

Simulating International Society: A Semiotic Reading of International Rules from Premodern Counterfeit to Postmodern Hyperreality

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Dissertation abstract:

International society consists of states and the rules and institutions they share. Although international society has become a mundane feature of the world and the principal research focus of International Relations, it has become meaningless. More specifically, the technical rules that determine what states are and how they relate to other features of the world are units of semantic meaning, but their rampant, unprincipled proliferation has corroded their capacity to contain existential meaning. This deterioration is to be deplored because it alienates subjects from each other, it is totalising and excludes alternatives, and it is theoretically irreversible. To connect the two kinds of meaning, the first step is to reconceptualise international society as consisting strictly of constitutive rules whose meaning depends on the context they jointly compose, which implies that these rules can in turn be represented as signs in a semiotic structure. In order to evaluate the capacity of the signs to contain existential meaning, the next step is to adapt Baudrillard's hierarchical typology of semiotic systems, ranging from the most meaningful systems based on symbolic exchange value to the vapid terminus of hyperreality based on sign value, in which semantic meaning is without value and existential meaning is impossible. The narrative traces the history of the signs of international law from the premodern period, when Christendom was understood as an approximation of the divine kingdom and a vehicle for salvation, to the present postmodern period, in which hundreds of articles of international maritime law make the decision to go to war over isolated rocks intelligible – even rational – and international trade law catalogues potato products to six digits. Three cases in particular exemplify this devolution in international law: the laws determining the territorial sea, the most-favoured national principle of international trade law, and nationality as a normative basis for statehood.