

Globalising the international: Bull's metaphysics of order

Introduction

That the international order constitutes, in Hedley Bull's words, "a single political system that is genuinely global," is an idea so elementary that it scarcely merits mention in most literature on international politics today.¹ In a discipline often characterized as fragmented, plural, and diverse, the story of the expansion of international society exercises an outsized influence as a unifying frame that explains what has been called "the universalization of the nation-state"² or the globalisation of the European system of states.³ As the origin story of the present world political order, what John Hobson calls the "big bang" of international relations,⁴ the expansion narrative serves as "arguably the only effective and generally accepted grand narrative that prevails" in the discipline.⁵ Moreover, as Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit write in the introduction to their recent edited volume *The Globalization of International Society*, many contemporary political debates "assume the global political order wrought by this transformation" of the world into a "universal order of sovereign states."⁶ The expansion narrative and its critical revisions are thus a foundational element of debates about the character of contemporary world order.

The becoming global of the international system conventionally marks the difference between a world order based on positive rather than natural law. As Bull puts it, while "natural law theorists from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries described an international society that was global in extent, even if they also recognized an inner circle of Christian or European states,"

¹ Bull 1977, 19.

² Getachew 2019, 1.

³ Reus-Smit 2011.

⁴ Hobson 2012, 139.

⁵ Little 2015, 24.

⁶ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 18.

the recognition of the independence of non-European political communities “could not be said to have been endorsed by a universal system of positive international law and did not reflect a universal international society that actually existed.”⁷ This transition is considered synonymous with others that continue to structure the modern human sciences and contemporary political orders such as a transition from ‘tradition’ to modernity, from an imperial to an international world order, and a world of many ‘local’ political orders to a single world political order: the global international system. Moreover, teleological explanations and justifications of these transformations persist despite their links to racial, national, and civilizational hierarchies. The focus of this article is the way Bull and subsequent scholars of the globalisation of international society mark these distinctions through a specific ontology of order. Attention to this ontology demonstrates how Bull’s metaphysics of order continues to order the narrative of political globalisation in ways that naturalise and universalise a highly particular account of world-scale political order.

This problem is especially salient in the context of a variety of challenges to the current configuration of world political order. Global patterns of violence and inequality, anthropogenic climate change, nuclear weapons, old and new great power rivalries, and novel transnational social and technological forces have all given rise to vigorous debates on the prognosis for political order on a world scale. One key, though largely unspoken, dimension of these discussions is whether the global international system constitutes the latest or the first world political order. If the former, questions about possibilities for world order are limited to transformations within an unchanging structural form. If the latter, that structure itself is considered one possibility among many, a

⁷ Bull 1984, 124.

possibility whose origins, potentialities, and conceptual foundations become subject to scholarly investigation and political contestation.

I contend that scholarship on international society in international relations has moved from primarily giving the ‘first’ answer to increasingly giving the ‘latest’ answer, a transformation that has accompanied the conceptual shift from the *expansion* to the *globalisation* of international society. In what follows I consider some of the consequences of this shift with reference to two main texts: Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society* and Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit’s *The Globalization of International Society*. This shift results, I argue, in the transformation of the global international system from the *explanandum* (what is to be explained) to the *explanans* (the explanation) of the globalisation of international society.⁸ Dunne and Reus-Smit’s volume synthesizes decades of historical scholarship on the globalization of international society through two key conceptual innovations made with reference to *The Anarchical Society*. The first relates to the distinction between system and society, the need for which the authors argue is eliminated by contemporary developments in conceptual and historical analysis related to international society. The second has to do with Bull’s concept of a world political system, the world order whose study the authors suggest can explain the globalisation of the European system of states. Together, however, these conceptual changes miss the analogy Bull draws between international and world order and present a vision of the global international order characterised by the kind of structural permanence that was the target of the original expansion story. This results from the way globalisation narratives continue to rely on many of the same basic conceptual distinctions found in Bull’s work.

⁸ Hempel and Oppenheim 1948, 135–175.

This article identifies the consequences of these distinctions—what I call Bull’s metaphysics of order—for the theory of world politics presented in *The Anarchical Society* and subsequent scholarship on the globalization of international society. By a metaphysics of order, I mean the irreducible relation between parts and whole (designated by the term ‘system’) that Bull argues is characteristic of anything that displays order. As Dunne and Reus-Smit acknowledge, *The Expansion* “consists of a series of interlinked empirical narratives, structured and informed by an a priori conception of international society, one drawn largely from Bull’s earlier writings.”⁹ Bull’s conception of world order depends on a key distinction between aggregate and system which for Bull marks the difference between an aggregate world of local political orders and a systematically unified world political order in the form of a global international system. To the extent that recent histories of the globalization of international society are guided by Bull’s distinction, they are unable to explain such a transition in historical terms without transforming the global international order from the *explanandum* of the globalization of international society to its *explanans*. As a result, global histories of the globalization of international society resemble the structural theories of international politics that they disavow and naturalise a global international system as the structural form within which changes to world political order take place. In doing so they change profoundly the kind of questions that can be asked regarding the origins, character, and future of political order on earth.

