

Class on Hedley Bull

1. Some general points about Bull's view

A central claim in Bull's argument is that anarchy—understood as interaction between and among agents, whether individuals or states, in the absence of a state—is not a single thing with a determinate set of consequences. Even if we accept the Hobbesian thesis that a world of separate individuals interacting under conditions of anarchy lacks any order, there are still at least three forms of anarchy which work very differently from one another:

- (i) an *anarchical community* of the kind that we find within stateless societies, where order among clans and lineages groups, with partially overlapping competences, is preserved in part because of a high degree of cultural homogeneity and social solidarity, and the rules enforced by groups are understood as having religious or natural status and a special authority owing to that status form of special owing to are according to custom and tradition;
- (ii) an *anarchical international system* (anarchical state system) with a plurality of states and no element of society (as Hobbes thought of international society) or none that plays a consequential role, in which order is preserved through the separate states acting on their own interests and/or values and principles, and not on the basis of a sense of common interests or an understanding of being bound by common rules and institutions;
- (iii) an *anarchical international society*, in which order among states is maintained by the existence of an international society that does not operate in the shadow of the state: that is, by a sense of common or shared interests/values, and a sense of being bound by common rules and institutions (habits, practices, and organizations).

Focusing for now on the second and third forms of anarchy, the point is that there are distinct possible sources of order under conditions of anarchy; moreover, these distinct sources of order lead, so Bull seems to say (though less precisely and in a less focused way than would be desirable), to different patterns of order. So because anarchy comes in these varieties—the pure system variety and the social variety—we cannot conclude from the absence of a state that the factors relevant to understanding and explaining either foreign policy or international politics (regular patterns of interaction among states) can be reduced to the interests of states and the distribution of power or capabilities among them. Instead, the interactions of states may be embedded within a social background—a background that includes ideas and norms—that shapes the conduct of individual states and the patterns of their interaction. The central point—denied by Hobbes and suggested in Locke—is

that the existence of a society, expressed in ideas and norms with real consequences for interaction—does not depend on the existence of a state.

2. Central Ideas in Bull's View:

- a) Much of Bull's presentation takes the form of stating definitions and presenting classifications. It is essential in understanding the view to understand the distinctions, but not to get lost in them. We want to understand the distinctions and then use them to get some argumentative traction: that is, to get past the definitions, distinctions, and clarifications of concepts and to see what substantial claims about international politics Bull is advancing, who he is disagreeing with, and how those disagreements might be adjudicated.
- b) Main Concepts:
 - In general, an *order* is a pattern of activity that advances a goal. Not part of the existence of an order that the agents in the order aim at the goal or follow rules in achieving it (6-7). So for example, a perfectly competitive market is an order that advances efficiency, without that being the aim of any participant in the order. Important to the view that *order* gets defined independent of the means for achieving and sustaining it, that is, independently of its causes, which may include rules and institutions.
 - We have *order in social life* iff we have a pattern of activity that advances the basic goals of a society, namely: protection against violence; keeping agreements; and protecting property. What makes these goals basic: (i) would not call "a constellation of persons and groups" a society unless pattern of activity among them advances these goals; preconditions for pursuing other goals; universal. NB: the third point seems to be redundant: if a collection does not count as a society unless it advances these goals, then it follows that "all actual societies" advance them. If all possible societies advance them, then surely all actual societies do.
 - *International Order* when we have a pattern of activity between and among states that sustains the basic goals of the society of states, which include: (i) goals of all social life (security, agreement, property); (ii) preservation of state system of states; (iii) maintaining independence of the separate units; (iv) preserving peace.

- *International (or State) System*: a plurality of states that regularly interact, so that the well-being of each depends on the conduct of others and such that each needs to take the likely conduct of others into account in deciding what to do.
- An *international society* (society of states) is a system of (interacting) states in which the members form a society, that is: (i) have a sense of common interests and/or values, (ii) regard themselves as bound by common rules, which provide standards of conduct; and (iii) cooperate in making common institutions operate.
- A *world order* is a pattern of activity that advances the three basic goals of social life—security, promise-keeping, stability of possessions—for mankind as a whole.

