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Forum

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THE MAKING OF A CLASSIC: ON DIPLOMACY 30 YEARS ON

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Over the last decades, International Relations has achieved a degree of disciplinary maturity. This is reflected in the questioning of disciplinary foundational myths as well as in the growing self-reflective appreciation of disciplinary fore-runners. On one hand, scholars have been busy re-reading, re-interpreting, criticising and re-appraising earlier stories about the discipline and its alleged canonical books and thinkers (de Carvalho et al., 2011). Some older works have been discarded as best forgotten, others have been re-appraised and some have been rescued from oblivion. On the other hand, disciplinary associations celebrate distinguished scholars and pick the best books of the year (and indeed the decade), and courses as well

as introductory texts are structured around “classic works” in the discipline (Bliddal et al., 2013).

The desire to convene first a conference panel, and then this forum on James Der Derian’s *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* drew on both of these impulses. The intent is both to celebrate a work which we find to have a deserved status as a classic, and to examine in detail what makes it a classic. In the following contributions, a stellar cast of scholars in and around the study of diplomacy provide their personal takes on the book, and Der Derian provides his own genealogy of the genealogy. In the rest of this introduction, I will first provide a more general scene-setting, locating *On Diplomacy* in the broader study of international relations and diplomacy. Then I will briefly discuss my own favourite takeaway from the book, the understanding of diplomacy as “the mediation of estrangement” (Der Derian 1987a: 42).

CLASSICS, CLAIMED AND MADE

What defines a book as a classic? Some texts become known as instant classics. When used in marketing, this usually implies that the book captures something of the spirit of the age, and that it will be sold in airport bookstores and make the authors rich and everyone else envious and dismissive. More interesting are the rare texts which are recognised as seminal almost immediately, and soon accepted as classics, such as Morgenthau’s *Politics Among Nations*, which was rapidly adopted in teaching and sold remarkably well (Knutsen, 2016: 305). Another category of texts is the forgotten classics, which were highly important in their own time, but are largely forgotten now. During the 17th century, Justus Lipsius was published far more than, for instance, Bodin, and his key texts clearly influenced both Grotius and Hobbes (Leira, 2008). Today, however, he is remembered most for giving a name to the office-building in Brussels which houses the Council of the European Union. Less ambiguous are the Pantheon classics; everyone knows that they are classics and reveres them as such, and they made important contributions to disciplinary developments when they were published. But even so, they might not speak much to current readers. Nevertheless, at the very pinnacle of the Pantheon, we find the texts which continue to speak to scholars, generation after generation.

Before reaching the Pantheon, texts must prove that they stand the test of time; in most cases, it takes some time for a classic to be established as such. For relatively recent texts we might most appropriately be talking about classics in the making, as they are just establishing themselves as nodal points in disciplinary discourse and practice. Thirty years after the book’s publication seems to be a useful time to take stock of this process. By that time, the book has had time to influence more than a generation of scholars, and we have enough distance to assess both the

work on its own terms and the impact it has had. And thirty years after its publication, it is safe to say that *On Diplomacy* has made a mark, and that it continues to engage.

To those of us coming to what was then referred to as 'critical' IR in the late 1990's, on the heels of the heated theoretical debates of the preceding decades, *On Diplomacy* had a somewhat mythical nimbus. At the basic material level, it was virtually impossible to get one's hand on an actual physical copy of the book. My first exposure to it came in the form of a hand-me-down photocopied version filled with Iver B. Neumann's comments in the margins. Used copies currently sell at Amazon for above 300 USD (which is in line with what you would have to pay for a first edition of a Henrik Ibsen play). But more importantly, the book seemed almost incomprehensibly ahead of its time. While we were struggling simply to find room to think and graduate outside of the mainstream, *On Diplomacy* had already been in the field for more than a decade. Furthermore, while many of the seminal 'critical' texts were articles or collections of articles (cf. Walker, 1993; Neumann, 1999), Der Derian had produced a full-fledged monograph, fleshing out a sustained argument over hundreds of pages, and tying together concerns of classical IR theorising (particularly of the English School kind) with newer social theories.

