

THE *DEUS EX MACHINA* OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM:
THE GREEK EMPIRE, THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH
AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS IN THE THOUGHT
OF ALFRED E. ZIMMERN AND GILBERT MURRAY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to analyse the League of Nations as an attempt to formulate the British hegemonic role in the European order by some 'public historians', in particular by some scholars who were at the same time part of the academic and of the political elites and who, supported the reform of the British Empire as British Commonwealth and the new liberal international institutions. These intellectuals are Alfred E. Zimmern and Gilbert Murray. The main questions investigated are: the way in which they formulated a theory that justified at the same time the British Empire and the League of Nations, how they legitimated the role of Britain as colonial dominant power, as a hegemonic force in Europe and as a guardian of peace in the world, and finally what kind of universal theory and categories they used in order to keep together the British and Western hegemon role in the global order and the right to self-determination of all nations. The hypothesis of the essay is that, in a critical period, where the old balance of power was challenged and Great Britain's pivotal position was shattered by European and extra-European powers, the internationalist project by the liberal internationalists seems to be connoted as conservative and innovative at the same time: innovative because it really promoted new methods and instruments for giving publicity and solve the issues of international order; conservative because the order which it supported did not cast doubt on the hegemonic role of the old European colonial powers.

Keywords: Liberal Internationalism, Hegemony, British Commonwealth, Civilization, Alfred E. Zimmern, Gilbert Murray.

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INTRODUCTION

What has liberal internationalism to do with the study of Ancient Greece? How were scholars of Ancient Greece able to become the main protagonists of the new internationalist momentum after the First World War?¹ How was it possible for some liberal internationalists between the two wars to reconcile two contradictory principles, namely the defence of imperialism and the promotion of self-determination in the first international institutions, in particular the League of Nations?

The study of the origins of the first international political organizations challenges our way of thinking about both International Relations and the main actors in international politics. Continuities and discontinuities characterise the transition between the League of Nations and today's international institutions and organizations, like the UN: even though the creation of an international public opinion is a fundamental legacy of the League of Nations, little else has remained of the original political approach of the liberal internationalists.² The following pages aim to examine the League of Nations from a perspective that the League was not merely a forerunner of contemporary international institutions, but also represented the emergence of something new, of a new 'international mind' born out of a world divided into national States and colonial Empires in the 'age of extremes'.³

In particular, two leading liberal internationalists – Alfred E. Zimmern and Gilbert Murray – will be examined in their roles as guarantors of the hegemonic power of specific states inside the international community, as British public historians,⁴ as supporters both of British colonial power and, later, of the first international political organization, the League of Nations.

This investigation will aim to throw light on those intellectual milieus which, before the Second World War, were intent on promoting the colonial and imperialistic world order while at the same time declaring themselves to be reformers of the British Empire. Thus, what might seem to be a contradiction in the thinking of some liberal internationalists, namely the praise both of self-determination for nations and at the same time of the

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¹ SLUGA 2013.

² MAZOWER 2012: 196.

³ HOBBSAWM 1994.

⁴ FESKE 1996; BUTTERFIELD 1965.

superiority of dominant European colonial powers over extra-European colonised subjects, will become understandable as a sign of the continuity between the past and the present.

This does not mean that there were no differences between the world system before the First World War and the new international system after it, but rather that the continuities, far from being fortuitous and related to individual positions – specifically, to the ideas of certain liberal conservative thinkers – were structural and connected to the dominant role that colonial powers enjoyed from the beginning of the 20th century and which began to decline. Indeed, according to accounts by Robert W. Cox and John J. Mearsheimer, the dominant role of Great Britain, which had been undisputed from 1845 to 1875, began, at the end of this period, to be challenged as a result of German economic and political development: this European disruption of the balance of power ultimately led to a clearer alliance between the anti-German continental powers and to the interruption of Great Britain's buck-passing strategy.⁵ This also entailed a revision of the internal structure and role of the British Empire, which was Britain's main source of power. Against this backdrop, intellectual and political elites which supported the British colonial empire tried to reinvent the colonial system, while at the same time renewing British hegemony in Europe. Some leading supporters of British internationalism belonged to those circles that sought to reinvigorate and modernize the colonial empire and to bind it to the League.

In short, the central idea underlying the following considerations is that, rather than defining international political development in the period after the First World War as a shift from the European concert of great powers, based on the domination of empires, to an international anarchic state system, based on self-determined states, it is useful to focus on the many continuities between an imperial and a post-imperial world in which some Empires still matter much more than other non-colonial states. The League of Nations can, in fact, be seen on the one hand as a bridge between the old colonial world and the new post-Versailles era, and on the other hand as the foreground for the subsequent emergence of spheres of influence defined and dominated by hegemonic world powers. As Alfred Zimmern put it, the League functioned as a 'deus ex machina' in the Commonwealth: it confirmed the pivotal role of the reformed British Empire, which would be able to return as the main hegemon after the defeat of Germany in the First World War (Zimmern 1926: 63).

The aim of the following pages is then to analyse the attempt to formulate the British hegemonic role in the League of Nations and in the

⁵ MEARSHEIMER 2001: 267.

European order by certain public historians who were part of the academic and political elites and who, at the same time, supported the reform of the British Empire into the British Commonwealth alongside new liberal international institutions. The main questions investigated are: the way in which these historians formulated a theory that justified both the British Empire and the League of Nations; how they legitimated the role of Britain as a dominant colonial power, as a hegemonic force in Europe and as a guardian of peace in the world; and, finally, what kind of universal theory and categories they used to maintain the British and Western hegemonic role in the global order. We will see how they presupposed and at the same time created the conditions for a global public opinion, which they saw as a primary goal for the League of Nations.