c) Main Theses

- Order is one important good, but it is distinct from justice, and the preservation of world order may be neither necessary nor sufficient for achieving justice.
- One form of world order is a global state system, but there may be other ways to achieve world order (global state, federation of states, for example). So there is a substantial question—to which the best current answer is affirmative—about whether the state system is the best way to foster world order.
- In principle, international order—order in relations among states—could exist on the basis of an international system, which is not embedded in an international society: this appears to be a standard Realist thesis, that order can exist without a society or state. In this case, there would be order—pattern of activity that advances the goals of a society of states, including the three basic goals of social life—even though the pattern would not be sustained by such social facts as norms and institutions, but only by the separate efforts of states to advance their own interests and values on the basis of their capabilities. NB: The definition of international order—which refers to the goals of a society of states—may be confusing on this point, because it might suggest that an international order requires as a conceptual matter the existence of a society of states. But the connection between society and order, to the extent that such connection exists, is substantive not conceptual (62-63): it is not

a conceptual truth that only a society of states can advance those goals.

- Grotian Thesis: Modern state system, in its various incarnations (Christian, European, and World International Society) has always been in part an international society, in that there has been a sense of common interests, and of common rules accepted and common institutions upheld through cooperation. Moreover, that social element—shared interests/values, accepted rules, and institutions—has exerted an influence on the conduct of states.
 - (a) Thus the Grotian Thesis has two main components: (i) Descriptive Grotian Thesis (DGT): agents in the modern state system are, in some measure, members of an international society in that they are aware of shared interests/values, and regard themselves as bound by common rules and common institutions; and (ii) Explanatory Grotian Thesis (EGT): *order* in the various forms of modern state system—that there is order, and the kind of order there is—is in part a result of the fact that states are embedded in such an international society. As this two-part statement of the Grotian Thesis indicates, the claim is not simply that the state system is embedded in a society of states, but that the social element—awareness of shared interests/values, an understanding of being bound by common rules, and sharing in common institutions—is in some measure a source of international order.
 - (b) And there are, correspondingly, two ways to reject the Grotian Thesis: (i) reject DGT, with its idea that there are common interests, rules, institutions in the various forms of the modern state system. Call this “social nihilism”: international politics is not socially embedded; (ii) reject EGT, with its idea that the conduct of states and, more particularly, patterns of order in international politics are in any substantial way explained by the social element (sense of shared interests, or of being bound by common rules and institutions). And this rejection might take one of two forms, which could be called social epiphenomenalism and social intervening variable-ism. Social epiphenomenalism accepts that there is the social element, but denies that it exerts influence on practice (or perhaps any influence on aspects of international practice that are of particular interest). Social intervening

variable-ism is the view that the social element is an intervening factor in the causal chain from non-societal facts (interest and power) to patterns of order, but is itself explained by those underlying non-societal facts (say by the ability of a dominant power or powers to get others to sing the same tune).

- (c) The issue here is a little more complicated than this because Bull understands institutions capaciously, to include not just organizations, but also such habits and practices as war, balance of power, existence of great powers, and diplomacy. So the Realist who rejects EGT may well agree that *these* institutions do help to promote the three basic social goals. The Realist sees these institutions themselves as the product of the pursuit of state interests, given the distribution capabilities. In contrast, Bull sees, for example, the balance of power as also emerging in some cases from policies guided by the aim of balancing (rather than the aim of increasing relative power) or by the aim of preserving the overall balance in the system (101-02). So a disagreement remains, about how and when the institutions produce order: Bull thinks that institutions, like rules, can provide standards that guide state conduct to the achievement of shared interests and values. With this idea of rules and/or institutions as independent factors shaping the conduct of states and patterns in their interactions, Realists disagree.

3. Defense of the Grotian Thesis

- a) Need first to show that—contrary to social nihilism—in the different phases of the modern state system, states have a sense of common interests/values, of being bound by common rules, of sharing in common institutions: this is essential to defending the DGT.
- Consider the case of rules: so rules are norms, standards of conduct, not simple patterns or regularities of conduct. So among the rules in international politics are rules of membership (e.g., that states are the only members, only bearers of rights and obligations), coexistence (use of violence, keeping agreements, ownership of property/control of territory), and cooperation. These rules express interests/values—provide definite standards for advancing interests—and are made,

interpreted, enforced, and protected by institutions (including diplomacy, balance of power, war, organizations, great powers).

