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0521810310 - Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics

Edward Keene

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Beyond the Anarchical Society

Edward Keene argues that the popular idea of an ‘anarchical society’ of equal and independent sovereign states is an inadequate description of order in modern world politics. International political and legal order has always been dedicated to two distinct goals: it tries to promote the toleration of different ways of life, but at the same time it promotes one specific way of life that it labels ‘civilization’. The nineteenth-century solution to this contradiction was to restrict the promotion of civilization to the world beyond Europe. That discriminatory way of thinking has now broken down, with the result that a single, global order is supposed to apply to everyone, but that has left us with an insoluble dilemma as to what the ultimate purpose of this global order should be, and how its political and legal structure should be organized.

EDWARD KEENE is Tutor in Politics at Balliol College, Oxford, and has previously taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. With Eivind Hovden he co-edited the journal *Millennium*, and *The Globalization of Liberalism* (2002). He is the author of *International Society as an Essentially Contested Concept* in Michi Ebata and Beverly Neufeld (eds.), *Confronting the Political: International Relations at the Millennium* (2000) and *The Reception of Hugo Grotius in International Relations Theory* (Grotiana).

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Preface

As anyone who has studied international relations will probably be aware, the title of this book is a reference to Hedley Bull's famous work, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. My use of a similar language is intended in part as a tribute to the power and insight of Bull's argument, and in part as a criticism of its limitations. Before I present my own perspective on order in world politics, then, I want to explain briefly why I attach so much importance to Bull's approach, and where I think he went wrong.

To my mind, the most attractive feature of Bull's work is his lucid defence of the view that in certain respects international relations are social relations, and that order in world politics should therefore be conceived as a form of social order. Bull developed this position primarily to challenge the popular belief that international relations should be understood in 'Machiavellian' or 'Hobbesian' terms. In other words, he was taking issue with the argument that, because the international system is anarchic, all states have to obey the brutal logic of *Realpolitik* and must devote themselves to the pursuit of their own national interests. Bull acknowledged that this perspective captures some aspects of international relations, as does an alternative 'Kantian' perspective that highlights the importance of transnational or ideological solidarity and conflict, but he insisted that neither tells us the whole story. In particular, they underestimate the importance and frequency of cooperation and regulated intercourse among states, based on the norms, rules and institutions of the modern 'anarchical society' of equal and independent sovereign states. While it is important to explain how the logic of anarchy influences the behaviour of states, it is just as important to understand the normative structure of the order that has been created in this international society. As well as having to explain how states respond to the anarchical nature of the international system, theorists must also make sense of the relationship between the goals that are promoted by the existing order in the society of states and alternative goals that might conceivably be regarded as attributes of justice in world politics. Here, one of the key themes in

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Bull's work was the claim that, although it often falls short with regard to certain principles of 'human' or 'world justice', the society of states nevertheless represents a valuable achievement in terms of its realization of 'interstate' justice; it sustains an order where ethnic, cultural and political differences are tolerated through the norm that states should respect each other's sovereignty. This goal, Bull argued, should not lightly be dismissed in the attempt to build a more liberal or cosmopolitan world order.

The bulk of the academic commentary on Bull's theory, whether critical or supportive of his views, has concentrated on these rather general claims about the normative character of international order and its relationship to different conceptions of justice. For many years, the main debates were centred on the questions that Bull himself raised about whether or not an international society exists, whether or not the order sustained by the society of states can provide for a satisfactory conception of justice in world politics, and what is happening to the traditional pattern of international order as it is forced to deal with contemporary developments in world politics. More recently, international relations theorists have also begun to address certain questions that are more internal to his approach, applying insights from social theory to refine Bull's often rather vague, and now rather dated, functionalist ideas about precisely how normative principles are established in international society and how they come to play a constraining role on the behaviour of states. The range of these enquiries has been as diverse as social theory itself: various post-structuralists, critical theorists, historical sociologists and social constructivists have all produced significant treatises on where the norms, rules and institutions of the modern society of states came from, why they look the way they do and how they condition the conduct of international actors.

