

THE BRITISH COMMITTEE FOR THE THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

some historical notes by Adam Watson (November 1998)

The committee started in 1958 as a result of an approach by the Rockefeller Foundation to Herbert Butterfield, then the Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. The committee was designed to study the relations between states. The foundation intended it to be a parallel body to an American committee; but the American body did not last.

The Rockefeller Foundation provided funds for three weekend meetings a year at Peterhouse, Cambridge, with generous travel, meal and other expenses. (The Foundation told me a few years ago that it considered the result of the committee's work to be well worth the funding; but that the foundation considered that Western Europe was well enough off now to fund its own projects, and that Rockefeller money was more urgently needed elsewhere. The Ford Foundation has also given me the same general answer.)

Butterfield then co-opted Martin Wight, of the L.S.E. and Chatham House (he soon moved to be the Professor of European History at the University of Sussex). In practise Butterfield and Wight ran the committee jointly, though Butterfield always took the chair at the weekend meetings. They co-opted Desmond Williams, an Irish diplomatic historian at the Catholic University College, Dublin; Donald Mackinnon, a Scottish moral Philosopher; and Michael Howard, a military historian. Soon after they invited me, a practitioner at the Foreign Office.

From the outset the committee was determinedly inter-disciplinary, for two reasons:

1) Both Butterfield and Wight hoped and believed that the contact between people with different training and different ways of thinking would spark insights that a more narrow concentration would not. That was, I think, the chief reason why they wanted me as a member, and later William Armstrong of the Treasury, Robert Wade-Gery of the Foreign Office and Noel Dorr of the Irish Foreign Service (who later became a principal architect of the Anglo Irish agreements about Northern Ireland).

2) There were at the time no faculties of International Relations such as exist today.

The central purpose of the committee was suggested in a letter from Butterfield to Wight in 1958: "... not to study diplomatic history in the usual sense, nor to discuss current problems, but to identify the basic assumptions that lie behind diplomatic activity, the reasons why a country conducts a certain foreign policy, the ethical premises of international conflict, and the extent to which international studies could be conducted scientifically". Wight's views are set out in his seminal essay: "Why is there no International Theory?" It is hard to realise today how novel these ideas were only forty years ago.

The practice was for each member who was willing, to write a paper relevant to the committee's work, on a topic which he had studied; and to send it to the chairman

in good time for circulation of other members. Examples of such essays are those in Diplomatic Investigations, Desmond Williams' paper on the long term foreign policy of the Vatican, and my paper on interests of state other than vital interests. The papers were then discussed at the next meeting of the committee. They were understood to be in penultimate form, giving the author opportunity to revise them before publication. The diplomats and Treasury officials did not intend their papers for publication, and their influence on the development of the Committee's thinking is less visible than the published papers of the academic members. Butterfield kept notes of the discussions, and circulated these too. Subsequent chairmen were more lax about that.

After a very generalized and wide-ranging start the committee began to focus on systems of states. The discussions of states systems were focussed by Wight's essay entitled 'De Systematibus Civitatum' and Butterfield's submission of Heeren's formula in his 'European States system'. Heeren's definition of a states system is "the union of several contiguous states resembling each other in their manners, religion and degree of social improvement, and cemented together by a reciprocity of interests".

When Wight brought in Hedley Bull, an Australian scholar whose book on the control of arms race had led to temporary appointment in the British Foreign office, the committee began to focus on the idea of international society. Bull submitted several draft chapters of what became his classic The Anarchical Society. Essentially Bull argued that in looser systems the members (states, monarchs, etc.) acted according to what they conceived to be their interests; but when the members were as closely knit together as in Heeren's definition, or even the present global system, they could be considered a society. The rest of us largely accepted Bull's thesis. Bull and Butterfield wanted to limit the committee's discussions - at least for a year or two - to the European-contemporary society. Wight and I wanted to discuss not only other systems of independent states, but also hegemonies and suzerain systems, and dependent states.

After the publication of a number of committee papers as Diplomatic Investigations, the question arose of the committee working on a collective book about the origins and functioning of the present international society. This proved too difficult a collective task. Wight declared that each of us should write "as the spirit moves him or her". Bull remained eager to use the committee to produce two collective books: one of the expansion of European (Westphalian) international society to encompass the whole world, and the other on the revolt of the third world against the West (or possibly against the West and Soviet world). He would edit both books. I undertook to produce a book on past and present systems of states.

When the Rockefeller foundation discontinued their subsidy, the committee agreed to continue at its members' expense. Wight became chairman in Butterfield's place. On his untimely death I succeeded him; and when I left for the University of Virginia, Bull took over from me.

The committee from the beginning invited guest scholars and practitioners to talk on their special subject. This was not often successful, because the experts emphasised that the subject of their expertise (e.g. the ancient Greeks, High Islam, the Irish Government) did not think in terms of state systems etc. But when Bull became chairman, he developed the practice of inviting experts on various appropriate subjects

as guests in order to familiarize them with the committee's thinking, so that they could each write a chapter in his collective book on how the anarchical society became worldwide. This plan proved fairly successful, and resulted in the Expansion of International Society. Bull and I co-edited the contributions by other experts, and it took a lot of editing to mould their disparate contributions into facets of a common theme.

The committee came to a factual end in 1985 with Bull's early death. It was not formally dissolved; and there was talk of continuing it, perhaps with John Vincent in the chair.

Much the best - one might say the only - historical account of the committee is the ninety page account by Professor Brunello Viguzzi of Milan University, in Italian with careful footnotes, which forms the preface to the Italian edition of the Expansion, L' Espansione della Societa Internazionale.