In particular, in the work of these internationalists in the years after the Versailles treaty, we observe not only the transformation of the British position internationally from mere dominance – based on the colonial empire and on economic industrial leadership – to hegemony, but also the justification of that hegemonic role. This role was based on the purported cultural primacy of Western civilisation, on the codification of its function both as leader for developing countries, and as peacekeeper in the international community.⁶ Here hegemony is intended in the sense that Robert W. Cox gives it when he applies Antonio Gramsci's theory to international relations, asserting that

historically, to become hegemonic, a state would have to found and protect a world order which was universal in conception [...] Such an order would hardly be conceived in inter-state terms alone [...] it would most likely give prominence to opportunities for the forces of civil society to operate on world order scale.⁷

The particular relevance of civil society is evident here: the hegemon state tries to achieve a universal consensus and does not confine itself to behaving as a dominant power exercising coercion. In Gramsci's and Cox's terms, it sets up a universal ideology that supports the alliance between different and opposing power groups or states and persuades those which are subordinate that their interest too is represented by the universal ideology established by the dominant forces. It is true that a mixture of hegemony and domination, consensus and coercion, is a permanent feature of the exercise of power, but, as Cox remarks, "the hegemonic concept of world order is founded... upon a globally conceived civil society".⁸

⁶ YEARWOOD 2009; PEDERSEN 2015.

⁷ COX and SINCLAIR 1996: 136.

⁸ COX 1983: 171.

The arguments used by Zimmern and Murray to support the British hegemonic role in the international institutions incorporated four main dimensions: an institutional/historical dimension, specifically the justification of the League of Nations as the final product of a historical universal progressive project, from the Greek Empire to the League, via the British Commonwealth; secondly, a cultural dimension, based on the creation and postulation of a global public opinion of well-informed world citizens and elites; thirdly, a philosophical dimension, the liberal defence of a universal idea of order and freedom; and, finally, a political dimension, concerning the justification of the hegemonic role of Western civilization.

In short the hypothesis underlying the following analysis is that, in a critical period, when the old balance of power was challenged and Great Britain's pivotal position was undermined by European and extra-European powers, the internationalist project promoted by Alfred E. Zimmern and Gilbert Murray was both conservative and innovative: innovative because it really did promote new methods and tools for providing publicity and solving the issues of international order; conservative because the order which it supported did not question the hegemonic role of the old European colonial powers. Possibly their idea of international politics supported what Gramsci – and Cox – would call a 'passive revolution', in the sense of a transformation of the political international system from above, which did not effectively change the economic system or the real political balance of power but tried apparently to change political methods and international means of arbitration.

The following investigation is divided into three parts: the first will give an account of the proposals for the reform of the British Empire into the British Commonwealth, and of the role of actors and institutions – in particular the Round Table – in the new formulation and revision of the Empire. In the second part, Alfred Zimmern and Gilbert Murray will be considered in their twofold function as public historians and supporters and leading protagonists of the League of Nations. In the third part, their ideas will be analysed in order to illustrate their attempt to legitimize the League as a hegemonic project designed to support universal principles and, at the same time, to ground the hegemony of the West.

1. THE ROUND TABLE AND THE REFORM OF BRITISH EMPIRE

Alfred Zimmern and Gilbert Murray were among the leading intellectuals in Oxonian culture – in particular in the Hellenistic field of study and in *literae humaniores*. As Casper Sylvest and Jeanne Morefield have remarked, the Oxonian curriculum of studies and the Oxonian intelligentsia

were well-known in particular for the quality of their studies in antiquity and for having been the birthplace of the British idealism school, around T.H. Green.⁹ Not only were they members of the highest intelligentsia from the beginning of the 20th century until the end of the Second World War, but they also represented the political liberal conservative elites whose role in containing political instability and adapting to new critical situations at national and international level was key.

Indeed, owing to strong instability, the British Grand Strategy during the 1930s had to change from the traditional stance adopted in 1848 by Lord Palmerston, according to whom “we have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies: our interests are eternal and perpetual”:¹⁰ at a time when Germany was becoming the most powerful economic competitor in the continent and intent on “taking a place in the sun”¹¹ among the colonial powers, the British Empire had to cope with a direct challenge to her economic and colonial supremacy.

This meant that the most perceptive sectors of the British elites began not only to support a defensive strategy against these new challenges but also to envisage reform of the British Empire. Alfred Milner, who was High Commissioner of Southern Africa and Governor of Cape Colony as well as a supporter of the Boer War, was active in seeking to overcome the crisis affecting the British Empire, which had become evident in the Second Boer War; he created the so-called Milner’s Kindergarten, a group of experts from Oxonian academic circles, which aimed to defend and reformulate Britain’s leading role as a colonial power. As Andrea Bosco astutely noted, “at the end of the Second Anglo-Boer War, a new language of imperialism had to be invented. It became a social-imperialistic language, able to fuse the rising social question with Imperial vested interests”.¹² The reform of the British Empire, which was growing increasingly fragile as a result of internal contestation by the colonies and external challenges in the shape of increasing German power, became for Milner’s Kindergarten and for the broader liberal milieu, a way to safeguard the *Pax Britannica* and to usher in an era of imperial expansion and social reforms.¹³ The *Pax Britannica* represented an exaltation of the past, of the British nineteenth century, which had allegedly brought peace and forms of self-government to the uncivilized colonies as well as economic wealth to the globe, and at the

⁹ SYLVEST 2009: 217; MOREFIELD 2005: 68.

¹⁰ LOBELL 2012: 147.

¹¹ BRUCH and HOFMEISTER 2000: 268-70.

¹² BOSCO 2017: 158.

¹³ KENDLE 1975.

same time provided a guarantee for the future. In this perspective, Britain civilization was seen as the most culturally and technically advanced and thus capable of guiding inferior cultures towards enjoyment of the values of liberty, prosperity and self-government. This meant stronger cooperation between Great Britain and her colonies, in particular the dominions, in order to find a third way between a centralized government and self-governing colonial states. As Jeanne Morefield observes,

at the heart of the Round Table's concerns about 'imperial affairs' was their general, typically Edwardian conviction that the rise of Germany, the US, and Russia as competing imperial powers, the increase of unrest in the colonies and the rise of anticolonial nationalism, and the movement of the dominions toward independence, threatened the Empire's coherence... The set of questions that preoccupied the Round Tablers focused on how the future Empire might be recast to address these concerns. What was the Empire to look like in the coming century? What would be the relationship of the British state, the dominions, and the dependencies to each other? How was imperial foreign policy to be developed and the military maintained? How was it to be financed?¹⁴

