

Bull, Hedley (1932–85)

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Hedley Bull's thinking about relations between states continues to influence the way scholars understand international relations and diplomacy. Bull's definition of diplomacy as the "conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means" (1977: 156) continues to be one of the most quoted – although more recently with qualifications that account for the impact of globalization and advanced information communications technologies (ICTs) on diplomacy. Equally important, Bull's continuing influence is related to his argument, which he shared with other members of the English School of International Relations, that there exists an "international society" of states and that diplomacy is a central institution within it. Again there are many books and articles on diplomacy that refer to Bull's argument. Bull's continuing stature is also reflected in the Australian National University's recent decision to name an architecturally award-winning building on its campus the Hedley Bull Centre in honor of its Australian son.

Bull was born in Sydney in 1932. His academic career started with studies in history and philosophy at Sydney University and then politics at Oxford and the London School of Economics. After being appointed director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Unit at the British Foreign Office, he returned to academia as professor of International Relations at the Australian National University and then, for some seven years, as Montague

Burton Professor of International Relations at Oxford where he died in 1985, tragically at just fifty-three years old.

Hedley Bull's credentials for inclusion in this volume are obvious. The rest of the entry will elaborate in more detail on his treatment of diplomacy. First, it explains Bull's worldview since it is the intellectual context for his view on diplomacy. Second, it explores Bull's understanding of diplomacy and its contribution. Third, it reflects on some of the critiques of Bull's work on diplomacy and finally it shows how Bull's thinking continues to inspire recent research on practice theory.

BULL'S WORLDVIEW

The title of Bull's most famous book, *The Anarchical Society*, first published in 1977 and printed repeatedly since then, captures his central proposition about international relations and world politics. Bull argues that most states, while functioning in a context where there is no dominant central authority to construct and enforce international rules, nonetheless recognize that diplomatic communication and various diplomatic rules and conventions are mutually beneficial. As Bull explains, "the existence of this international society is not as such disproved by the fact of international anarchy (1977: 49).

The significance of Bull's argument then and now is that it contrasts with the continuing dominant worldview, largely perpetuated by influential American scholars, that the international system is anarchic in the sense of being without order and is best understood with the help of a metaphor about billiard balls. The metaphor is that states behave like billiard balls in constant friction with each

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other, and are separate, self-contained, and egoistic units. Rather, for Bull, states have enough non-friction interaction with each other to behave as parts of a whole, at least to some degree. Bull is also critical of the methodology behind the American worldview because it rests largely on an ahistorical account of the international system and on variables deprived of social context which could in principle be measured, rather like those in the physical sciences.

For Bull, and many of his English School contemporaries, while agreeing that the state is central, an interpretative historical methodology provides additional insights that allow for other attributes, such as states' adherence to norms, rules, and conventions, which allow for a concept of order to exist at the international level. Indeed, it was this comparative analysis of different states-systems throughout history that Bull and his colleagues in the British Committee of the Theory of International Relations, which began meeting in the mid-1960s, used to counter the rigidly scientific theoretical stream within the American academic community.

There was considerable overlap between the membership, and thus the thinking, of the British Committee and the English School of International Relations. For example, Bull, Herbert Butterfield, Martin Wight, and Adam Watson were members of both. To this day the school's original and still evolving membership (often referred to as the three generations of scholars) influence thinking about the assumptions that explain diplomatic practices between states.

BULL'S TREATMENT OF DIPLOMACY AND HIS CONTRIBUTION

Bull and other English School scholars propose that one of the main constituting features of the international society of states

that supports order are its institutions. Institutions here refer more to the habits and practices that help to realize states' common goals and less to an organization or administrative body (Bull 1977: 71). Bull argues that:

These institutions serve to symbolise the existence of an international society that is more than the sum of its members, to give substance and permanence to their collaboration in carrying out the political functions of international society, and to moderate their tendency to lose sight of common interests. (1977: 71)

Bull is well known for his emphasis on there being five institutions that support international society's shared understandings and implicit rules: the balance of power, international law, the diplomatic mechanisms, the management of the system of great powers, and war (1977: 71). So far as the institution of diplomacy is concerned, Bull refers to the functions it conducts: communication, negotiation of agreements, gathering intelligence or information about foreign countries, minimizing the effects of friction in international relations, and symbolizing the existence of international society (1977: 163–66).

