

# THE ANARCHICAL SOCIETY

A Study of Order  
in World Politics

Hedley Bull

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in World Politics*

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# THE ANARCHICAL SOCIETY

For  
Emily, Martha and Jeremy

# Preface

In this book I have sought to expound systematically a view of international society and international order that I have stated only in piecemeal fashion elsewhere.

It owes a lot to my former colleagues in the International Relations Department of the London School of Economics, and especially to C. A.W. Manning. It has benefited greatly from the discussions of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics, in which I have taken part for some years. I owe a profound debt to Martin Wight, who first demonstrated to me that International Relations could be made a subject, and whose work in this field, to use one of his own metaphors, stands out like Roman masonry in a London suburb. His writings, still inadequately published and recognised, are a constant inspiration.

At some points in the argument I draw on the ideas of my Oxford teacher, H. L. A. Hart. In several chapters I dispute the views of my friend Richard A. Falk of Princeton. I believe, however, that his is one of the most significant points of departure in the study of world politics today, and the attention I devote to refuting him should be taken as a compliment. I am particularly grateful to my friend and colleague, Professor J. D. B. Miller, for his criticism and encouragement.

This book is the product neither of refined theoretical techniques nor of any particularly recondite historical research. When still an undergraduate I was very impressed (I now think too impressed) by the dictum of Samuel Alexander, the author of *Space, Time and Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1920) that 'thinking is also research'. My book reflects the limitations of an attempt to deal with a large and complex subject simply by thinking it through.

An earlier version of Chapter 4 appeared as 'Order vs Justice in International Society' in *Political Studies*, vol. xix, no. 3 (September 1971). An earlier version of Chapter 8 appeared as 'War and International Order', in *The Bases of International Order: Essays in Honour of C. A. W. Manning*, ed. Alan James (Oxford University Press, 1973). I am grateful to the publishers for permission to reproduce passages from these essays.

My greatest intellectual debt is to John Anderson, Professor of Philosophy in the University of Sydney from 1927 to 1958, a greater man than many who are more famous. He had little to say directly about the matters discussed in this book, but the impact of his mind and his example has been the deepest factor in shaping the outlook of many of us whom he taught.

Hedley Bull

# Introduction

This book is an inquiry into the nature of order in world politics, and in particular into the society of sovereign states, through which such order as exists in world politics is now maintained. I have sought answers to three basic questions:

- (i) What is order in world politics?
- (ii) How is order maintained within the present system of sovereign states?
- (iii) Does the system of sovereign states still provide a viable path to world order?

The three parts of the book explore, in succession, these three questions.

It will be helpful if, at the outset, I indicate the basic elements in my approach to this subject. First, I am concerned in this book not with the whole of world politics but with one element in it: order. Sometimes when we speak of world order (or of *the* world order) what we have in mind is the totality of relationships among states, the international political system as a whole. Here, by contrast, I am thinking of order as a quality that may or may not obtain in international politics at any one time or place, or that may be present to a greater or lesser degree: order as opposed to disorder.

Of course, the element of disorder looms as large or larger in world politics than the element of order. Indeed, it is sometimes held (mistakenly, as I shall argue) that there is no such thing as order in world politics at all, and that we can speak of international order or of world order only as some future, desirable state of affairs which we should strive to bring about but which does not exist at present and has not existed in the past. But while it is important to remember that order is at best only one element in world politics, it is upon this element that I wish to focus attention. Thus when, in Part 2, I consider such institutions of the society of states as the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war and the great powers, it is their functions in relation to order that I seek to explore, not the place they occupy in the international political system as a whole.

Second, order in this study is defined (in Chapter 1) as an actual or possible situation or state of affairs, not as a value, goal or objective. Thus it is not to be assumed that order, as it is discussed in this study, is a desirable goal, still less that it is an overriding one. To say that such and such an institution or course of action helps to sustain order in world politics is not to recommend that that institution should be preserved or that course of action followed.

Of course, in common with most men I do attach value to order. If I did not think of order in world politics as a desirable objective, I should not have thought it worthwhile to attempt this study of it. Indeed, it is doubtful whether any serious theory of political ends or values fails to attach some value to order in human relationships.

But, as I argue in Chapter 4, order is not the only value in relation to which international conduct may be shaped, and is not necessarily an overriding value. One of the themes of the present time, for example, is the clash between the preoccupation of the rich industrial states with order (or rather with a form of order that embodies their preferred values) and the preoccupation of poor and non-industrial states with just change. Similarly, we often hear that order in international politics should be subordinated to freedom or liberty – the coalition against Napoleon, for example, saw itself as fighting for the liberties of European nations against a system that provided order but extinguished these liberties, and today it is often said that within the American and Soviet

spheres of influence order is imposed at the expense of the freedom or independence of small states.

To speak of order as if it were an overriding value, therefore, would be to beg the question of the relationship between order and other goals, and this I do not wish to do. A study of justice in world politics, which may be envisaged as a companion volume to the present one, might yield some very different perspectives from those that are expressed here. I am not unaware of these perspectives or unsympathetic to them. But this is a study of order in world politics, and not of justice. I do, in the course of this work, consider how order in world politics is related to demands for justice, and I discuss the extent to which demands for just change have to be satisfied if order in world politics is to obtain. But these excursions into the theory of justice are undertaken only because they are essential to the treatment of order.