This dilemma is particularly significant in the context of critiques of the original expansion narrative, and of theories of international relations generally, of affirming teleological, universalizing accounts of world political order. The substantial historical revisions made to the expansion narrative over the last several decades seek to overcome the ways that the original

⁹ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 28.

expansion narrative reifies a particular conception of international society, reproduces a Eurocentric narrative, and affirms a universalizing philosophy of history.¹⁰ However, because Bull's metaphysics of order continues to structure contemporary accounts of the globalisation of international society, as the below analysis shows, critical historical accounts of political globalisation remain tied to a structural account of globalisation in which the globalisation of the European state-system, which for Bull is a historical novelty, is projected backward for centuries as the condition of possibility of such an order. By making a global international order an explanation of the globalisation of international society, these accounts grant a global international system a kind of structural permanence that the original expansion story was meant to contest. This analysis thus also suggests that the teleological, universalizing features of the expansion story are produced by an abstract ontology of order. The qualities, genealogies, and constitutive effects of this ontology must therefore figure in the critique and contestation of such features and the structuring hierarchies that they generate.

The significance of Bull's conception of order to *The Anarchical Society* and the literatures it inspires has not gone unnoticed. As John Williams notes, "the study of and reflection upon order...have constitutive effects...ideas like order play a highly significant role in shaping the interests that are the classic focus of enquiry into political actions."¹¹ Edkins and Zehfuss point out that what is excluded from a concept as unimportant or irrelevant is constitutive of the concept itself. In the case of Bull, attention to the problem of order works as a perpetual deferral of questions concerning justice.¹² More recently, Pasha has argued that the value Bull places on order obscures the centrality of colonial violence to international order. "By defining 'order' and

¹⁰ Çapan 2017, Kaczmarek 2019.

¹¹ Williams 2006, 21–2.

¹² Edkins and Zehfuss 2005.

‘justice’ in specific ways,” he writes, “ownership of certain unsavoury features of the Western past can be evaded.”¹³ Order is not simply a possible result of particular political practices, but rather represents an ontological claim that is constitutive of the limits and possibilities of those practices. Bull’s careful attention to questions of order thus takes us neither into the realm of the mundane and useless nor into the domain of methodological practicality, as some studies suggest.¹⁴ Rather, they introduce questions about order, structure, and unity to which political theories of the international give particular answers. These are especially evident when it comes to questions about world political order, given the connection between conceptions of world or cosmos and metaphysical questions about order, totality, and wholeness. Bull’s answers to these questions are foundational elements of his theory of world political order and remain highly influential of scholarship on the globalisation of international society today.

In the following section I survey the transformation from a narrative of expansion to one of globalization over the last several decades along with the two key conceptual revisions by which Dunne and Reuse-Smit synthesise this shift. The first of these is eliminating the distinction between system and society and second is understanding the system of states as part of a wider world political system. The next sections examine these revisions in more detail with reference to the ontology of order articulated in Bull’s *Anarchical Society*. The final two sections draw conclusions from this analysis related to historical accounts of political globalization in international relations.

¹³ Pasha 2017, 100.

¹⁴ For the former, see Corry 2013, 83; Buzan and Little 2000, 35; Weltmann 1973. For the latter, see Watson 1987, 153; Zhang 1991, 3–4; Neumann 2011, 466.

From Expansion to Globalization

One of the key elements of Bull and Watson's original text is its attention to the novelty of the global character of contemporary international order. As Dunne and Reus-Smit explain in the *Globalization* volume, "Bull and Watson recognized the uniqueness of the global order of sovereign states produced by post-1945 decolonization."¹⁵ The enduring significance of Bull and Watson's volume is that "while most of their contemporaries in IR took this [global] order as a given, as a fundamental and enduring structural conditions of international relations, Bull and Watson understood its novelty in world history."¹⁶ As we will see below, Bull theorizes this novelty through a metaphysics of order based on the distinction between an aggregate and a system. Bull describes the shift from a world of many political orders to a world of one with reference to this distinction between order and disorder with which *The Anarchical Society* begins. The crucial difference between a European, or regional international system and a global one when it comes to world order is the difference between an aggregate of political units and a positive, systematically unified political order.

Bull and Watson's volume *The Expansion of International Society* investigates the processes by which the European system of states becomes an international political system coextensive with the surface of the globe. This process, according to the authors, takes place over five centuries, beginning in the late fifteenth century and ending with the universalization of sovereign equality expressed in the UN Charter in 1945.¹⁷ In Bull's view, a systematically unified world political order first emerges from what Daniel Green has recently called "the frenzied phase of English imperial expansion and conquest that saw much of the world suddenly come under

¹⁵ Bull 1984, 3.

¹⁶ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 3.

¹⁷ Bull and Watson 1984, 6.

European control after 1870.”¹⁸ While this initial world political order is characterized by European political domination, on Bull’s account, struggles for equal sovereignty, racial equality, economic justice, anti-colonial revolution, and cultural liberation bring the expansion process to its completion.¹⁹

A consensus has emerged in international relations that *The Expansion* presents a narrow, one-sided account of the globalization of international society that portrays the European system of states as the subject of a progressive history of which post-1945 decolonization is the culmination. This account has been subject to a number of critiques over the last several decades which demonstrate that the expansion narrative provides a Eurocentric explanation of the spread of the European states system and tells a story of unidirectional European expansion that largely occludes both the experiences of those outside Europe and the co-constitution of Europe and its outsides.