Lionel Curtis, who in 1909 founded the Round Table Movement, was continuing Milner's work and enlarging the audience and the membership of the colonial intellectual elites. He and Philip Kerr were the main leaders of the group, which included other prominent Oxonian protagonists, amongst them Alfred Zimmern. Right from the foundation of the Round Table society, a lively discussion arose about the possible forms of reform and structural association between the members of the Empire. In particular, Lionel Curtis and the London Group published a significant number of papers on the so-called 'principle of Commonwealth'. Zimmern's 1911 work *The Greek Commonwealth* enjoyed huge success in this milieu. As Peter Mandler has remarked, the expression 'British Commonwealth', to refer to the British Empire, was first used by Lord Rosebery in 1884 but was further developed by Lionel Curtis and Alfred Zimmern.¹⁵ The fundamental aims of Curtis's approach, and of that supported by many members of the Round Table society, were to assert a perspective on imperialism that would acknowledge the political relevance of the dominions, binding them to cooperation with Great Britain, and, at the same time, justifying British imperialism as 'good', contrasting it with the German equivalent. Lionel Curtis, Alfred Zimmern, Gilbert Murray and Philip Kerr did this by anchoring their arguments in the history of the Greek world and in

¹⁴ MOREFIELD 2014: 104.

¹⁵ MANDLER 2006.

particular in the Oxonian idealist tradition of thought, specifically in T.H. Green's and Bernard Bosanquet's various suggestions regarding the British Empire and international law, which they re-interpreted.¹⁶ So the Round Table's rhetoric supporting the British Commonwealth was based on the idealized British Empire, which guaranteed liberty and inclusive politics, and which was not openly based on racial divisions but rather on the superiority of Anglo-Saxon culture.¹⁷

Curtis's plan, like Milner's before him, was not to democratize the Empire, and even less to break it up, but to bind the dominions even more closely and to justify order in the colonies and the obedience of the latter to Great Britain. This tension between the positive characterisation of the British Commonwealth as a guarantor of liberty and, on the other hand, the need to preserve the "organic unity"¹⁸ of the Empire lies at the heart of Curtis's reconstruction of the difference between Asian despotic States and Western Commonwealths,¹⁹ as does his definition of duty and freedom as intertwined in British colonial tradition and practice. His argumentation aimed at justifying and legitimating British power as the product of a historical legacy whose exemplary character was, for him and for many Oxonian intellectuals, beyond dispute. In line with Commonwealth principles, Curtis understood the attempt to reconcile the demand for increasing autonomy for the dominions and for the 'ethical empire' seen as an organic unity.

Jeanne Morefield, among others, provided an in-depth analysis of Curtis's formulation of the theory of the British Commonwealth in his *The Commonwealth of Nations* in 1916.²⁰ Here it is necessary to stress the similarities between Curtis's approach and Zimmern's and Murray's vision of the Empire: the fact that all three refer to what David Boucher calls the "sentimental imperialism" represented by British idealists of the previous generation, T.H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet and David George Ritchie, whose aim was to prevent the development of social imperialism;²¹ the emphasis they all placed on the roots of the British Commonwealth in the Greek empire;²² their reference to the Teutonic roots of the Anglo-Saxon and German model of political development supported by E.A. Freeman and William Stubbs; the clear opposition they set up between bad German

¹⁶ MOREFIELD 2005; BOUCHER 1994.

¹⁷ RICH 1986.

¹⁸ CURTIS 1916; MOREFIELD 2014: 108 ff.

¹⁹ Strawberry Memorandum in MOREFIELD 2014: 110 ff.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 99ff.

²¹ BOUCHER 1994.

²² BELL 2006.

colonialism and the imperialism based on the civilizing mission of British governments; their shared faith in the exceptional and expanding quality of the British way of life, and in the idea of Britain bringing liberty, democracy and rule of law to the world; and, finally, their praise of the multicultural and peace-preserving nature of the British Commonwealth. What Alfred Zimmern and Gilbert Murray added to Curtis's apology for the British Empire and his astute attempt to justify it as the only legitimate colonial government was their attempt to place the British Commonwealth at the centre of an innovative conception of international relations. They shifted the narrative about the British Commonwealth onto an international level with the aim of safeguarding the main tenets of the 'Commonwealth principle' and transforming them into the main axioms of their internationalist doctrine. In so doing, they universalized certain principles that had been used to justify colonial power, combining a theoretical with a practical approach for the development of a stable international order. These principles were: the Greek legacy, the Commonwealth tradition; liberal thinking, civilizing power.

2. GREECE AND LIBERTY

The academic prominence, scholarly reputation and political relevance of Gilbert Murray and Alfred E. Zimmern cannot be overestimated, in part because of the cumulative effect of their political and academic prestige. In particular, they were public intellectuals whose roles were not confined to academic milieus but extended to the most powerful international organizations. They had much in common: educated in *literae humaniores* at Oxford, both attended New College, both were classicists and liberals and had a prominent role in international institutions. After lecturing at the LSE, Alfred E. Zimmern worked for the Ministry of Reconstruction from 1917 and was appointed the following year to the Political Intelligence department. In 1919 he also became the first professor of international relations at the University of Aberystwyth, a post that he resigned in 1921; in 1930 he was appointed to the first Montague Chair of International Relations in Oxford, with the strong support of Gilbert Murray. He was an influential political internationalist and his role in the League of Nations, in the British Foreign Office and in the Royal Institute for International Affairs was also to ensure that the public was informed, and thus to strengthen popular support for international cooperation.²³ Born in Australia, Gilbert

²³ MILLER 1979; RICH 2002; MOREFIELD 2005; MAZOWER 2012; BAJI 2021.

