

The Transformation of Diplomacy: Mysteries, Insurgencies, and Public Relations

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Abstract

There has lately been a resurgence of interest in the art of diplomacy, fuelled by the growing popularity of the idea of ‘soft power’. This article reviews three works key to this revival, all of which argue that a transformed and revitalized diplomacy can and should play a positive role in international politics. One calls for diplomats to overcome their traditional reserve and become ‘guerrillas’ fighting for a human security, peace and development; another for a broader and deeper engagement with ‘public diplomacy’ – the practice of speaking to foreign peoples rather than just foreign sovereigns. The last favours a return to inherited diplomatic wisdom now half-forgotten. While welcoming this renewed concern for diplomacy, this article argues that its place in contemporary international politics is perhaps less secure than the works reviewed allow. The ‘management of legitimacy’ – the central task of diplomats – is a much more difficult task, it suggests, than is often acknowledged.

Biographical note

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Daryl Copeland, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: Rethinking International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009).

Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Nancy Snow & Philip Taylor (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008).

Even its most enthusiastic students would acknowledge that diplomacy is something of a backwater in the academic study of International Relations (IR), a subject far less exciting than security studies and far less glamorous than international theory. Indeed, it is fair to say that most scholars in the field think diplomacy to be largely inconsequential. They recognize diplomatic activity goes on, of course, but generally they do not think that diplomacy is where the real action in international politics is to be found.¹ We must look elsewhere, most scholars insist, to understand

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¹ Scholars of international relations turned away from diplomacy as a subject for serious study as early as the mid-1950s, with the result that some of the greatest theorists in the field could build entire careers without ever discussing diplomacy in any depth. See, for example, Kenneth Waltz's collected essays, *Realism and International Relations* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), which, despite their other virtues, contain no mention of diplomacy at all.

how states behave, wars begin, wealth is made, and so on. A redoubtable few have continued to toil away in the study of diplomacy – working on processes of negotiation, the structure of resident embassies, official protocol, or the niceties of state dinners – but the majority of the field moved on to apparently greener pastures long ago.²

Lately, however, there have been signs of a resurgence of interest in matters diplomatic. Some of this excitement has been seen in universities, but most of it has occurred in think-tanks, governments, and even in the diplomatic corps itself.³ Long thought in decline and relatively unimportant, diplomacy is now thought by some to be on the cusp of a transformation that will see its relevance to contemporary international politics restored.⁴

This change of mind is largely a response to events, especially to the widespread perception that America's image in the world is not what it should be, and that antipathy to the United States is affecting its ability to pursue a successful foreign policy. These concerns were magnified first by 9/11, which led many to ask why the perpetrators hated the United States in the way they did, and second by negative

² See especially R. Barston, *Modern Diplomacy* (London: Longman, 1988), Geoffrey Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice* 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), G. R. Berridge, Maurice Keens-Soper & T. G. Otte, *Diplomatic Classics from Machiavelli to Kissinger* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), and Keith Hamilton & Richard Langhorne, *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995).

³ A number of very active centres for diplomatic studies have recently emerged, among them the Clingendael Diplomatic Studies Programme, which publishes working papers as well as *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*. See their website at: <http://www.clingendael.nl/cdsp/>

⁴ See, for instance, Shaun Riordan, *The New Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002) or J. P. Singh, *Negotiation and the Global Information Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

reactions worldwide to what some have described as the creeping ‘militarization’ of American foreign policy and diplomacy.⁵ Together, these worries have driven a renewed interest within and outside the Bush Administration in what Joseph Nye famously termed ‘soft power’, at the centre of which must be sound and effective diplomacy.⁶ Despite the change of Presidents and some changes in the direction of US foreign policy, this growth of interest has shown few signs of abating. The significant ‘bounce’ produced in polls of foreign public attitudes to the United States by the election of Barack Obama has merely confirmed, for many, the potential of this new diplomacy, generating a further outpouring of enthusiastic studies of ‘soft power’ and its mechanisms.⁷

