

Taming the Anarchical Society

Written by Ian Hall

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IAN HALL, JUL 5 2012

Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* (1977) is rightly regarded as a classic statement of the English school approach to International Relations. It still appears on many reading lists and a new (fourth) edition is about to be published to celebrate its 35th anniversary.[1]

But is *The Anarchical Society* a good book? I'm not sure. Does the theory it presents still stand up to scrutiny? I don't think so. And what place ought it to have in the contemporary English school? I think, in the end, a diminishing one.

In short, it is time to put this iconic but confused and dated book aside, and move on. I don't think Bull would have minded. He was an intellectual pugilist and an enthusiastic iconoclast. He scorned orthodoxies and rejected received wisdoms. He detested flannel and flattery. So I'm inclined to think he wouldn't have liked the veneration now afforded *The Anarchical Society*.

So let's approach *The Anarchical Society* in a Bullian spirit – with some straight-talking and some shooting-from-the-hip. I don't want to dissuade further generations from reading it, but I do want a better sense of proportion about Bull-the-IR-scholar and his best-known production. Bull was, I think, bigger and better than that confused and confusing book. He was a teacher and essayist of real power, and a strategist of the first order, as *The Control of the Arms Race* (1961) revealed, but *The Anarchical Society* was not his best effort.[2]

It was hastily-written, the argument is seriously thin, and parts of it are horribly dated. This makes it interesting to the historian – as I'll discuss later – but not much use to the contemporary theorist. Indeed, I'm not convinced it would now pass a review process for a serious publisher. Its intended audience is not clear – students or academics? IR theorists or all scholars in the field? It satisfies no obvious market: it is too convoluted and arcane to serve as an introductory text, even for theory courses, while the theoretical sections are too cursory and ill-grounded to be considered a really significant intervention to scholarly debate.

It does not help that Bull made little effort to locate the core arguments *The Anarchical Society* in the wider literature on IR theory. The book as a whole has very few notes or citations of other works. Though its 14 chapters take up more than 300 pages, it has barely 12 pages of references and fewer than 200 notes. Chapters 4 (on order and justice) and 10-13 (on 'alternative paths to world order') are really just reviews of some of his contemporaries' ephemeral (and now mostly forgotten) work.[3] Moreover, the five central chapters (5-9) on the primary institutions of international society are highly derivative of Martin Wight's earlier analyses in *Power Politics*. [4]

The original contribution to knowledge made by *The Anarchical Society* comes only in the first three chapters – those on the concept of order, whether order exists, and how order is maintained. Bull starts by distinguishing between order as any arrangement of things and as arrangements that have some kind of object – 'purposive orders'. He asserts that 'all societies' of 'men' have certain 'elementary' and 'universal' goals (concerning 'life, truth and property') and that they contrive purposive orders to achieve them (pp. 3-5). These orders may or may not involve formal rules and a means to enforce them (p. 7). This allows Bull to make the argument that an international society could exist without a sovereign, but with a purposive order.

This was an ingenious argument, but not one without problems. Bull's logic is Hobbes minus Leviathan: we move

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from pre-social life to social life by developing a 'purposive order' of rules, but not necessarily of formal rules, and these 'general imperative principles of conduct' pertain even without a means of enforcement (p. 7). How does this work? And in particular, how is power managed and how are principles upheld?

As Stanley Hoffmann complained in his Foreword to the second edition, Bull just doesn't tell us enough to answer these questions (p. x). He asserts that rules are made, communicated, administered, interpreted, enforced, legitimised, modified and protected (p. 54), but glosses over how these processes work in international society – and why – in barely three pages (pp. 68-71).

And Bull doesn't say anywhere near enough about whether societies of states really are analogous to societies of 'men'.^[5] Is it really plausible to think that a collectivity of political institutions of varying forms and capabilities can form and maintain a 'purposive order', especially when such orders are animated by each actor's 'awareness and understanding' of others (p. 15)? Can political institutions possess such capacities? In what way do they shape decision-making and behaviour? On all these points, Bull is unclear.

These problems emerge in *The Anarchical Society* partly because Bull's account of what international society is and where it comes from was radically different from earlier ones. Older members of the English school offered a different account. First, rightly or wrongly, they equated 'international society' with 'European international society' and examined it as a historical phenomenon not a theoretical construct.^[6] For Martin Wight *et al.*, 'international society' was the singular and contingent product of Western European – and especially Christian – thought and practices over a thousand or more years after the fall of the Roman Empire.^[7] They were mostly sceptical of the claim – Bull's core claim – that similar societies might be found elsewhere in history or that they might simply spring into being when 'men' or states live in close proximity.^[8]

Second, the early English school was less interested in states and more in 'statesmen'. They might not have agreed with Charles Manning on everything, but they did agree that the 'state' was merely shorthand for various institutions in which individuals thought and worked in various different ways.^[9] These individuals – 'statesmen' and diplomats, especially – constituted 'international society' and generated 'purposive orders'. It was they who, imbued with certain beliefs about the value of this society, acted to maintain it or to undermine it. The early English school was concerned, in short, with what actual, historically-located 'men' in international society thought and did at given moments in the past or present, not with how 'states' behaved in the abstract.