I recognize that these controversies about Bull's account of order in world politics raise serious issues that demand attention, and that his conception of social order needs to be supplemented with more sophisticated analyses of social theory. However, I do not think that these are the most serious problems with Bull's work, and in this book I am going to explore another weakness in his argument that I regard as much more pernicious. This may surprise some readers, because my approach will not really engage with the main debates that have occupied international relations theorists since *The Anarchical Society* appeared in the late 1970s. I will not, for example, join realists and cosmopolitans in asking whether the kind of norm-governed order that Bull described is a significant or desirable feature of world politics. Nor will I ask which kind of social theory offers the best chance for making sense of how the modern pattern of order in the society of states was established, how it works and what its future prospects are. My argument is directed at a

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completely different question: is Bull's account of the anarchical society, founded on the principle of states' mutual respect for each other's territorial sovereignty, an adequate description of the norms, rules and institutions that have characterized order in world politics since around the middle of the seventeenth century?

As the title of this book suggests, my answer is no. I believe that Bull's chief mistake was to underestimate the dualistic nature of order in world politics. My position is that there have always been two patterns of modern international order, each of which was dedicated to its own goal, and therefore possessed its own unique normative and institutional structure. Bull's work provides a description of only one of these: the pattern of order that developed in the European states-system, through relations between European rulers and nations. He almost completely ignored the other pattern of order, which developed roughly simultaneously in the colonial and imperial systems that were established beyond Europe. As is exemplified by Bull's conception of interstate justice, the main purpose of the European order was to promote the toleration of ethnic, cultural and political differences; the extra-European order, however, was dedicated to the goal of promoting a particular idea of civilization, transforming 'uncivilized' cultures and social, economic and political systems along the way. This divergence is manifested in the very different international political and legal arrangements that were established in the two contexts. The European order of toleration was predicated on the principle that states should respect each other's territorial sovereignty, and hence their equality and independence. By contrast, the extra-European order was based on the principle that sovereignty should be divided across national and territorial boundaries, creating hierarchical institutions through which colonial and imperial powers transmitted the supposed benefits of their civilization to the rest of the world.

This is a crucial omission from Bull's work, since the world we live in today contains the legacy of both of these patterns of modern international order. As Bull was well aware, the principles of toleration and mutual respect for sovereignty outgrew their European roots in the twentieth century, gradually being extended to cover all the peoples of the world. But because he lacked a proper understanding of the extra-European order of civilization that had also existed in modern world politics, he failed to realize that its basic norm of dividing sovereignty to promote good government and economic progress had also persisted into the new global political and legal order that was constructed after 1945. And because subsequent scholars have not properly investigated this weakness in Bull's theory of the anarchical society, they have also failed to appreciate the long-standing tension between toleration and civilization that has

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always lain at the heart of order in modern world politics. Instead, they have consistently misrepresented the contemporary practice of dividing sovereignty as an unprecedented, 'post-modern' or 'post-Westphalian' phenomenon.

Before I develop this argument, I want to make one final remark about its scope. I have chosen Bull as my critical foil because his work has been exceptionally influential in contemporary international relations theory. So many scholars today use Bull's description of the modern society of states as a starting point for their own work that I regard it as absolutely crucial to demonstrate the shortcomings of his thesis. However, the position that I am attacking is not just Bull's alone. On the contrary, what I will call the orthodox theory of order in world politics has been a central part of mainstream thinking about international relations and international law for roughly two hundred years; in a sense, Bull's work is just the latest re-statement of a much older position, up-dated to suit the specific problems and dilemmas of international relations in the late twentieth century, but substantially unchanged in its fundamentals. In criticizing Bull, then, I am really attacking one of the most popular and long-standing points of view on international political and legal order that there is. Obviously, this is an ambitious project, and I suspect that it takes more than a single book to challenge an academic orthodoxy that has become so deeply entrenched over the last two centuries that even many 'critical' and 'dissident' scholars working today still accept its core claim about the centrality of the society of sovereign states to the modern world. Nevertheless, the orthodox theory is so badly flawed that it acts as a major hindrance to our ability to comprehend the nature of the dilemmas that we face today, and it is of the first importance that we begin to call its basic assumptions into question. At the very least, I hope that my argument will illustrate the seriousness of its shortcomings, and thus encourage others to adopt a fresher perspective on order in modern world politics, whether or not they agree with the interpretation that I will present here.