In quite different ways, the three books reviewed here are reflective of this change of mood, one that seems to promise that our world of ‘warrior politics’ can and will be transformed by a reinvigorated diplomacy fit for a new age.⁸ *Guerrilla Diplomacy* calls for diplomats to reinvent themselves to meet contemporary challenges, taking on a radically different, ‘insurgent’ persona to the rather staid and

⁵ George W. Bush asked ‘why do they hate us?’ in an address to Congress on 21 September 2001. On the militarization of US foreign policy, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶ The concept of ‘soft power’ has its origins in Joseph S. Nye’s *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, new ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), but is explored most fully in his *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

⁷ The ‘bounce’ is readily apparent in the surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project, available at: <http://pewglobal.org/>. On the hopes for Obama, see especially Nancy Snow, *Persuader-in-Chief: Global Opinion and Public Diplomacy in the Age of Obama* (Ann Arbor, MI: Nimble Books, 2009).

⁸ Robert Kaplan’s *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002) seems – at least to this observer – the representative work of the post-9/11 era.

old-fashioned one with which we are familiar. Snow and Taylor's *Handbook* explores some of the strategies and tactics that they think the new diplomat needs if they are effectively to 'sell' their nation's message. Lastly, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* asks us to recover and apply again some of what might be called the inherited wisdom – the 'mystery' – of past diplomatic practice. All three agree that diplomacy must be transformed if it is to survive; all three suggest that once transformed, diplomacy will prove a powerful agent for good in international affairs.

Reinvention

Diplomacy serves states in three useful ways: as a channel of communication between sovereigns, a means of negotiating agreements between them, and a source of information about what was happening in host states. Past scholars thought these activities so important that they called diplomacy the 'master-institution' of international politics.⁹ They also recognized that this institution was fragile. Dishonest or inept diplomats can disrupt channels of communication and generate great – and consequential – misunderstandings, while poor negotiators can undermine attempts to secure agreements even when states' interests align. The gathering of information can all too often shade into espionage, especially in the perceptions of host sovereigns, and spying can wreak lasting damage to the reputations of diplomats themselves and the states they are sent abroad to represent.

⁹ Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, revised ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 113. For a wider related discussion, see Paul Sharp & Geoffrey Wiseman (eds.), *The Diplomatic Corps as an Institution of International Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

Diplomacy, in other words, can play a very positive role in international relations, but if practiced badly it can also be a potential source of great instability and even conflict. This is because – in essence – diplomacy involves more than just bargaining, as is sometimes assumed.¹⁰ Rather, diplomacy is better understood as the ‘management of legitimacy’ and legitimacy is a difficult thing to build and maintain. Successful diplomacy renders difficult compromises between states acceptable to both parties: it helps to confer legitimacy on agreements that might not, at first glance, be palatable to sovereigns. Poor diplomacy, on the other hand, undermines the capacity of states to view any compromise as legitimate. Without legitimacy international agreements are hard to make and are often not kept, at least not for long; with legitimacy, states are arguably more easily bound to their commitments.¹¹

This task of managing legitimacy would be difficult enough in the absence of any other concerns, but diplomats must also contend with the fact that their own legitimacy, and that of their activities, is often in doubt. Diplomats must manage the suspicion of their host state and that of their own state, demonstrating their honesty, reliability and capacity to both. If they fail in the first, their host may choose to limit their dealings with a diplomat or even expel them, if they come to believe that they

¹⁰ On studies of bargaining and diplomacy, see Christer Jönsson, ‘Diplomacy, Bargaining and Negotiation’, in Walter Carlsnaes, Beth A. Simmons & Thomas Risse (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002), pp. 212-234.

¹¹ There is now an extensive literature on this subject. For a sample, see Ian Clark’s *Legitimacy in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Christopher Gelpi’s *The Power of Legitimacy: Assessing the Role of Norms in Crisis Bargaining* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

are engaging in activities that go beyond their proper remit.¹² If they fail in the second, they may be recalled, redeployed, or face even sterner punishments.