Murray was Professor of Greek in Glasgow and came back to Oxford in 1905, where he became Regius Professor of Greek some years later. He was not only the leader of the League of Nations Union but also committed himself to a long-term project for the education of public opinion under the auspices of the Committee for Intellectual Cooperation and the Council of Education in World Citizenship.²⁴ As Mazower, Sluga, Bosco and Morefield have shown, the role of both Zimmern and Murray in the League of Nations, as regards its creation and the founding Convention, was key.²⁵

Both were liberal internationalists and historians. Liberal internationalism may be characterised as having a distinct international program which “transposed onto the international sphere the belief in progress, justice and order that inspired domestic liberal agendas”. Belief in the State as the institution paving the way for human progress, in freedom and in human progress were the fundamental values underpinning their thinking.²⁶ Liberal internationalism therefore sought to develop an international juridical framework for arbitration between states and security.²⁷ As historians, Alfred Zimmern and Gilbert Murray belonged to a generation who despised any positivist conception of historical processes and entities, preferring an approach to history based on the role of individuals and nations. As Casper Sylvest remarks, for this generation of historians history attained the status of a ‘scientific sermon’, its aim being to assert moral and political values. Adopting the whiggish assumption of the progressive development of the British nation and the exemplary role of the British Empire, these intellectuals carried out their task as public historians whose role was at the same time political, intellectual, and cultural.²⁸ History was ‘virtually boundless’, and included philosophy, jurisprudence, and political science.²⁹ The whiggish conception of history that they represented rested on two epistemological premises: the belief that British history was “central to a proper understanding of the national character and its propagation as a crucial glue for social and political cohesion”; and their identification with their public, with whom they shared an education and interests.³⁰ For this generation of historians, not only the British government but also the British Empire meant constitutional progress, the accomplishment

²⁴ MOREFIELD 2005; STRAY 2007; WILSON 2011.

²⁵ MAZOWER 2008, 2012; SLUGA 2013; BOSCO 2017; MOREFIELD 2005.

²⁶ SYLVEST 2009.

²⁷ PETRUCELLI 2020: 118.

²⁸ OTTE 2019.

²⁹ SYLVEST 2009: 149-159; MANDLER 2002: 45.

³⁰ PARKER 1990: 40-41.

of a civilizing task and the guarantee of global peace. History went hand in hand with moral and civic education, and the examples of the ancient civilization were key to any form of education.

For many academics and intellectuals the ancient empires, in particular the Greek empire, were a kind of mirror of the British empire; J.R. Seeley, Anthony Froude, E.A. Freeman, Lionel Curtis, Alfred Zimmern and Gilbert Murray – to name but a few – explored the Greek and Roman worlds in search of examples of more harmonious and safer co-existence of various ethnic or racial groups, while at the same time seeking to politically legitimate the British empire, which was held to be the most civilized and civilizing.³¹ Duncan Bell has recently shown that the Greek empire, even more than the Roman empire, was cited in British historical and political literature from the Victorian age onwards as a model of inspiration for the British Commonwealth: contrary to the Roman approach, which was based on pure coercion, the relationship between Athens and her colonies, was nourished by a feeling of trust and partnership. This model could be the inspiration for an organization of the British Empire based on a graduation between the imperial centre, the dominions and the other colonies.³²

Murray and Zimmern were among the main proponents of the relevance of the Greek and Roman political models in contemporary life.³³ For them, the Fifth-century perfection of the Greek world was not a nostalgic image but a concrete political and social model that should inspire the state and, in particular, the construction of the British State and the British imperial structure. Specifically, two aspects of Greek sociality were fundamental for Western civilization: the political architecture of the Greek Empire and the idea of universal freedom within the community. Ancient history provided the political models for the new dominant English multi-ethnic Commonwealth, also supplying the civilizational standards that served to justify the superiority and distinctiveness of Western civilization.

In his *The Greek Commonwealth*, which was widely read in the Round Table movement, Zimmern supported the idea of a looser federation between the dominions and Great Britain grounded on two main principles: firstly, the idea of an ethical empire, based much more on hegemonical power over colonies than on state authority and obligation; and, secondly, the structure of “a composite state” of various nationalities with differing levels of self-government, ranging from the almost complete autonomy of

³¹ VASUNIA 2013; GOFF 2005; BRADLEY 2010; HAGERMAN 2013.

³² BELL 2006.

³³ TURNER 1981.

the “white dominions” to the total imperial control of British Africa.³⁴ This composite state, according to Zimmern, was equivalent to a “free union”, in which free states united voluntarily under the control of a colonial civilizing State. The multicultural nature of the British Empire was made possible by the coexistence of and graduation between the various communities: “Constitutionally speaking, the British Empire can [...] best be described as a procession. It consists of a large variety of communities at a number of different stages in their advance towards complete self-government” (Zimmern 1926: 7). Therefore, while liberty and self-government seemed to be nominally safeguarded by Zimmern, the order and the subordination of the ‘not-yet-civilized’ countries stemmed from their allegedly objective inability to exercise their sovereign power and their need to evolve, under the guidance of British civilizing power, towards civilisation.

Morefield, Chakrabarty and Mehta have made in-depth analyses of the definition of non-Western civilizations as confined to “the waiting room of history” that was accepted from John Stuart Mill onwards and right up to the time of Curtis, Zimmern and Murray.³⁵ The relevant issue here is that this classification, which was used to characterise the different communities in the British Commonwealth and was meant to recall the structure of the Greek Empire, was not only the foundation of the imperial composite state, but, according to Zimmern, at the same time shaped the structure of the League. Order and respect for cultural nationalities were the main tenets of Zimmern’s conception. He proposed the following solutions to two issues concerning order and stability in the new international order: the question of vertical obedience between colonized and colonizers could be resolved by postulating a hierarchical distinction between civilizations; and the burning question of the horizontal difference between nationalities could be dealt with by distinguishing nationalities from states and giving autonomy to the former – the national cultural movements – while controlling and the claims of the latter – the nationalistic political battles for independence.

The second contribution that Hellenic culture offered towards the solution of contemporary questions consisted in the harmony of individual freedom and integration into the community, which was a remarkable feature of the Greek world, according to Murray and Zimmern. Liberty, in Murray’s and Zimmern’s view, meant not economic freedom but social and political progress towards a universal and perennial value that could overcome cultural and national differences and historical times. As Murray

³⁴ Zimmern in MOREFIELD 2005: 146.

