

Susanna Hast, *Spheres of Influence in International Relations: History, Theory, Practice*

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Susanna Hast has written an interesting book about the concept of ‘spheres of influence’ in Western thought and practice. To understand how the book unfolds, it is useful to get a sense of the motivation behind it. As Hast explains in the first paragraph of the opening chapter, she was looking to explore ‘Russia’s sphere of influence’ when she discovered that “there was no literature discussing, defining and contesting the concept of ‘sphere of influence’” (p. 1). And so she embarked on a study of this concept. Convinced that ‘spheres of influence’ matter and that scholars of International Relations (IR) ought to pay more attention to them, Hast seeks to bring the concept back into sight through a “theoretical assessment from a historical perspective” (preface). But there is more to it. She observes that the notion of a ‘sphere of influence’ is popular in Western discourse to describe and criticise Russia’s dealing with the former Soviet space. Hast dislikes this image. For her, the pejorative (she uses this word a lot) connotation attached to the term in the West is the result of a Cold War mindset combined with amnesia. And she sets out to counter this by showing that the concept is in fact quite common in Western thought and practice. Her intent is to ply the concept away from the negative association with Russia and bring it back into the consciousness of Western IR theory where, she says, it has been “denied its place” (p. 1). Importantly, in addition to reviving the concept she wants to give it a positive meaning as well.

The book, which appears to be based on her PhD dissertation, is well written and consists of four chapters framed by an introduction and conclusion. These four chapters offer a good conceptual history, tracing different forms and connotations the concept has taken on in Western thinking from the context of European colonialism by way of the Monroe Doctrine to the Cold War. Hast considers the Monroe Doctrine “the embodiment of a sphere of influence” (p. 41) characterised by both the expression of ‘protecting’ the Americas against European meddling and the right, if not responsibility of the United States to intervene in societies situated in the Western hemisphere. This dual face of an intra-regional hierarchy and independence from extra-regional actors is central to her reading of the concept. It also is exemplified in the only empirical discussion offered in the book, the Cuban Missile Crisis. To summarise crudely her interpretation, the crisis came about due to the Soviet failure to respect the American sphere of influence, and escalation was subsequently

prevented due to the recovery of this respect (p. 135). It also suggests that spheres cannot overlap and that, hence, a small state like Cuba can only be part of one sphere.

This interpretation is grounded in Hast's particular reading of the concept, which she develops on two levels. The first level is an overview of how the concept was understood by Western intellectuals ranging from 19th century geopolitical thinkers, legal theorist Carl Schmitt, classical realist E. H. Carr and American writer Walter Lipmann to English novelist George Orwell. The common thread running through these accounts is a reading of 'spheres of influence' as building blocks of a stable world order. Notably, only in Orwell's case is this arrangement discussed in negative terms. Indeed, one gets the impression that Orwell's account is included primarily to balance a predominantly sympathetic reading of 'sphere of influence', which Hast seems to prefer. While this reading is rarely formulated in her own voice but emerges gradually when discussing approvingly Schmitt, Carr and Lippmann, she does not hide her normative objective: to offer a conception that is suitable for maintaining a pluralist world order "between nation and humanity", as she puts it (p. 77).

Specifically, Hast sees 'spheres of influence' as a solution to the "disintegration of the system of states and the problems of forming a world community".(p. 27) The book does not offer evidence supporting this diagnosis, but the imagery is common enough among the authors she cites. And it works intuitively as a theoretical alternative to the competing maxims of state-centric 'particularism' and cosmopolitan 'universalism'. Hast's stance also has a pragmatic ring to it: she sees international relations organised around 'spheres of influence' as the best possible option for a world in which Great Powers and, hence, hierarchy, are inevitable. If done right, we are told, these constructs – similar in form to Schmitt's "*Grossräume* as separate spheres of international law" (p. 92) – will manage relations between Great Powers (as long as they recognise and respect each other's sphere) and towards smaller states (as long as they accept the regional hegemon). I have some issues with this reading or, rather, what is missing from it, to which I will come back later.

