For Diplomacy: Representation and the Study of International Relations

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I want to make an argument for why more international relations scholars should be studying diplomacy more often. It is odd that we do not for, in Raymond Cohen’s phrase, diplomacy remains the “engine room” of international relations, as both the site of most of the actual relations we study and as the immediate motive force of their being undertaken. We see this in the world of international relations practice; witness the “diplomatic inflation” that has occurred since the end of the Cold War. More states and new actors have required more representation and even the resident embassy has prospered. We also see it in the world of international relations theory for, as I argue here, diplomacy is a discrete human practice constituted by the explicit construction, representation, negotiation, and manipulation of necessarily ambiguous identities. As such, it provides powerful metaphors not only for understanding what the professional diplomats do, but also for understanding international relations in general. In sparse or thin social contexts, where even the basic terms of what

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4For a development of this theme, see Costas Constantinou, On the Way to Diplomacy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Indeed, he suggests that diplomacy offers powerful metaphors for understanding social life in general.
is going on may be contested, people behave diplomatically, at least as long as they wish to continue conducting relations with one another.

Therefore we might think that students of international relations would pay a great deal of attention to diplomacy, but they do not. The study of diplomacy remains marginal to and almost disconnected from the rest of the field.

It may be objected that this is unfair. Bargaining and negotiation, as a glance at recent issues of *International Studies Quarterly (ISQ)* and the *Review of International Studies (RIS)* reveals, remain hot topics and appear to offer promising meeting points between international relations and international political economy. One article in *ISQ*, for example, demonstrates how a small, open, postcommunist state has been able to exploit changes in its international environment to strengthen its bargaining position with the multinational corporations with which it must work if it is to develop its car industry. Another models the dialogue between the Soviet Union and the United States over intermediate nuclear forces in the 1980s. It concludes that agreement was eventually possible because of changes in the way the Soviet Union reconceptionalized its strategic environment, rather than as the result of the American deployment of cruise and Pershing missiles. A similar conclusion is drawn in an article in a recent issue of *RIS* that argued from a “graduated reciprocation in tension reduction (GRIT)” perspective and credited Gorbachev with taking the first and decisive step toward ending the Cold War.5

Certainly, we learn a great deal from these articles about the impact of structural contexts and technical developments upon bargaining. We also learn about ways to conceptualize strategic interaction, behavior, and discourse within negotiations. Yet, in all of them, unproblematic and unproblematized entities play out their games in ways that admit little attention to diplomats and diplomacy.6 The same is true of the current big books on international relations, indexes of which omit the term “diplomacy.” The better textbooks contain dutiful chapters that take the reader from the Renaissance to Rio, but they are usually self-contained affairs, not part of the main argument. Diplomacy is presented as one of the “lesser tools of foreign policy,”7 a medium for communicating the use of other tools. It is also presented as an instrument in its own right.


6I am grateful to my reviewers for insisting that this point be made more explicit.

We tell our first-year students that most international relations consist of diplomacy in this sense. As the course proceeds, most of them are invariably left wondering where diplomacy belongs in the framework for analysis. If it is a policy tool in its own right, then what could “pure” diplomacy be, apart from the communication of threats, promises, and rewards? If it is merely a way of communicating the use of other tools, then how can it be so central to the whole ensemble of international relations?

This confusion over diplomacy is unfortunate, for it constitutes a barrier to the conceptual coherence that our international relations/international studies (IR/IS) field requires if it is to improve its understandings of international relations practice. It is now more than a decade since Kalevi Holsti made his observations on the “dividing discipline,” and Michael Banks, in what now seems like a fit of unwarranted optimism, attempted to identify successive “waves” of progress or, at least, development in international relations theory.\(^8\) What has happened since is an ironic, as well as a perverse validation of our enterprise. Interdependence theorists have continued to cluster in small groupuscules capable of conducting intense internal debates, but having little to say to one another.