Following Neumann’s suggestion to turn towards a conceptualisation of entry into international society as a “relational process,”²⁰ a host of studies examines the entry into international society of various countries that emphasize the diffuse, complex, relational processes by which the European states-system expanded. This work aims to correct what Shogo Suzuki identifies as the English School’s “myopic and normatively driven conceptualization”²¹ of the expansion of international society by attending to what Ejodus calls “the entrants’ side of agency.”²² Slovakia’s entry, for example, is “multi-stage” and “chronologically layered” process that required contact with “multiple power centres” within Europe,²³ while Russia’s exemplifies a “mediated

¹⁸ Green 2020, 172.

¹⁹ Bull 1984, 217–228.

²⁰ Neumann 2011, 470.

²¹ Suzuki 2005, 137.

²² Ejodus 2014, 448.

²³ Batora 2014, 456.

expansion” that demonstrates the way the standard of civilization operates within the state system as well as between the states system and its outsides.²⁴ Others point to the way that China’s diplomatic practices, from its entry into international society in the late nineteenth century to its role in the reconstruction of international order after the first world war, evince not “a passive ‘response’ to the Western ‘impact’” but rather that “China actively participated in the reconstruction of the post-war international order.”²⁵ Colas, meanwhile, considers the role of pirates, privateers, and corsairs in the development of international society from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, describing the process as “a dialectical relationship between barbarism and civilization” that is characterized as “highly uneven, protracted and conflictual.”²⁶ This theme also appears in global history in Andrew Phillips’ critique of vanguardism, which concludes from a study of the strategic use of local intermediaries by colonial powers that “world politics has been defined by hybridization—not homogenization—for the vast majority of the modern era.”²⁷

This literature corrects the way that standard accounts conceive of expansion as a primarily intra-European process, thus ignoring the ways that European identity was constructed through relations with an outside ‘Other.’ As Neumann writes, “European international society was, from the very start, dependent on having internal and external Others in relation to which it could self-define.”²⁸ Furthermore, “a focus on the expansion of international society occludes the experience of being expanded upon – the focus directs attention only to one side of the social relation in question.”²⁹ This literature is critical of standard accounts of international society for missing the significance of colonialism and empire in determining the boundaries of international society and

²⁴ Kayoglu 2010, Buranelli 2014, 818–819.

²⁵ Zhang 1991, 15.

²⁶ Colàs 2016, 841–2.

²⁷ Phillips 2016, 63.

²⁸ Neumann 2011, 465.

²⁹ Neumann 2011, 467.

corrects this oversight by showing the tensions between the principles of equality and reciprocity that existed within the European states-system and the relations of hierarchy and inequality that existed between Europe and the rest of the world. While historical scholarship on the expansion in international relations focuses on a variety of time periods, from the earliest European voyages to the Americas to the entry of states into the international order post-1989, these analyses articulate shared conceptual innovations.

These are synthesized by Dunne and Reus-Smit in *The Globalization of International Society*. Contributors to Dunne and Reus-Smit's volume respond to the limits of the expansion narrative by studying the development of international society in global terms. Only by understanding the world as an already-ordered political whole, the argument goes, can the globalization of the European state-system be studied without excluding or rendering subordinate other peoples, actors, and practices constitutive of that process. The key conceptual move that organizes the volume is the distinction between the original account of the expansion of international society and the contemporary critical study of the globalization of international society. The distinction between expansion and globalization is summed up by Dunne and Reus-Smit as follows:

The conventional narrative about the 'expansion' of international society is a story of 'European' international society expanding outwards to encompass the globe through processes of imperialism and decolonization...the story we tell in the following chapters is one in which international society was, from the outset, profoundly influenced by encounters, engagements and interactions between European and non-European peoples, producing a global international order that is culturally and politically far more complex.³⁰

³⁰ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, viii.

Expansion presents a vision of the development of world order as a ‘scaled-up’ version of the European system of states that develops internally rather than through an interplay of internal and external identities, forces, and processes. Globalization is a catch-all term for the variety of critical accounts of the development of European international society in relation to the political communities and economic forces that traversed the wider world.

This shift is encapsulated by Dunne and Reus-Smit through two key conceptual revisions. The first is related to the distinction between international system and international society while the second is related to the distinction between a world political system and world society. While Bull treats these two relationships as analogous, Dunne and Reus-Smit use Bull’s concepts to theorize a different relation between world system and world society than is present in international order. Before exploring these revisions in detail, we must first examine their centrality to Bull’s theorization of international system and society.

System and Society: Bull’s Metaphysics of Order

Bull’s careful elaboration of the distinction between system and society has become a touchstone for studies of international society and continues to be influential of much contemporary scholarship. *The Anarchical Society* is an effective exemplar for its influence and for its explicit attention to an account of order *per se* by which various ordered arrangements can be identified, named, and studied. My analysis proceeds from a sense that *The Anarchical Society* is a text which, as Williams puts it, “continues to repay close reading.”² Bull begins his text with an explicit account of what constitutes order, one which informs his description of the international system and international society.

System and society are usually distinguished by a prior distinction between order in general and social order in particular. As Andrew Hurrell points out, this is a feature of “almost all analyses of social order,” which begin by distinguishing between order understood “in the sense of stable and regular patterns of human behaviour...in contrast to chaos, instability, or lack of predictability,” and order conceived as “a particular kind of purposive pattern...that involves a particular set of goals, objectives, and values.”³¹ These forms of order correspond to the way the distinction between an international system and an international society is elaborated by Bull and subsequent scholars of international society. On these accounts, system refers to the minimal form of order that enables the development of the common rules, values, and culture that are characteristic of international societies.