³⁵ MOREFIELD 2005; CHAKRABARTY 2000; MEHTA 1999.

put it, liberty was “the movement which leads [...] to the Stoic or Fifth-century ‘sophist’ who condemns and denies slavery, who has abolished superstitions” (Murray 1921: 15). According to both Zimmern and Murray, liberty was the spiritual force that has inspired all democratic regimes, from Ancient Greece onwards (Zimmern 1924). In opposition to aggressive liberalism and social imperialism, Zimmern and Murray championed a paternalistic form of government: the ethical responsibility of the higher civilisations to protect the lesser ones and the need for social reforms.³⁶ Murray and Zimmern, then, tried to reconcile individual liberty and civic obligations by referring to the Hellenic world and to the philosophical conception of British Idealism promoted by T.H. Green.³⁷ In Fifth-century Athens, wrote Murray in *Five stages of Greek religion* (1912), the inner light of the individual and the higher ideals of the *polis* were reconciled in a progressive movement, in line with the principle that truth was given only by a continuous search that had to be pursued (Murray 1925: 42). According to Zimmern’s *The Greek Commonwealth*, “politics and morality, the deepest and strongest forces of national and individual life had moved forward hand in hand toward a common ideal, the perfect citizen in a perfect state” (Zimmern 1924: 378). In his view, the Greek Empire *per se* represented the common Good, and the fundamental legacy of Greek civilization was its patriotism (*ibid.*: 58).

3. INTERNATIONALISM AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

For Zimmern and Murray, the conversion of the lessons offered by Greek history and by idealistic philosophy into a discourse that legitimated both the British Commonwealth and the birth of international institutions was their most significant task. The challenge that they faced was arduous because they not only theorized international ethics or law like the British idealists but were also actually members of institutions that promoted the consolidation of the British Commonwealth (like the Round Table) as well as being involved in the foundation of the League of Nations. As many scholars have shown, the plan for the League was proposed but not devised by the American President Woodrow Wilson: the real architects of the League were the British imperial elites, of which General Smuts, Alfred Zimmern and also Gilbert Murray were members.³⁸ Even though

³⁶ MOREFIELD 2005; BAJI 2021.

³⁷ BOUCHER and VINCENT 2000; KAYMAZ 2020.

³⁸ MAZOWER 2012; SLUGA 2013; PEDERSEN 2015.

they had to cope with and adjust to certain American principles dictated by the US President – the principle of self-determination and a vague anti-imperialist orientation – they were relatively free when it came to defining and laying down the foundations of the first international institutions. They succeeded in their goal by adapting the structure and even the basic architectural principle that ruled the British Commonwealth into the basis for the League of Nations.

The fundamental role of international organizations like the League of Nations in forging a universal consensus comes to the fore here as, according to Cox, international organizations are producers of hegemonic relations for four reasons: they embody the rules – political or juridical – which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders; they are the products of hegemonic world orders; ideologically they legitimate the norms of a world order and co-opt the elites from peripheral countries; and, lastly, they absorb counter-hegemonic contestations and discourses.³⁹ The League of Nations was one of the international organizations that supported a hegemonic world order, in which some regional powers exercise their influence on areas of the globe.⁴⁰

Philosophically and historically, both Murray and Zimmern saw the League as “a natural extension of humanity’s tendency toward social cohesion”.⁴¹ In these terms, the League was more than a mere bureaucracy; “more than a convenient mechanism of intergovernmental cooperation; it represent[ed] a great political idea” (Zimmern 1926: 67). Starting from his idea of the contemporary meaning of the Greek polis, Zimmern reframed British democracy and imperialism to fit the Hellenic model: in his *The Greek Commonwealth*, the British Commonwealth embodied the real historical accomplishment of the ancient polis, and therefore the achievement of a superior civilization based on law, constitutionalism and internationalism. Following this evolution, internationalism was seen as a natural extension of Western civilization and of its major manifestation in the civilizing mission of the British Commonwealth. Therefore, Zimmern observed:

The idea of the Commonwealth of Nations is not a European principle: it is a world-principle. [...] It is here, in the union and collaboration of diverse races and peoples, that the principle of the Commonwealth of Nations finds its peculiar field of operation (Zimmern 1918: 29).

³⁹ COX 1983: 172.

⁴⁰ MEARSHEIMER 2001; WALTZ 1979.

⁴¹ MOREFIELD 2005: 156.

Concretely, the institutions of the League should at the same time conform to two seemingly contradictory ideas: guaranteeing the principle of self-determination of all political members, and at the same time preserving ‘order’ – which also meant peace – under the leadership of the Western civilization. The solution to this involved anchoring the international political apparatus to the multiracial and multinational model of government of the British Empire and to the appeal of British authority. The graduation of the imperial communities, from self-sufficient, civilized states to lower societies that needed guidance in order to become full political entities, became the main idea underlying the mandate system.⁴² In this respect, the British Commonwealth had accomplished an “immense valuable pioneering work” for the League concerning the main issues of the organization of a multi-ethnic international order (Zimmern 1926: 144). So, following the model of the Commonwealth, the League could solve the main problems of international society, which Zimmern saw as:

firstly, the problem of inter-racial relations, the issue between the white and the non-white peoples [...] secondly, the problem of economic relations, or the issue between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ [...] thirdly, the problem of nationality, or the issue between the cultured and the uncultured, that is, between the peoples who consider themselves culturally superior and those whom they despise” (Zimmern 1926: 81).

The League’s identity, according to Murray and Zimmern, was based on its functions as a guarantor of peace, as a means of obliging members to mutual protection, as a “limiting factor of policy” and as a “standard agency of cooperation in matters of common concern to all civilized peoples” (Zimmern 1926: 59). In these senses, the new international organization could find in the Commonwealth an indispensable source of authority: the British Empire, defined as the “surest bulwark for peace in the world” was actually “a surer bulwark than the League” – and this “not so much in virtue of what it does, or of the physical force it can master at need, as in virtue of what it is – a multi-national association of peoples in five continents” (*ibid.*: 67). So the two were complementary: the League had the constitutional and institutional structure needed to exert power but lacked the authority that only the British Empire enjoyed. “If the League can keep the peace today, it is because the British Empire provides the chief of its guardians and executants, *Quis custodiet ipos custodes?* What power in the world is strong enough to restrain those guardians if they fall out among themselves?” asked Zimmern rhetorically (*ibid.*: 67).