The great transboundary discussions, insofar as there are any, seem to be between those who prefer a thousand schools of thought to contend in a democratic and emancipating project, and those who emphasize studying international relations a certain way, or giving it up for something else like IPE, critical social psychology, or even diplomatic history. It has become hard to imagine what a centered IR/IS would look like amid the fragmentation. Those who still hope for a better dialogue are like hosts at failing salons trying to revive the conversation. Often they resort to procedural devices at academic conferences. They offer incentives for the joint sponsorship of panels by subfield sections or call for more plenary sessions, and some even wonder out loud if things would go better if fewer people were invited. Although they are separate from one another, these groups share three things: their members are all unsure that there is anything distinctive about international relations—virtually everything in it is treated as an instance of something else; they find the members of other groups “uninteresting”; and, sadly, the rest of the world finds them all uninteresting, as anyone of us who has attempted to give an honest answer to the question, “So what exactly is it that you do?” has found out.\(^9\)


A revival of interest in the study of diplomacy would do much to address each of these problems. First, it would provide a site from which practitioners of international relations could respond to academics and remind them of what is distinctive about the discipline. It also would provide a perspective on what happens and why nearly everyone in the field can engage international relations, although it is not acceptable to everyone. And finally, the discourse about diplomacy could engage the interest and expectations of the public at large, and make a considerable contribution to reviving a general interest in the academic study of international relations.

This is long overdue, for international relations are widely seen to have become interesting again, and for numerous reasons. Most obvious, we may point to the end of the Cold War. More important, we may point to the broader attitudinal changes that robbed that "great contest" of its ideological life force, even though most of the concrete manifestations or symptoms of the conflict remained in place. Right or wrong, the impression exists that everything, as far as making sense of international relations is concerned, is up for grabs. Yet none of the scripts—new or old, radical or conservative—seems to capture an apparent new world of uncertain identities performing both in and out of character, yet that still resonates with the characters, plots, and arguments that Martin Wight called "the same old melodrama."10

The study of diplomacy offers a way out of this fix, but not by claiming to provide the definitive factual or prescriptive capture of the current interplay of social forces in world affairs, nor even by offering a freeze-frame in which to analyze the claims of other candidates in contention for capturing class, state, nation, gender, organization, or civilization. It does so by focusing on how relations are maintained between identities that are continuously under construction in conditions that, if not anarchic, are characterized by very thin social contexts. Ideological absolutes, Garrett Mattingly argued, drive diplomacy from the field. In their absence, diplomacy is returning.11 Indeed, as the Cold War and our sense of living in modernity recede, the extent to which hegemony is a departure from a norm in which living with difference was the highest aspiration is becoming increasingly clear. It is time, I argue, for IR/IS to catch up with international relations and to begin to focus again on how life in a world of differences is sustained by diplomacy. I do so by examining successively attempts to define diplomacy—public, professional, and academic conceptions of diplomacy and its significance; and the present state of diplomatic studies—before offering themes for a research agenda based on seeing diplomacy primarily in terms of representation.

THE IDEAS OF DIPLOMACY: FROM HEGEMONY TO ISOLATION

Diplomacy is one of those terms that is best approached through a consideration of its usages, rather than by an attempt to assert or capture a precise, fixed, or authoritative meaning. The word is derived from the Greek diploma, meaning a folded document, and is linked to the study of official handwriting and the idea of credentials confirming the claims of the bearer. A preoccupation with authenticity and, hence, authority appears to have been present at the etymological creation of the term, and it would seem interesting that the study of a sort of official handwriting, archives, also constitutes the greater part of the method of the diplomatic historian. We may even have fun with the notion of the folded diploma that both reveals and hides, thereby underscoring the ambiguity at the heart of the practice. Upon reflection, these links become obvious and unrevealing, and it is more helpful and interesting to pass on to recent usages and attempts to capture or define the term.

It is customary to distinguish between broad and narrow conceptions of diplomacy. In the United States, especially, diplomacy is often used as a synonym for statecraft, foreign policy, and international relations in general. James Baker’s memoirs, The Politics of Diplomacy, and Henry Kissinger’s Diplomacy provide examples of this broad conception. Kissinger and his publishers “pay tribute” to the earlier and famous book by Harold Nicolson with the same title, but hasten to assure the reader that it “was quite different in scope, intentions and ideas” (p. 8). Kissinger is interested in providing his view of the broad themes of statecraft and international history, whereas Nicolson was interested in the practices of professional diplomacy. The distinction between broad and narrow conceptions of diplomacy is problematic. Although Nicolson’s book was written with the young man considering a career at the Foreign Office in mind, he regards the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of diplomacy, which he uses as implying a broad conception of the practice. He does so because his book has little to say about the narrow concerns of diplomatic practice and a great deal to say about the conduct of international relations in general, albeit as seen from


14 In Nicolson, Diplomacy, pp. 4–5, the Oxford English Dictionary defines diplomacy as “the management of international relations by negotiation; the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys; the business or art of the diplomatist.”
a distinctive perspective. We might even argue that if IR/IS is about the broad patterns of what typically happens in international relations, then Nicolson’s Diplomacy has a stronger claim than Kissinger’s to belonging in its pantheon of classics, for it deals with how people engaged in international relations behave and how they ought to behave.