With regard to negotiation of agreements, Bull notes its essential role, pointing out that without it "international relations would be possible but they would consist only of fleeting hostile encounters between one political community and another" (1977: 164). Bull's view about the central role of "professional diplomatists" with "specialist skills and techniques" in negotiations may appear outdated in this modern era of the democratization of diplomacy and the participation of non-official diplomatic actors, such as NGOs. However, Bull's emphasis on the importance of private exchanges undertaken by professional, mutually respectful diplomats who can avoid outside pressures

(1977: 174) continues to have many advocates and remains one that can produce good results.

For Bull, diplomats, while not without flaws, are the professional, uniquely skilled experts in conducting the various practices that constitute the institution of diplomacy and the diplomatic profession is the “custodian of the idea of international society” (1977: 176 and 172–77). Indeed, it is his emphasis on the role of diplomats and their practical skills that informs current innovative theorizing by those scholars contributing to the “practice turn” in diplomatic studies and international relations and who offer ways of more empirical-based theorizing than is common in the discipline of international relations. Two of these scholars, Adler and Pouliot, define practice theory as “what practitioners do [...] the quotidian unfolding of international life [understood as] competent performances” (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 3).

Another of Bull’s observations that comes out of his focus on the practices of diplomats, albeit sketched rather than fully developed, is his concept of a “diplomatic culture,” which he defines as “the common stock of ideas and values possessed by the official representatives of states” (1977: 304). Bull’s emphasis on shared cultures, both a diplomatic culture and a wider moral and intellectual culture of ideas, helps, according to one of his students, James Der Derian, “[dismantle] many of the fixed oppositions and supposedly eternal enmities of world politics” (1996: 97). Moreover, it continues to inspire comment and research, more recently on diplomatic cultures beyond the official representatives of the state to include epistemic communities and knowledgeable advocacy networks (Riches 2013).

CRITIQUES OF BULL

As expected in academia, Bull’s thinking has its advocates and its critics. Within the English School the three generations of scholars do not so much disagree with Bull, rather they highlight gaps in his expositions and interpret his various works in different ways. For example, some within international relations literatures see Bull as a champion of constructivism while others see him more as a classical realist. Beyond that, among the more trenchant critiques of Bull’s treatment of diplomacy is Neumann’s concern that Bull “does not treat diplomacy and the four institutions of international society as constitutive, but reflective of it.” For Neumann, Bull’s treatment of diplomacy and international society begins to have “an epiphenomenal hue” (2002: 9). Neumann acknowledges that Bull rightly emphasizes the practical nature of diplomats’ work but he fails to develop it beyond a diplomatic culture of ideas.

LOOKING AHEAD

Hedley Bull and his colleagues in the English School are a major focus of the recent “practical turn” in international relations and diplomatic studies. In this context, as Wiseman explains, diplomatic practices concern the “standard operating procedure” or “everyday routines” of diplomatic agents (2015: 2). Increasing attention is being given to Bull’s five institutions, particularly diplomacy as the source of observations and understandings about the nature of international practice. Navari points out that “Bull’s concept of an ‘institution’ is identical to ... [the] conception of a practice” (2011: 620). In a 2015 edition of the journal *Cooperation and Conflict*, several authors explicitly explore the “multiple synergies between international practice theory and diplomatic studies” (Pouliot and Cornut

2015: 1). Scholars from the “practice turn” emphasize the centrality of these diplomatic agents and practices within the five institutions that Bull sees as the basis for the international society of states – itself the basis for international order. Wiseman notes that Sending et al. argue that “diplomacy is not simply one of the five institutions, it is the site where the other four play” (2015: 4). Hence, as Wiseman argues, “practice theory would benefit from diplomatic studies’ connections with diplomatic practitioners and its intimate knowledge of diplomatic history” (2015: 2). This is not to suggest that Bull himself explores and analyses diplomats and diplomatic practices in such depth but that he obviously continues to inspire others to do so. As Wiseman astutely notes, “This practice theory perspective seems to take Bull’s view of diplomacy (Bull 2002: 156–77) further than Bull himself does” (2015: 4). Despite Hedley Bull’s premature death in 1985 it is quite clear from these scholars’ most recent research that his legacy lives on.

SEE ALSO: International Law and Diplomacy; International Relations Theory and Diplomacy

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