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Vincent Pouliot
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Introduction
All the world's a stage

Being a state diplomat – that is, speaking and acting as the recognized representative of a country – can be as exhilarating as humbling. Thanks to his unusual professional trajectory, Carne Ross experienced both sides of the coin, first as a British delegate to the United Nations (UN) and later as consultant for stateless peoples for the non-governmental organization (NGO) Independent Diplomat. The contrast could not have been starker: "When I was with the British mission, officials of the UN or other countries paid attention when we spoke. Doubtless this was often faked, but it was perhaps felt to be required, given Britain's place in the UN pecking order. With the Kosovars, no such deference is necessary. Junior officials become impatient with our demands and even on occasion allow themselves a perceptible sneer when they talk to us."[1] Ross tells of his everyday encounters with patterns of social stratification in diplomacy: "Meeting a national diplomat at the UN or a UN official is, like an audience with the King, a more difficult matter, its ease or difficulty a signifier of one's status in the obscure hierarchies of international diplomacy."[2] In the practice of multilateral diplomacy, he concludes, some ambassadors are "spectators at the main fight."[3]

For those state delegates operating along the corridors of international organizations' (IOs') headquarters, it is a basic fact of life that diplomacy takes place on a deeply unleveled playground. The principle of sovereign equality notwithstanding, in any multilateral setting, some state representatives weigh much more heavily than others. Practitioners often refer to this hard-nosed reality as the international "pecking order" – a term originally coined by a zoologist to describe the dominance hierarchy of hens. In his ethnographic account of UN Security Council dynamics, Ambrosetti describes a "daily social division of multilateral labor": "The precise moment when the

[1] Ross 2007, 5. [2] Ross 2007, 7. [3] Ross 2007, 50.

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delegations were speaking during private consultations and public meetings and the kind of arguments and concerns they broached were not accidental. There was a pervasive form of influence at stake in the course of the interaction and in the achievement of preliminary tasks that were collectively expected."[4] How are international pecking orders produced, reproduced and at times contested in the course of multilateral diplomacy?

As a category of practice, pecking order stands for an analytical concept that has recently gained much currency in International Relations (IR): that of hierarchy. As Donnelly argues, "Super- and subordination, both formal and informal, are central to the structure of most international societies – including modern international society."[5] Increasingly, scholars from a variety of theoretical perspectives defy the age-old assumption of anarchy in IR, to instead depict a highly stratified global realm, pervaded with domination and authority struggles. Hierarchy takes many forms on the world stage, ranging from institutionalized racism and gender inequality to empire and neo-colonialism, through normative stratification, cultural hegemonies and special responsibilities.[6] International pecking orders, as diplomats use the term, describe something more specific: the informal hierarchies of standing that pervade multilateral organizations such as the UN. For students of world politics, these sites open a superb window onto social stratification dynamics on the world stage. This book is a study of international hierarchy in practice, as it emerges out of the multilateral diplomatic process. It is an invitation to the engine room of world politics, where amazingly rich and complex processes operate to generate macro-phenomena of power, order and governance.

The book argues that multilateral diplomacy produces inequality. Building on the social theories of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu, I show that international pecking orders emerge out of the multilateral diplomatic process itself. As they manage everyday multilateral affairs, state representatives compete for influence and standing through the display of practical know-how. As a result, practices, which I define as

[4] Ambrosetti 2012, 68.
[5] Donnelly 2012a, 157. See also Clark 1989; Cooley 2005; Goh 2013; Hobson and Sharman 2005; Kang 2004; Lake 1996; 2009; and Sharman 2013.
[6] On these various forms, see Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bukovansky et al. 2012; Doty 1996; Enloe 1989; Ikenberry 2011; Kang 2010; Nexon and Wright 2007; and Towns 2012.

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socially organized ways of doing things, generate inequality (from) within the ranks of diplomats. As productive of social stratification as it may be, though, the process of multilateral diplomacy is also structured at four levels, which I call situations, dispositions, relations and positions. First, practitioners are situated in an interaction order that contains locally defined rules of the game. Second, diplomats embody practical knowledge that disposes them toward certain ways of doing things. Third, permanent representatives are part of a structure of relationships that generates opportunities and constraints. And fourth, diplomats are unequally positioned in terms of the resources and instructions that they get from the capital. In sum, the local struggle for competence, the diplomatic sense of place, the peculiar morphology of permanent representation, as well as the multilateral field of states all combine to structure the everyday performance of international pecking orders.

