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978-1-107-14343-2 - International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of
Multilateral Diplomacy

Vincent Pouliot

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International Pecking Orders

In any multilateral setting, some state representatives weigh much more heavily than others. Practitioners often refer to this form of diplomatic hierarchy as the “international pecking order.” This book is a study of international hierarchy in practice, as it emerges out of the multilateral diplomatic process. Building on the social theories of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu, it argues that diplomacy produces inequality. Delving into the politics and inner dynamics of NATO and the UN as case studies, Vincent Pouliot shows that pecking orders are eminently complex social forms: contingent yet durable; constraining but also full of agency; operating at different levels, depending on issues; and defined in significant part locally, in and through the practice of multilateral diplomacy.

VINCENT POULIOT is Associate Professor and William Dawson Scholar in the Department of Political Science at McGill University.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	page vi
<i>List of tables</i>	vii
<i>Preface and acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiv
Introduction: All the world's a stage	1
Part I Situations	25
1 The politics of multilateral diplomacy	27
2 A practice theory of social stratification	48
Part II Dispositions	69
3 The diplomatic sense of place	71
4 A working consensus: the negotiation of the 2010 Strategic Concept and the NATO pecking order	86
Part III Relations	117
5 Permanent representation: relational structure and practical logics	119
6 Clan politics: Security Council reform and the UN pecking order	154
Part IV Positions	191
7 State practices and multilateral fields	193
8 The field logics of multilateral pecking orders: NATO and the UN compared	226
Conclusion: The "miracle" of multilateral pecking orders	254
<i>Appendix: Research design, methods and data</i>	272
<i>References</i>	308
<i>Index</i>	334

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14343-2 - International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of
Multilateral Diplomacy

Vincent Pouliot

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Figures

5.1 The clique structure of multilateral diplomacy	<i>page</i> 123
5.2 The star-shaped, dual-layered structure of multilateral diplomacy	130
5.3 The clustered structure of multilateral diplomacy	139
5.4 The headed structure of multilateral diplomacy	148
8.1 Member states and the NATO pecking order	234
8.2 Member states and the UN pecking order	235
8.3 Local distributions and the NATO pecking order	236
8.4 Local distributions and the UN pecking order	237
8.5 Global metrics and the NATO pecking order	238
8.6 Global metrics and the UN pecking order	239

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14343-2 - International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of
Multilateral Diplomacy

Vincent Pouliot

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Tables

6.1 Main groups in Security Council reform debates	<i>page</i> 162
7.1 List of variables and indicators used in the MCA	213
7.2 NATO member states per pecking order tier	219
7.3 UN member states per pecking order tier	219
8.1 Family resemblances between local distributions and pecking orders	240

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14343-2 - International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of
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Vincent Pouliot

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface and acknowledgments

“Inequality is a central fact of international political life,” writes Andrew Hurrell in his widely acclaimed opus.¹ Starting from a similar observation, this book is about the social production and negotiation of hierarchy on the world stage. I look at the counterintuitive case of multilateral diplomacy, which despite being formally premised on the principle of sovereign equality, actually takes place on a deeply unlevelled playing field. I aim to theorize and empirically document the manifold practices of social stratification in international politics, the ways in which inequality is generated, reproduced and contested, and more generally the pervasiveness of hierarchy as an ordinary condition of global life. While the book cannot aim to cover all of the different forms that social stratification takes in world politics, the theory and methodology that I put forward aspire to capture the basic dynamics of inequality production on the international stage.

When I first submitted a funding application for this project back in the fall of 2008, my working title was meant to paraphrase Hedley Bull’s landmark book: *The Hierarchical Society*. Soon enough, though, references to international hierarchy became cottage industry in International Relations (IR). Thanks to this surge of scholarly interest, today there is arguably nothing particularly controversial in stating that world politics is less about anarchy than it is about hierarchy. The specific contribution of this book is in developing a theoretical framework about – as well as in empirically substantiating – the manifold social processes by which social stratification emerges on the global stage. Contrary to conventional wisdom, which focuses primarily on the distribution of state capacities, I contend that it is the structuring play of practice – itself enabled and constrained by situations, dispositions, relations and positions – that

¹ Hurrell 2007, 11.

Cambridge University Press

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Vincent Pouliot

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

best explains what diplomats often refer to as international pecking orders.

In more than one way, this book may be construed as a sequel to my first single-authored book, *International Security in Practice*. In both cases, I am concerned with the politics of multilateral diplomacy and the social negotiation of meaning. In fact, this book arguably starts where I left off in 2010. In my analysis of NATO–Russia security relations, I concluded that the key irritant was the absence of an established distribution of ranks and roles to help structure the relationship. Most, if not all, of the multilateral diplomacy between NATO and Russia seemed to be going into (re-)negotiating the terms of engagement after the end of the Cold War. There are, as I put it then, “two masters but no apprentices” at the table. As I started to shift my gaze to other cases, I wondered how seemingly more functional diplomatic pecking orders actually come about. The idea of contrasting the NATO case – where social stratification looks pretty much as strong as it gets – with the case of the United Nations (UN) – whose many debates over the pecking order have gripped institutional reform for decades – quickly germinated in my mind.

It took me much longer to write this book than I had originally planned – six long years of hard and intensive work. I guess this is the story behind most academic books anyway. My own experience was compounded by the fact that in the course of research, the project grew in size and depth almost exponentially. This expansion imposed itself on me as I discovered, inductively, the sheer complexity of international pecking orders as social phenomena. The book started off as a project about the sense of place in international organizations and quickly it veered in a number of new directions that I had not planned originally, including relational mapping and field analysis. In this spirit, I would say that if this book could get only one point across, it would be this: The social processes by which international hierarchies emerge and operate are incredibly rich and eminently intricate.