The book was ahead of its time in its intellectual comprehensiveness, but it was also topically ahead of its time, setting out a somewhat different course than many of the other canonical critical works. Another of these early monographs, David Campbell's (1998) *Writing Security*, first published in 1992, can provide a useful contrast. Campbell started from the notion of identity being inescapably connected with difference, and the Self existing in separation from and opposition to the Other, and, like many of the writers on identity in the 1990s, applied this insight to foreign-policy-making, stressing how states constituted themselves as different from other states through processes of exclusion and boundary-drawing. This form of analysis proved easy to replicate for other cases, and spoke to mainstream concerns about wars, hot and cold.

While Der Derian was also dealing with difference between people and political entities, expressed through the terms alienation and estrangement, his concern was with how this alienation could be overcome. In the terms of Foucault, who resonates in most 'critical' work of this type, it can perhaps be suggested that while a number of scholars were working out the implications of sovereign and disciplinary power for IR, Der Derian had jumped directly to a form of pastoral power and even biopower. One instance of this would be his understanding of diplomatic change and evolution: "it is not necessarily the preponderant accumulation of power - be it material or spiritual - which will determine diplomatic forms; rather, it is the circulation, exchange and exercise of alienated power which generates the

rules of diplomacy which dominant power(s) might impose" (Der Derian, 1987a: 86–87). Intellectually speaking, Der Derian had suggested solutions before many other writers had fully identified the problems. While much academic energy in the 1990s was spent on discussing alterity and the potentially destructive consequences of turning difference into otherness, *On Diplomacy* had already suggested a way forward.

With a gradually broadening and deepening reception of Foucault, parts of the discipline of IR have in a sense caught up with *On Diplomacy*. While the book had already gained a reputation in its first decade, it became recognised as an enduring classic in the succeeding decades, as new generations of scholars discovered it. The basic (and somewhat flawed) bibliometrics of Google Scholar demonstrate this development convincingly. *On Diplomacy* was cited regularly, if not particularly frequently, in the years immediately after its publication. But starting in the late 1990s, and accelerating from around 2005, it has been cited more and more frequently, with 2016 being the year with the highest frequency to date.

The discipline of IR caught up to *On Diplomacy* not only theoretically, but also thematically. Since its publication, there has been growing interest in diplomacy, both within and outside of the discipline, and where diplomacy was historically associated with aristocracy, secrecy and war-mongering, it has increasingly become seen as something positive, as a way of if not overcoming, then at least living with difference (Leira, 2016). And in the intellectual pursuit of diplomatic studies, it seems hard to overestimate the importance of *On Diplomacy*. Diplomatic studies in IR had, up until its publication, been almost indistinguishable from diplomatic history, and both scholars and practitioners had tended to think of diplomacy as some sort of tactile art to be described and intuitively understood. *On Diplomacy* demonstrated that diplomacy could be theorised just like any other topic, and infused diplomatic studies with a much-needed dose of theoretical vigour. Others have theorised diplomacy differently afterwards, but it remains necessary to touch base with Der Derian's work for anyone engaging diplomacy theoretically.

A CLASSIC IN THE MAKING

As the following essays demonstrate, there are many reasons why Der Derian's theorisation of diplomacy continues to inspire. But I will argue that the central one is the one at the heart of the text: the coupling of estrangement and mediation with diplomacy. In the book, the reading is of diplomatic culture, understood as "the mediation of estrangement by symbolic power and social constraints" (Der Derian, 1987a: 42); in the article version of the argument, diplomacy itself is seen as "a mediation between estranged individuals, groups or entities" (Der Derian, 1987b: 93). As one contemporary reviewer noted: "The point seems so central that one wonders that Der Derian is the first to have capitalized on it in a contemporary context"

(Warren, 1989: 210). The reactions among students and non-IR specialists when presented with this understanding of diplomacy for the first time, are similar: it makes intuitive sense (at least when one has explained what “estrangement” means).

In contrast with more specified definitions of diplomacy, which tend to narrow the scope of analytical investigation, Der Derian's conceptualisation opens things up. Starting from the meta-level of mediation, rather than, for instance, from specific functional traits of diplomacy, implies that diplomacy is not tied solely to state apparatuses, but can be approached as a general phenomenon. This also allows for studies of diplomacy as a form of ‘third culture’ concerned specifically with the mediation of estrangement between other cultures, and worthy of study in and of itself. Furthermore, in this perspective, diplomacy is explicitly scalable; in addition to being a general phenomenon that is abstractly approachable at the macro-level, it can be studied at the micro-level of face-to-face interaction and mediation. Such a detailed study might also reveal the limits to the usefulness of this approach, though, as it could highlight how there is much more to diplomacy, at least at the micro-level, than the mediation of estrangement (Adler-Nissen, 2015). And, as the contributions to this forum suggest in different ways, there are still other genealogies of diplomacy to be written.