Numerous commentators have now pointed out that it is difficult if not impossible to conceive of a system of states that entirely excludes a social dimension. System, these authors argue, necessarily implies some form of already-present social relation. This problem has prompted a variety of responses. Some scholars conceptualize the relation between system and society as a continuum.³² On the continuum model, the move from a system of states to a society of states is the product of a historical evolution. Others prefer to deal with the problem by doing away with the difference altogether and using the term international society exclusively. This is the approach that Reus-Smit takes in describing the effects of struggles for individual rights on the expansion of international society, and it has been adopted wholesale by the contributors to the recent edited volume *The Globalization of International Society*. These scholars, the introduction

³¹ Hurrell 2006, 193.

³² Berridge 1980, 82–92, Watson 1992, Buzan 1993.

claims, “draw no distinction between international society and system, theoretically or historically.”³³

For Dunne and Reus-Smit, its benefit is a more fulsome account of the way today’s global international society developed in relation with a global political order. “International society,” they write, is “preceded by, and embedded within, wider networks of global social and political interaction.”³⁴ Understanding international society as analytically inextricable from the international system helps explain its globalization in relation to forces beyond its boundaries that are global in scope. Bull’s claim that world society and the world political system are related analogously to international system and society suggest that careful attention to Bull’s metaphysics of order is needed to parse the details of Bull’s theory of world order. Doing so casts doubt on the second conceptual innovation related to the world political system. Before we arrive at this conclusion, however, Bull’s systemic, purposive ontology of order and its relation to the international must be parsed in greater detail.

Though descriptions of Bull’s conception of order are divided between mechanical and purposive accounts, the way Bull distinguishes between order and disorder shows that his account of order is not a mechanistic one, but rather purposive, that is, expressed by an organized relation between parts and whole.³⁵ William Bain aligns mechanistic and purposive conceptions of order with what he calls imposed and immanent theories of order that have their roots in philosophical and theological conflicts over the origin of the world, the nature of God, and the conflict between religious and secular authority. While in an immanent theory of order, “the natures of things are the outcome of their interconnections and their interconnections are the outcome of their

³³ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 33.

³⁴ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 33.

³⁵ Odysseos 2007.

characters,”³⁶ on the theory of imposed order “singular things, having no intrinsic connections, enter into relations that are imposed from without, either by legislation or the force exerted by an impersonal mechanism.”³⁷ Most commentators ascribe a mechanical conception of order to Bull’s theory of international society. Louiza Odysseos, for example, argues that the realist, rationalist, and revolutionist traditions combined in Bull’s anarchical society are premised on an account of political coexistence premised on what Odysseos calls a “logic of composition” in which coexistence takes place between pre-constituted units, whether individuals or states.³⁸ According to this logic of composition, the international names the sum total of this collection of autonomous, non-relational, independent units. Bain agrees, arguing that Bull employs a mechanical conception of system that exhibits the qualities of imposed order, in which separate states combine in “an aggregate of singular states.”³⁹ These descriptions, I contend, are at odds with the way Bull’s understanding of systemic order is theorized in opposition to an aggregate.

Bull begins *The Anarchical Society* by distinguishing between order and disorder, a difference which is analogous to the relation between purposive and mechanical forms of order. Here Bull is concerned not with the limits of particular conceptions of order but the conditions of possibility of any ordered whole, be it a set of books or an international system. “To say of a number of things that together they display order,” he writes, “is to say that they are related to one another according to some pattern, that their relationship...contains some discernible principle.”⁴⁰ Order results when a number of parts have been organized in relation to a common whole. To illustrate the distinction between what he calls a “haphazard relation” and an ordered relation, Bull

³⁶ Bain 2020, 30.

³⁷ Bain 2020, 29.

³⁸ Odysseos 2007, 14.

³⁹ Bain 2020, 185.

⁴⁰ Bull 1977, 3.

uses the example of a number of books. “A row of books on the shelf displays order,” he explains, “whereas a heap of books on the floor does not.”⁴¹ The row of books aligned on the shelf is arranged according to a principle by which they are organized, whereas the books on the floor lack any such principle. To use language that Bull will use later in the text, the books on the floor do not display order because unlike the books on the shelf, they are not related to one another as parts to a whole.

Next, Bull distinguishes between order in general and social order in particular. Order as such is to be distinguished from what he calls “order in social life,” which is not any ordered pattern, but one designed to achieve the realization of purposes, goals, and values. Hurrell calls this distinction “beguilingly simple” because of the way that “order as fact and order as value are often very hard to disentangle.”⁴² Bull tries to do so by analogy with books, explaining that, “in this purposive or functional sense, a number of books display order when they are not merely placed in a row, but are arranged according to their author or subject so as to serve the purpose or fulfil the function of selection.”⁴³ The distinction between order in general and social order in particular is expressed in the difference between the books placed in a row, and books arranged according to some principle of selection. This is a curious definition, since Bull has just described books placed in a row as related to one another according to “some discernible principle.”⁴⁴ Arranging books by author or subject is precisely to arrange them according to a unifying principle, just as arranging books in a row on a shelf is to do the same. In short, on Bull’s account, both order in general and social order in particular are determined by an organizing principle or purpose that

⁴¹ Bull 1977, 3.

