

Anastasios Giouzepas*

The ‘Barbarians’ of the Contemporary International System
(or the outcasts of contemporary international society)

In the following pages I seek an answer to the questions below: Can we speak of ‘barbarians’ of the contemporary system (or outcasts of contemporary international society)? If yes, then who are they? In their effort to be ‘de – barbarized’ which are the available alternatives for political action and which are their respective consequences? The main hypothesis of this study is that rather than creating a static definition of the ‘barbarian’, one may consider seeing a dialectic by which the powerful project an image of inherent weakness upon an individual or a society. Accordingly, one may observe the effort of the ‘barbarized’ individual or society to be ‘de – barbarized’, in other words to be admitted by the powerful as an equal.

In the light of the above, the following methodological path will be followed. Firstly, I will indicate the relation between the two concepts, international system and international society, mentioned in the title of the present study. The dynamic content of the term ‘barbarian’ will then be analyzed and supported by two historical examples drawn from Islamic and Middle Eastern history, the Ottoman Empire and the Crusades. The theoretical outcomes will be applied to the modern ages. The existence of a modern international society will be stressed and its core characteristics will be codified. The concept of the modern ‘barbarian’ will, finally, be positioned within this theoretical.

Arguably, the definition of what we mean international system seems rather straightforward while, on the other hand, a definition of the term international society, if and when such a thing exists, is rather trivial. This essay draws on the writing of two important researchers in the field of international relations and politics, namely Martin Wight and Hedley Bull. The goal of this paper is to examine the term ‘barbarian’ as it relates to the concepts of international system and international society.

Wight begins with a commonsensical description of term *international society*:

“At first glance it seems that the international society is a political and social fact, as it is evident from the diplomatic system, the diplomatic society, the acceptance of international law and the reports produced by international law experts, as well as from social intuition, the consequences of which are diffused to nearly everyone, exciting the tourist’s curiosity or even creating a sense of kinship with the whole of humanity.”¹

Bull uses the terms *common values* and *common rules* rather than *common sense* to the same effect:

“{An international society} exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.”²

As for the relation between the *international system* and *international society* Bull notes:

“An international society... presupposes an international system, but an international system may exist that is not an international society.”³

Following this line of thinking Bull argued that specific international systems also constituted international societies. The examples he cites include the Hellenic City-State system, the system of Hellenic Kingdoms - which emerged after the death of Alexander the Great and the division of the vast empire amongst his heirs -, the Chinese system during the Warring States period, the state system of ancient India and the modern international system of states.⁴

The term ‘barbarian’ must be conceived as the deviation from the norm(s) of a particular epoch. There are historically contingent world-views, societies with equivalent institutions who have distinct and yet equivalent institutions, hold ‘other’ forms of social organization to be ‘barbaric.’

¹ Martin Wight, *International Theory, The Three Traditions* (London: Leicester University Press, 1991 [Greek translation: *Διεθνής Θεωρία: Τα Τρία Πνεύματα Σκέψης*. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Ποιότητα]), 37.

² Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 2nd edition), 13.

³ Bull, 13.

⁴ Bull, 15.

Following this line of thinking Martin Wight remarks that “...*all known international societies covered a region that was smaller than the totality of the known and inhabited surface of the planet; therefore, they were aware of the fact that there are societies other than their own.*”⁵ In other words, there has always been an in-group and an out-group division of the planet. In this case the in-group maybe defined as societies of regular and, at times, institutionalized contact, as opposed to the out-group with whom contact was never effectively predictable. Nowadays, for example, we talk of an international society governed by inter-national organizations or bilateral treaties etc. Surely, such terminology does not account for peoples living in the deepest zones of the Amazon forest.

Martin Wight used the term ‘barbarians’ in order to describe those societies excluded from regular and systemic interaction. ‘Barbarians’ was a term first employed by the ancient Greeks and, later on, by their heirs in the Eastern Mediterranean, that is, the Romans. In those times, generally, the term referred to those societies perceived as culturally incompatible rather than the culturally inferior. More specifically, it may be noted that the term ‘barbarian’ in the Hellenic antiquity signified “he who speaks an incomprehensible tongue,” thus a non-Greek; this characteristic did not necessarily constitute a value judgment, or a social demeanor.⁶ Even in the 5th century BC, when the Hellenic world was confronted with the Persian Empire, there is little mention of Hellenic superiority vis a vis the ‘barbarian’. For example, value demeanors are nowhere to be seen neither in the historical work of Herodotus, nor in the Corpus Hippocraticum in reference to the other-than-Greek peoples.⁷

It was only in the Hellenic world’s counter offensive in the 4th century BC that the Persian ‘other’ is seen as the inferior ‘barbarian,’ especially by Aristotle and Isocrates.⁸ However, one may also note that in the same period one observes the emergence of new philosophical currents, such as the Cynic movement and the Stoic school, which greatly influenced the Greco-Roman world. Cynicism, and its

⁵ Wight, 61.

