

# **The Expansion of the International Society in Heeren's account of the European states-system**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper makes a preliminary assessment Arnold Hermann Ludwig Heeren's *History of the Political System of Europe and Its Colonies* and, in particular, its role in English school thinking. This History was originally written in German at the start of the nineteenth century, in 1809, and it then went through four more editions over the next twenty years.. It was translated into a variety of European languages, including English, in 1834, and it had a significant impact at the time on thinking in both Europe and the United States. First generation members of the English School approach to the study of international relations were impressed by Heeren's idea of Europe as a states-system, which they developed as one of their key concepts. Keene, in a later generation of English School thinkers, however, focuses on the counter-revolutionary element of Heeren's thinking and relates it to what he sees as a conservative dimension of English school thinking. In this paper it is argued that Heeren thesis is more interesting than has generally been acknowledged by the English school. Buzan has criticised the school for failing to acknowledge colonialism as a central institution of the European international society and for ignoring the crucial importance of the international economy. Yet colonization and the international economy are both located at the very heart of Heeren's account. It follows that Heeren's analysis of the European states-system is more interesting and significant than the English school has so far acknowledged.

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In this short paper I investigate the role played by the idea of the expansion of international society in Arnold Hermann Ludwig Heeren's *History of the Political System of Europe and Its Colonies* written at the start of the nineteenth century. Heeren (1760–1842), was born near Bremen, at that time an independent city state, within the German or Holy Roman Empire, but he studied and later taught philosophy and history at the University of Göttingen, one of the foremost German universities of the time. Members of the English School have regularly made reference to Heeren because he drew attention to the importance of treating Europe as a set of *Staatensystems* which, in the British translation of Heeren's history, was rendered as states-systems.<sup>1</sup> This somewhat clumsy term was regularly used by the first generation of English school thinkers, perhaps because it embraced the distinction later drawn by Bull between the international system and the international society.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>By contrast, George Bancroft, a major nineteenth century American historian who studied with Heeren at Göttingen and who did the American translation of the history translates *Staatensystem* as 'political system'. Inconsistently, however, the British translation also uses political system in the title of the book, thereby losing sight of a central argument made by Heeren that Europe was initially made up of more than one states-system. Moreover, it is clear that even in the British translation, *Staatensystem* is frequently translated as political system. Heeren was a significant figure on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth century. Kiracofe (2005), for example, notes that in the nineteenth century, 'American international legal thought and diplomatic approach was influenced in no small way by the studies of state systems, the international systems of different periods, by distinguished professors at Göttingen University' and he refers specifically to Bancroft's translation of Heeren's *Handbuch der Geschichte des Europäischen Staatensystems*. However, Bancroft's translation changes the subtitle of the book, from the one which Heeren gave: 'From Its Formation at the Close of the Fifteenth Century to its Re-Establishment Upon the Fall of Napoleon' to one more likely to appeal to an American audience: 'From the Discovery of America to the Independence of the Continent' (Heeren: 1829) The two volumes of the American translation and the second volume of the English translation are available on Google Books.

<sup>2</sup> States-systems and international society are regarded as synonymous in this paper.

Although this paper only focuses on Heeren's approach to states-systems, it needs to be viewed as part of a very much bigger project being planned by Barry Buzan and myself that aims, first, to reassess and reconstitute the framework employed in Bull and Watson (1984) to examine the expansion of the international society and then, second, to revise the established English School account of the expansion of the international society.<sup>3</sup> It seems to us that there are some significant problems with both their formulation of the states-system and, as a consequence, the account of the expansion of the international society generally presented in the English School's approach to the history of international relations. So, for example, the inadequate provision for the international economy and the absence of colonialism as a dominant institution of the international society seem to us to be significant drawbacks to a framework that aims to map and account for a history of the international society. In particular, it generates the assumption that the expansion of the international society was essentially a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The initial reason for returning to Heeren's history, however, was primarily to provide some historiographical background to the English School's thinking about states-systems.