On a second level, this reading is interwoven with a particular theoretical framework of International Relations. Here, Hast's choice is not obvious. The affinities to realist reasoning around balancing are unmistakable and corresponding references are found throughout the text. Yet while her discussion at times sounds like an echo of distant and re-emerging discussions surrounding (the virtues of) polycentrism and multipolarity, surprisingly Hast does not make realism the theoretical home for her 'sphere of influence' concept. Neither does she choose a Marxist-inspired theory, which is less surprising as that would clash with her emphasis on hierarchies as acceptable forms of world order. One might have expected a connection to the growing literature on regionalism, with spheres of influence understood as spatial configurations that produce and reflect regional orders, yet this discussion also is bypassed.

Instead, Hast embeds the concept in the theoretical framework of the English School. Drawing mainly on the work of Hedley Bull and a lesser-known book by Paul Keal (one of Bull's students), she suggests viewing spheres of influence as an institution of international society that balances 'solidarism' and 'pluralism'. More specifically, she suggests reading them as "regional solidarist orders which allow the pluralist order to survive on the global level" (p. 68). This is an interesting reading, although I am insufficiently invested in the English School to judge whether Hast is correct that it has neglected the 'sphere of influence'. Certainly the notion of an

international society managed by Great Powers is not new. Ian Clark, whose work is not engaged by Hast, has argued extensively that hegemony can be an institution of international society,¹ and discussions of regional orders dominated by a single state can be found in the work of Barry Buzan.² Hast's reading fits nicely with this literature, which has contributed to the revival of the English School in recent years, and her normative stance gives it a distinct tone.

At the heart of her conceptualisation of a 'sphere of influence' is the tension between intervention (hierarchy) and sovereignty (equality) characterising this configuration. I was not quite convinced by her discussion of how this tension might be solved. This has partly to do with her appropriation of the conceptual language of the English School, which seemed a bit forced at times. For instance, throughout the book Hast maps the tension between intervention and sovereignty to the traditional English School concern with the trade-off between order and justice. This works only up to a point. And while her conceptualisation prioritises order (which she links to peace), Hast repeatedly notes the importance of justice. Yet it was never clear to me what meaning of justice is at work, and how, in her notion of 'sphere of influence'. Similarly, I found the references to 'pluralism' and 'solidarism' not always convincing – not least because these are rather broad terms that are used differently in English School literature – and they may not draw in readers unfamiliar with English School debates.

In her attempt to discern the meaning of 'sphere of influence', Hast navigates her way through a web of related core concepts such as 'hegemony', 'Great Power', 'sovereignty', 'intervention', 'legitimacy' and 'protection'. Here one wishes she had spent less time on summarising the terminology of the authors she reviews and put more effort in developing her own reading of these concepts. And some concepts fall by the wayside. For instance, despite noting that 'hegemony' is central to any understanding of 'spheres of influence' (p. 34), it is hardly discussed in the book. Related, and rather strangely, the book has very little to say about influence, or power more generally. Indeed, there is no engagement with the concept of power at all. Instead, influence is discussed in terms of 'intervention'. This is not an implausible move, but then the reader would have liked to hear more about the kind of intervention Hast has in mind.