⁶ Albrecht Dihle, *Die Griechen und die Fremden* ([Greek translation: *Οι Έλληνες και οι ξένοι*. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Οδυσσέας, 1998]), 18.

⁷ Dihle, 55.

⁸ Dihle, 58.

philosophical heirs, the Stoics, advocated the ideal of equality between peoples, despite their linguistic competences, level of income, and tribal or racial origin.

Concerning the term ‘barbarian’, therefore, I would like to make two suggestions:

1. By calling someone a ‘barbarian’, the members of a specific international system (or international society) simultaneously define both their similarity and their incompatibility to the observed subject. The content of the term ‘barbarian’ depends on the perspective adopted by those inside the international society. Generally, international societies are hierarchical structures. The dominant criteria by which an individual or a society are seen as ‘civil’ or ‘barbarian’ are set by those seated on the top of the structural pyramid, which one may call the ‘great powers.’

As to the question of ‘systemic frontiers’ Gilpin suggests the following:

“An international system, as any system, has a set of boundaries that separate it from its environment... In defining the borders of an international system is necessarily arbitrary and subjective. What constitutes an international system is largely defined by its members.”⁹

However, the author is not as naïve as to suggest that all members have an equal say in defining who is a member and who is not. He argues that a system is created as institutionalized regular interaction for particular purposes, to pursue political, economic, and other interests. The institutions governing such systems tend to reflect the relative power of their members. In other words, any system remains a hierarchical structure, in the sense that it is designed to serve the interests of its most powerful members.¹⁰

2. Secondly, one may view Martin Wight’s definition of the ‘barbarian’ as a process of ‘barbarization’ (or even ‘de – barbarization’). Rather than creating a static definition of the ‘barbarian’, one may consider seeing a dialectic by which the powerful project an image of inherent weakness upon an individual or a society. Ultimately, a ‘barbarian’ becomes *objectively* a ‘barbarian’ if he learns to see himself as *naturally* inferior, under-developed, un-civilized, etc.

⁹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press [Greek translation: *Πόλεμος και αλλαγή στη διεθνή πολιτική*. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Ποιότητα, 2004]), 78 – 79.

¹⁰ Gilpin, 33.

Let's now consider two historical examples of 'barbarization' drawn from Islamic and Middle Eastern History. Prior to the Siege of Vienna, the Ottoman Empire was frequently considered a legitimate heir to the Eastern Roman Empire, even by the Venetians, their greatest competitors in the struggle for domination in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹¹

Arguably, there were two factors leading to the 'barbarization of the Ottomans.' Firstly, whenever Venice was pushed into the corner by their Ottoman rivals, it sought to turn the military confrontation into a fight between Christendom and the Evil Sultan.¹² Secondly, the growth of the merchant States in the second half of the 18th century, allowed certain European States to continuously challenge Ottoman domination in the region.

Seeing the Ottomans as the 'barbarians' of the international society reaches its climax during the 19th and the early 20th century when the Ottoman Empire was 'barbarized' and branded with etiquettes such as 'The Great Patient'. After the First World War the Ottoman realms were seen as 'legitimate' booty for the victorious powers; those barbarized could be 'legitimately' be colonized. Ottoman history from the 17th to the 19th century can be seen as an attempt by the Ottomans to retain their status of equivalence in the world; to become significantly similar to their major rivals in terms of military and financial know-how, in order to retain their claim to being significantly different.

The second historical example proves the reverse possibility of 'de-barbarization'. The first crusaders considered the Muslims not only as 'barbarians' but even as non-humans. In the year 1095 Pope Urban II declared a campaign for the recapture of the Holy Lands. Asbridge cites his speech delivered in Clermont (Auvergne region), where the Christendom first formalized a theory of Holy War:

“A central feature of Urban's doctrine was the denigration and dehumanization of Islam. He set out from the start to launch a holy war against what he called 'the savagery of the Saracens', a 'barbarian' people capable of incomprehensible levels of cruelty and brutality. (...) By expounding upon the alleged crimes of Islam,

¹¹ See: P. Sprinborg, *Western Republicanism and the Oriental Prince* (Polity Press, 1992).