The problems with the conventional distinction between broad and narrow conceptions of diplomacy are illustrated by a controversy that arose over the publication of the second volume in Gordon Craig’s work on diplomacy in 1994.15 The first volume covers the period in primarily European diplomatic history between 1919 and 1939, whereas the second takes us up to the 1970s. In a review of the second volume, the scholar-diplomat Smith Simpson maintained that, unlike the first, it is not properly about diplomacy.16 Rather than focusing on the foreign services, foreign ministers, and ambassadors of the period, it offered a series of essays on political leadership and the big questions of World War II and Cold War foreign policy. For Simpson, it was a matter for regret as there was no scarcity of such analyses, whereas the role and importance of diplomacy proper in such matters remain underinvestigated and poorly understood. Diplomats, Simpson argued, make international life possible in much the same way as “free-floating infinitesimal aquatic plants known as phytoplankton” are responsible for a quarter of the oxygen we breath. It is the activities of diplomats and consular officers around the world that “day in and day out, indeed hour in and hour out, get much of the world’s affairs rationality attended to.”17

It may be seen that Smith’s response was not just a call for more attention to a neglected subfield in international relations. It also involved a conception of what is important to understanding how the world of international relations works. As such, it enjoyed little success in either Smith’s own attempts to defend his conception of what aspiring diplomats ought to be learning or in the IR/IS academic community at large. Many of the reasons for this lay beyond the control of the diplomats and their advocates. As Costas Constantinou notes, Nicolson’s writings on diplomacy and other examples of the genre of which it is a part are striking in their attempt to define authoritatively what true diplomacy is and what it is not. It is not, for example, foreign policy, nor is it usually practiced by anyone other than the officially accredited representatives of sovereign states and international organizations. Within the narrow conception of diplomacy, political leaders may determine the goal of policy and the broad means by which


17Ibid., p. 758.
it might be achieved, but they should do so on the advice of the professional diplomats to whom they should also leave most of the execution of policy by negotiation.

The content of formulations such as these is not nearly so definitive as the tone in which they are delivered. The division of labor between political leaders and diplomats offered above, for example, can be interpreted to suggest that the leaders’ role is restricted to nodding their heads or signing at the appropriate moment, or that diplomats have nothing to do with policy choices; they merely advise and execute. Neither is usually the case. This being so, it is the tone that is of interest. Why did writers like Nicolson need to sound as if they were capturing authoritatively what diplomacy was, and with what consequences? The simple answers are that this was the predominant rhetorical style for making an argument, or that people like Nicolson believed that the true identity or essence of a practice could be established by linguistic precision. The latter is plausible, for accompanying the authoritative tone in Nicolson’s work is a confidence in the progressive character of the evolution of the state system and its institutions. In all but his later writings, we are constantly invited to witness the emergence and evolution of the diplomatic system and method into what they have now become.18

It is also possible to ascribe the authoritative tone to the defense of professional turf by a former practitioner using his old skills. In conditions of uneasy ambiguity, act confidently and with certainty and you may succeed. After all, Nicolson was writing in the aftermath of one great catastrophe, World War I, which, rightly or wrongly, had been attributed to a failure of diplomacy, and in the face of another where, once again, diplomacy and the discredited, appeasement with which it was associated were both under pressure. At more or less the same time, Jules Cambon, a former colleague, was speculating on the future of diplomacy. Fifty years ahead of his time, Cambon suspected that what might survive would be a kind of “diplomacy without diplomats.”19

There is some merit to the claim that diplomacy has always been presented as a “profession in peril,”20 by its protagonists as well as by its enemies. I suspect that Nicolson and others like him adopted the tone they did because they had confidence in what they were saying, rather than doubts about the profession. Nevertheless, unforeseen and unfortunate consequences followed as diplomacy