One reason for making this excursion is because of the important argument developed by Keene (2002:15) who suggests that the idea of a *staatensystem* has had a 'pervasive influence on historical, sociological and political theoretical scholarship over the last 200 years'. From his perspective, all these theorists have drawn on the idea of a states-system to help to establish a distinction between the medieval and modern worlds. It follows, therefore, that the English School must be located at the heart of mainstream

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to Bull and Watson (1984) see, for example, Gong (1984), Zhang (1999) and Suzuki(2005).

thinking about the emergence of this modern world. But the problem with this position, for Keene (2002:16), is that it ties the English School to an argument advanced by propagandists for the European states-system at a time when the system was under threat at the turn of the nineteenth century; in particular, Keene notes that the propagandists endeavoured to ‘stigmatize the French Revolution and especially the Napoleonic imperial system as unlawful in terms of “traditional” principles of European public law and order’. Keene (2002:16) acknowledges that there is an important ‘kernel of truth’ to the approach promoted by the propagandists, but that they ‘exaggerated the significance of some aspects of modern world politics, while down-playing or even ignoring others that were not so helpful to the counter-revolutionary cause’.

At first sight, Keene’s argument, at least as applied to Heeren, seems irrefutable. In the first edition, published in 1809, Heeren takes his *Geschichte*, or history, up to 1804 by which time the 1802 Peace of Amiens had broken down and France and Britain had gone back to war. But with this development, Heeren (1857:389) observes that in France ‘instead of the ancient royal throne, an imperial one was erected; instead of the legitimate monarch it was ascended by a successful soldier, who in defiance of all morality and policy, had just dipped his hands in the blood of a branch of the royal family’. More important, Napoleon was seen to have fundamentally undermined the foundations of the European states-system and it was far from clear, at that stage, whether Britain was either willing or able to rectify the situation. As Heeren (1857:337) had noted in the context of the 1790s, the problem was that William Pitt, the British Prime Minister, despite recognising the threat to the states-system posed by Napoleon, ‘either could not or would not take the elevated view, which places the general interest of Europe above the

particular interest of England'. As a consequence, the future of the European states-system was very much in doubt, and there was a serious danger that Heeren's (1857:vii) history could do no more than serve as an extended epitaph for an historical phenomenon that he believed was the most important in any 'general history of mankind'.<sup>4</sup>

Keene (2002:25) argues that because the English School relies on a 'counter-revolutionary description of the development of the European public order' their view of history rests, as a consequence, on an inadequate account of early modern world politics. Keene points, in particular, to two crucial gaps. First, the antipathy of the counter-revolutionaries to republicanism means that the English School 'seriously understate' the relevance of republican political ideas to modern international thought. Second, and even more significant for Keene (2002:25) is the 'lack of a proper account of the development of international political and legal order beyond Europe'. Keene effectively traces the failure of the English School to investigate the normative dimensions of colonialism directly back to their reliance on Heeren. In endeavouring to account for the Heeren's putative lack of concern with this dimension, Keene (2002:26) suggests that because he was anxious to reassert the legal basis of European political order 'it hardly would have suited that purpose to call attention to the increasingly consolidated British imperial world beyond Europe'. If this evaluation is correct, however, it suggests that Heeren's approach was not only deficient on the normative front, but that he must also have ignored one of the most significant features of modern world history. Keene's critique of

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<sup>4</sup> However, because Heeren's History went through five editions (1809, 1811, 1819, 1822 and 1830) he was able to chart the defeat of Napoleon and the restoration of the European states-system. The final edition of the History ends in 1826 with entry of Greece into the reconstituted European states-system. By the time it was translated into English (Bancroft's 1829 American version was based on the fourth edition, whereas the 1834 British translation was based on the 5<sup>th</sup> edition) it had already been translated into French, Polish, Swedish and Dutch.