¹² See: D. Weinstein, *Ambassador from Venice: Pietro Paqualigo in Lisbon, 1501* (University of Minnesota Press, 1960).

he (the pope Urban II) sought to ignite an explosion of vengeful passion among the Latin audience, while the attempts to degrade Muslims as ‘sub – human’ opened the floodgates of extreme, brutal reciprocity. This, the pope argued, was to be no shameful war of equals, between God’s children, but a ‘just’ and ‘holy’ struggle in which an ‘alien’ people could be punished without remorse and with utter ruthlessness. Urban was activating one of the most potent impulses in human society: the definition of the ‘other’. Across countless generations of human history, tribes, cities, nations and peoples have sought to delineate their own identities through comparison to their neighbours or enemies. By conditioning Latin Europe to view Islam as a species apart, the pope stood to gain not only by facilitating his proposed campaign, but also by propelling the West towards unification”¹³.

Asbridge notes that Urban’s complex doctrine (inspired by St. Augustine’s doctrine of *Just War*) included two crucial elements:

- a) A holy war could only be dictated by a right authority, which he assigned to the Pope.
- b) Secondly, the War had to be motivated by a ‘just cause’ and fought with ‘restraint.’

Interestingly enough ‘restraint’ merely signified the killing of Muslims only, rather than blind pillaging:

“This approach was an offshoot of the Augustinian principle of ‘right Intention’, requiring a Just War to be fought with restraint and control. Urban suggested that ‘normal’ violence was both illegal and corrupting, that only a war fought under regulated conditions could be considered licit or sanctified. But he proclaimed that in his campaign the regulating factor would be not the degree of brutality, but rather the ‘alien’ status of its target. (...) (Pope Urban declared that) the crusade would be a distinct class of warfare, prosecuted under a particular set of controlled conditions. In this instance, however, the ‘controlling’ feature that established a ‘right intention’ had nothing to do with degrees of violence or the tempered prosecution of warfare. Instead, it was entirely dependent upon the ‘alien’ nature of the enemy to be confronted. **The expedition would be ‘just’ because it was directed against ‘inhuman’ Muslims, not because it was executed with moderation.** This may, to some extent, help to explain why the First Crusaders proved capable of such extreme brutality”¹⁴ (my emphasis)

This view changed radically the following years. Fifty years later, the crusaders of the second expedition (the second crusade begun in 1145 and ended outside the walls of Damascus in 1148 – 9) were unpleasantly surprised to discover the assimilation of

¹³ Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History* (London: Free Press, 2004), 33 and 34 – 35.

¹⁴ Asbridge, 24 and 36.

‘the men of Jerusalem’ – their fellow Christians – to an eastern way of living. Sean Martin notes:

“One of the reasons why the Second Crusade was seen to have failed was perfidy on the part of the ‘Men of Jerusalem’ and the Military Orders. The Crusaders under Louis VII had been shocked at how much the Latins in Outremer had adopted Eastern ways, unaware that in many cases the adoption of local custom was the most pragmatic thing to do. The culture of the Arab world was more refined than the culture most Crusaders had known in the West”¹⁵.

In 1187 Islam found a champion of Kurdish origin known as Saladin (Salah – al – din), who successfully in successful campaign recaptured Jerusalem. The Christian counterattack, that is, the Third Crusade failed to recapture Jerusalem for the Christendom; however, the Muslims were no longer seen as ‘barbarians’. According to Christopher Tyerman, “*diplomacy and truces between Muslims and Christians became standard practice*”¹⁶ Characteristically, a few centuries later, Dante placed Saladin to the first circle of his *inferno*, besides other significant infidels like Plato and Aristotle. As soon as power equivalence was restored, the ‘barbarians’ were ‘de-barbarized’.

We can now reach the conclusion that the content of the term ‘barbarian’ is not static because the balance of power is also not static. The regular contact between societies, which the term system implies, is not as regular when the power-resources of its members are transformed. Hence, the delineation of the system is dynamic and, consequently, the concept of the ‘barbarian’. Both case studies we have examined relate to the Islamic ‘other.’ ‘De-barbarization’ seems to occur when the opponent acquires power-equivalence. Islam is not ‘naturally’ antithetical to Christendom; the relation has always been dynamic.

Prior to defining modern ‘barbarians’, we should first attempt to define a modern international system and society. This is a prerequisite before discussing the term ‘barbarian’ as an outsider. On this subject, Bull notes:

¹⁵ Sean Martin, *The Knights Templar: the History and Myths of the Legendary Military Order* (Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2004), 58.

