

Hedley Bull

The *Anarchical Society* (1977) est son travail principal : il est largement considéré comme un manuel dans le domaine des Relations internationales et est aussi considéré comme un texte clef de l'[école anglaise](#) en relations internationales. Dans ce livre, il défend le fait que, malgré son caractère archaïque, la scène internationale est caractérisée par la formation d'**une société d'États, et non seulement de systèmes d'États. Les États forment un système quand ils ont un degré suffisant d'interaction**, afin qu'ils "se comportent - dans une certaine mesure - comme les parties d'un tout."

Un système d'États peut exister sans que cela soit une société d'États. Une **société d'États se crée "quand un groupe d'États, conscients de certains intérêts et valeurs communs, forment une société dans le sens où ils conçoivent eux-mêmes être liés par un ensemble commun de règles dans leurs relations avec les autres, et partagent le fonctionnement d'institutions communes."**

Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* has become a classic International Relations text in the United Kingdom since it was first published in 1977. Its name in large part describes Bull's thesis: the **current system of states is anarchical in that there is no higher level of authority over states**, each state having ultimate sovereignty over its citizens within its borders; and the system forms a **society in that there are certain "common rules and institutions"** (25) which provides order to the international arena. Neither statement seems very novel to a student of International Relations; indeed, it seems to be an overview of the common neo-realist/neo-liberal position. *The Anarchical Society*'s value seems to be that it was one of the first books to comprehensively present such ideas in a book that most of all helps one to analyze world politics from many angles - albeit always from a neo-realist/neo-liberal perspective.

Having said that, *The Anarchical Society* can be rather boring for the International Relations student for the main reason that Bull says little that is new, at least in hindsight. In fact, Bull's statements don't seem that profound at all, and in many cases he seems to be saying the obvious (but this may be like reading Isaac Newton and saying that inertia seems to be common sense.) Perhaps my worst complaint is that, in painting a picture of his world, Bull sets forth definitions that he has carefully constructed so that his world will fit his definitions. It is inevitable that the world fit Bull's theory because of the way Bull has constructed his definitions.

Part 1: The Nature of Order in World Politics

One doesn't have to go much further than the concept of an "anarchical society" to find the point of Bull's work. Reminiscent of Kant (if I can remember back five years ago), Bull first sets out to define each of the terms he is working with - Bull seems consciously intent on forming a classic-to-be from the very start. He spends pages

discussing exactly what is meant by *order*, both in general and referring to the international sphere. It is here that he makes an important distinction between a *system of states* and a *society of states*. An international *system* simply means that there are states which have contacts and dealings with each other (9). An international *society*, on the other hand, while presupposing an international system, share a set of rules and institutions (13). Bull's point then is simple: **although the modern system of states are anarchical in that no hierarchical level of sovereignty exists above that of each state, the states do to some extent form a society with common rules and institutions, although this society "is always in competition with the elements of a state of war and of... conflict,"** and one should not think that "international society were the sole or [even] the dominant element" (49).

Part 2: Examining Order in the Contemporary International System

After some further discussion on exactly how the states system has evolved and an explanation of how rules are formed and used, Bull turns to "Part Two: Examining Order in the Contemporary International System," in which he simply looks closer at certain rules and institutions (the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war, and the great powers) contribute to modern international order. Having made his point, this section is simply supportive and seems to almost be a distinct discussion. The student of International Relations will find this reading useful, again not because of its novelty or profoundness, but because of its analysis. Here are some items I found important and/or interesting:

The Balance of Power and International Order

Bull makes a distinction between general and local balances of power, and dominate and subordinate balances of power (98). A balance in the international system is a recent idea, originating in 15th century Italy (101). The chief function of the balance of power is to preserve the system of states (103, 111). The current balance of power doesn't share a common culture, as did the 18th and 19th century European balances of power (110). I would ask, since the latter ended up more in something like a community, why couldn't the former do the same, with more of a homogenous culture?

International Law and International Order

"States obey international law in part because of habit or inertia; they are, as it were, programmed to operate within the framework of established principles" (133). That gives credence to the notion that international relations are at least in part socially constructed, and it makes for interesting thoughts about social conditioning in general.

The presence of international law in our current system of states is very much a product of the current system evolving from Western Christendom and its system of laws and values (137).