The ‘institution’ of diplomacy is, in other words, constantly subject to stress by the very nature of its construction and the fragility of its legitimacy. For most of the twentieth century that pressure was exacerbated by the spread of democracy, with its concomitant suspicion of elites, especially powerful and secretive ones like the diplomatic corps. The legitimacy of diplomacy itself thus became subject of almost constant scrutiny, leading to frequent calls for the reform of diplomacy to better fit the democratic age and to render it – ideally – more open, accountable and relevant.¹³ In reaction, for most of the past century, traditionalists have lamented the apparent ‘decline of diplomacy’ and gloomily predicted its imminent demise.¹⁴ At issue, for both the reformers and the traditionalists, is how the legitimacy of diplomacy ought to be measured – whether diplomatic practices ought to be appraised by how they conform to democratic norms or whether they should be judged by different standards.

¹² This was common practice in the Cold War, but it has not gone away, as the recent expulsion of the Australian High Commissioner and New Zealand’s highest ranking envoy from Fiji (4 November 2009) demonstrates.

¹³ For brief accounts of the diplomatic system in the twentieth century, see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 156-177 and Ian Hall, ‘Diplomacy, Anti-diplomacy and International Society’, in Richard Little & John Williams (eds.) *The Anarchical Society in a Globalized World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 141-161.

¹⁴ See, for example, Lord Vansittart, ‘The Decline of Diplomacy’, *Foreign Affairs* 28:2 (1950), pp. 177-188.

Daryl Copeland's *Guerrilla Diplomacy* stands in the long tradition of reformism. It is unapologetic in its commitment to open, accountable and relevant diplomacy, but it is no less valuable for that. A book of boundless enthusiasm for a new diplomatic service fit for what he calls the new 'diplomatic ecosystem', it blends the wisdom of long experience as a Canadian diplomat with extensive scholarly work.¹⁵

Copeland is motivated by three concerns. The first is a familiar one to students of the field: he is worried, as have been many others, that diplomacy is losing its relevance in the contemporary world and that its practitioners are pushed aside by soldiers and aid workers and other actors.¹⁶ 'Diplomats', he thinks, 'are languishing in the bleachers as the legions march by'.¹⁷ Copeland's second concern is what he terms 'human-centered development', which he thinks ought to be central to Western engagement with the global South. In essence, this is an extension of the 'human security' agenda Canada has pursued since the mid-1990s. His last concern is the promotion of the idea of the 'guerrilla diplomat', the agent of transformational change who can restore diplomacy to its true standing and promote the ends of peace, development and justice in the world.

¹⁵ Copeland, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, p. xiii. Copeland served in the Canadian diplomatic service from 1981 to 2009 and was posted to Thailand, Ethiopia, New Zealand and Malaysia. He has a personal website: www.guerrilladiplomacy.com.

¹⁶ This anxiety is also central to James Der Derian's *Antidiplomacy: Spies, Terror, Speed and War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

¹⁷ Copeland, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, p. 3.

Copeland's portrait of the guerrilla diplomat is a new twist on the old idea of the 'ideal ambassador' – another perennial concern of writers on diplomacy.¹⁸ The guerrilla diplomat needs, he argues, the attributes of the classic guerrilla: 'agility, adaptability, improvisation, self-sufficiency, and popular support'.¹⁹ He or she must be highly versed in the complexities of modern technology and in cultural particularities. Guerrilla diplomats must not, Copeland insists, be 'confined to organizational silos' or be permitted to 'drown' by being 'submerged under waves of bureaucracy'.²⁰ The ideal is a diplomatic Lawrence of Arabia, a political counter-insurgent rather than a militant insurgent, or even a district officer of the later British Empire, relying on their own wit and resources to administer those in their charge.²¹ The guerrilla diplomat is a 'high-functioning, street-smart, renaissance humanist with well-developed instincts, a Black-Berry, and, when necessary, a Kevlar vest'.²²

Copeland thinks this portrait of the guerrilla diplomat might be met with some harrumphing in foreign ministries, and well it might, but that is not the only reaction that it provokes. The picture he paints is a very familiar one to students of IR: it resembles the contemporary aid-worker or civil society activist, governance advisor or security consultant – individuals who may be working for states in an official capacity, but equally may be serving a non governmental or international organization. Recognizing this prompts a crucial question for Copeland's project: if

¹⁸ For one discussion of this topic, see Peter Calvocoressi, 'The Diplomat', *Political Quarterly* 28:4 (1957), 352-361.