⁴² STAHN 2008.

4. THE LANGUAGE OF UNIVERSALISM

The shift from the justification of the British Commonwealth, which exercised power relations in the British colonial area, to the legitimization of the international organization of the League of Nations took place through the universalization of the political imperial discourse and of the Greek political model. Moreover, Zimmern and Murray's aim to give a universal character to their discourse was revealed also by their emphasis on universal public opinion and their determined work to develop institutions for the education and informing of the public. Their engagement was paramount for the emergence of what Glenda Sluga has defined as the main legacy of the League of Nations: the formation of a wide public arena for the debate of international issues.⁴³

Education and the existence of informed public opinion was, according to Murray, the best antidote to the possible dangers facing democratic governments, namely internal disorder and the possible mobilization of the people against international agreements and decisions. The free press, for example, was necessary for the creation of a wider public for the internationalist politics, although as well as informing the public, it could also exert a nefarious influence on readers by supporting aggressive nationalism and exalting war (Murray 1929: 59-62; 1948: 68-69). Wise statesmanship, which should avoid seeking to please the masses and to mobilize them for power politics, should therefore rely on the work of education. Yet, the efforts made to ensure a good education of the masses at national level were not enough in a world that had experienced the First World War and the dangers of mass mobilisation: the situation required world citizens who were well informed about international affairs. As Peter Wilson observes, "in true Athenian fashion, Murray believed that responsible citizenship and education went hand in hand".⁴⁴ Education, in his view, meant not technical knowledge but philosophical training, the appreciation of the ancient world – in short, the *literae humaniores* – and, in addition, a knowledge of international affairs (Murray 1925). Indeed, according to the Greek scholar, a classical education was necessary to promote a true understanding of the common good or, in other words, of the relation between the individual and the collective. In this sense, Murray can be numbered among the representatives of the so-called cultural internationalism, "the fostering of international cooperation

⁴³ SLUGA 2013.

⁴⁴ WILSON 2011: 891.

through cultural activities across the international boundaries”.⁴⁵ For Murray, international intellectual cooperation was the only way to create informed global public opinion and good citizens – which would lead to true internationalism and to peace in the world. Good nationalism, which, as a historian, he took to mean the combining of individual freedom and the common good, was a fundamental aim for the political community. On the other hand, aggressive German nationalism, which had torn the world apart in the Great War, was evil because it worked against international cooperation and understanding. Scientific cooperation, education and intellectual exchange were “a powerful though unseen influence for good” (Murray 1948: 200).

Zimmern, like Murray, worked for the emergence of a universal public opinion and for the education of the elites and of citizens. Both worked in the ICIC (International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation) and promoted the development of Chatham House, seen as an agency for informing and educating British public opinion, while Zimmern also continued his work for intellectual cooperation in UNESCO. In order to sway public opinion and create a strong consensus regarding the need for the League of Nations, Zimmern set to work on the education of public opinion and of the political elites: his aim was to create an “international mind”, a form of thinking open to international collaboration.⁴⁶ “International mind” was an expression originally used by Nicholas Murray Butler as a “habit of thinking which views the several nations of the civilized world as friendly and co-operating equals [...] in developing commerce and industry, and in spreading enlightenment and culture throughout the world” (Murray Butler 1913: 102), while Hobson used the term critically to define a political and intellectual culture – the “legitimate political organism” – for managing the system of social economy.⁴⁷

Public opinion, according to Zimmern, was “the life blood of a civilized community” (Zimmern 1927: 10). In the fight against parochial nationalism and aggressive politics, Zimmern saw in the international mind a way to bind contemporary civilization to the Ancient Greek model and to overcome the egotism developed by narrow-minded statesmen and ignorant masses. The international mind was, for him, synonymous with the *idem sentire de respublica*, which had bound individuals to the Greek polis and to the ancient Roman *respublica*. However, whereas in the Greek world public opinion was delimited by the borders of the political community, “the *res publica* with

⁴⁵ IRIYE 1997: 3.

⁴⁶ SLUGA 2013: 30-41; MAZOWER 2012: 152; BAJI 2021; MOREFIELD 2005: 127 ff.

⁴⁷ HOBSON 1971: 194-197.

which it is our duty to concern ourselves [...] extends to the ends of the earth. The political interdependence of the world is the most important fact in the postwar international situation.” (*ibid.*: 10-11). As Baji rightly points out, the international mind was for Zimmern not a homogeneous mentality but a “common public spirit” or, in other words, a general understanding of the virtues and duties of the global citizen, denoting “the basic public spirit that formed a prime foundation for private ethics, including friendship and attachment, which would then underpin public virtues – the circular and mutually supportive moral composition”.⁴⁸ So, by bolstering the role of educators, of intercultural exchange and of information, Murray and Zimmern could aim to “bring about a global public opinion that mirrored the one in Fifth-century Athens”⁴⁹ and that at the same time could match the standards needed for developing well-informed pro-internationalist world citizens. On this point, Zimmern went as far as to affirm that:

All that is necessary, is that most of the citizens of the advanced and responsibly governed countries should be world-minded” and to speak about the obligation for “a common man to become a citizen [to] enlarge his vision so as to bear in mind that the public affairs of the twentieth century are world affairs (Zimmern 1939a: 26).

The plan to create a planetary public opinion reveals a shift in Zimmern’s and Murray’s discourse, from their defence of the British Commonwealth to supporters of the British Empire to the aim to speak to a wider public: a shift from the national imperial readers towards an – emerging – global public, and thus towards the creation of a global audience and global educated elites, nationally situated but capable of developing a view of the interconnections and interdependencies between states and political movements. On the other hand, the concepts that they used to formulate their theory of liberalism and internationalism seem to oscillate between the narrow assertion of the superiority of the British way of life and civilization and a wider attempt to speak for a universal audience, translating the colonial discourse of support for the British Empire into a wider defence of international institutions. In order to throw light on this shift, two main clusters of concepts will be explored here: Zimmern’s reconstruction of the dialectics between nationalities and states, and Murray’s ideas of order and liberty, as well as their idea of hegemony.