Third, I have sought to confine my inquiry into order in world politics to enduring issues of human political structure or institutions, and to avoid consideration of the substantive issues of world politics at the present time. It is often said, sometimes correctly, that the prospects for international order depend on the outcome of some substantive question of the day – as, at present, the control of strategic nuclear weapons, or the development of *detente* between the United States and the Soviet Union, or the containment of the Arab-Israeli dispute, or the avoidance of a world depression, or the reform of the international monetary system, or the limitation of population growth, or the redistribution of the world's food supply. But whatever the substantive issues of the day may be, they have to be dealt with in the context of the existing political structure of the world, and it is in relation to this political structure, and alternatives to it, that I have sought answers to the three basic questions I have posed about order.

Fourth, the approach to order in world politics that is developed here is one that does not place primary emphasis upon international law or international organisation, and which, indeed, treats order as something that can exist and has existed independently of both. Order, it is contended here, does depend for its maintenance upon rules, and in the modern international system (by contrast with some other international systems) a major role in the maintenance of order has been played by those rules which

have the status of international law. But to account for the existence of international order we have to acknowledge the place of rules that do not have the status of law. We have also to recognise that forms of international order might exist in the future, and have existed in the past, without rules of international law. It is, I believe, one of the defects of our present understanding of world politics that it does not bring together into common focus those rules of order or coexistence that can be derived from international law and those rules that cannot, but belong rather to the sphere of international politics.

Similarly, the approach followed here does not place major emphasis upon international organisations such as the United Nations and its specialised agencies, and the various regional international organisations. Of course, the part played by these organisations in the maintenance of order in contemporary world politics is an important one, and this is acknowledged at various points in the argument. But to find the basic causes of such order as exists in world politics, one must look not to the League of Nations, the United Nations and such bodies, but to institutions of international society that arose before these international organisations were established, and that would continue to operate (albeit in a different mode) even if these organisations did not exist.

Even the part that is in fact played by the United Nations and other international organisations is best understood not in terms of the official objectives and aspirations of these organisations themselves, or of the hopes commonly placed in them, but in terms of the contribution they make to the working of more basic institutions. It is for this reason that such references as are made to the United Nations and such bodies appear in the chapters dealing with the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, the role of the great powers, and war. It is these latter that are the effective institutions of international society; the League and the United Nations, as Martin Wight once argued, are best seen as pseudo-institutions. I have also been influenced by the feeling that the United Nations, because of the great mass of documentation it engenders, has been overstudied, and that this tends to deflect scholarly attention away from sources of international order that are more fundamental.

Finally, my purpose in writing this book is not to prescribe solutions or to canvass the merits of any particular vision of world order or any particular path that might lead to it. My purpose, or at least my conscious purpose, is the purely intellectual one of inquiring into the subject and following the argument wherever it might lead.

Of course, I do not wish to imply anything so absurd as that this study is 'value-free'. A study of this kind that did not derive from moral and political premises of some kind would be impossible, and, if it were possible, it would be sterile. What is important in an academic inquiry into politics is not to exclude value-laden premises, but to subject these premises to investigation and criticism, to treat the raising of moral and political issues as part of the inquiry. I am no more capable than anyone else of being detached about a subject such as this. But I believe in the value of attempting to be detached or disinterested, and it is clear to me that some approaches to the study of world politics are more detached or disinterested than others. I also believe that inquiry has its own morality, and is necessarily subversive of political institutions and movements of all kinds, good as well as bad.

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# Part 1

## The Nature of Order in World Politics



# Chapter 1

## The Concept of Order in World Politics

A study of order in world politics must begin with the question: what is it? I shall indicate what I mean by order in social life generally, and proceed to consider what it means in the system of states and in world politics in general.

### **Order in Social Life**

To say of a number of things that together they display order is, in the simplest and most general sense of the term, to say that they are related to one another according to some pattern, that their relationship is not purely haphazard but contains some discernible principle. Thus a row of books on the shelf displays order whereas a heap of books on the floor does not.

But when we speak of order as opposed to disorder in social life we have in mind not any pattern or methodical arrangement among social phenomena, but a pattern of a particular sort. For a pattern may be evident in the behaviour of men or groups in violent conflict with one another, yet this is a situation we should characterise as disorderly. Sovereign states in circumstances of war and crisis may behave in regular and methodical ways; individual men living in the conditions of fear and insecurity,

described in Hobbes's account of the state of nature, may conduct themselves in conformity with some recurrent pattern, indeed Hobbes himself says that they do; but these are examples not of order in social life but of disorder.

The order which men look for in social life is not *any* pattern or regularity in the relations of human individuals or groups, but a pattern that leads to a particular result, an arrangement of social life such that it promotes certain goals or values. 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. It was this purposive conception of order that Augustine had in mind when he defined it as 'a good disposition of discrepant parts, each in its fittest place'.<sup>1</sup> This is a definition which, as we shall see, involves a number of problems, but because it presents order not as any pattern but as a particular kind of pattern, and, because it places the emphasis on ends or values, it provides a helpful starting point.

Augustine's definition at once raises the question: 'good' or 'fittest' for what? Order in this purposive sense is necessarily a relative concept: an arrangement (say, of books) that is orderly in relation to one purpose (finding a book by a particular author) may be disorderly in relation to another purpose (finding a book on a particular subject). It is for this reason that disagreement obtains as to whether or not a particular set of social arrangements embodies order, and that social and political systems that are in conflict with one another may both embody order. The social and political systems of the *ancien regime* and of Revolutionary France, or today of the Western world and the socialist countries, each embodies a 'disposition of discrepant parts' that is 'good' or 'fittest' for some different set of values or ends.

But while order in this Augustinian sense exists only in relation to given goals, certain of these goals stand out as elementary or primary, inasmuch as their fulfilment in some measure is a condition not merely of this or that sort of social life, but of social life as such. Whatever other goals they pursue, all societies recognise these goals and embody arrangements that promote them. Three such goals in particular may be mentioned. First, all societies seek to ensure that life will be in some measure secure against violence