⁴² Bull 1977, 3.

⁴³ Bull 1977, 4.

⁴⁴ Bull 1977, 3.

combines parts into an organized whole. Only phenomena that exhibit such a relation between parts and whole can be said to display order.

Bull defines international order as “a pattern or disposition of international activity that sustains those goals of the society of states that are elementary, primary, or universal.”⁴⁵ These goals are sustained by the five primary institutions of international society that Bull identifies: The balance of power; international law; diplomacy; war; and great powers.⁴⁶ According to Bull, these institutions are forms of *social* order, and as such, they are directed toward the achievement of particular goals. In the case of international society, these goals are threefold: First, preservation of the system and society of states; second, preservation of the independence of sovereign states; and third, the maintenance of peace in the sense of the temporary absence of war.⁴⁷ The primary goal of international society, on this account, is to secure a particular kind of order that enables other goals or patterns of order to follow. According to Bull, these particular goals are instances of the primary goals of all societies, to secure life, truth, and property.⁴⁸ This definition of international order relies on a prior conception of order expressed by the concept of a system of states. “A *system of states* (or international system),” Bull writes, 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.”⁴⁹ Both concepts depend on a prior distinction between order and disorder in such a way that make order (in general) and social order (particular orders) difficult to distinguish.

⁴⁵ Bull 1977, 16.

⁴⁶ Along with many possible additions. For recent examples, see Falkner and Buzan 2017, Nantermoz 2020.

⁴⁷ Bull 1977, 16–18.

⁴⁸ Bull 1977, 4–5.

⁴⁹ Bull 1977, 9.

How then can social order be distinguished from order? Bull qualifies his definition by arguing that social order is not defined by purposive action in general, but by purposive action aimed at specific ends. For Bull, these ends are security from violence and death (life), guarantees of contract and agreement (truth), and some conception of private ownership (property).⁵⁰ Thus, while violent conflict exhibits a pattern, “this is a situation we should characterize as disorderly.”⁵¹ It is here, as Vincent aptly puts it, that “the exponent of order in social life in general is in practice a defender of particular orders.”⁵² The entanglement of order and social order in Bull’s text is outlined in detail by John Williams, who shows how Bull vacillates between normative and ‘objective’ conceptions of order. At various points throughout *The Anarchical Society*, Bull variously presents order either as an arrangement that displays purpose or goal-directed behavior in general, or as an arrangement that aims at those particular goals, that Bull views as conditions of possibility for social life.⁵³ The result, Williams explains, is that “the idea of society is virtually subsumed into the notion of order; for where there is order there is society, as the distinguishing feature of society is that it generates order.”⁵⁴ In short, on Bull’s account, social order is a particular form of order in general, but any attempt to identify such a general account of order inevitably lapses into particularity.

Bull’s emphasis on a particular form of order—a whole not reducible to its parts—that leads others to conclude that for Bull, “order and purpose are in some fundamental way connected.”⁵⁵ Bull sometimes acknowledges explicitly that there is no impartial conception of order, and thus that social order is “necessarily a relative concept”; what counts as order and

⁵⁰ Bull 1977, 4–5.

⁵¹ Bull 1977, 3.

⁵² Vincent 1990, 44.

⁵³ Williams 2006, 17–20.

⁵⁴ Williams 2006, 25.

⁵⁵ Edkins and Zehfuss 2005, 456.

disorder depends on one's purpose.⁵⁶ Bull thus articulates a conception of order that depends on purpose, and a conception of purpose that depends on a particular form of order. The reciprocal relation between order and social order in Bull's text helps explain the difficulty of distinguishing between system and society in studies of international order. Just as the difference between a purposive order in general (books on a shelf) expresses the same form of order as one directed toward the achievement of particular purposes, so system and society express an analogical form of order, one in which order is achieved through parts related by some kind of ordering principle. Ultimately, all of Wight's 'traditions' rely on the form of order expressed by system: that of a relation between parts and whole.

It is in this sense that Bull's distinction between order and social order is not a difference in form, but rather social order is considered as a particular expression of order in general. Bull thus has much to say about how the social order of the international is maintained in relation to particular ends through common interests, rules, and institutions such as the balance of power, diplomacy, great powers, and war.⁵⁷ These elements of international politics, however, concern the maintenance of an already present system. While social order, on Bull's account, is constituted by parts arranged in particular ways for particular purposes, order in general is understood as the arrangement of parts in relation to a whole. This reading of Bull's theory of order accords with the position that the system/society distinction can and should be collapsed, as both depend on a systemic, purposive conception of order. An analogous relation can be found in *The Anarchical Society* between world society and the world political system, the subject of Dunne and Reus-Smit's second conceptual revision.

⁵⁶ Bull 1977, 4.

⁵⁷ Bull 1977, 95–124.

