



**The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics, 3rd edition**

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The third edition of *The Anarchical Society* marks the 25th anniversary of its publication. Bull's central theme is the problem of achieving order in a system of sovereign nation-states. To a contemporary political theory audience, this topic might seem more relevant to the world of the 19th century than to that of the 21st century. Since the first edition was published, the study of international relations has been systematically exposed to normative concerns. This has opened up an important place for ethical debate that has, to an extent, displaced Bull's focus on the problem of achieving international order. Nevertheless, a weakness of the wave of normative literature, even in its communitarian guise, is that it has often tended to lack a sophisticated sociological analysis of the states system that is able to bridge the divide between of theory and practice. The publication of the third edition of Bull's *Anarchical Society* should be taken as an invitation to political theorists interested in international relations to fill this gap in their emerging research agenda.

*The Anarchical Society* examines the nature and workings of the modern states system. This system is anarchic in the sense that it lacks an over-arching framework to enforce law. Nevertheless, Bull argues that through their interaction states form an 'international society' reflecting common norms and rules, and share an interest in maintaining these institutions. The 'institutions' Bull identifies as shaping international anarchy are the very limited ones of the balance of power, war, diplomacy, sovereignty and the special rights and responsibilities of the great powers. Indeed, these institutions are so minimal that to some they constitute a thin veil for the operation of *realpolitik*. Yet Bull identifies the ways in which they routinely introduce a higher element of regularity into international affairs than might be expected in a Hobbesian state of nature. Bull's world is a pluralist one in which states differ over the values that underpin their internal political constitution. Nevertheless, all states can share in the order that an international society generates.

This framework has presented an anathema to many approaching international relations from a political theory perspective. On one reading, *The Anarchical Society* suggests that international order should not be jeopardized by the pursuit of more idealistic ends that might threaten its



existence. The predominance of this reading inevitably generated a counter-reaction. As Andrew Hurrell comments in his new forward, the criticism was made that Bull 'separate(d) the subject of International Relations from the richer traditions of social and political theory to which it was necessarily intimately connected, and downplayed or ignored a range of fundamental questions about the state, community and nation that could never satisfactorily be addressed solely from the perspective of the society of states' (p. xiv). The result has been a steady flow of literature exploring normative dimensions of world politics. This trend increased as the end of the Cold War and renewed debates about globalization problematized the whole notion of a stable and enduring states system. From the perspective of much of this literature, one might be forgiven for concluding that Bull's study now appears dated.

This verdict would, however, be premature. A limitation of the new generation of normative literature is that it has raised important moral questions without providing concomitant institutional answers. It is certainly true, for example, that vital debates have emerged in the wake of globalization about the extension of democracy above the nation-state, and about gross inequalities within the world economy. However, even after extensive debate on cosmopolitan democracy and international distributive justice, the institutional mechanisms through which these projects may be realised remain under-specified. The communitarian literature is arguably more compatible with the pluralistic structure of international society modelled by Bull. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how satisfactory communitarian principles might be in informing and judging the moral conduct of actors within international society. Walzer, for example, famously argued for a duty of intervention in humanitarian catastrophes that 'shock the moral conscience of mankind' (Walzer, 2000). Yet the events of the 1990s have surely demonstrated just how difficult this idea is to apply the practice of intervention in either prescriptive or evaluative terms.

What is missing from normative debates is a sociological framework capable of bridging the gap between ethical theory and political practice. It is in providing this sociological framework that *The Anarchical Society* remains an important point of reference. From a contemporary perspective, it can be acknowledged that Bull's own sociology of the states system is unduly narrow. Bull pays insufficient attention to transformative potential within the system of states, and tended to under-estimate the level of world society. However, he did have a subtle awareness of the moral complexity of world politics that belies a one-dimensional reading of his contribution. As Hurrell identifies, Bull did not give analytical priority to order over justice, but was instead interested in the relationship which exists between order as a fact and order as a value. Hence he was 'centrally concerned with the legal and moral understandings of order as they had developed within international society, and with the political and



moral pre-requisites of a meaningfully moral community'. This highlights the dialectical character of the relationship between order and justice, and is a powerful reminder of the way in which 'many of the most pressing and intractable ethical dilemmas in the field of world politics are as much about the legitimacy of practice, power and process as they are about philosophical foundations' (p. xv). If normative theorists wish to extend their research agenda, they must engage with second-order sociological issues such as these.

This is not to claim that the pendulum is swinging back to more 'traditional' debates within international relations. Normative theorists have ensured that moral issues are now thoroughly mainstream. However, normative theorists must ask themselves difficult questions about the application of moral principles to the evaluation of conduct in international affairs. Otherwise the momentum generated by the important questions they have raised may be lost. This would be a pity given the inroads made into an excessively narrow and morally blinkered discipline. Ultimately, of course, debates about order and justice can never be far removed from one another in either international relations or political theory. The two concepts should constantly feed back and inform one another. Bull's *Anarchical Society* essentially replays debates about the state of nature that have long been familiar themes in political theory. Conversely, the issue of how to generate order is inescapably central to normative reflection about political life. Political theorists who might be tempted to disregard Bull's insights as no longer relevant to contemporary international relations ought to reconsider their arguments in the light of these perennial philosophical issues.

## References

- Walzer, M. (2000) *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 3rd edition, New York: Basic Books.

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