- In some cases, there is no such shared framework of rules and institutions: Mongol invaders and their enemies; Christian and Islamic societies; Conquistadors and Indian populations (and in modern settings, Wilsonians and others). In each case, there are (arguably) ethical ideas that justify policy, but the ideas are not shared. So the Mongols have a story of carrying out the Mandate of Heaven, but the peoples they were seeking to control did not share that idea. Now you might ask: what difference would it have made if the ideas had been shared. And I think Bull's response would be that if the Mongol ideas had been accepted by others, there would have been no need for invasion, but also—and more importantly—that peoples do not accept ideas that call for their own subjugation. So had there been shared ideas, then the Mongols might not have had any rationale for subjugating, and perhaps would have been less likely to subjugate.
- But in the case of the modern state system (in its different phases), the major players do appeal to common ideas and norms: we find these ideas and norms expressed in theoretical statements and correspondingly in the statements and arguments advanced by statesmen. Now Bull is pretty casual with the kinds of evidence that he uses to argue against social nihilism. So for example he says that even during WWII, the Nazis respected ordinary rules in the relations with other Axis powers. But then may be said for Mongol invaders, Conquistadors, and jihadists. And he says that some members of each belligerent group sought a basis for negotiated peace: but that is a weak basis for asserting that the social ideas are shared among states.
- But let's not dwell here because most Realists, who do not think the social element matters in the way that the Grotian does, can accept the DGT: they need not deny—and typically do not deny—that there are shared norms, but will argue that shared norms are not causally fundamental because they may themselves be the product of the power of status quo powers to win acceptance through what Carr calls "power over opinion" of norms that advance their national interests (TYC, pp. 132-45). The traction must lie elsewhere. Carr and Morgenthau, for example, do not deny the existence of shared norms, but argue that an essential task of analyses of international politics is to see the political forces that lie behind them (see PAN, p. 111).

- b) So what about EGT? What sorts of evidence does Bull have that the social element “exert(s) an influence,” which means that it is a source of order and perhaps of order with distinct patterns.
- A first point, deep and interesting, might be thought of as a challenge to the distinction I have drawn between DGT and EGT. Thus DGT says that we live in a world in which states feel bound (in some measure) to justify their conduct by reference to rules and standards that other states accept—as distinct from a world in which they acknowledge no need to justify or are prepared to justify to themselves in light of their own views. Now suppose we think also that the justifying ideas that other states accept must give some weight to their own interests: that there is, as Carr says, some limit to power over opinion (144-45). Now states regard themselves as bound to justify their conduct by reference to ideas that give some weight to the interests of other states as well. And the thesis is that even if the appeal to these ideas is a pretext—a disguise for the real motives that lie behind a state’s conduct—that the need to find a pretext is itself a constraint, and the element of society expressed in the requirement of finding a suitable rationale will foster order. Bull gives no examples, and it is not clear that the need to find an acceptable rationale is quite so constraining. But it is worth investigating this proposed constraint: to the extent that it has force, international orders embedded in international societies will be more stable than those that are not.
 - Second, we have the case of balances of power that require contrivance: where states are guided in their conduct not by a concern to advance their own power, with balance as the unintended product, but cases in which the balance is the product of a coordinated policy of balancing guided by the goal of achieving a system in balance.
 - Similarly, the social element is expressed when we have wars to enforce international law (esp. to enforce third party rights), or to preserve the balance of power: here again, the claim is that we have cases in which states act as agents for the order itself.
 - Now both of these cases may seem like arguments about foreign policy, not international politics. But insofar as there is a distinction to be made there, the arguments may have implications for both. So it may be that when we consider the patterns on the balance of power, for example, we find strands

that cannot be explained without supposing that states sometimes act with the intention of ensuring an overall balance, not with the intention of increasing their own relative power.

- Then we have two kinds of cases in which the social element is said to be effective when you would least expect it: (i) first, in periods of peace that follow war (40). But this claim seems wrong. It is hard to see why a period of peace requires social explanation. Here Bull seems to be confusing the DGT with the EGT, and simply to be observing that after a period of conflict, appeal is made once more to ideas about shared interest, norms, and institutions; (ii) then we have cases in which the social element is said to be present even during periods of intense conflict, such as WWII or the Cold War. Here again, the case seems weak. Thus Nazi Germany treated its allies in accordance with ordinary rules; there were people in Nazi Germany who sought to negotiate; and the Geneva conventions were respected: not clear why any of these behaviors require explanation by reference to an independent importance of norms and institutions, however the parties themselves may have presented or thought about what they were doing.

This is not the place to assess the different forms of evidence. Suffice to say that there does seem to be a distinctive view, for the truth of which real evidence could be brought to bear.