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My biggest intellectual debt is to Justin Rosenberg, who supervised the Ph.D. thesis on which this book is based. Justin was an invaluable source of expertise and encouragement while I was writing the thesis, and he has been a model of thorough and imaginative scholarship as I have tried to take the next step to presenting my ideas to a wider public. Close behind him in their importance are Andrew Hurrell and Fred Halliday. Andrew engaged my interest in international relations theory while I was an undergraduate, and his thoughtful, learned questioning has been a constant stimulus ever since. Fred probably has more responsibility than anyone else for my decision to pursue an academic career; his charismatic approach to the study of international relations gave me both a sense of vocation and an abiding affection for everything that the London School of Economics (LSE) has traditionally represented. As well as Justin and Fred, I have benefited hugely from the other members of the International Relations Department at the LSE, particularly Michael Banks, Mark Hoffmann and Peter Wilson, but it is no disrespect to them if I say that I probably learnt even more from my fellow Ph.D. students. I had the good fortune to find myself in a vibrant and friendly community of scholars, which gave me an experience to cherish and had a profound impact on my work: my particular thanks go to the members of the Modernity workshop, my colleagues at *Millennium* and above all to Eivind Hovden, not just for helping me to develop my thoughts on

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international relations, but also for keeping me cheerful during the often lonely business of writing a thesis.

Completing the Ph.D., though, was really only half the battle. Since then I have received a great deal of help from numerous scholars, and I would like to thank them for their comments, criticisms and encouragement. As I moved into my first proper job, I was lucky enough to find myself at SOAS, surrounded by the same kind of intelligent and convivial community that I had just left at the LSE: Kathryn Dean, Sudipta Kaviraj, Charles Tripp, Tom Young, and most of all Stephen Hopgood have been excellent friends and colleagues. I am extremely grateful to my Ph.D. examiners, Andrew Linklater and James Mayall, for their penetrating analysis of my thesis, and to the readers of the initial manuscript that I sent in to Cambridge University Press. I think, and I hope they will agree, that their excellent suggestions have led to real improvements in both the content and presentation of my argument. Considerable thanks are also due to Margot Light, who encouraged me to submit my thesis to this series and has been wonderfully sympathetic and helpful as I have slowly gone about the nerve-wracking task of turning a Ph.D. that I knew no-one would ever read into a more public statement of my position. Finally, I am no less grateful to the several experts who have taken the time to read parts of the manuscript and have saved me from numerous errors, among whom Peter Borschberg and Nicholas Onuf have my special thanks for their extraordinary intellectual generosity and perception. Of course, it would be asking too much of anyone to spot all the mistakes that I have made, and I take responsibility for the remaining ones that have made their way into print.

Although these intellectual debts are considerable, they pale besides the constant and loving support of my family. Since 1999, I have been in the enviable position of having two families, one in Georgia and one in London, and consider myself doubly blessed. My wife, Molly, has shown me unstinting tenderness and compassion, and her gentle strength has sustained me during the writing of this book. I have always drawn upon my sister Harriet's unconditional love. But most of all it is my parents, Gillian and David, who have given me the rare opportunity to follow my vocation, as well as a perfect foundation from which to pursue it. I am profoundly moved by their generosity of spirit, and it is but a small recompense to dedicate this book to them.