World Political System

Dunne and Reus-Smit's global approach to the history of the European system of states builds on Bull's conception of the world political system. The authors point out that while Bull admits that "international society emerged and globalized within a broader world political system" by which "[its] evolution is profoundly affected,"⁵⁸ he and other scholars of expansion fail to "consider the long-term constitutive effects of the world political system on the development of international society."⁵⁹ By contrast, the globalization approach locates international society within a long history of interactions with outside political, economic, and social actors within a broader world order, interactions which are constitutive of international society itself. According to Dunne and Reus-Smit the novelty of the global international order is related to the division of the entire surface of the globe into separate states: "Never before had the entirety of the globe been divided up into such states."⁶⁰ This account, however, is at odds with Bull's formulation of the concept of a world political system which is made on the basis of the difference between an aggregate and a system, that is, between discrete states and an international system.

While Bull's most frequently cited definition of world order is "patterns or dispositions of human activity that sustain the elementary or primary goals of social life among mankind as a whole,"⁵ world order in *The Anarchical Society* is also defined on the basis of the distinction between aggregate and system. As Bull writes in *The Anarchical Society*, the development of a global international system means that that "order on a global scale has ceased to be simply the sum of the various political systems that produce order on a local scale, it is also the product of what may be called a world political system."⁶ The distinction between a world comprised of a

⁵⁸ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 34.

⁵⁹ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 32.

⁶⁰ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 3.

multitude of political orders, be they empires, states, or proto-international systems, and a global international political order is marked by the distinction between an aggregate and a system by which Bull defines order in general.

In Bull's influential formulation, "the first global political system has taken the form of a global system of states. What is chiefly responsible for the emergence of a degree of interaction among political systems in all the continents of the world, sufficient to make it possible for us to speak of a world political system, has been the expansion of the European states system all over the globe, and its transformation into a states system of global dimension."⁶¹ Thus, while Bull does distinguish between world order and international order, world politics for Bull has taken the form of international politics because the international constitutes a single global political system. The global character of this political order lies in the way it links various local political orders into a systematically unified whole. According to Bull, it is the world prior to the globalization of international society that is characterized by political division. What marks the genesis of world order is not only a novel form of division but a novel form of political unity: a global system of states.

As Bull and Adam Watson explain in the introduction to their volume, the culmination of the expansion of international society—the political unification of the world in the form of a global international system—first occurs when the disparate political communities of the world are united in a single international political system. Before the expansion of international society, according to Bull and Watson's introduction to the *Expansion*, "the world was not organized into any single international system or society, but comprised several regional international systems (or what we choose to call international systems, with some danger of anachronism)."⁶² This systemic

⁶¹ Bull 1977, 20.

⁶² Bull and Watson 1984, 1.

interconnection that produces a world political order is not simply a matter of economic or technological interconnections, but a political unification that is not reducible to them. Crucially, for Bull, “it was the expansion of Europe that first brought about the economic and technical unification of the globe, just as it was the European dominated international society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that first expressed its political unification.”⁶³ This unification is described by Bull with reference to the distinction between an aggregate and a system.

The significance of these a priori conceptual distinctions lies in the way they mark the novelty of the globalization of international order. Bull marks the genesis of world order by explaining that “throughout human history before the nineteenth century there was no single political system that spanned the surface of the world as a whole,” but that “since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there has arisen for the first time a single political system that is genuinely global.”⁶⁴ What this means, in Bull’s view, is that “before the latter half of the nineteenth century world order was simply the sum of the various political systems that brought order to particular parts of the world,”⁶⁵ whereas the expansion of international society across the globe means that “order on a global scale has ceased to be simply the sum of the various political systems that produce order on a local scale, it is also the product of what may be called a world political system.”⁶⁶ The international constitutes a single, global, political order because it is a form of order that exhibits a relation between parts and whole, a system.

Bull’s account of the development of a world political order is thus consistent with the theory of order that Bull outlined earlier in the text. On this account, before the European states

⁶³ Bull and Watson 1984, 2.

⁶⁴ Bull 1977, 19.

⁶⁵ Bull 1977, 19.

⁶⁶ Bull 1977, 19–20.

system expands to encompass the globe, the various political orders of the world resembled the heap of books in Bull's metaphor. Like the heap of books, and like the international, the world only becomes ordered with the emergence of a system, that is with the arrangement of the various 'local' political orders that populated the earth into an irreducible whole. It is precisely the lack of any relation between parts and whole by which Bull marks the difference between the world before the globalisation of international society and world constituted by global international political order. It is only when these local orders are understood as elements of a single system, a whole that is not reducible to its component parts, that, according to Bull, world political order is achieved. While there is something that Bull can call "world order" before international society becomes global, the relations between these local political orders are not organized in relation to a single political order of which they are all a part; order is merely local order.

What is notable about Bull's analysis is the way that the link between the expansion of the European system of states and the development of world order is expressed in the abstract distinction between aggregate and system. This distinction has profound implications for studies of world politics, given that it marks the genesis of what for Bull is the first world political order: the global system of states. It is on the basis of the distinction between system and aggregate that Bull attributes an ordering function to the European system of states and positions that system as the subject of the creation of a world political order. This theory of order informs Bull's account of the globalization of international society. This has consequences for Dunne and Reus-Smit's synthesizing conceptual innovation – to conceive of the globalization of international society as the result of forces constitutive of a broader world political system.