¹⁹ Copeland, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, p. 207.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210 & p. 230.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 259.

‘guerrilla humanitarians’, ‘guerrilla activists’ and ‘guerrilla consultants’ already exist outside states’ diplomatic services, what need do we have for ‘guerrilla diplomats’?

Indeed, one could argue that Copeland’s ends are better served by these non-diplomatic means than by the reinvention of diplomacy. One could even go further and suggest that making diplomats more like aid-workers and security consultants might be positively detrimental to Western states. Quite possibly, a transformation of diplomacy along Copeland’s lines could damage the basic norms of inter-state relations – and recent history provides a number of indications that this is far more likely than he permits.

The central premise of *Guerrilla Diplomacy* is that ‘human-centered development’ is the best response to the contemporary challenges of globalization.²³ The international system, Copeland thinks, is splintering into different worlds: an ‘A-world’ of ‘advancing’ political and economic advantage; a C-world that is partly developed, but precariously and only ‘contingently’ so; a T-world of dependent peoples; and finally an E-world of the wholly excluded.²⁴ This splintered world is still interdependent, in the sense that ‘persistent insecurity’ in one can affect the others, but without just and peaceful efforts at developing the worst-off, the process of fragmentation will continue.²⁵

The problem here is even if this account is valid – which is not to say that it isn’t – it is by no means clear that the ‘guerrilla diplomats’ are the best response. For all Copeland’s thinking-outside-of-the-box there is something restrictively statist about his argument. It may simply be the case, I suggest, that states and state agents

²³ Ibid., 3.

²⁴ Ibid., 66.

²⁵ Ibid., 75-90.

are not the best responses to the challenges he outlines. Aid may be better delivered – and certainly better distributed – by non-governmental organizations; economic development may be better promoted by small-scale civil society groups, working with or without international agencies or institutions. Research and development of scientific and technical capabilities to address global problems – a key area of Copeland’s concern – might be better done by charitable foundations, universities, or even corporations. Above all, transforming diplomats into ‘guerrillas’ in order to reclaim these roles from other actors risks depriving states of a tool whose legitimacy depends to some degree on not pursuing the kinds of political agendas Copeland favours. I will return to this point in a moment.

Repackaging

Even if the ‘guerrilla diplomat’ is not the answer, many scholars and practitioners agree that diplomats could learn much from the worlds of business and especially public relations. This particularly true in the case of ‘public diplomacy’ – the practice of states speaking to foreign publics to influence opinion rather than just to foreign officials – where great efforts have recently been made to learn new strategies and techniques from outside governments.²⁶ The thirty-two contributors to *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* do stint in their enthusiasm for these initiatives and the transformative power they hold public diplomacy to have. None of this should come as a surprise to those with even the faintest acquaintance with the

²⁶ The classic example of such efforts was the ill-fated hiring of Charlotte Beers, a former advertising executive, to be the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in the Bush Administration in the aftermath of 9/11.

field: the book is the product of one of the most energetic centres for the study and advocacy of public diplomacy, situated at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication.²⁷ One quarter of the contributors have some formal relationship to the Center, either as faculty members, adjuncts or former students.

Overall, the *Handbook's* authors are an intriguing mix of academics, officials and free-lancers – Copeland's diverse diplomatic ecosystem in microcosm. Eight are former or current 'public diplomats'; five are consultants or professional public relations or advertising experts. Two contributors are former soldiers and former practitioners of information warfare or psychological operations. These interlopers do not quite amount to 'legions marching by' the orthodox diplomats, but they do show the extent to which other players are already at work in the diplomatic game.