Why did Bull depart from this earlier understanding of international society? Partly, it was because of Bull's intellectual background. Wight, like most other members of the early British Committee, including Herbert Butterfield, Michael Howard and Adam Watson, was a historian. Bull was not. His first degree was in philosophy. He had studied at the University of Sydney with one of Australia's foremost twentieth century thinkers, John Anderson, and that experience had shaped his approach to intellectual inquiry and academic debate.^[10] Bull's attempt to tackle the subject 'simply by thinking it through', rather than utilising 'refined theoretical techniques...[or]...recondite historical research', was distinctly Andersonian in inspiration.^[11]

But there is something else about the way the core argument of *The Anarchical Society* is constructed which is significant. Bull's attempt to reground the theory of 'international society' in philosophy rather than history was a deliberate attempt to rescue the concept in both intellectual and practical terms.

The Anarchical Society is an artefact which bears the scars of its age and its political imperatives. It appeared at a critical juncture in post-war international history – the mid-1970s. Decolonization was almost complete and Western Europe reduced to near-irrelevance in great power politics. Declinism was sweeping America – defeated in Vietnam, mired in economic stasis, and keenly aware of its dependence on others (notably Arab oil producers) to keep itself going. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was seemingly on the rise, its influence felt throughout a vocal and restive developing world in which anti-Westernism was a powerful force.

Amidst this turmoil, publishing a 'study of order in world politics' – Bull's subtitle for *The Anarchical Society* – was a studied move. Quite self-consciously, Bull aimed to reassure his readers, lay and professional, as much as to explain,

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and even to prescribe. Bull was not and had never been, after all, a disengaged or ivory tower theorist. Throughout his career, Bull moved backwards and forwards between the worlds of policy and academia in both Australia and the UK. He was familiar with think-tanks and with politicians, and, unlike many of his later followers, did not shrink from engaging policy-processes when the opportunities arose.

The Anarchical Society was not just a work of theory, just as Bull was not just a theorist. It was a response to the pessimism of his English school colleagues about the prospects for international society in a world in which the West was no longer dominant.[12] It also conveyed a subtle message to Western policymakers: 'despite the present international disorder, hold your nerve', I think it said, 'for international societies can be built and sustained without substantive agreement on common values and norms, or, indeed, a common cultural heritage'. International society-the-concept, informing practice, can be rescued from the wreckage of actual European international society.

Thirty-five years on, and with apologies to its publisher, I think we should see *The Anarchical Society* as a book more important for what it says about Western anxieties in the latter half of the 1970s than for what it might offer latter-day theorists. We now know far more about how rules are made, enforced and legitimised in international relations than Bull did, thanks to historical institutionalists, game theorists, constructivists, and indeed the new English school. Our understanding of the state, the workings of primary institutions, and the interactions of norms and practices are far superior. Our accounts of international ethics have moved well beyond simplistic debates about 'order and justice'. Read *The Anarchical Society* if you wish, but recognise it for what it is: flawed and anachronistic, as well as iconic, and a book that aimed to enlist theory in an effort to change the minds of practitioners as well as scholars.

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[1] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 4th ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012). The American edition is published by Columbia University Press.

[2] Bull-the-strategist is the subject of a new study by Robert Ayson, *Hedley Bull and the Accommodation of Power* (New York: Palgrave, 2012). See also *The Control of the Arms Race: Disarmament and Arms Control in the Missile Age* 2nd ed. (New York and Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965) and Bull's many essays, including those in J. D. B. Miller and R. J. Vincent (eds.), *Order and Violence: Hedley Bull and International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) and Kai Alderson and Andrew Hurrell (eds.), *Hedley Bull on International Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

[3] Chapter 4 – 'Order versus Justice in World Politics' – began life as an essay for *Political Studies* (19:3 (1971)) responding to Ali Mazrui's *Towards a Pax Africana* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969). Chapters 10-13 reflect on Richard Falk's *This Endangered Planet: Prospects and Proposals for Human Survival* (New York: Random House, 1971) and Rajni Kothari's *Footsteps into the Future: Diagnosis of the Present World and Design for an Alternative* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1974), among other works.

[4] See especially Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, new edition, edited by Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978).

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[5] This point was raised by Roy Jones in his 'The English school of international relations: a case for closure', *Review of International Studies* 7 (1981), pp. 1-13, and has never really been addressed by the English school in the detail that it deserves.

[6] See *Power Politics*, but also his 'Western Values in International Relations', in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (ed.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), pp. 89-131.

[7] See especially Renée Jeffery, *Hugo Grotius in International Thought* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

[8] The exception to this rule, of course, was Adam Watson.

[9] See, if you dare, C. A. W. Manning, *The Nature of International Society* (London: London School of Economics, 1962).

[10] See Renée Jeffery, 'Australian Realism and International Relations: John Anderson and Hedley Bull on Ethics, Religion, and Society', *International Politics* 45:1, (2008), pp. 52-71.

[11] Bull, 'Preface' to *The Anarchical Society*, p. xiii.

[12] On this pessimism and for a longer discussion of this point, see Ian Hall, 'The Revolt against the West: Decolonization and its Repercussions in British International Thought, 1960-1985', *International History Review* 33:1 (2011), pp. 43-64, and more broadly, Ian Hall, *Dilemmas of Decline: British Intellectuals and World Politics, 1945-75* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

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