Heeren also fails to mesh in any neat and tidy fashion with the very favourable evaluation of him in the United States during the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, therefore, what I want to do is to reassess the theoretical framework that Heeren relies upon in developing his history of the European states system. In the process I will also examine some of the basic factors that, from his perspective, generated change in world politics across the historical period that he examines.<sup>6</sup> What emerges from this investigation is that Heeren operates on a much broader canvas than the one conventionally employed by the English School. The idea of an evolving states-system certainly represents the starting point for Heeren and, moreover, the five institutions identified by Bull (2002) that help to constitute the states-system – war, diplomacy, great power management, international law and diplomacy – are all central features in Heeren’s account. But Heeren also locates the international political economy and the emergence of colonization at the very heart of his analysis. But the stress on these features is unsurprising because Heeren had specialized in the history of the ancient world and he did so, in particular, in terms of the economic interconnections within this world.<sup>7</sup> A detailed look at Heeren also throws doubt on Keene’s assertion that he was a counter-revolutionary. Indeed, Heeren (1857:322) argues explicitly that by the start of the twentieth century, the era he was living through might well be called a ‘constitutional’ rather than a ‘revolutionary’ era.

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<sup>5</sup> In the Preface to his translation of Heeren, Bancroft praises its ‘impartiality’ and ‘laborious fidelity’.

<sup>6</sup> Because of the constraints of time and space, however, I restrict the investigation to the period that Heeren covers in the first edition, that is up to 1804, although I rely on the English translation of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Heeren’s (1857) *Historical Researches into the Politics, Intercourse and Trade of the Carthaginians, Ethiopians and Egyptians* identified by Clarke (1989: 114) as a ‘neglected’ work that operated on the assumption that the Egyptians were black Africans.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first explores Heeren's conception of the European states-system and the second then explores the very tight connection that he establishes between colonization and the international political economy. What Heeren's analysis suggests is that the English School assumption that it is possible to think of the expansion of the international society following in the wake of an expanding international system is difficult to sustain and, by the same token, it is also difficult to sustain the argument that the expansion of the international society was primarily a feature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the contrary, what Heeren's analysis suggests, at least implicitly, is that the evolution of the European states-system was intimately connected to an evolving world-wide European colonial system that extends back to the sixteenth century.

### **The European States-Systems**

Heeren (1857:vii) 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'. Heeren (1857:viii) goes on to stress the 'mutual independence of its members, however disproportionate they may be in regard to physical power' and as a consequence he can then contrast a states-system with a system that we would now call hegemonic or unipolar, 'where an acknowledged preponderance of one of the members exists'. Given his familiarity with ancient history, Heeren recognizes, of course, that the emergence of states-systems is not unique to modern Europe. On the one hand, he identifies the existence of states-systems in Greece and Renaissance Italy, although he regards these systems as 'inferior both as



regards their power and their extent', but, on the other hand, he acknowledges that the states-system formed by the Hellenistic Empires that emerged after the death of Alexander the Great in 323BCE was more comparable to modern Europe, although failing to attain 'such an exalted degree of maturity and refinement'. Members of the English School also stressed that the European states-system was more complex and refined than anything observed in earlier periods.

From Heeren's (1857:5) perspective, the essential quality of the European states-system is its 'internal freedom' by which he means the 'stability and mutual independence of its members'. There is, as Keene makes clear, therefore, a very significant normative agenda underpinning Heeren's view of the European states-system. Keene (2000:18) argues that Heeren, like the other counter-revolutionaries, wanted to claim that the 'public order' generated by the European states-system was inextricably linked to treaties made by dynastic rulers that 'usually involved the transfer of specific prerogatives from one family to another' and that, as a consequence, public order 'rested on the principle of respect for the lawful rights of dynastic rulers codified in the treaties'. Keene supports this assessment by citing Heeren who argues that the European states-system had traditionally been a 'system of predominant monarchies' and that, as a 'reactionary' (from Keene's perspective), Heeren supported this system because it prevented 'the people from taking a more active part in public affairs' (Heeren, 1857:7