The *Handbook's* twenty nine essays are predictably varied in subject-matter, though overwhelmingly American in provenance and concern. The editors provide two very useful, if brief, introductory essays that define public diplomacy, introduce the literature and relate it to other relevant fields. The rest of the book is split into six parts, looking at the contexts of public diplomacy, its applications, its management, the roles of state and non-state actors, non-American (British, German, Japanese, Chinese, Central and Eastern European, and Australian) approaches, and the future of the academic field that studies it.

²⁷ The Center for Public Diplomacy's website, which contains one of the more extensive collection of materials on the subject on the internet, is at: <http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/>. The other major institution in the United States is the Edward R. Murrow Center in the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University (see <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/murrow/>).

The various contributors are, on the whole, enthusiasts for public diplomacy in both its traditional and more innovative forms.²⁸ If properly practiced, they argue that public diplomacy offers a powerful way not only of bolstering America's reputation in the world, but making international relations somehow better. Elite exchange programmes, Giles Scott-Smith maintains, can change the perceptions of future leaders in positive ways; cultural and arts exchanges can have similar effects in target countries. Newer modes of public diplomacy – nation-branding, for example, or policy-networking – can bolster these efforts, as can the mastery of older tricks of propaganda and information warfare. The core of the *Handbook* analyses these techniques in some detail, with practitioners like Sherry Mueller reflecting on exactly what works and what doesn't in citizen diplomacy and scholars like Anthony Pratkanis drawing upon sociological theories to build models of how 'social influence' occurs in international conflicts.

A *Handbook* ought to speak primarily to specialists and keep them abreast of the latest developments in the field. This volume does both well. What is lacking, though, is context, and when it comes to something as potential revolutionary – even potentially subversive – as public diplomacy, context matters a great deal.

Public diplomacy operates in a legal and normative grey-area. It stands in potential, if perhaps not actual, contradiction to aspects of the normative structure of the modern international system, the basic rules of which are enshrined in the United Nations Charter, but is actively encouraged by others. The Charter commits states to non-intervention in the affair of others, or, at the very least commits them not to use force or the threat of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of

²⁸ There are occasional exceptions to this rule, not least Michael Vlahos, who argues that American public diplomacy in the GWOT has aided the loss of its 'world authority' rather than prevented it.

any state (Art. 2:4), and prohibits the UN itself from intervening in matters reserved to the domestic jurisdiction of states (2:7) – barring, of course, circumstances covered in Chapter VII. These norms might be taken to imply that public diplomacy ought not to be practiced, but – somewhat paradoxically – other parts of the UN system were deliberately designed to it. Educational, cultural and scientific exchanges across borders are thus promoted especially by UNESCO and state-to-state contacts are also encouraged.²⁹ The 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations is no further guidance on this issue, merely stating that building friendly relations between states (note: not peoples), as well as educational, cultural and scientific exchanges, are one of the purposes of resident missions (Art 3:1(e)).

No clearer picture of the acceptability and legitimacy of public diplomacy are indicated by state practice. During the Cold War both sides used various modes of public diplomacy to influence each others' public opinion and to sway third parties, but both took measures too to block the others' efforts. The jamming of radio stations like the Voice of America illustrated this well, as did mutual condemnations of public diplomacy initiatives as propaganda or even subversion.³⁰ Nor are contemporary public diplomacy efforts immune from public or state suspicion, as recent discussions over the spread and the purpose of China's Confucius Institutes demonstrates.³¹

²⁹ UNESCO's mission is described on its webpage, at: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=3328&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

³⁰ On Cold War public diplomacy, see especially Jarol B. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³¹ See the report by Oxford Analytica, 'China's Language Diplomacy', reprinted in *Forbes online*, 25 July 2006, at: http://www.forbes.com/2006/07/24/confucius-diplomacy-china-cx_np_0725oxford.html

The problem here arguably lies in the very nature of public diplomacy. It consists of interference within the borders of other states – it aims at influencing the public opinion of foreign publics, sometimes against the declared views of their leaders. Public diplomacy might often be benign and well-intentioned, fostering dialogue and understanding, but it might equally be malign and ill-meant, and in international relations we lack both agreement on which is which, and rules to regulate its practitioners.