¹⁶ Christopher Tyerman, *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 56.

“My contention is that the element of a society has always been present, and remains present, in the modern international system, although only as one of the elements in it, whose survival is sometimes precarious. (...) The element of international society has always been present in the modern international system because at no stage can it be said that the conception of the common interests of states, of common rules accepted and common institutions worked by them, has ceased to exert any influence. (...)”

Most states at most times pay some respect to the basic rules of coexistence in international society, such as mutual respect for sovereignty, the rule of agreements should be kept, and rules limiting resort to violence¹⁷”.

In other words, Bull argues that today there is such a thing as an international society, which is essentially anarchical and presents three fundamental regularities:

- 1) Mutual respect for sovereign authority.
- 2) Respect for inter-national agreements.
- 3) Limited use of violence against those considered members of the systemic in-group. This limitation does not hold for systemic outcasts, that is, the ‘barbarians’.

Nowadays, one can assert that the primary regularity of mutual respect of sovereign authority has partially been circumscribed by a fourth regularity referring to inner – state democratic governance and the arising politics of intervention. In a uni – multipolar world, the leading members of the international society designate the modern ‘barbarian’ on the criterion of this fourth regularity, the western – type democracy. As a result, some of the ‘barbarian’ societies are Middle Eastern states that ignore democratic values, in American and European terms. Iran and Syria are branded ‘the axis of evil.’ Middle Eastern individuals who oppose or threaten western values are called terrorists. Joseph Nye has observed the increased role of the individual in inter-national relations:

“The information revolution and technological change have elevated the importance of transnational issues and have empowered nonstate actors to play a larger role in world politics. (...) Terrorism is nothing new, but the ‘democratization of technology’ over the

¹⁷ Bull, 39 and 40.

past decades has been making terrorists more lethal and more agile, and the trend is likely to continue”¹⁸.

The very concept of terrorism is not new. As Carr has noted, the use of moral demeanors is a usual practice when dealing with the less fortunate; the weak are often blamed for disturbing the peace; the weak also have the tendency to respond with violence.¹⁹ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has often been suggested that *asymmetrical threats* – such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation and the, so-called, rogue states - are the greatest threat to international peace; one may argue that these indeed constitute the greatest threat to the only remaining super-power, that is, the cornerstone of the current international system. It comes then to no surprise that one of the main champions for the institutionalization of this argument has been the North Atlantic Treaty. Talbott notes:

“Indeed, the extent to which there truly is an international community will depend in no small degree on whether NATO and its web of partnerships are around to make that concept real.”²⁰

The image of a polemical and a barbaric Islam, in other words, is not in any way ‘natural’. Donnelly and Serchuk note:

“Indeed, from West Africa to Southern Asia, the United States is quietly working to recruit, mobilize, and support locals willing to join the fight against radical Islam. In essence, just as al Qaeda has been to “franchise” jihad – outsourcing the grunt work of suicide bombings to angry young locals from Turkey to Indonesia – the Pentagon is building a rival franchise in counterterrorism”²¹.

The heart of the battle is a conflict for the re-definition of moral authority; the issue is not anymore a union against the common enemy (U.S.S.R) but a claim that the existing hegemonic system represents an ideal form of life. The members of international society, the international community, a term that according to Carr faces

¹⁸ Joseph S. Jr., “U. S. Power and Strategy After Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 82 No. 4 (July/August 2003): 62.

¹⁹ Edward H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919 - 1939* (London: Macmillan, 1939 [Greek translation: *Η Εικοσαετής Κρίση 1919-1939: Εισαγωγή στη μελέτη των διεθνών σχέσεων*. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Ποιότητα, 2000]), 122 and 123.

²⁰ Strobe Talbott, “From Prague to Baghdad: NATO at Risk,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 81 No. 6 (November/December 2002): 57.

²¹ Thomas Donnelly and Vance Serchuk, “Transforming America’s Alliances,” *National Security Outlook*, Jan 1, 2005, AEI Online. Available from World Wide Web: http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.21756,filter.all/pub_detail.asp.

serious drawbacks²², campaign on the soil of the modern ‘barbarians’, the Middle East. They campaign and they ‘export democracy’ simultaneously. As Donnelly and Serchuk observe:

“Indeed the ‘arsenal of democracy’ formulation captures perfectly the Bush administration’s response to the September 11 attacks”²³.

