

# Bull's Critique of Hobbesian International Anarchy

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A degree of caution is needed when asserting that Hedley Bull's claims about international society undermine the Hobbesian understanding of international anarchy. Although this essay largely purports that it does, it must also be acknowledged that the Realist view of international anarchy forms part of the foundations of Bull's international society. To make this argument clear, Bull's theory of international society will be broken up into three parts; the first is his argument against the domestic analogy as an inaccurate depiction of international relations; the second is his acknowledgment of the international system, in which realist viewpoints can be clearly seen and; the third and final part is the formation of international society. To fully answer the question at hand it will be argued that parts one and three of his theory undermine the Hobbesian understanding of international anarchy. Part one proves it to be theoretically unfounded and part three establishes what Hobbesian international anarchy claimed to be unattainable, whilst part two represents the paradoxical element of Bull's theory – as it uses certain realist ideas as a starting point for the development of his international society

### Part One: the Failure of the Domestic Analogy

There is undoubtedly a general tendency amongst Realists to assume that anarchy in the state of nature as depicted by Hobbes in *Leviathan* is also true in the international realm. Despite their acceptance that a Leviathan does not and cannot exist at the international level, realists still use it to justify the trinity of the state, security and self-interest. Bull (1969:35) argues that this domestic analogy, that 'from the experience of individual men in the domestic society... states must do the same', is a fundamental flaw in the realist understanding of Hobbes. The justification for this statement can be found in the work of Hobbes and what he says about international relations. Hobbes' state of nature is much more complex than the Realist understanding, for example there is no consensus on what the world is or what it ought to be, so in this sense it is much more profound than the logic of relative gains and problems of cooperation (Williams 2005:23-24). Furthermore, in presenting such an analogy, realists have overlooked the obvious differences between individuals and states, something that Hobbes himself recognised.

He says that anarchy between states is not hell and because of 'independency', 'jealousies' and that they have 'their weapons pointing and their eyes fixed on one another' they are merely in a 'posture of war' (L 13:65) meaning that although uncertain with another, they are not necessarily in a permanent state of war and terror. The reason for this is that they 'uphold thereby the industry of their subjects, there does not follow from it, that misery, which accompanies the Liberty of particular men' (L 13:90). In other words, because states keep order internally the anarchy that exists between individuals in the state of nature is not the same as that which exists between states.

Furthermore in proving the domestic analogy to be inaccurate, Bull (1977:41-43) points out what would appear to be obvious observations that undermine the Realist assumption. He argues states are not as vulnerable as individuals and they are not all equal in the Hobbesian sense. Bull goes further saying that competition for resources between states isn't as aggressive as that between individuals and the system of trade and commerce sees states preferring diplomatic and fiscal forms of competition. It can be argued it is for these reasons that Hobbes '[fails] to extend the logic of his political theory to the international realm' (Williams 1996: 214) and Bull does the same, not only because it is illogical but also because it is unrealistic as it is highly unlikely that states would ever abandon their sovereignty.

### Part Two: The International System

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Bull's starting point in theorising about international relations is the acknowledgment of an anarchic international system. It is important to understand the international system as prior to international society and as a more basic idea. According to Bull the projection of European power in the fifteenth century created an international system as it brought people and political communities into regular contact (Buzan 1993:331). Therefore for a system to exist there must be units and interaction between them and additionally, a minimal desire for order (this point will be developed later). Bull defines this interaction such that 'the behaviour of each [actor] is a necessary factor in the calculations of others' (Bull 1977:9). To put in very simple terms, international society entails states that have contact and dealings with each other.

In such a system the units are numerous and powerful and because their activities and ideas cross paths – peaceful interaction occurs at first. However like Buzan (1993:314) suggests, as interaction becomes more frequent and intense so does the probability of conflict to the extent that 'international relations as a system without any society are analogous to a madhouse.' Competition for resources and territory and tensions between cultures and religion begin to generate strategic interaction.

This idea of strategic interaction is dominant in Realist thought of Hobbesian international anarchy. In the absence of an overall authority, the international system is an amalgamation of uncertain and vulnerable states that are all predominantly concerned with survival constantly engaging in a 'struggle for power' (Morgenthau 1985:31) in a war against all exemplified by the security dilemma. The balance of power plays a key role for Realists in explaining all state behaviour and in maintaining the state system. It is measured by material factors such as population size, territory size and economic and military strength. Within this context, international law is largely irrelevant as states do not respond to rules but to practical considerations determined by the amount of power they have vis-à-vis other states (Cali 2009:29). Amid this mistrust, all states are hesitant to interact with one another because interaction means competition meaning, due to their common fear that others may gain more, states will often abandon cooperative arrangements despite their possibility of success (Grieco 1988: 487). For Realists, this is international relations, it is an anarchic international system and there is no international society.