War and International Order

Bull notes that we currently see states at war as an alternative to states at peace, but when the power to make war was first confined to states, the alternative to war was "more ubiquitous violence" (179). In other words, **when states were first given the sole right to wage war, war was thought to actually reduce the violence present in the previous medieval setting.** Interesting.

Bull thinks that if war would have broken out between the US and the USSR, it would have been for security reasons. This is in contrast to Halliday, who thinks it would have been because of ideological reasons (188).

I wonder if Raymond Aron's idea of "slowing down of history" came before Fukuyama's "end of history" phrase, and if one of them was playing on the phrase of the other (190).

Bull feels that, "**The balance of power remains a condition of the continued existence of the system of states...**". He also points out the relative rise of civil wars after 1945.

The Great Powers and International Order

Bull states that, "...just as during the Cold War period the general character of any country's foreign policy was determined by its attitude to the first two" (198). Since *The Anarchical Society* was written in the 1970's during a period of detente, does Bull think the Cold War is over at this point?

Bull describes the various ways in which great powers can contribute to order, but he clarifies (?) that this is not necessarily what great powers actually do, or even what they should do - it is rather what they could do (201). I'm not sure what this clears up...

Bull makes the distinction among **dominance** (the "habitual use of force by a great power against the lesser states" it has control over without regard to their sovereignty), **primacy** (clear one-way influence and control without threat of military force or violation of sovereignty, such as the US and the other NATO members), and **hegemony** (between dominance and primacy, involving **control with force or threat of force that isn't habitual**, such as the former Soviet Union and the Eastern European states) (207).

Bull notes that the hegemony of the USSR has kept "territorial disputes" - like those between Poland and Russia, Poland and East Germany, Hungary and Rumania, of which the world has heard nothing in the post-1945 era" held in check and has prevented them "from reaching the surface of conscious political activity" (212). With the fall of the Soviet Union, have these territorial disputes have come to the surface? Is hegemony over an area analogous to a state keeping its internal disputes in check through the state's laws?

Although Bull claimed earlier that, "The contribution of the great powers to international order derives from the sheer facts of inequality of power as between the

states that make up the international system" (199), he asserts that, "the great powers cannot formalize and make explicit the full extent of their special position." He claims (somewhat contradictorily) that "international society is based on the rejection of a hierarchical ordering of states," so if the great powers are to "make explicit" that they have special rights and duties "would be to engender more antagonism than the international order could support" (221). This is quite paradoxical; he seems to be saying that the great powers have inequality of power, which contributes to the international system, but that making these inequalities explicit would undermine international order. I'm not sure if this is correct.

Part 3: Alternative Paths to World Order

Bull's last section, "Alternative Paths to World Order," is very insightful. This section is more closely linked to the first and helps not only to reaffirm that an international society exists, it goes on to essentially claim (again using Bull's own specially-made definitions, of course) that the current international society should exist for some time; Bull sees no contenders that have a chance of taking its place in the near future. Although Bull presents several alternatives to the current order, the ones presented below are certain ones I felt were particularly interesting for my essay, "[Changing Times: Alternatives to the Balance of Power as a Basis for International Order](#)," and the following is quoted from that essay, after which I present various other thoughts I had on this section.

A Disarmed World: utopic, states are based on the monopoly of violence and violence will always exist

The balance of power depends on violence or the threat of violence by one or more states in the system to counteract another state's rise in power.

World Government

Somewhat more realistic is the option of a **higher entity to which all the states in the world would be subject**. This could either present itself as a loose confederation of states entering into an agreement of cooperation, or the states could be fashioned in a similar manner to the structure of the United States, in which each state has some autonomy but power over the entire system is consolidated in one geographical area... [S]tates could then afford to be altruistic without fear of being taken advantage of, as either the worldwide legal system would prevent misuse or coordinate the altruistic process in the first place. Analogous to farmers in Oklahoma sending hay to feed the Texas cows during the drought of 1998, states would be free from a threat of aggression from other states, allowing them to freely exercise altruistic intentions.

The formation of a **world government** is a more plausible alternative, since it is evident that **such formations have taken place on a smaller scale throughout history**. Indeed, governments can be formed in several ways, mostly through conquest or consent. Herein lies a problem: plausibility does not necessarily begat probability, or even desirability. If we are seeking an alternative to the violence present or implied in a balance of power, a world government by conquest is hardly acceptable. On the other hand, the probability of the current system of states

voluntarily forming a world-wide government seems as low now as it did to Bull in 1977 (253).