The *Handbook* authors repeatedly note that public diplomacy is about building legitimacy, to promote positive views of a state and of its particular policies, but rarely do they question whether public diplomacy is itself a legitimate activity. Rather, its practice – at least by Western states – is justified in the same way as Copeland justifies his diplomatic insurgency: by appealing to the good intentions that drive their agendas.³² The question is whether good intentions are enough to bring about the global transformations Copeland and the public diplomats desire, or whether, as the last book reviewed here suggests, a return to more traditional values in diplomacy might realise them more successfully.

Recovery

For Paul Sharp, the problem is not how diplomacy should adapt to the contemporary world, as it is for Copeland and *Handbook* authors, but how it should recover and reclaim some of its old magic. His *Diplomatic Theory* is an effort to

³² For the best dissection of his kind of moral reasoning and its place in the contemporary world, see David Runciman, *The Politics of Good Intentions: History, Fear and Hypocrisy in the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

derive from the history of diplomatic practice and principle a normative philosophy of international relations. He wishes, indeed, to demystify diplomacy's mysteries and thus to show how 'the distinctive ordering of familiar understandings, values and priorities that is particular to diplomacy as a social practice'.³³ These, Sharp thinks, can give us guidance for the contemporary world.

Diplomatic Theory proceeds in four parts. The first delineates three diplomatic traditions, akin to Martin Wight's three traditions of international theory, of radicalism, rationalism, and realism.³⁴ From these, Sharp distils what he calls a 'diplomatic tradition' – mainly drawn from 'rationalism' – and the next two sections examine its underlying theory and its practical aspects. This central part of the book draws heavily on the earlier work of Adam Watson, though less his *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (1982) than his later work, especially *The Evolution of International Society* (1992).³⁵ Sharp explores, in particular, how diplomacy operates in historical periods where international societies integrate and disintegrate, expand and contract, and concentrate and diffuse. In the final part, he turns to four kinds of contemporary diplomacy and the means by which they have been, and can be, addressed: the diplomacies of 'rogue states', 'greedy companies', 'crazy religions', as well as 'dumb public diplomacy'.

Sharp conceives of his book as an extension of the prior work done on diplomacy by the 'English school of international relations', which has devoted more

³³ Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory*, 4.

³⁴ For Wight's treatment of this subject, see his *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, ed. Brian Porter & Gabrielle Wight (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1991).

³⁵ Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981) and *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992).

attention to the theory and practice of diplomacy than the adherents of any other theoretical approach.³⁶ Unlike much recent work in that tradition, however, which has found the founding members of the school too conservative for their critical-theoretical tastes, Sharp adopts the school's original philosophical position as well as its working methods. For him, diplomacy can be a 'civilizing' force and no apology is due for using such terms. More importantly, diplomacy is conceived as an expression of a humane and liberal politics; indeed, 'nothing less than reason made manifest on the international stage'.³⁷

Diplomats, Sharp argues, 'see the world differently and with different priorities from those they represent'.³⁸ For much of the twentieth century, this has been thought a serious problem, either by democrats who see diplomats as elitist distorters of the expression of 'general will' in foreign policy, or by realists who mistrust the ignorance and capriciousness of the masses.³⁹ Sharp gets around this problem by conceiving of diplomats not as mere public servants, but as messengers, mediators, even 'objective articulators' of 'different worlds'.⁴⁰

To some, this might seem unduly metaphysical, especially if one thinks of ordinary everyday diplomats, who seem to lead far less dramatic existences than the ones Sharp describes.⁴¹ Beyond the style, however, there lurks a further problem.

³⁶ For a discussion, see Hall, 'Diplomacy, Anti-diplomacy and International Society'.