Both Murray and Zimmern were at the same time opposed to parochial nationalism – defined as the Prussian version – and supporters of ‘good’

⁴⁸ BAJI 2021: 139.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 138.

nationalism or, in other words, of Wilson's idea of self-determination, which, as will be shown, would in the end be viable in Eastern Europe but not in the 'non-civilized countries' or inside the national states. For both of them, however, the issue of colonial order and of peace implied the rejection of an anarchic international system where all states and nations were equal. Zimmern and Murray tried to maintain respect for the principles of nationality and self-determination and, at the same time, for the leading role of the civilized countries at the core of their international vision. Zimmern proposed achieving the difficult balance and harmony between self-determined nationality and internationalism in three ways: firstly, at the organizational level, by representing the League as a loose structure which would be "less rigid than a federation and more intimate than an alliance",⁵⁰ in that it would refuse to rigidly bind the states to international decisions; secondly, at the international level, by preserving the identity of cultural nations and denying national movements any political and economic claims to political autonomy; and finally, at the imperial level, by restricting the acknowledgement of political sovereignty to politically and culturally allegedly mature civilizations.

Against this background, Zimmern formulated a theory that could cope with the main challenges of nationalist movements without rejecting in principle the nationalists' cultural claims. Against what he defined as "parochial nationalism" (Zimmern 1918: 46-50; Zimmern 1926: 139) and in order to prevent outbreaks of nationalism in the colonies and inside the national states, Zimmern aimed to make the national movements politically neutral. As already mentioned, he distinguished the political nations from the cultural nations, conferring on the latter a universal quality and rejecting any consideration of their claims to political autonomy. Arguing about the need to acknowledge political self-determination for the dominions, he explained in his *The Third British Empire* that

The question of nationality raises a spiritual problem, or [...] a cultural problem. It is thus a wholly different realm [from the political] [...] it is possible for the community under the British flag to be politically dependent and culturally independent (Zimmern 1926: 132).

Zimmern thus "depoliticized the nationalities":⁵¹ on the one hand, he acknowledged and promoted the forms of cultural nationalism – in particular in colonial areas and in Great Britain in the Welsh or the Irish communities (Zimmern 1939b: 38) – and on the other hand he rejected

⁵⁰ Zimmern in MOREFIELD 2005: 146.

⁵¹ BAJI 2021.

any attempt to translate cultural nationalism into political autonomy in the colonial areas and inside British territory, while at the same time supporting Wilson's principle of self-determination for Eastern Europe.

He thus justified historically his theory on nationalism, citing the British Commonwealth as the first example of a government able to cope with the issue of nationalities, mastering different peoples, nations and cultures. This was, according to Zimmern, one of the main achievements of the British Commonwealth and, at the same time, a fundamental guarantee for the global order:

The British Commonwealth – he wrote – avoids the vicious confusion [between government and nationality] ... it has recognized that the whole art of government consists in bringing different kinds of people, different nations, different groups, different religions, different cultures, under a single law, under what we call the 'Pax Britannica', under an international system of justice (Zimmern 1926: 131).

This was another example of his transhistorical legitimation of the British Empire, made possible by throwing a bridge between it and the League of Nations. The international organization that was the League, heir of the British Commonwealth, thus became the only political institution able to prevent the specific crisis of the Western world and of the international community; at its core the British Empire would keep her role as guarantor of peace and order. So Zimmern translated the role of Great Britain from that of a colonial power into a hegemonic universal function, keeping peace and prosperity in the colonies and in the world:

The work that the British Empire is called upon to do is to preserve the peace in the world ... not so much in virtue of what it does or of the physical force that it can muster at need, but in virtue of what it is – a multi-national association of peoples in five continents (Zimmern 1926: 144).

At the core of Zimmern's idea of good community and empire there lay, then, the universal ideal of liberty and a model of a society – like British society – that was not controlled by a strong state but emerged from the free association of individuals and of groups. In his work Murray explored in detail this idea of liberty as the leading principle of any political organization. The liberal spirit was not synonymous only with free trade or with a political party but with a universal good and progressive society: in his *Liberality and Civilization* (1938) he associated liberality with civilization, while implicitly referring to the Ancient Greek civilization and to its offspring, namely British and Western civilization. He thus postulated a progressive view of liberty, justifying the imperfections of ancient Greek democracy – the exclusion of women and slaves – and of contemporary democracies by asserting the

moral and political progress ensured by liberal and democratic principles, which had always to be implemented. While for Zimmern liberalism was a “political religion” (Zimmern 1918: xiv), according to Murray it philosophically mirrored the Greek conception of the “One Great City of Men and Gods” or, in other words, the ‘common good’, namely a social world that satisfied the individual desire for freedom and solidarity, where everyone worked to accomplish their own potential and the potential of the community (Murray 1948). Liberalism, in this perspective, was the founding force in the ancient Greek world (Zimmern 1924; Murray 1938) and later for British civilization, while in the twentieth century it is the only safeguard for welfare and peace. Murray felt that war had demonstrated the need for a liberal approach to world politics, and that the emergence of the League after the First World War had made clear that liberalism and internationalism went hand in hand. “On the whole,” he argued in 1921, “I think it looks as if we were moving in the direction of realizing upon the earth something like the Once Great City of Gods and Men” (Murray 1921: 200).

However, in Zimmern’s and Murray’s thinking, the search for the common good was shaped by a strong belief in the superior value of Western civilization and, as far as Murray was concerned, by a strict idea of order and of the division between leading and led peoples. According to Murray, order was the main characteristic of a harmonious society, beginning with local communities and extending to states and to international organizations. An ordered world should be inhabited by nations who willingly agreed to embrace a civilized way of life and values and liberalism and to reject violence (Murray 1948). In this world there was no place for revolutions, social contestation and wars. Internal order – like international order – could be safeguarded only if based on a hierarchy, that is on the division between led and leading political communities:

Surely there is something wrong in that whole conception of human life which implies that each man should be a masterless, unattached and independent being. It would be almost truer to say that no man is happy until he has a master, or at least a leader to admire and serve and follow... I do not think it is true that no nation is good enough in this qualified sense to be another’s master. The World Order does imply leaders and led, governors and governed; in extreme cases it does imply the use of force (Murray 1920: 40).