In terms of case studies, the book delves into the politics and inner dynamics of two prominent IOs: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the UN. There is little need to elaborate on the political significance of these two multilateral sites in early 21st-century global governance. NATO is by a wide margin the most powerful security organization in the world, and the geographical and functional scope of its activities has grown exponentially since the end of the Cold War. As for the UN, the "parliament of Man"[7] as Kennedy puts it, it is the sole universal body in which all countries of the world sit permanently to discuss a large variety of global governance issues. Given the increasing significance of multilateralism in global governance, understanding the internal politics of these two IOs – especially as they undergo institutional transformations – seems of critical importance to both IR students and policy practitioners. In terms of concrete outcomes, the book helps explain how NATO manages to maintain its "gloss of harmony"[8] despite significant internal rifts, and why Security Council reform is unlikely to happen any time soon.

The NATO and UN cases offer a particularly useful comparison in terms of pecking order dynamics. While NATO is often construed as the archetype of a smoothly functioning multilateral organization, the UN is generally thought to be gripped by intense contestation over the distribution of standing among member states. This contrast helps

[7] Kennedy 2006. [8] Müller 2013.

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identify the rich social dynamics of multilateral pecking orders. Despite some similarities as multilateral sites, NATO and the UN are structured by distinct pecking order dynamics. In Brussels, the anchoring practice of consensus generates a highly organized struggle for competence. There are ways to join the consensus, to reach out to others or to put forward compromise formulas that allow some practitioners to gain standing in the midst of negotiations, for instance by skillfully playing with their instructions. All of these practices rest on the sense of place that delegates display with variable competence, helping them figure out their rank and role (as well as that of their counterparts) in the local hierarchy of standing. Within the Alliance, the Secretary-General often plays the role of the guardian of the pecking order, using a variety of practices – so-called confessionals, the staffing of committees, the drafting of reports – that help "keep the family together."

By contrast, in New York, pecking order dynamics seem much more fluid and equivocal. Of course, the Permanent Five (P-5) exert a dominant position at the Security Council and beyond, but this is merely the tip of the iceberg. My case study shows that UN hierarchies of standing are also heavily structured by relational dynamics (e.g., coalition politics), state practices (e.g., permanent mission staffing) and local rules of the game. Perhaps most strikingly, almost everything diplomats do in New York is about "getting the numbers" – to the point that being part of subgroups becomes a means to exist as a diplomatic player. Those representatives who manage to occupy brokerage positions, for instance, gain standing not only within the subgroups they lead but also in the face of other brokers in the broader diplomatic community. Given the centrality of procedure at the UN, pecking order dynamics often revolve around practices of committee composition, text amendment and report writing. Compared to Brussels, chairs in New York find themselves walking on a particularly tight rope, having to preserve the appearances of fair procedure while also attending to those diplomats with higher standing around the table.

The book seeks to show how rich the politics and practices of multilateral diplomacy actually are. Contrary to the lay notion, there is not one international pecking order, relatively stable and immanent, but several of them, contested, changing and multifaceted. As one seasoned diplomat put it in an interview, in multilateral affairs "which countries are critical changes according to circumstances." Indeed, pecking orders are eminently complex social forms: contingent yet durable;

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constraining but also full of agency; operating at different levels, depending on issues; and perhaps most important of all, defined in significant part locally, in and through the practice of multilateral diplomacy itself as performed within particular organizations. Grasping this social complexity requires an analytical approach that is more refined and comprehensive than what is currently on offer in IR.

Explaining multilateral diplomacy: structure, agency and practice

Existing literatures in IR tend to explain international pecking orders – that is, hierarchical dynamics in multilateral diplomacy – in one of two ways: there is a structural story focused on the distribution of state capacities and an agency story centered on the rationality and/or psychology of the individuals involved. In this section I critically review a few emblematic pieces of work from each side and begin to carve space for my own framework. Despite their respective strengths, both stories end up neglecting the diplomatic process because they focus on variables that are preexisting and exogenous to multilateral negotiations. By contrast, in this book I endogenize structure and agency by showing how they come about (and come together) in and through diplomatic practices.

Dominant thinking in IR holds that it is the uneven distribution of state capabilities that best explains unequal standing and influence on the world stage. Elaborating what he calls the "power-based model," Steinberg argues that, at the World Trade Organization (WTO), "relative market size offers the best first approximation of bargaining power."[9] According to this view, a trade diplomat enters an international negotiation equipped with his or her country's economic assets in his briefcase, so to speak. In the security realm, scholars rather emphasize military assets and other material capabilities as key sources of leverage.[10] Building on a similar logic, Nye's soft power argument suggests that a state's cultural assets, ranging from movies to technological patents and so on, are key sources of influence in world politics.[11]

While scholars disagree as to which state capacities ultimately matter – ranging from guns through money to ideas – the basic argument is

[9] Steinberg 2002, 347. [10] Waltz 1979. [11] Nye 1990.