³⁷ Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory*, p. 38.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁹ For an early discussion of these problems, see Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939).

⁴⁰ Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory*, pp. 101-105.

⁴¹ It should be noted that Sharp is not the only author to portray diplomacy in this way – he builds, indeed, on the earlier work of James Der Derian (especially his *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of*

Sharp's message is that diplomacy can teach us lessons. He locates three in particular: first, that we ought in our international relations to suspend judgement until it is right and proper to apply it; second, that we should always be ready to appease; and third, that we ought on principle to suspect universalist claims.⁴²

This may or may not be sensible advice, but *Diplomatic Theory* does not provide quite enough of an argument to support it. Indeed, Sharp leaves himself wide open to the Humean charge of deriving his 'ought' from his 'is'. If there was clear evidence that our present system of international relations was the best of all possible worlds, and, more specifically, was the product of the application of the diplomatic wisdom Sharp favours, then the normative argument he wishes to make could perhaps be made. But that proposition is not at all clear and many would argue the world we have is nowhere near as good as the worlds we could have.

Conclusion

Like much English school writing, *Diplomatic Theory* has a 'flattening' effect on history, ironing out the differences between past ages, peoples and things, and conveying the impression that nothing much has changed since the Greeks and nothing much will in the future.⁴³ It offers, as a result, as stark contrast to the

Western Estrangement (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) and Iver B. Neumann (especially 'To Be a Diplomat', *International Studies Perspectives* 6:1 (2005), pp. 75-93).

⁴² Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory*, p. 296.

⁴³ This was one of the principal criticisms made by Roy Jones in the article that gave the school its name ('The English school of international relations: a case for closure', *Review of International Studies* 7:1 (1981), pp. 1-13) and Michael Nicholson ('The enigma of Martin Wight', *Review of International Studies* 7:1 (1981), pp. 15-22).

prevailing tenor of writing in the field, the bulk of which emphasizes novelty and change. For most scholars of diplomacy, like Copeland or the *Handbook* authors, the system that we have inherited is being radically transformed, as traditional diplomacy vies with ‘guerrilla diplomacy’ and ‘celebrity diplomacy’, ‘antidiplomacy’ and ‘noopolitik’.⁴⁴ There are, I have suggested, reasons to temper the excessive enthusiasms of some proponents of new diplomatic practices, but there are, too, good reasons to think that diplomacy is changing fast and that matters more in international relations than international theorists often suspect.

The real challenge to diplomacy may not lie in the conservatism of the diplomatic establishment, as Copeland thinks, in mastering the techniques of public diplomacy, nor in our collective amnesia about past practices and principles. The danger is that all of these drive the diplomatic system beyond the limits of its legitimacy. Insurgency and public relations can be utilised for ill as well as good; guerrilla or public diplomats with bad intentions might well have similarly dramatic effects as those envisaged by those with good ones. We lack in the contemporary international system any kind of agreement as to why, when and how we ought to speak to foreign publics and try to shape their views. Without that, the guerrilla risks being treated as a saboteur and the public diplomat as a propagandist.

The great virtue of Sharp’s *Diplomatic Theory* is that it offers a reminder that diplomacy was designed and is sustained as a means of addressing the problems inherent in the relations between polities with different accounts of the ‘good life’ rather than an instrument for promoting our own account to others. The claim of

⁴⁴ See Andrew F. Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy* (Boulder, CO. & London: Paradigm, 2008) and John Arquilla & David Ronfeldt, *The Emergence of Noopolitik: Toward an American Information Strategy* (Santa Monica, CA.: RAND, 1999), as well as Der Derian’s *Antidiplomacy*.

diplomats to play this role is, as I have argued, somewhat fragile: the legitimate 'rights', as it were, of diplomats are not unlimited and they are often themselves subject to renegotiation. Stronger, better, even transformed diplomacy, and the replacement of 'hard power' by 'soft' are welcome, but not at the cost of undermining the legitimacy of very system that allows diplomacy to be practiced.