A New Mediaevalism

Another alternative to the balance of power is to revert to the worldwide situation that was found immediately before the rise of the current international system of states. **In the Middle Ages, the West was organized by multiple layers of authority, each of which shared sovereignty with the others.** These layers of sovereignty were overlapping and were not supreme; authority was shared among rulers, the vassals beneath them, and the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor above (245).

A secular alternative to such an organization, in which multiple governments share authority over a geographical area, might be possible today. Such a crisscrossing of authority could result in a more stable world system, reducing the inherent trend of violence between powers, since these powers would in many cases share authority (246). This alternative is even more plausible than the others, since already it can be seen that governments are becoming interdependent in economics and technology, the United Nations is now a familiar part of world affairs, and Non-Governmental Organizations are increasingly prevalent. For these reasons, Bull admits that to a secular "neo-mediaeval order" being possible (255), although he doubts whether it would be inherently more orderly than the current balance of power situation (246).

One other similar alternative which Bull seems to immediately dismiss is that of "pairs and groups of states - the pairs and groups which Karl Deutch calls 'pluralistic security-communities' - among which there have been not only long periods of peace, but also long periods in which neither party has seriously expected that disputes would be resolved by resort to force" (273). Just as it is unthinkable that the United States would go to war with Canada or (in modern times) Great Britain, other states could conceptually form similar "pluralistic security-communities" in which violence would simply not be an option - it would indeed be unthinkable.

Such configurations are plausible, already existing within the present states system, and should immediately make one question *why* in these areas armed conflict is not accepted by the parties involved. One would expect great interest in such a system that not only promises an alternative to balance of power politics but has even shown itself to exist in the contemporary states system. Bull however, while granting that the concept of this scenario being extended on a worldwide basis may "offer hope," he quickly qualifies his statement by asserting that "we have no present reason to expect that... such a vision will be realized" (274).

How can Bull claim that a world government would impede on the rights and liberties of an individual (245) when a world government could conceptually be no different than a modern state, except that its boundaries encompass the earth? How does an individual's liberties change based upon the existence or nonexistence of other states?

Bull seems to sometimes needlessly duplicate alternative international systems in the discussion (245, 254). Bull recognizes that the current state system is connected with modern technology and communication (251).

Bull says that, even if Western Europe formed some sort of super-state, that would only be a regional phenomenon (257). Why couldn't that eventually spread to the entire world?

Bull's (and Brzezinski's) recognize that the initial feelings brought about by "technological unification" is that of feelings of fragmentation (263, 270).

Bull rejects the idea of "pluralistic security-communities" (273). But we can now see signs of a conducive environment for them.

Bull argues that economically less-well-off states are holding onto their "statehood" to keep a larger system from further exploiting them economically. I think this absurd. For example, if Pakistan and Bangladesh were thinking purely in terms of economics, they would not have split away from India and Pakistan, respectively (281).

Bull seems to want to claim the state system to be superior regardless. If alternative system is unlikely, he readily states it. But if a situation is unlikely in the states system, he holds onto the possibility: "We have no reason to assume that this will happen," he says, speaking about the states system promoting worldwide economic well-being, but maybe, "this now so delicate plant, will survive and grow" (282).

Bull recognizes a forming global culture, at least among the elite (305).

Bull does present some ideas that even today (in 1999) are actively being investigated in International Relations, such as the presence of order without rules through conditioning (52). Bull at times sets out his view of history, such as his notion that states' ideas of justice evolved from individual ideas of justice (79). Bull comments about current events, such as his contention that the current United Nations Charter places international order at a higher priority than human rights (85). Throughout, you will find his viewpoint very much in neo-realist camp, especially in his assumption that states are the main actors on the international stage (78, 81), although his idea of international society seems firmly neo-liberal.

The Anarchical Society is therefore a major work not in its novelty but its extensiveness. It would not be incorrect to say that it is biased. It is true that some things are ignored. Sometimes it seems to twist a few facts a bit, and in (many) other places it seems monotonous and pointless. But its examination of the international system is useful and has its place in the evolution of international relations theory. Should you read it in an International Relations course? Maybe. On one hand, it's a classic, so your professors will be discussing it, especially in the UK. On the other hand, you're bound to pick up some of the book's major ideas in other later works. If you have the time, go ahead and read it so you can say you have. Make sure you read Part 1, skim Part 3, and skip around to sections that interest you in Part 2. And feel free to switch to something else when it gets boring.