It appears that the leading members of the contemporary international society desire the doctrinal homogeneity (proliferation of democracy on the lines of Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*). One could argue that the United States react to terrorism with a policy of dogmatic imperialism. Wight notes:

There is a second path in revolutionary theory for the establishment of *civitas maxima*, and the harmonization of internal and external policy, that is, ideological and dogmatic imperialism, the enforcement of homogeneity.”²⁴

However, in dividing the world between members of a liberal communion and everybody else, it is possible to create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those addressed as a single enemy might become a single enemy. After September 11th, it seems that North Korea and Iran found themselves sharing a common world view, that of having the same enemy. Prior to that date, it is possible that their leaders would have had difficulty locating each other’s country on the map.

To the campaign of the members of international society in the Middle East, it could be argued that the modern ‘barbarians’, the outcasts of the international society, are presented with two options:

1. To fight back and use power as the means to reclaim autonomy and membership in another inter-national society (revolutionaries) - or...

²² According to Carr the drawbacks of the term international community are: Firstly the principle of equality amongst the members of a community is not applied and, in reality, is difficult to be applied on a global scale. Secondly, the principle according to which the collective good is above everything and everyone (axiom of every integrated community) is not universally acceptable. Carr, 213.

²³ Donnelly and Vance, 4.

²⁴ Wight, 52.

2. To accept the necessary changes, their democratization, in order to regain, somehow, in the future, their autonomy and membership to the contemporary international society (reformers).

The confrontation between revolutionaries and reformers is an ongoing process in the Middle East. According to Niall Ferguson:

“This division is not merely between Sunni and Shiite. It is also between those seeking a peaceful *modus vivendi* with the West (embodied I Turkey’s desire to join the EU) and those drawn to the Islamic Bolshevism of the likes of Osama bin Laden”²⁵.

In Iraq, for example, rebels fight simultaneously against US forces and Iraqi forces. Kenneth Waltz in his book *Man, the State and War* notes:

“Of what use is freedom without a power sufficient to establish and maintain conditions of security? (...) If the alternative to tyranny is chaos and if chaos means a war of all against all, then the willingness to endure tyranny becomes understandable. In the absence of order there can be no enjoyment of liberty”²⁶.

This maybe is the contemporary dilemma of Iraqis. Niall Ferguson’s ideas perfectly summarize the situations in which the modern barbarian is placed:

“We are long way from a bipolar clash of civilizations, much less the rise of a new caliphate (*to which Al Qaeda refers as a period where Islam was seen as an equivalent or even superior force in the international system – my comment*) that might pose a geopolitical threat to the U.S. (...) In the absence of strong secular polities, it was religious institutions – the Papacy, the monastic orders, the Muslim *ulema* – that often set the political agenda. (...) If free flows of information and factors of production have empowered multinational corporations and NGOs (to say nothing of evangelistic cults of all denominations), the free flow of destructive technology has empowered criminal organizations and terrorist cells, **the Viking raiders of our time** (my emphasis). These can operate wherever they choose, from Hamburg to Gaza. By contrast, the writ of the international community is not global. It is, in fact, increasingly confined to a few strategic cities such as Kabul and Sarajevo. (...) Waning empires. Religious rivals. Incipient anarchy. A coming retreat into fortified cities. These are the Dark Age experiences that a world without a hyperpower might find itself reviving. (...) The alternative to unipolarity may not be multipolarity

²⁵ Niall Ferguson, “The End of Power,” In *Opinion Journal from The Wall Street Journal Editorial Page* [cited 21 June 2004]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.opinionjournal.com/editorial/feature.html?id=110005244>.

²⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: a theoretical analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 [Originally published: 1959]), 12.

at all. It may be global vacuum of power. Be careful what you wish for²⁷.

It is difficult to predict the result of this process. It is easier to search for historical precedents. In 376 A.D., when the Visigoths entered the Roman Empire they swore to each other a solemn oath that they will assail the Romans in any and every way and would cause them all the harm in their power, no matter what benefits the Romans should be willing or should be compelled to grant them. However, during the following years they were divided into two fractions, one pro – roman which declared that the oath must be forgotten and a second one loyal to the terms of the oath. A violent struggle (prominent leaders of both sides were assassinated) between those two fractions begun. The struggle kept on until the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476. The Visigoths had their part to the fall but generally no single ‘barbarian’ was capable of destroying the Roman Empire. However, in the meantime, Alaric, a controversial figure who never really chose between the two fractions, sacked Rome in 410 but didn’t occupy it²⁸.

This is just a historical example among many others. History re – writes itself or not? For the time being it is just safer to claim that what we witness now in the Middle East is an on – going effort of ‘de – barbarization’.

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²⁷ Ferguson.

²⁸ E. A. Thomson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 38 – 57.