But there are two problems with Keene's assessment. In the first place, it fails to note a tension in Heeren's normative and empirical analysis. So, it is certainly true that Heeren (1857:7-8) acknowledges that the European states system was primarily monarchical, and that the 'preservation' of the European states-system was 'secured by

most of the governments being hereditary'. He also notes that the management of 'public affairs' had increasingly been concentrated in the hands of monarchs and their ministers (generating cabinet policy, as Heeren puts it), and thereby excluding the people from having an impact on public affairs as happened in the 'great republics of antiquity'. It is also true that Heeren argues that this impact was to generate disorder, although he notes that the emergence of religious divisions in Europe produced a similar effect to the rise of popular parties in the ancient world. Nevertheless, despite his attacks on popular sovereignty, it is far from clear that Heeren's normative position is inherently reactionary, as Keene suggests. On the contrary, Heeren argues that the commitment to 'internal freedom' meant that the European states-system embraced every kind of monarchy, and not just hereditary monarchs, as well as every kind of republic. From Heeren's (1857:7) perspective, it was this 'practical diversity' that led to both the 'enlightened and enlarged views' in European politics and also, to a very large extent, accounted for Europe's 'rapid advancement in civilization'. There is, therefore, a tension in Heeren's analysis. So, on the one hand, when he examines the apparent collapse of the system at the end of the eighteenth century, he suggests that it is important to note that it was the illegal division of an elective monarch in Poland that 'virtually destroyed' the maxim of 'legitimate possession' and there is a presumption that the division would not have happened if there had been a hereditary monarch in place. However, when he comes to look at the partition of Poland in detail he argues that 'cabinet policy' was primarily responsible for the policy of aggrandisement (Heeren, 1857:198).

In any event, Heeren is without doubt committed to a system that permits and promotes diverse political regimes and his position extends well beyond specifically

defending hereditary monarchies. As a consequence, although Heeren (1857:198) recognises the importance of hereditary monarchy and dynastic politics, what he is really concerned about is the ‘sanctity of legitimate possession’ which is a maxim that extends to every kind of political regime. It follows that the second problem with Keene’s assessment is that it presupposes that Heeren’s view of the European states-system presupposes a defence of the status quo. But this is not the case. Heeren (1857:viii) insists that every ‘society or union of states’ operates on the basis of ‘general ideas’ that inevitably change across time. The role of the historian, therefore, is to reveal how these changing ideas have affected the ‘reciprocal connections’ that exist among the states that form the European states-system. As noted, a central idea in the European states-system relates to the diversity of constitutions within the system. So, for example, Heeren (1857:72-3) notes that when the Netherlands became an independent republic at the start of the seventeenth century, although it did not change the nature of the essentially monarchical system, it did, nevertheless, ‘exert a very strong influence upon it’.

Moreover, when America emerged as an independent republic, Heeren (1857: 284) goes on to show that the impact was even greater, in part, because it was ‘a state of Europeans, not belonging to the European political system’. This development poses a problem for Heeren’s framework that he never formally resolves. However, in the preface to the 1809 edition of the History, written on the ‘ruins’ of the European states-system Heeren(1857:x-xi) was, nevertheless, able to discern ‘a greater and more glorious future’ where the European states-system would be replaced by ‘a more free and comprehensive system, which shall include the states of the whole earth and is even now rising in its strength’. There seems little doubt that it was the emergence of the United States that

encouraged Heeren's idea that the European states-system would eventually give way to a global states-system.

