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# Cosmopolitikos' Notes

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*HEDLEY BULL'S  
THE ANARCHICAL SOCIETY*

A Summary

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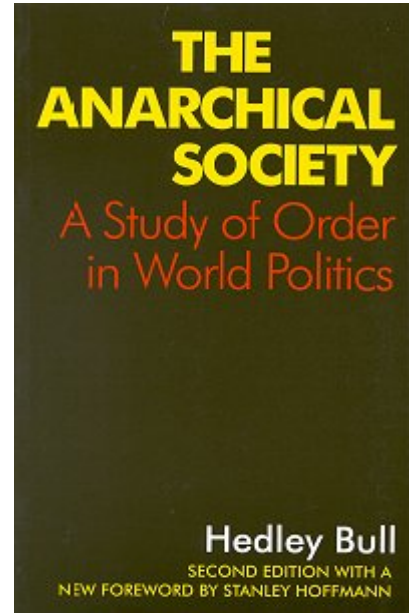
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# *Cosmopolitikos' Note:*

Bull, Hedley. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (1977)

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*In his seminal book, Hedley Bull exposes the essential principles of the International Society approach to World Politics, also known as the English School. In the tradition of Grotius, at mid-way from the Realists and the Cosmopolitans, Bull recognizes the existence of a society of states sharing common rules and institutions, even in the absence of a universal authority. This is the Anarchical Society. In this study, Bull's interest leans toward the explanation of the maintenance of Order by the common institutions.*



## 1. The Nature of Order in World Politics

Order in social life: "a pattern of human activity that sustains elementary, primary or universal goals of social life" (p. 4), such as:

- a) To secure life from violence;
- b) To ensure promises will be kept.
- c) To ensure that the possession of things will remain stable.

International Order: "a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society." (p. 8)

### Primary Goals of the International Society:

- (i) Preservation of the system and of the society of states itself.
- (ii) Maintaining the independence or external sovereignty of individual states.
- (iii) Maintaining peace.
- (iv) Limitation of violence.
- (v) Keeping of promises.
- (vi) Rules of property.

State: "independent political communities each of which possesses a government and asserts sovereignty in relation to a particular portion of the earth's surface and a particular segment of the human population, what may be called internal sovereignty, which means supremacy over all other authorities within that territory and population. On the other hand, they assert what may be called external sovereignty, by which is meant not supremacy but independence of outside authorities." (p. 8)

System of States: "(or international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave - at least in some measure - as parts of a whole." (p. 9)

Society of States or International Society: "exists when a group of states conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions." (p. 13)

- The International Society is present today in ideas and in reality; it is characterized by its lack of a central authority, therefore the international society is anarchic (Chap. 2).
- Order is maintained in today's political system by the features that make international society: "a sense of common interests in the elementary goals of social life; rules prescribing behaviour that sustains these goals; and institutions that help to make these rules effective." (p. 63)
- Although order should not necessarily be preferred to other values such as justice, order is often prior to other goals, because without it other values might be hard to sustain. (Chap. 4)

## 2. Order in the Contemporary International System

In this section, Bull explores the institutions of the international society, such as the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war and the role of the great powers, and examines the functions they fulfill in the contemporary political system.

### 2.1. *Balance of Power*

Definition: Bull shares his definition of the balance of power with Emmerich de Vattel, "a state of affairs such that no one power is in a position where it is preponderant and can lay down the law to others." (p. 97, quote from the *Law of Nations*)

#### Functions of the Balance of Power

- a) The General balance of power prevents the system from being transformed into a universal empire by conquest.
- b) The Local balance of power protects the independence of states from preponderant powers.
- c) Provides conditions under which other institutions can operate.

### 2.2. *International Law*

Definition: "May be regarded as a body of rules which binds states and other agents in world politics in their relations with one another and is considered to have the status of law." (p. 122)

#### Functions of International Law

- a) To identify supreme universal political organizational principles (i.e. sovereignty).
- b) To state basic or primary rules of coexistence (life, promise and property).
- c) To mobilize compliances with rules and create an expectation of performance.

### 2.3. *Diplomacy*

Definition: "The conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means." (p. 156)

- This includes the formulation and execution of Foreign policies, whether bilaterally or multilaterally, whether in an *ad hoc* or institutionalized matter.

### Functions of Diplomacy

- a) To communicate (Messenger).
- b) To negotiation of agreements.
- c) To gather intelligence.
- d) To minimize friction.
- e) To symbolize the existence of the Society of States.

### 2.4. *War*

Definition: "War is organized violence carried on by political units [States] against each other." (p. 178)

### Functions of War

- a) To serve as an instrument of State policy.
- b) To determine the shape of the international system at anyone time.
- c) Although it can, at a certain point, be a threat to international order (revisionist state's war), war can also be a mean used to reach other international objectives such as the maintenance of the balance of power or to enforce international laws.

### 2.5. *Great Powers*

#### Definition:

- 1) "We imply that there are two or more powers that are comparable in status; we imply, [...], the existence of a club with a rule of membership." (p. 194)
- 2) "The members of this club are all in the front rank in terms of military strength." (p. 195)
- 3) "Great powers are powers recognized by others to have, and conceived by their own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties." (p. 196)

### Functions of the Great Powers

"Great powers manage their relations with one another in the interests of international order by

- (i) preserving the general balance of power,
- (ii) seeking to avoid or control crises in their relations with one another, and
- (iii) seeking to limit or contain wars among one another.

They exploit their preponderance in relation to the rest of international society by

- (iv) unilaterally exploiting their local preponderance,
- (v) agreeing to respect one another's spheres of influence, and
- (vi) joint action, as is implied by the idea of a great power concert or condominium." (p. 200)

### 3. Alternative Paths to World Order

In this section Bull explores the potential alternatives to the System of States and its actual relevance in today's world.

*Alternative forms of States System*

- Disarmed world: States would possess armament and armed forces only for the purpose of internal security. This would require a new questioning about the maintenance of international order and the relationship among States.
- Solidarity of States: Without the establishment of a world government, the States by their close co-operation and their "close adherence to constitutional principles of international order" (p. 230), would uphold "the will of the society of states against challenges to it." (*idem*)
- Many nuclear powers: A world where the possession of nuclear might is universal and where nuclear deterrence would be the condition of the maintenance of international order.
- Ideological homogeneity: The universal adherence to an ideology would, according to the proponents of this ideology, reduce or eliminate the sources of conflicts.

*Beyond the States System*

- System but not a Society: A group of States with interactions among them, but no bonding rules.
- States but not a System: A group of States with no or insufficient interactions among them.
- World government: The world is reduced to a universal State.
- New Mediaevalism: "A system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalty." (p. 245) This would be the end of sovereignty and territorial authority as we know it.

*The Future of the System of States*

Since "the states system has always operated within a wider system of political interaction" (p. 270) there is no immediate signs of decline of the States System despite the trends leading towards possible alternatives, especially a new mediaevalism.

To remain functional, Bull argues, the states system must not only keep working at their "common interests, common rules and common institutions" (p. 284), which makes it a society of states, but also extend their common interests and consensus to the management of other demands such as peace, justice and environmental issues.

The principal objective of *Cosmopolitikos.com* is to provide the students of International Relations and the practitioners with the best set of tools to reach an understanding of World Politics.

Our work is in constant development; therefore it is constantly improved, expanded and updated.

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pascal.malouin@gmail.com