James Der Derian starts the festivities by providing his own genealogy of the genealogy. It is appropriate that this genealogy is itself full of fits and starts, and draws in not only Hedley Bull, Michel Foucault, Karl Marx and a varied cast of IR luminaries, but also James Baldwin and Buddy Guy. The genealogy of the genealogy makes clear what the original genealogy hints at, namely how it, for all its timelessness, was a distinct product of its time and place. This is how it must be, for as **Iver B. Neumann** stresses in his broader situation of *On Diplomacy* as a genealogy, the goal is to write a history of the present in terms of the past. Although praising *On Diplomacy* as the first work of its kind in IR, Neumann finds that Der Derian could have been more explicit about his method, and that he in particular underspecifies the genealogical breaks when alienation and diplomacy became problematised in new ways. This in no way invalidates the analysis, but suggests that future research could lead to alternative genealogies, alternative dating of the genealogical breaks and perhaps also alternatives to alienation and estrangement. In her contribution, **Merje Kuus** agrees with the centrality of estrangement for diplomacy. However, going back to mythical origins and with Wagner as her tool, she argues that this estrangement carries with it the possibility of recognition, since political subjectivity is, at heart, relational. To Kuus, then, *On Diplomacy* opens for an exploration of the emotional base of politics and an ethic of subjectivity. While Neumann and Kuus look to the foundations of *On Diplomacy* to suggest the possibility of different analyses of diplomacy and politics, **Michele Acuto** reflects on

the book as a way of transcending both diplomacy and IR, starting with the book's insights about techno-diplomacy and incorporating Der Derian's later work. He does so by maintaining a focus on diplomatic culture(s) and its (their) transformation in light of ever proliferating estrangements and mediations, and the rapid rise in new technologies. He concludes by suggesting that the developments of the last 30 years have only made Der Derian's starting question about the possibility of diplomacy for the future more pertinent. The possible futures of diplomacy are also a topic of **Paul Sharp's** closing statement. Placing *On Diplomacy* in the wider trajectory of IR and diplomatic studies, he notes how it revitalised the latter, and how it allows us to yet again raise questions about diplomacy's future. He notes how Der Derian suggests that diplomacy might be coming to an end, but also suggests other possible readings, like Acuto's emphasis on techno-diplomacy as a new form rather than a replacement, or a complete slide to diplomatic practices which fall in and out of play.

A CLASSIC OF OUR MAKING

In *On Diplomacy*, James Der Derian took on a somewhat forgotten topic and, through a fusion of English School ideas and social theories, opened it up for new generations of scholars. Immediately recognised as a profound work of analysis, through its continued (and increasing) influence on scholarship, it has proved itself as a classic in the making. Our discussion here obviously performatively contributes to this construction; if a sign of a classic work is that it continues to resonate and create discussion, year after year, this forum is surely contributing to the making of *On Diplomacy* as a classic. However, as demonstrated in the various contributions, the book is not a classic simply because we say it is, but because of the many contributions it has made to scholarship. One testament to its status as a classic is how "the mediation of estrangement" is now close to being a compulsory reference for anyone wanting to write in a theoretically informed way about diplomacy. The insights contained in such pithy phrases, which make intuitive and self-evident sense, making one see a well-known phenomenon in a new light, are the kinds of insights of which classics are made.

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'EVERY DOG GOT HIS DAY': ON DIPLOMACY AFTER THIRTY YEARS

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"People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does."

Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason

Having been asked to join a roundtable commemorating *On Diplomacy*, my reaction is one of deep appreciation shadowed by a mild apprehension. Who would not be grateful for recognition by esteemed peers? But thirty years on, some unease sets in. Has the book suddenly become timely? Belatedly timeless? Or is it simply a case of time out of mind?

All things considered, I think it best to leave in more capable hands the question of what what I do does (it sounds better in the original French) and in higher hands the matter of when what I do must come to a stop. Nor do I wish to subject readers