proclivities. This created a stimulating, nourishing, and thought-provoking amalgama of ideas, thoughts, and insights, which underpin all the contributions and reflect the collaborative, respectful, and supportive engagement between the authors with whom we were lucky to work. In fact, thanks to this cross-pollination, the articles in this special issue do not stand alone as individual assessments of Watson's scholarship, but rather are pieces of a larger mosaic—in healthy dialogue and productive tension with one another, certainly insightful on their own but even more so if seen as parts of the broader picture offered by the whole project.

Furthermore, our gratitude is also for the very personal touch that this project has managed to acquire thanks to unforeseen, but crucial synergies. In the first phases of the research as well as throughout the whole project, Filippo Costa Buranelli made the acquaintance of two of Watson's descendants—Alaric in London and Polly in Blacksburg, VA, while visiting Yannis Stivachtis at Virginia Tech—who not only did help massively in directing the researchers to themes and areas of enquiry, but also offered materials and access to archives, one of them is now digitalised and open access for everyone.³ Another personal touch added to the special issue is the welcome opportunity to have the conclusions written by two former students and mentees of Adam Watson—Julie Bunck and Michael Fowler. As will be evident from their piece, the scholarly and intellectual legacy of Adam is not second to the deeply human impact and bonds he had on his students and young collaborators, and

³ The archive, which is physically in the Special Collections section in the library of the University of St Andrews, is available in open access at <https://collections.st-andrews.ac.uk/search/?form=list&mode=query&query=ms39166&sort=metaID>. Filippo Costa Buranelli is deeply grateful to Maia Sheridan, senior archivist at the University of St Andrews Library, and Celina Chen, who digitalised and systematised the archive through the St Andrews Research Internship Scheme (StARIS) funded by the University of St Andrews.



to have their thoughts on Adam's work mixed with vivid and affectionate recollections and memories of him is something we could not have done ourselves even if we wanted to.

To conclude, as one of the following contributions states, the hope is that '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', while at the same time giving a fair account of the contentious areas of his scholarship and an authentic sense of the educated humanist, as well as generous scholar, that was John Hugh 'Adam' Watson.

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Conflict of interest No conflict of interest to declare.

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