This is because for Bull, the wider set of processes that constitute the world political system can only develop *after* the emergence of what Bull considers the *first* world political system, the

global system of states. While Bull does argue that “the state-system has always been part of a wider system of interaction in which groups other than the state are related to each other,” he adds that “all that is in any sense new or recent in the world political system of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is its global or worldwide character; and, of course, it is only in this recent period that the states system itself has been worldwide.”⁶⁷ To examine the historical development of the European system of states as an element of a positive (in the sense of positive law) world political order, would be, on Bull’s definition of world political order, to project backward into history a world political condition that is only characteristic of the planet since the late nineteenth century. While it is surely possible to imagine the world as a single order at any given point in history, such an order is substantively different from the positive, systematically unified political order Bull identifies as the result of the globalization of international society.

What Bull calls world order and world society, however, do involve much more than the global system of states. Bull distinguishes between international order and world order, writing that the subjects of the former are states while the subjects of the latter are individuals. Thus, world order is “more fundamental and primordial” and “morally prior” than international order. However, “if international order does have value, this can only be because it is instrumental to the goal of order in human society as a whole.”⁶⁸ Possibilities for world order and world society, depend upon the prior ordering of the world as a global international system. While the international is constitutive of world *political* order, then, world order exceeds the explicitly political dimension of global order.

Exactly what additional elements are constitutive of world order is the subject of considerable debate. Some point to the development of a culture of universal human rights, a global

⁶⁷ Bull 1977, 268.

⁶⁸ Bull 1977, 22.

civil society, global civil society.⁶⁹ Others suggest that humanitarian intervention in the name of human security is suggestive of world society.⁷⁰ These elements align with Bull's conception of a "world political system" which includes a greater range of social interaction within the whole of world political order. Bull insists that a global system of states is not synonymous with the world political system, whose beginnings Bull discerns in "the world-wide network of interaction that embraces not only states but also other political actors, both 'above' and 'below' the state."⁷¹ These, however, are additions to the existing world order established by the system of states. The globalization of the states-system provides the unity that makes a 'world' out of what Bull might call the 'haphazard' relations between local political orders.

At the same time, this degree of interaction is insufficient for a world society, since for Bull the latter involves not just "interaction linking all parts of the human community to one another, but a sense of common interests and values, on the basis of which common rules and institutions may be built."⁷² In this regard, Bull explains, "the concept of a world society...stands to the totality of global social interaction as our concept of an international society stands to the concept of an international system."⁷³ The relation between the world political system and world society is analogous to that between the international system and international society. This means that the world political system follows and is enabled by the globalization of international order. The world political system thus cannot explain the development of international society without transforming global international order from an *explanandum* to an *explanans* – from a question to an answer.

⁶⁹ Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez 1997.

⁷⁰ John Williams 2014, 127–142.

⁷¹ Bull 1977, 266.

⁷² Bull 1977, 269.

⁷³ Bull 1977, 269.

Global International Order: From *Explanandum* to *Explanans*

The way a global international system is transformed from the explanandum of studies of the expansion of international society to its explanans is exemplified in chapters by Jennifer Welsh and Adam Phillips in the *Globalization* volume. Both Welsh and Phillips are explicit about their use and revision of conceptual claims made initially by Bull. Welsh's article aims to "adjust the frame of reference from the narrower notion of European expansion, which misrepresents the relations between West and non-West, to the global interplay between states, regions, and civilizations."⁷⁴ Welsh writes that "the core question is...less 'who became part of international society and when', and more how various entities fit within a global order at different points in time—an order which contained elements of both system and society."⁷⁵ In referring to system and society, Welsh evokes the two major elements of Bull's version of the contemporary 'anarchical society.' However, the global political order of which system and society are elements does not arise for Bull until the end of the nineteenth century. If a global anarchical society is present even at the beginning of the expansion process, the difference that the expansion narrative arose to explain—between a world of multiple political order and a systematically unified global order—is glossed over. The global quality of the present international order—the quality that marks its novelty, according to Bull—is posited as a condition that brings about the globalization of the European system of states.

Similarly, Andrew Phillips builds on Bull's claim that "the states system has always been part of a wider system of interaction in which groups other than the state are related to each other,"⁷⁶ to argue that while "from the late fifteenth century, Western Europeans undeniably

⁷⁴ Welsh 2017, 146.

⁷⁵ Welsh 2017, 147.

⁷⁶ Bull 1977, 268. This passage is cited in Phillips 2017, 43.

spearheaded a qualitatively higher increase in global interaction...they did so off a foundation of pre-existing hemispheric interconnections.”⁷⁷ Phillips demonstrates the way that “before European international society spearheaded early modern globalization, it had itself first been constituted through an earlier wave of Afro-Eurasian hemispheric integration.”⁷⁸ However, if the expansion of the European system of states is explained with reference to a global political system, the key difference articulated by Bull in his theory of international order—between a world of multiple political orders and a world of one—is difficult to explain. By studying the development of the European states system as an effect of a broader set of dynamics of a world political system, Welsh and Phillips add to our historical understanding of the development of European system of states but are unable to explain what makes the present international political system more ‘global’ than any previous—the question that spurred investigation into the globalization of the European international system in the first instance.

The consequence of this approach is that the difference Bull’s expansion narrative claims to explain, between a world of many political orders and a world of a single, positive political order, is eliminated. On this account, the development of a global international political order is explained with reference to the prior existence of a global international political order. To theorize this global interplay, contributors to *The Globalization of International Society* posit the historical existence of a condition that is said to be the *result* of the expansion process—a condition of political unity expressed by an international political order that is both systemic and societal, coextensive with the surface of the globe. Returning to the origin of global international society seems to land us back where the inquiry began: in a global international order (system) described

⁷⁷ Phillips 2017, 43.