Heeren, however, insisted that he was not interested in 'general speculation' and he kept his eyes focused on the records that allowed him to analyse the European states-system over the previous three hundred years and which helped him to account for the expansion and the refinement of the system. Perhaps the most crucial factor that he used to account for the growing refinement of the system was the fact that all of Europe shared a common faith and, because Europe was made up of Christian states, this meant that the Europeans were 'morally united into one community which was only politically divided' (1857:7). This line of argument is also central to English School thinking, and although I do not have the time at this stage to demonstrate this point, all five of the international institutions identified by Bull -- that is, international law, great power management, diplomacy, war and the balance of power -- play a central role in Heeren's analysis and will need to be examined in greater depth in an expanded version of this paper.

Before turning to the importance of the international political economy as well as the European colonies in Heeren's analysis, it is necessary to comment briefly on how he structures his analysis of the European states-systems. There are two dimensions to the structure of the history, one is geographical and the other is temporal. What is lost in the titles of both of the English translations of Heeren's history is that for most of the period he is investigating, he identifies two European states-systems: hence the reference to *Europäischen Staatensystems* in the German title of the book. Only at the very end of the eighteenth century, in 1797, does Heeren identify the formation of a single European states-system. For almost three hundred years he argues that it is necessary to distinguish

between a Northern states-system and a Southern states-system. The main actors in the Northern system are Russia, Sweden, Poland, and Denmark and in the Southern system they are France, Spain, England, Holland, Austria, the Papal Powers and Turkey. The two systems are not completely separate, however, because he suggests that Prussia has a foot in both camps.

Heeren does not, in fact, devote any time to discussing the conceptual basis for this division, but it seems fairly clear from his analysis that the division is essentially based on Bull's formulation of a system which presupposes that all the Great Powers in the system take the responses of the other Great Powers into consideration whenever they are making strategic calculations. So, from this perspective, for almost all of the period examined by Heeren, the Russians, for example, did not take the Spanish into their strategic calculations and the Spanish operated on the same basis. Heeren does not suggest that there were no points in time when there were strategic links between the two systems, but he does insist that they were transitory and they were certainly not sufficient to bind the two systems together on a permanent basis. Nevertheless, he does accept that the two systems became increasingly linked together over time and that with the first partition of Poland, the two systems became irrevocably entangled with each other. It is possible to infer from his analysis that the critical factors that led to the integration of the two systems was the growing power of both Prussia and Russia. This development had obvious consequences for Austria, but the growth in Russian power also meant that Turkey came under increasing pressure as Russian influence moved south. In addition to separating out the Northern and Southern states-systems, however, Heeren also identifies a third geographical area: the colonies, although they are encompassed within the

sections on the Southern states-system and must, therefore, presumably be seen to be part of the European states-system. It is worth noting that Heeren devotes very much more space to the colonies than he does to the Northern states-system.

The second structural division that Heeren establishes is a temporal one and he identifies three main periods (although they are all subdivided). The first period opens in 1492, with the discovery of the Americas, although Heeren also identifies 1453 as a significant date for the emergence of the Southern states-system because at that juncture the Turks extended their empire into Europe. He associates this initial period with the rise of the balance of power although he also argues that practical politics were dominated by religion. He starts the second period in 1661 with the rise of Louis XIV, ends it in 1786 with the death of Frederick the Great and associates it with the establishment of the balance of power and an era when practical politics were dominated by mercantilism. The final period is one in which Heeren identifies practical politics in revolutionary and constitutional terms and with the dissolution of the balance of power. The temporal structure, however, looks rather arbitrary in retrospect and lacks the potential theoretical bite of the geographical structure – although more needs to be said on both counts.

### **Colonies and the political economy**

Perhaps the single most significant feature of Heeren's history is the emphasis that he places on the political economy and the importance that he attaches to the ideas that governed economic thinking at this time. The ideas are of crucial importance because, on the one hand, Heeren considers them to be dangerously erroneous and yet, on the other hand, they are seen to have had the most profound effect on the behaviour of

states in the European states system. In particular, they are considered to have encouraged a very intense competition for colonies amongst the maritime great powers.