Over the years of researching and writing, I have accumulated a number of debts that I would like to acknowledge. Perhaps most significantly, in the span I teamed up with a handful of colleagues in side projects that have considerably influenced the shape of the book. Most importantly, my long-standing partnership with Emanuel Adler, including the coedited book and article on international practices, led

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14343-2 - International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of
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Vincent Pouliot

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface and acknowledgments*

xi

me to revisit a number of my own ideas. My collaboration with Ole Jacob Sending and Iver Neumann, with whom I produced a journal special issue and a coedited volume about diplomacy, pushed me to go all the way with the constitutive and relational implications of my own argument. The joint article on Libya that I wrote with Rebecca Adler-Nissen allowed me to try out and further refine my argument on the struggle for competence. My team work with Jean-Philippe Thérien, including our latest piece on the evolution of world governing councils, as well as the special issue on practice theory and diplomatic studies that I coedited with Jérémie Cornut, were also quite formative. The most important thing about these different projects, apart from the intellectual stimulation of course, is the genuine fun that I had working with such great colleagues and friends.

As I was preparing this book, I also took part in a number of conference workshops that proved quite instrumental in getting across parts of my argument and obtaining quality feedback from high-powered intellects. The Dartmouth conference on status in world politics (October 2010), the Copenhagen workshop on Bourdieu in IR (December 2010), the Georgetown conference on process-tracing (March 2011) and the San Diego workshop on international hierarchies (May 2014) were all rich experiences. More generally, I should thank audience members at the various places where I presented bits and parts of the project, including the SGIR conference in Stockholm; ISA conferences in New Orleans, Montreal and San Diego; APSA Chicago; as well as guest talks at Georgetown University, University of Southern California, University of Ottawa, Université de Montréal, Columbia University, University of Toronto, Northwestern University, Cornell University, Yale University, University of Minnesota, Sciences Po Paris, the University of Copenhagen, NUPI-Oslo, IRSEM-Paris, Darmstadt Technische Universität, Griffith University and the University of Queensland. My records are unfortunately not detailed enough to name each and every individual who pushed me to rethink parts of my arguments with incisive questions but I am very grateful for the many chances I had to engage with a variety of scholarly communities.

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Cambridge University Press

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Vincent Pouliot

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Mainville. Sincere thanks for all the advice and support. Guillaume Devin and Antoine Vauchez were also kind enough to take long looks at my argument as I was putting the final touch. The comments I received from all these individuals were critical in helping me refine the argument, improve the framing, sharpen the analysis and clarify the implications. Other colleagues who also contributed to my thinking, either by providing comments or by engaging substantively with me, include (in alphabetical order): Séverine Autesserre, Lloyd Axworthy, Thierry Balzacq, Tarak Barkawi, Michael Barnett, Christian Büger, Joe Clark, Jeff Checkel, James Der Derian, Jack Donnelly, Matt Evangelista, Marty Finnemore, Robert Fowler, Louise Fréchette, Nina Graeger, Lene Hansen, Matt Hoffman, Ted Hopf, Ian Hurd, Christer Jönsson, Peter Katzenstein, Ron Krebs, David Lake, Christian Lequesne, Michael Loriaux, David Malone, Janice Bially Mattern, Kate McNamara, Frédéric Mérand, Nuno Monteiro, Iver Neumann, Dan Nexon, T. V. Paul, Krzysztof Pelc, Brian Rathbun, Ed Schatz, Ole Jacob Sending, Kathryn Sikink, Jason Sharman, Jens Steffek, Wendy Wong and Ayse Zarakol.

At a more practical level, I benefited from financial support through generous research grants from the Fonds québécois pour la recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC), Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and McGill's William Dawson fund. In 2014–2015, I was also lucky enough to be a fellow at the Paris Institute for Advanced Studies and at Sciences Po, which provided the best possible working environment for me to finish writing the book. Thanks also to the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, more specifically to Chris Reus-Smit, Tim Dunne and Richard Devetak, for welcoming me in Brisbane during the latter part of my sabbatical leave.

Last but not least, I am very thankful to research assistants who helped me gather empirical data over the years. In many ways, I could not have written this book – or, at least, collect as much research material – had I not been lucky enough to count on superb students to support my efforts. I would like to thank, in chronological order of involvement: Séverine Koen, Mark Paradis, Natasha Geber, François-Xavier Plasse-Couture, Ragheb Abdo, Lydia Zemke, Jacob Rabas, Michael Faubert, Alice Chessé and Lou Pingéot. Lou and Alice not only helped me assemble the final text but also provided pointed criticisms that forced me to clarify certain parts of my argument.

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978-1-107-14343-2 - International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of
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Vincent Pouliot

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface and acknowledgments

xiii

Working with students is my favorite part of the academic job, and this team was definitely up to the task.

I dedicate the book to my children, Mathilde and Colin, who were both born during the winding process of getting the manuscript together – at points enduring some of its unfortunate consequences on my temper, but at all times giving me the energy, drive and passion to carry it forward to destination.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Abbreviations*

C-10	Committee of Ten (African Group)
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
COREPER	Committee of Permanent Representatives (European Union)
E10	The ten elected (non-permanent) members of the United Nations Security Council
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
G4	Group of Four
GDP	Gross domestic product
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IO	International organization
IR	International Relations
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
MCA	Multiple correspondence analysis
NAC	North Atlantic Council
NAM	Non-aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
P5	The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council
PK	Peacekeeping
PRC	People's Republic of China
S5	Group of Small Five
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UfC	Uniting for Consensus
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
US	United States of America
WTO	World Trade Organization