

Recollection of my discussions with Hedley Bull about the place in the history of International Relations of the idea of the Anarchical Society

By Adam Watson (July 2002)

When I first got to know Hedley Bull, he was a political theorist, interested especially in the international models of systems of states.

He accepted that any group of states so involved with each other that each had to take account of all the others, could be called a system. When such states consciously developed, and in the main observed certain rules, and operated certain common institutions, and perhaps shared some values (though shared values were not essential), they could be considered to have formed an international society.

Martin Wight proposed in meetings of the British Committee that where every state in a system recognised the same degree of independence for all the other members as it claimed for itself, we could call it an international system; but where a few big states had rights and responsibilities that others did not – whether de jure or de facto – we should speak of hegemonial or suzerain systems. Wight and I agreed about the substantial degree of hegemony in the European states system and in the worldwide system which grew out of it. I maintained that in practice every known “international” system had some degree of hegemony; and that the concept of a wholly anarchical society of states was a theoretical absolute that had never been realised.

Hedley Bull, in conversations with me, agreed about the prevalence of some degree of hegemony or imperial authority in historical practice. He said he was not a historian but a political scientist. His point was that nonetheless this concept of a society of fully independent and juridically equal states did exist; and that it played a large part for several centuries in European thought about international relations, and also to some extent their conduct in practice. In particular, the heady era of Western decolonisation in which we were then living was dominated by the ideal of a non-hegemonial world society of independent states, to which all remaining colonies ought to accede forthwith regardless of their competence. Hedley as an Australian, regarded the attainment by dependent states of full independence as a natural evolution towards an almost unquestionable goal. Hedley of course, recognised that dependent states might become integral and equal parts of an extended imperial power, as the French, Portuguese and Soviets for instance, proposed.

So it was possible for Hedley, and many others, to regard the propensity to hegemony, which I saw as an integral and ever-present feature of systems of substantially independent states, as an aberration or defect, a failure so far to achieve the more perfect society towards which we were moving. Wight distrusted this belief in Progress. He once observed in this context that to err is human – i.e. that if hegemony was a failure to achieve perfection, it was a permanent failure. But in spite of Hedley’s theoretical assumptions, he became, like me, increasingly interested in hegemonial and suzerain systems, and accepted the metaphor of a spectrum from anarchy to empire – from a state of nature to a single universal leviathan.

Hedley Bull's great book, *The Anarchical Society*, is about the ideal international society and progress towards it. It does not even dismiss hegemony as an aberration, and its index does not include the word. This seemed to him a reasonable limitation for one book. But he was steadily becoming more interested in the historical record – 'la storia' itself as Herbert Butterfield liked to call it. He thus came to see the key role of hegemony and anti-hegemonial coalitions in international practice. Understanding and analysing this side of the story was to be my job, and he encouraged me to write about it.

Hedley Bull came to see the origins of the anarchical ideal in the Westphalian settlement of 1648 and the anti-hegemonial coalition that established it. He studied the historical record of that settlement carefully and in detail. In so doing, he saw increasingly how much the realities of 17th century European history differed from what is now often called the Westphalian ideal. But the ideal continued over the centuries to influence practice in many ways. For instance, a main purpose of the rules and institutions of the European international society, from *cujus regio ejus religio* to the United Nations, and especially the operation of the balance of powers, was in Heeren's classic phrase "to protect the weak against the strong". The goal of a free anarchical world of multiple independences, made up largely of emancipated colonies, most notably the United States, effectively relegates hegemony and even more suzerainty from endemic conditions to the very obstacles to be overcome. Or so it seemed to most of us in the 1960's and 1970's. It is my impression that Hedley, especially as he became more historically minded, did not fall into this trap.

Hedley Bull saw that the states which regained their independence from European domination, or acquired it for the first time, accepted the general structure of the worldwide society of states: though it was of Western origin it appeared to the rulers of the new states capable of serving their needs. But otherwise the "third world" that had been assigned subordinate or colonial status by the expansion of the European society of states, seemed to Hedley determined to reject Europe. He intended to write a companion volume to *The Expansion of International Society*, to be called *The Revolt against the West*, which would show Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania as rejecting not only Euro/North American political, administrative and economic standards, but also the West's cultural standards and practices.

In our discussion of this projected volume, I urged him to include the rejection of the Soviet Union by those communist states which were independent enough to do so. Thus of the four major founders of the non-aligned movement, two – Nehru and Nasser – were opposed to British imperialism, and the two others – Chou En-lai and Tito – opposed Soviet domination. But we both realised that we did not know enough about the communist side of the equation to write about it. And of course our discussions took place before Gorbachev and the collapse of Soviet domination.

Hedley seemed to me always somewhat uneasy about the relationship of the newly independent non-white world to Western values and standards of civilisation. To many Westerners in the 1960's and 1970's, the decolonisation movement and the adoption of universally valid standards of human rights, democracy, the position of women in society, the protection of the environment and so on, went hand in hand.

Hedley personally favoured these values as much as any member of the British committee, including myself. But his understanding of the international situation was that the world was moving towards a society of some 200 substantially independent and therefore culturally very diverse states. The symbolism of the U.N. was the principle of universal membership.

Acceptance of a state into the U.N. legitimised membership of international society, and therefore legitimised cultural diversity – a worldwide version of *cujus regio ejus religio*.

The international scene has greatly changed since Hedley Bull and I had these discussions. We thought in terms of a global society where we co-existed, and to some extent collaborated with communists and ayatollahs as well as still primitive communities. We did not foresee the collapse in our working lifetimes of bipolarity, or the great technological and military predominance of the United States. But notwithstanding these changes, the Westphalian ideal and Westphalian assumptions remain vigorous and widespread. Most significantly, the long-term assumptions of the United States about a desirable world order remain Westphalian, rooted in their war of independence. And even if, as I asked in my presentation on 5 June, the ideal of multiple and therefore diverse independences turns out to be only a crock of fairy gold at the end of the Westphalian rainbow, still *The Anarchical Society*, and Hedley Bull's work generally, will retain their definitive value in formulating and analysing the concept of a Westphalian world.

More generally, it is well to remember that all ideas do not have the same force. The “unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, and “liberté, égalité, fraternité” have been idées notrices of world political history since their proclamation. And in the more limited sphere of relations between states, the same seems to be true of the Westphalian ideal that Hedley Bull set himself to define.

Adam Watson, Paris, July 2002