This meant also safeguarding the imperial division and the civilizing aim of the British Empire – and of the League, and therefore the superiority of the European great powers. Underlying Zimmern’s original perspective, lurking behind his solution to the vexed question of nationalities, was the belief in the superiority of the British government and of Western civilization. The British Commonwealth was one of the clearest examples

of the superiority of British government and reinforced an image of the English gentleman as “represent[ing] a specific and clearly-marked type of civilized humanity [...]. He has evolved his own special technique of government [...] the English gentleman has been, in fact, an unrivalled primary teacher of peoples” (Zimmern 1926: 75).

At this point we come to the most important historical and philosophical question that they had to tackle: how could domination be formulated as a positive force, as having a civilizational value that would be fruitful for the subjugated and dominated countries? Murray’s and Zimmern’s conception of power, namely their idea of imperial responsibility, was focused on a civilizational and altogether hegemonic function. According to their theories, the British, like the citizens of Ancient Greece, did not control their empire with coercion or the use of violence – even though they may have been obliged to do so on occasions – but exerted an attraction that bound the lower civilizations to their higher one. This hegemonic force of attraction was independent from racial superiority – the race distinction being abhorred by Zimmern (Zimmern 1926: 77, 84, 89; 1918: 52) – and from the use of violent strategies: it was in fact something that actually depended on the natural abilities of superior civilizations, not on will. In his *The Greek Commonwealth* Zimmern stressed how after the Peace in Persia in 448 “Athens could no more step back than most Englishmen feel they can leave India. She had woken up to find herself an Empire and was resolved to play the part” (Zimmern 1924: 194) – the comparison meaningfully emphasises the superiority of the old and the new imperial power. The Athenians were not imperialistic because they wanted to gain power: “they had neither the leisure nor the desire, any more than eighteenth-century Englishmen, to invent an imperial theory of their own” (Zimmern 1924: 196); they shouldered the responsibility of managing an empire because of the objective superiority of their customs and civilizations. And, accordingly, in this idyllic image, they treated their allies and colonies as “free partners”, while the latter widely acknowledged their superiority. So, wrote Zimmern, “Athens had gradually formed herself, whether her pupils liked it or not, to be an education to Greece. The process was so gradual, and the control so wisely exercised, that the allies could not easily put their hand on any particular cause of complaint” (Zimmern 1924: 191). As Morefield perceptively noted

Like the British, the Athenians managed inadvertently to develop principles of governance unique to themselves that they then accidentally brought into the world through their Empire ... Athenian imperial culture was the Oxford paradox: universal and simple, broad and narrow.⁵²

⁵² MOREFIELD 2014: 53.

CONCLUSIONS

In these pages, unlike in Carr's famous interpretation,⁵³ Zimmern and Murray have been considered neither as idealistic nor as naive. They imagined a *res publica* extending to "the ends of the earth" (Zimmern 1927: 10); they challenged the parochial view of nationalism, the old methods of diplomacy and the balance of power, thus departing from the praxis of international relations of the nineteenth-century. The positive value of their work is their new idea of internationalism, which was however embedded in a system of classification that defined some political entities as being not ripe for self-government. Their paternalistic liberal internationalist approach to the issue of self-determination became evident in the League's mandate system, which envisaged the dependency of 'non-civilized' states – the colonial and non-white states.

Being well aware of living in a challenging period, they had to safeguard the old liberal order and, at the same time, change the conditions in which national and international politics were conducted. They saw clearly that the world faced a tragic choice between a renewal of the old diplomacy through the internationalization of political decisions, and a return to a state of nature, as Zimmern put it in 1931 (Zimmern 1936: 278 ff.). Fearing the possible dangers of aggressive nationalism, which might pave the way to world catastrophe, they tried to neutralise it by suppressing any claim to autonomy by colonial states and of minorities and by promoting the auxiliary work of Western powers to lead the "would-be nations" in the colonies – through the mandate system.

However, these two Greek scholars were not mere supporters of colonialism and conservatism: they were torn between their clear view of the new political and social conditions, which had led to the establishment of the new institutions for international politics, and their desire to keep their world as it was. They paved the way for the internationalization of politics and, at the same time, feared the power of a binding political League; they praised the idea of and enabled the creation of a planetary public opinion, but did not consider the claims of the colonial world which made up a large part of it; they acknowledged the equal rights of all nations while at the same time creating the mandate system and avoiding questioning the superiority of Western civilization.

Here it has become clear that Alfred Zimmern's and Gilbert Murray's function as public historians, their reinterpretation of the role of Britain

⁵³ CARR 1939.

as the highest example of civilization and as the pivotal peace keeper in Europe, their praise of liberalism and of the need to educate world citizens and guide colonial countries striving to become civilized, their appeal to civil society and to internationalism, and, finally, their elitist approach to politics are not contradictory but served to reformulate a European balance of power and to assert British hegemony. Indeed, it is their emphasis on universal values and methods – and in particular their consideration of the roles of education, civil society, the common good, universal civilization, liberalism and responsibility – that characterises their attempt to reformulate the old hegemonic order.

They were consciously trying to change the structures and the ways of doing politics by maintaining the hierarchies and relations of powers or, in other words, by maintaining the superiority of the British Commonwealth and of Western civilization. Their work and the institutionalization of the League may be seen as an attempt by the Western ruling countries and classes to support a passive revolution, a reform of the institutions that would safeguard the old power relations inside and outside political communities. They reformed the methods of international politics in order to preserve the European balance of power under the hegemony of the old colonial powers, believing that “everything must change for everything to remain the same”. The catastrophe that swept away their project and the League in the mid-Thirties may have been a result of the inadequacy of the new international institutions to cope with the real crises that were bound to submerge the fragile European balance of power: Bolshevism, colonial claims for independence; the social and economic crisis in Europe; European nationalisms and imperialisms, the issue of social justice.

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