It is interesting to follow her attempt to open up the notions of sovereignty and intervention to reduce the tension between the two and, basically, to remove the stigma from the latter. But this attempt fizzles out. Clark, in his aforementioned work, solves the tension between hegemony and sovereignty through the concept of legitimacy. Hast mentions the term but does not engage it. Rather, she links legitimacy to the responsibility of the Great Power to protect smaller states against 'the threat of universalism' and, thereby, to defend a pluralistic world order. By bringing the notion of 'protection' into play, the book usefully reminds us that small states finding themselves in a hierarchical relationship with a hegemon should not be seen as victims by default. Hast tacitly advances the idea that these states may agree

1 Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Clark, *International Legitimacy and World Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Clark, *Hegemony in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

2 Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Buzan, *An Introduction to the English School in International Relations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

to, indeed may even seek such a relationship because they (think they will) benefit from it.³ But in the end her suggestion that ‘spheres of influence’ can be mutually beneficial, resting on some sort of reciprocal agreement in which small states accept the limitation of their sovereignty in return for protection by the hegemon, remains underdeveloped. This is a pity. Not only because the picture remains vague, but also because it misses an opportunity to distinguish itself more clearly from Hegemonic Stability Theory and its recent liberal reincarnation in the work of John Ikenberry, neither of which is engaged.⁴ The main issue I have here is that the book remains trapped in the Great Power bias of conventional IR and does not even try to engage the perspective of small states. What does such a ‘sphere’ look like from their position? Why would they agree to be part of it? Under what circumstances would they try to leave? The book does not explore these questions, which is disappointing given that it is framed in terms of retrieving ‘subjugated knowledge’ and addressing ‘blind spots’. This promise sits uneasily with what at times reads more like a realist celebration of multipolarity with an English School twist.

One key weakness of the book that also underpins the shortcomings noted above is its neglect of method beyond noting that it analyses political discourse (p. 5). The discussions of Schmitt, Carr and Lippmann offer a good sense of the political context in which their thought developed, but the reader is not informed about the methodological approach guiding the analysis. Neither does the book offer a reflection on how to integrate a neglected concept into an existing theoretical framework. Although the suggestion that all the thinkers discussed offer “visions of regional solidarism” (p. 112) is intriguing, the text struggles with pressing them in an English School outfit – which, interestingly, she does not treat as a political discourse. A more careful discussion of how the ‘sphere of influence’ concept is explored and how the theoretical and historical material was chosen and approached would have made it easier to follow the analytical thread.

Due to its emphasis on presenting an intellectual history and a normative vision, the book offers little concrete guidance on how to identify and study spheres of influence empirically. Scholars looking for analytical tools to identify a ‘sphere of influence’ and assess whether a particular state is trying to build or be part of such a space will get pointers, but Hast does not offer a framework for recognising Great Powers and the content, terms and boundaries of their sphere. And yet, she cannot resist making empirical judgments regarding the case of Russia, which brings us back to the motivation behind the book. In ‘contesting’ the meaning of the concept, Hast not only hopes to broaden the scholarly discussion but also to “free Russia from the stigma of being a ‘sphere-of-influence’ power” (p. 19). And through her dual move of showing that Western Powers have long attempted to construct and maintain such a thing and, secondly, suggesting that a world divided into spheres of influence is good for international order, she feels confident claiming that Western critique of a Russia dealing with ‘its sphere’ is unwarranted. I can see the logic, but without an empirical analysis of Russia’s relations with its neighbours and a better

3 See also Felix Berenskoetter and Adam Quinn, ‘Hegemony by Invitation: Neoclassical realism, soft power and US-European relations’, in A. Toje and B. Kunz (eds.), *Neoclassical Realism in Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 214–233.

4 Maybe because of the universalist outlook and the sanctioning of American unipolarity common in that literature. See G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

sense under what circumstances critique would be justified, such a claim fails to persuade.

In the end, despite its weaknesses, I enjoyed reading the book and think it succeeds in reviving a neglected concept and placing it in a more favourable light. Although her claim that "we seem to be afraid of spheres of influence" (p. 108) is an unnecessary overstatement, Hast does a service in bringing the concept back to our attention. English School scholars also may find her normative treatment a useful contribution to their theoretical framework. And while the lacking engagement with non-Western thought and practice makes the study less comprehensive and insightful than it might have been, the book still offers valuable insights. At the very least, it is a welcoming invitation further to develop the concept theoretically and to substantiate it empirically when studying a world of regions.