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that the distribution of state assets translates into uneven leverage at the multilateral table. From this perspective, country resources create what Gruber calls, building on Hirschmann, "differential opportunity costs of noncooperation."[12] The importance of this variable is in determining the availability of "outside options."[13] Indeed, in any given negotiation, explains Stone, "powerful states are powerful by virtue of the fact that they have attractive outside options."[14] At the WTO, the key source of leverage is the looming (or express) threat to exit the negotiations. But this threat is credible only to the extent that the country in question has the capabilities to implement it. A state with vast trade flows, for instance, may gain influence from its capacity to live without an agreement. Unequal leverage is a function of relevant state resources.

The analytical implication should be clear: When negotiations actually begin, the playing field is already unleveled. State representatives essentially respond to, and play out, the preexisting distribution of corporate assets. The diplomatic process itself plays little to no role; it is either redundant or epiphenomenal. To caricature a bit, diplomats could all vanish overnight and the world would continue to go round, with multilateral outputs essentially mirroring the unequal distribution of state capacities. I argue that paying insufficient attention to diplomatic practices comes at great analytical costs. For instance, Steinberg observes that, at the WTO, "initiatives from weak countries have a habit of dying."[15] He goes on to hint at a few possibilities to explain this pattern: who gets to draft and table initiatives, who staffs the secretariat and so on. These various diplomatic practices, Steinberg intuits, matter a great deal in WTO decision-making. And yet, nowhere does he include them as part of his power-based theoretical model.

For the sake of illustration, compare with Eagleton-Pierce's recent study of WTO politics. Documenting the minute struggles for influence that structure multilateral trade relationships, the author discovers that "the most privileged WTO members draw upon a repertoire of methods in order to control other actors. For outsiders, these forms of power are not always directly observable, because these techniques are often 'underhand,' 'silent,' or 'gestural.'"[16] Eagleton-Pierce illustrates the

[12] Gruber 2000, 33. [13] Voeten 2001. [14] Stone 2011, 21.
[15] Steinberg 2002, 355. [16] Eagleton-Pierce 2013, 2. See also Wolfe 2005.

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point with the multilateral negotiations that led to the 2001 Doha Declaration:

> The director general (DG), as referee, had quietly informed all parties that only two representatives per country would be allowed in the room, but somehow the US delegation had five. Negotiation texts had been flying back and forth all day, covering a range of topics yet, in a kind of "act of magic," the objections of many Southern countries did not appear to have been incorporated into the main text. . . . Progressively, as the meeting dragged on until seven o'clock in the morning, the burden of proof shifted from those making new proposals to those not wanting them. . . . Outside, the other 130 countries that had come to the conference to defend their interests waited anxiously, unable to shape events.[17]

Clearly, it seems difficult to fully account for the political dynamics of multilateral diplomacy without theorizing (and studying empirically) the practices that give it shape. Yet the structural story tends to overlook such processes.

By contrast, those scholars who emphasize agency in explaining multilateral politics fall into two main camps: bargaining theory, which is premised on individual rationality, and behavioral frameworks, which build on psychological insights and methods. The emblematic bargaining theorist is Schelling, whose works brilliantly demonstrate how the skillful manipulation of commitment may increase one's leverage in a bargaining situation.[18] By tying one's hands or showing strength through saber-rattling, practitioners may increase their influence over outcome. Building on such premises, a cottage industry of negotiation analysis similarly emphasizes how certain individuals are tactically superior to others. As Thompson puts it, there are "two key tasks of any negotiation: creating win-win deals by leveraging information carefully collected from the other party and effectively laying claim to part of the win-win goldmine."[19] From this rationalist perspective, making the proper strategic moves reinforces a negotiator's hand.

A related though distinct stream of research borrows from psychology and cognitive sciences in order to explain how the "behavioral traits" and "psychological attributes" of involved practitioners help determine bargaining outcomes.[20] Already in the early 1980s, Zartman

[17] Eagleton-Pierce 2013, 1. [18] Schelling 1980. See also Fearon 1997.
[19] Thompson 2013, viii.
[20] Hafner-Burton et al. 2014; and Rathbun 2014, respectively.

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charted the research program by observing that "[p]ersonality and attitudes have a role in shaping the way negotiators act and react."[21] In his latest book, Rathbun similarly focuses on the motivational goals of diplomats, which vary from prosocial to proself and open- to close-minded. According to the author, "[n]egotiators intrinsically have different preferences,"[22] which are exogenous to the process of negotiations. In other words, just like the structural approach reviewed earlier, agent-based theories end up explaining multilateral politics through preexisting distributions; instead of state assets, they look into payoff matrices or personality traits. The process of negotiation, more particularly the rich variety of diplomatic practices that go into it, plays little to no role in and of itself.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that the agency story is often told in terms of its structural alternative, which is treated as default explanation. Paradoxically, such framing reinforces the pervasive view in IR that diplomacy is epiphenomenal – except in cases where agency takes over, as it were. By focusing on instances of "unlikely success,"[23] for instance, Rathbun wants to demonstrate that diplomatic agency exerts effects over outcomes that are independent of the "structural baseline," which remains the "null hypothesis."[24] The critical implication should be clear: agentic accounts end up focusing on exceptional individuals (who punch above their country's weight), unexpected outcomes (that depart from structural distributions) or both. This widespread bias toward extraordinary individuals or outcomes creates the wrong impression that diplomacy matters only when it creates "surprises" or (structurally) unexpected outcomes. This is, needless to say, a rather restrictive starting point of inquiry – and one that is unlikely to grant diplomacy a fully fledged explanatory role in the story.