⁷⁸ Phillips 2017, 43.

as an anarchical society. The order that is said to be the result of the globalization of international society is posited as its origin.

The result is that the distinction between ‘world order’ and ‘global international system’ is glossed over. Welsh, for example, explains that:

There is currently a substantial category of non-UN member states in the international system, which includes Taiwan, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Palestine, Abkazia, South Ossetia, and Kosovo. These territorial units are not universally recognized as sovereign, yet in many cases they have governmental structures responsible for conducting foreign policy.⁷⁹

Here, despite lacking formal membership, these states are still considered part of a global international system. The lack of formal recognition of a given state is not considered to threaten the ‘global’ status of this order, because it is understood as an already accomplished systematic unification that makes the global political order irreducible to its component parts (in this case states).

Thus, what for Bull is a historically specific, positive political order becomes the eternal form of a world order in which change is measured only through differences in its arrangement. Erasing the distinction between order and disorder on which accounts of the globalization of international society are based results in a theorization of global order in terms of a structural permanence that is difficult to distinguish from Kenneth Waltz’s paradigmatic account of international structure. The projection of a hybrid (system and society) global order like the present one projected back into centuries may differ in content but not in form from Waltz’s position, criticized for decades, that “the anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking

⁷⁹ Welsh 2017, 163.

sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia.”⁸⁰ Given the difficulties of distinguishing between system and society noted by scholars of international society, histories of the international that begin with a global international system do tell a story historical change, but also one of profound structural permanence.

This is evident in the way that Dunne and Reus-Smit, drawing on Bruno Latour, theorize global international society as “something that is, at any given point in time, ‘already assembled.’”⁸¹ On this model, the present configuration of global international order in the form of a system of states is only the latest iteration of a series of global international systems stretching back centuries. The present order is thus “a distinctive governing assemblage” which has “evolved over the course of the past five centuries within a context of and through interaction with, a shifting panoply of individuals and institutional actors, coalescing around diverse social and political assemblages, each of which has constituted a distinct locus of social and political power—a world political system.”⁸² This critique is premised on an understanding of the world political system that departs significantly from Bull’s and that misses the significance of the concept in relation to world order for Bull: its novelty.

If the distinguishing feature of the current world political system is its ‘global’ character, these approaches are unable to answer the question of the difference between before and after the globalisation of the European system of states. If global political order in part explains this globalization, it is not clear what it consists of, since it is precisely the now-global condition of the previously local or regional international political system that the expansion process purports to explain. What is missed is the ordering function of discourses of international order and its

⁸⁰ Waltz 1979, 66.

⁸¹ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 34.

⁸² Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 34.

globalisation in affirming a single planetary political order of a very particular form. Though they have added much depth to the expansion narrative, when the influence of Bull's metaphysics of order is considered, existing critiques of the expansion narrative thus appear less like challenges to the expansionist thesis than stories of the structural permanence of a global international system that rival even the most comforting 'Grotian pastorate.'

World political order in question

Conceiving of the global international system as the *explanans* of historical-political phenomena, past or present, changes the kind of questioning available to students of international politics. The novelty that provoked the questions of Bull and earlier scholars of expansion—the sense that the global international system of the late 19th century constituted the *first* world political order—is displaced in favour of the notion that the global international system is only the latest iteration of the long history of world political order. The form that this order takes among these subsequent authors, however, is of the global international system that is understood to be “very young.”⁸³ The question of the globalization of the international system transforms from one about the transformation of a world that consists of an aggregate of local political orders into a single world political order into one that concerns the arrangement of an existing world political order.

In the difference between aggregate and system lie the distinctions such as those between natural and positive law, tradition and modernity, and imperial and international that continue to structure the modern human sciences and world politics. Though Watson insists that “there is no abrupt gulf or revolutionary dividing line between the European state system and the present global

⁸³ Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017, 18.

one,”⁸⁴ this is difficult to reconcile with the way Bull conceives of the difference between a world of multiple political orders and world political order in such stark ontological terms—between aggregate and system. To begin on one side of these divides, as historians of the globalization of international society do when they use a global international system as an explanans, hides the constitutive effects of a metaphysics of order that makes a ‘world’ and an ‘order’ out of its outsides and its opposites. It is also evidence of the way historical change is measured in relation to a background of structural permanence. In this case, that structure is an irreducible parts-whole relation named by the term ‘system.’

The problem of the ontology of order implied by the concept of system is not unique to Hedley Bull and the literature on international society. The systemic quality of the international is a truism that is presumed by many accounts of international politics across conventional disciplinary divides. The difficulties outlined above are no doubt related to the challenges of thinking political order on world scale and the analytical and political dilemmas related to structure that they engender. The above analysis therefore represents a small effort to point toward a broad set of problems related to the ontology of order expressed through the concept of system used to theorize the international. These are of serious concern given that many of the most daunting political challenges of today call for a questioning of world order not only at the level of content and arrangement, but the level of form and structure. Ensuring this remains a question requires critical attention to the ontological accounts of order that structure stories of political globalization and their constitutive effects on world politics today.

⁸⁴ Watson 1992, 277.

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