From the middle of the seventeenth century through to the end of the eighteenth century, Heeren argues that the political economy was based on a mercantile system. As Heeren (1857:129) puts it, the ‘whole horizon of political economy’ was circumscribed by a mercantile system that generated ‘perverse measures’ that were made more ‘oppressive’ because there were so few doubts about their ‘justice and even their expediency’. In essence, according to Heeren, mercantilism assumed that the only real source of national wealth was from mines and foreign trade. It followed that states must acquire raw materials, use them to produce manufactured goods and then sell them to other countries. Central to the mercantilist theory was the assumption that trade was a zero sum game and so states needed to monopolise as much foreign trade as they could. Heeren (1857:130) identified the outcome as a *system of isolation* with states endeavouring to be self-sufficient and to ‘buy nothing and sell all it could’ with the consequence that ‘while every government was seeking to extend its commerce, all were taking the most effectual means to destroy it’. It followed, according to Heeren, that trade bred both distrust and envy because it was assumed that if a state was prospering, then it must be at the expense of other states.

Heeren (1857:129) is quite clear that mercantilism is a pernicious theory and he contrasts it with the ideas of the physiocrats but more especially with moral economists such as Adam Smith who measured national wealth in terms of ‘talent and knowledge’ as opposed to ‘material wealth’. Nevertheless, despite the existence of these alternative systems of thought, Heeren stresses the influence and impact of mercantilism. However,

he also acknowledges that trade and commerce flourished and prospered throughout this period but despite rather than because of the policies that governments pursued.

Nevertheless, one of the most obvious consequences of mercantilism was the drive for colonies and the determination of states to monopolise trade with their colonies. Heeren provides detailed accounts of the growth of colonialism and the centrality of the great trading companies in this process. The colonization, moreover, was not restricted to areas inhabited by primitive or barbarous peoples. He provides detailed accounts of the way that the trading companies opened up trade in India and then began a process of colonization with the collapse of the Moghul Empire.

## **Conclusion**

This is a first very rough and truncated cut at what Heeren had to say about the European international society. But even on the basis of what has been said so far, it is clear that he has much more to offer English School thinking than is generally acknowledged. In the first place he raises questions about when we can start to talk about a European-wide international society. Paradoxically, some of his analysis, although this has not really been demonstrated in the above discussion, suggests that a European-wide international society emerged before the establishment of a European-wide international system. Of course, this raises the question of whether this is a useful distinction and this is an issue that is currently being debated. Nevertheless, Heeren's two distinct states-systems throws a new and interesting light on the question.

By the same token, he also demonstrates that Europe had extended to every corner of the globe by the end of the eighteenth century and this raises questions about the status



of these colonies. On the face of it, Heeren treats them as part of the European states system and so it follows that they were part of the European international society. From this perspective then, the idea that the European international society only started to expand at the end of the nineteenth century needs to be reassessed. From Heeren's perspective, the expansion had been taking place since the end of the fifteenth century. What began to happen at the end of the nineteenth century was that the nature of this globalised international society began to undergo a significant change. Keene (2002) and Alexandrowicz (1967) have both challenged the conventional English School accounts of the expansion of international society and Heeren provides another take on the issue. His discussion of the United States is particularly interesting in this respect, because on the one hand, he argues that America is not part of the European states-system and yet, on the other, he shows that the Americans were deeply involved in the European commercial and international legal system. Again, this raises the possibility of Europe and America being part of an emerging global international society that was moving ahead of the emergence of an international system. The exact opposite of how Bull and Watson conceived of the situation. At the very least, an assessment of Heeren's History raises interesting questions about how to conceptualise the expansion of the international society, even if he fails to provide any clear solutions.

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- WP 02-07** Eric Herring, 'Neoliberalism versus Peacebuilding in Iraq'
- WP 01-07** Terrell Carver, 'Materializing the Metaphors of Global Cities: Singapore and Silicon Valley'