By contrast, this book is primarily concerned with the ordinary, everyday operation of international pecking orders – and not with exceptional performers or improbable agreements. My objective is to explain how social stratification emerges as a normal, basic condition of diplomacy. Of course, here and there I do find some ambassadors who perform unusually well (or badly). But in the broader scheme of things, these "anomalies" do not play a central role in the constitution

[21] Zartman and Berman 1982, 17. [22] Rathbun 2014, 5.
[23] Rathbun 2014, 4. [24] Rathbun 2014, 39.

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of international hierarchies. Instead, I embrace the fact that the overwhelming majority of multilateral diplomacy is uneventful and mundane. This focus does not suppress the space for agency, which remains analytically significant, but it does recast social action away from the extraordinary and toward the workaday. My objective is to make pecking orders visible not just in deviant cases but primarily in regular, everyday negotiations. Ultimately, there is nothing in this book suggesting that multilateral diplomacy might become a potentially subversive or democratizing force in world politics. Quite the contrary, in fact: The paradoxical conclusion that I reach at the end of the book, on the "tragedy of the competent diplomat," rather suggests that political change often hinges on the very reproduction of social order.

Similarly, the notion that some diplomats punch above (or below) their country's weight may have some intuitive appeal, yet it is analytically problematic because it suggests too staunch a dichotomy between ambassadors and the states that they represent. Indeed, in the framework of diplomacy this divide tends to dissolve: after all, the job of an ambassador is to represent a country at the negotiations table. Diplomats often refer to each other not by personal names but as countries. By implication, pecking orders attach to both individual practitioners and the corporate entities on whose behalf they speak and act. In practice, diplomacy seamlessly straddles these two levels, as human beings embody states and states act through human beings. As a result, state capacities and negotiators' skills are not two separate variables delivering independent effects; they consistently mesh together as multilateral diplomats go on with day-to-day negotiations.

Contrary to conventional wisdom in IR, in this book I put the process of multilateral diplomacy in the driver's seat. Pecking orders come out of practice: The patterned ways in which diplomacy is performed form the key explanatory processes through which social stratification becomes an ordinary condition on the international stage. To paraphrase Bourdieu, I want to show that practices are not only structuring, in that they indirectly produce an unleveled playing ground; they are also structured, that is, they are enabled and constrained by a variety of situational, dispositional, relational and positional social forces. Making this argument requires a fine-grained yet encompassing approach that embraces the rich social complexity of international pecking orders.

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The difference that practice makes

Why should IR scholars bother to dig into everyday international practices in order to shed light on world politics? After all, social wholes are greater than the sum of their parts. To the extent that global relations primarily consist of macro-phenomena, would IR students not be better advised to focus on holistic units of analysis, from structures to systems through preference distributions? Why go micro when what is at stake is the big picture? In IR theory, so-called reductionism has long had very bad press.[25] According to conventional wisdom, analyzing in detail the patterned ways of doing things internationally amounts to a theoretical distraction at best and a methodological waste of time and energy at worst.

Against this view, this book argues that starting from international practices is a most fertile way to analyze world politics. Two major benefits are worth highlighting at this stage. First, taking practices seriously throws light on a crucial (albeit oft-neglected) set of social processes. The volume posits that practices are socially productive, that is to say, they are a generative force in and of themselves. The socially organized and patterned ways in which world is performed are not merely outcomes in need of an explanation. They are also dynamic processes that produce effects in their wake, explaining the socially emergent nature of the world. As such, practices are a necessary part of any account of the so-called big picture. To ignore them is to cut oneself short from a key set of explanatory factors in world politics. The social world is emergent and practice is a key process involved in bringing the many facets of global life into being.

For example, in the field of international security, the practice of deterrence is premised on a limited number of repeated and scripted gestures, signals and linguistic devices that make minimal – if often ambiguous – sense to interlocutors.[26] Because it aspires to mutual intelligibility, the regular enactment of these deeds within a particular political context of state-to-state relations organizes social interactions along more or less shared lines. The patterned ways of doing deterrence, in other words, are what make it possible for actors to develop social relations, as they mutually recognize the meaningfulness of their respective actions. The process of practice gives structure to the space

[25] Waltz 1979.
[26] Adler and Pouliot 2011a. See also Adler and Greve 2009; and Pouliot 2012b.

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