

(Courtesy of Paul Staniland. Used with permission.)

Paul Staniland  
Foundations of Political Science I  
Analytical Paper #5

### Society, States, and Order in World Politics

Bull argues the modern international system can be thought of as including “elements of a society” because the states within it conceive of themselves as bound by shared rules and institutions. The actors within the society recognize one another and operate according to certain norms and standards in their relations. This society’s most basic shared goals are the preservation of the society of states, independence of the member states, peace, and “the common goals of all social life” (limitation of violence, keeping of promises, and stabilization of property rules) (16-19). Certain actors and actions are legitimized, while others are viewed as either outside or inimical to the order constructed and represented by the society of states. Rules and institutions provide limits and boundaries on conflict within the society (25). The modern international system, according to Bull, is primarily the model of society that began in Europe after Westphalia and then spread around the globe, centered around states and sovereignty.

However, the system is not solely characterized by this society. Bull identifies two other traditions that are present in the international system – Hobbesian and Kantian elements of interstate (and sometimes in the case of Kantian, trans-state) relations that emphasize different processes and focus on different phenomena. Each of these traditions reflect an important element in world politics, with the Hobbesian element centered around the state of war and Kantian elements primarily focused on transnational solidarity and struggle. Thus Bull is quite clearly not making a claim about the Grotian/society of states element being always dominant or exclusively important in international relations. He refers to it as “only. . .one of the elements in it, whose survival is sometimes precarious”(39).

Yet despite being only one aspect of international affairs, the society of states element exists as a phenomenon without which we could not understand international politics – “at no stage can it be said that the conception of the common interests of states, of common rules exerted and common institutions worked by them, has ceased to exert an influence” (40). The elemental aspect of the Grotian model does not make it unnecessary for understanding the broad sweep of history. The society of state’s importance is found in its continued role over time, despite variations and fluctuations in its position relative to Hobbesian or Kantian processes and dynamics.

Bull substantiates the above claim by arguing that most states at most times obey the rules of sovereignty, keeping of agreements, and limited resort to violence, as well as taking part in the working of common institutions (40). He points empirically to relations among the Axis and Allied blocs in the Second World War and between the US and USSR in the Cold War as examples where certain rules and norms were followed even in the presence of major conflict and competition (41). For instance, the dueling superpowers did not withdraw recognition of sovereignty or break off diplomatic relations – they instead recognized one another, at least in practice if not rhetoric, as legitimate actors in the international system. States generally are forced to provide justification for wars, which Bull argues puts bounds of the occurrence of conflict and further illustrates the presence of Grotian rules and boundaries at work (43).

Finally, he argues that relations between states who do not share these society rules and interests are characterized by a lack of recognition and agreement-keeping and a high prevalence of war (42-43). For instance, the conflicts between Europe and Islam, the Mongols and their victims, and the Conquistadores and the Incas and Aztecs did not show any signs of shared rules or limits – instead they were protractedly bloody affairs with no common framework and a lack

of boundaries on the rights and legitimacy of the combatant parties. There were no accepted rules of the game because there was no society of states among the combatants. As the European state system has expanded, however, situations like this have declined in frequency and the Grotian model has come to characterize a broader proportion of states.

How does Bull specifically evaluate the explanatory power of his argument? Above I outlined some of his examples of the presence of international society, but these examples do not make clear causal connections between the existence of a society of states and variation in outcomes of interaction. We must ask whether there are patterns in world politics inexplicable in the absence of an element of international society. The operation of the balance of power is a fruitful starting point in this discussion. Bull argues that the balance of power is basically a device of the society of states that began in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century – contrived balances are formed to limit preponderance of power (i.e. avoid empire), protect the existence of states, and provide the conditions on which institutions need for operation (102). These are the key aims of the society of states. Bull explicitly argues that the balance of power occurred simultaneously with “the notion that European politics formed a single system” and implied “the plurality of interacting powers as comprising a single system or field of forces” as well as “a continuous and universal system of diplomacy”(101).

Balancing in Bull’s view is conscious, implying “self-restraint as well as the restraint of others” (102). It is a conscious mechanism for maintaining a certain system in the form of a society of states. This stands in contrast to a Waltz-ian notion of balance, which focuses on the inevitable recurrence of balancing regardless of intent. Bull makes the argument that balancing and the European society of states arose in conjunction, with the latter providing the means of maintaining the former. The modern society of states, according to Bull, would be hard-pressed

to survive in the absence of the balance of power. And without understanding the aims and interests of international society, we would be unable to understand the importance and maintenance of the balance of power in Europe and then the world.

War also is given a role in maintaining the society of states, though it is more ambivalent. Bull argues that for international society war “has a dual aspect” (181). It can represent disorder, uncertainty, and the breakdown of international society – these aspects are deeply problematic from the perspective of the society of states. Wars that create empires or undermine institutions or disrupt agreed-upon rules are detrimental to international society. As a result of this destructive aspect of war, we see international society limiting the use of war – specifically, by confining the right to wage war to states, impose restrictions on the conduct of war, restricting its geographical spread, and restricting the legitimate reasons states can go to war (182). These rules and institutions exist because of the society of states’ attempt to limit the destructive impact of war upon the common framework of interaction in world politics.

War also has useful functions from the perspective of international society, however. War can preserve the balance of power, enforce international law, and sometimes promote “changes in the law generally regarded as just” (181). This creates a “positive role in the maintenance of international order” for violent interstate conflict that is directly related to the imperatives and aims of international society (182). War as a protector of international society is a role that reflects the dual-edged nature of conflict – it holds the potential to both uphold and disrupt the order of the society of states. The rules and institutions (for instance, neutrality, laws of war, and the legitimacy of self-defense) surrounding interstate conflict reflect the influence of international society. Bull argues that understanding these aspects of war can only be fruitfully achieved by acknowledging the causal importance of international society.