The essential point that Bull emphasises and that Realists seem to overlook in coming to this conclusion is that within the international system, international order exists. Bull (1977:16-18) defines international order as a pattern of activity between and among states that sustain basic goals such as self-preservation, maintaining sovereignty, maintaining peace in the absence of war and general goals of social life. Seeing as states have no choice but to interact with one another it seems inevitable that they would not only need but also desire to create some level of order in their relations. This resonates with a claim made by the international lawyer John Westlake who argued that any country, 'with an old and stable order of its own [would be] complex enough for the leading minds of that country to be able to appreciate the necessities of an order different from theirs...' (Gong 1984:59). For Bull order has always been part of the historical record of international relations and plays a key role in the development of international society. However this creates somewhat of a grey zone begging the question: when will international order within the international system form a society? This gap lends support to many critics such as Jones and Mann who dismiss society as analytically useless because of its operational imprecision (Buzan 1993:344).

Arguably the solution to this grey area is ironically reflected in Hobbesian 'immature' international anarchy as Buzan puts it. What becomes apparent is that within the Realist international system, all the actors i.e. states share a common goal and a common identity; they are all insecure and their number one priority is survival. This is in fact Waltz's (1979) logic of anarchy generating 'like units'. Within this shared identity states recognise themselves as being similar entities with equal legal status, which in turn marks a significant turning point in the development of rules and norms. As Wight (1977:135) puts it, 'it would be impossible to have a society of sovereign states unless each...recognised that every other state had the right to claim and enjoy its own sovereignty as well.'

## **Part Three: International Society**

Bull's very definition of international society embraces this idea of common interests and claims that this is the basis on which the society is founded. He defines international society as 'a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and values, [that] form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of

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rules in their relations with one another and share in the working of common institutions' (Bull 1977:13). The conceptual difference between international system and international society is now clear; in a system states have common interests and values but it is their awareness of this fact that leads to a society, where common set of rules, norms and institutions form through which states interact.

It is certainly ironic that Realists, given their understanding of Hobbesian international anarchy, repudiate any form of international society yet Bull has evidently used it as a stepping-stone to get there. Furthermore, the following discussion will illustrate how flavours of Realist thinking are peppered though Bull's international society. Bull recognises that the order that exists in the international society is far from perfect. It is anarchical in that there is still no government over governments, a view also shared by Realists. In fact Bull (1977:49-50) goes as far to say that the order provided by international society is always in competition with the elements of a state of war and of transnational solidarity of conflict. This too seems to resemble some of the characteristics of Hobbesian international anarchy; the difference is that it is within a framework of international society thus undermining the realist view that is confined to the international system.

One of the main ways that states can preserve international order and interact based on their commonalities is through the institutions of international society. It becomes clear that some of these institutions, although having different effects and purposes, were also present in the Realist concept of the international system. The first is the balance of power, which is primarily a realist concept and to which Bull dedicates an entire chapter to in *The Anarchical Society*. The role of the balance of power is to maintain the international society (differs from a Realist systemic role) and it is therefore not a coincidence but necessary (Brown 2001:428). The second institution is war, upon which Bull builds on the Realist idea that it shapes the system but additionally focuses on how in international society it serves a rational purpose such as preserving the balance of power and enforcing international law. International law is the third institution present in international society through which states interact. Moving further from Realism, Bull argues international law plays an important role in maintaining the society by creating rights and duties through moral and legal rules and norms and enforcing them. The final two institutions are the most removed from Realism and they are diplomacy and the 'Great Powers'. Diplomacy provides for communication and negotiation between states and the 'Great Powers' are almost seen as overall custodians of international society, not necessarily in the sense that they are, but that they could and should be.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to revisit the argument stated at the beginning of this essay: firstly, that Bull undermines the theoretical foundation upon which Hobbesian international anarchy is based and secondly that he then uses it as his starting point in his theory by using it as a vital step in the formation of international society. In other words, the arguments Realists put forward for denying international society and for advocating only the existence of the international system are used by Bull to prove the existence of international society thus undermining the Realist argument. Bull undermines the theoretical origins of Hobbesian international anarchy proving it to be based on a flawed, over simplistic view of Hobbes' work. Consequently, the Realist understanding of Hobbesian international anarchy overlooks the grey area inbetween the international system and the creation of a world government. Bull recognises the concepts of common entities, common interests and order that exist in the Realist international system but he goes further and 'activates' them through the creation of international society and the vital institutions through which states interact. International society is not one of power politics but nevertheless echoes Hobbesian ideas of survival and order. That there is an implicit relationship between international system and international society and that the concepts within the two are complementary not contradictory proves international society to undermine Hobbesian international anarchy. Realists seem to be at a standstill in international relations but Bull comes along and not only uses their arguments but goes beyond them to further his idea of international society. The outcome is complex, revealing a theory that combines Hobbesian international anarchy in the form of international system and international society as part of one coherent and realistic explanation of the international system and represents a more accurate depiction of international relations.

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