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18 For an assessment of the Cold War’s impact on the evolution of diplomacy, see, for example, Nicolson, “Diplomacy Then and Now,” Foreign Affairs 40, No. 1 (1961): pp. 39–49.
20 “Diplomacy: Profession in Peril?” was the title of a conference sponsored by the British Foreign Office at its center at Wilton Park in July 1997.
came under pressure from subsequent political, social, and technical developments. Although it may have prospered in quantitative terms, the need for diplomacy was assailed in the mass media and by students and practitioners of diplomacy alike.\textsuperscript{21} Who needed diplomacy in the narrow sense when there were telephones, televisions, and now the World Wide Web? And what did diplomacy in the broad sense mean beyond international relations in general, with some echoes of polite obscurantism and calculating self-interest? To questions such as these, the maintenance of the authoritative and exclusionary approach of asserting what is and is not diplomacy by many of its supporters hampered an effective response. As a consequence, not only did diplomacy as a profession in the narrow sense suffer, but, so too did the ideas of diplomacy as a broader social practice. In the way they asserted modern diplomacy’s hegemony over the conduct of international relations and the determination of what is important to them, diplomats and their advocates contributed to its apparent isolation. And they did so without improving on the notion that diplomacy was both a small and a big matter in the general scheme of things in international relations.

\textbf{Attitudes Toward Diplomacy: Publics, Practitioners, and Academics}

This ambiguity regarding the significance of diplomacy is present in the attitudes of publics, practitioners, and academics. Nearly everyone will agree with the propositions that diplomacy is, in some sense, in decline and not as important as it used to be, and yet most of them will agree that it remains very important. Among general publics, a well-developed image exists of a privileged elite pursuing exciting and prestigious careers, without paying parking tickets, and with varying degrees of effectiveness. This image is fed by legislative inquiries into government “waste,” which, in turn are fed by media exposés of the cost of diplomatic establishments and the activities they entail. Among the attentive public, the whole is completed by a series of character types from literature: greedy and incompetent political appointees like “Lucky” Lou Seers; poor Charlie Fortnum clinging to his honorary consulship so he can continue to import duty-free cars and sell them; the cold and arrogant professionals of his service who will barely raise a finger to save him from his captors; and lightweights like Antrobus and his bizarre colleagues floating

\textsuperscript{21}For an “outsider’s” doubts about the profession expressed from the “inside,” see, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith, \textit{Ambassador’s Journal: A Personal Account of the Kennedy Years} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969). In fairness to Galbraith, he regarded his ambassadorship to India as very much a consolation prize, and it is possible to chart a softening of his hard position on even the value of representation in the narrow sense in his account of his career.
down the Sava.\textsuperscript{22} It takes a bomb, assassination, or kidnapping to disrupt this image, although the effects of such episodes are only temporary. Diplomacy is generally regarded as “nice work if you can get it” by most people, but it is also assumed to be important work. Insofar as they think about international relations, most people assume that it is still the professional diplomats who do most of it, even if they differ on whether or not they do a good job.

Most professional diplomats would seem to agree with this assessment, although, like professors of international relations, they have their moments of existential despair.\textsuperscript{23} This sense of the importance of what they do is manifested in attitudes that range between the unreflective and what may best be termed, “defensive self-confidence.” To interested academics and legislative committees on foreign affairs, they profess to accept the need to justify continually their raison d’être, and they tend to do so in terms from which the aura of a “professional mystique,” as one officer expressed it at a recent conference, has been stripped. They are merely civil servants whose work happens to cross international boundaries. In discussing their work, diplomats make a seamless transition (some unconsciously) from a defense in terms of its ordinary character to a defense in terms of its special character and the special qualities that it demands of them. This is done almost entirely in terms of their being repositories of scarce and valuable skills,\textsuperscript{24} rather than on the basis of who or what they represent in terms of what they do rather than who they are.

Facility with languages and familiarity with cultures are the assets most frequently cited, although it is freely conceded that the former is too often honored in the breach than in the observance. Their social skills and contacts are also stressed, and some diplomats are clearly comfortable with the concepts and terminology of management and administrative sciences, talking of their roles as agenda setters, issue raisers, coalition builders, regime or order builders, and catalysts of collective action generally within the capitals and countries to which


\textsuperscript{23} One of my sources, an academic who trains diplomats, maintains that the sense of existential despair is far more pronounced than I am suggesting. Mid-career diplomats in particular, he maintains, experience a great deal of difficulty in coming to grips with not only contemporary international relations but also the terms in which they are discussed by politicians, attentive publics, experts, and academics.

they are accredited. In short, diplomats like to see themselves as generalists, although this term is presently out of fashion among them, and they prefer to present themselves as experts in several areas. For example, the basic science that informs a concern for the environment, according to one former senior British diplomat, is simply not that difficult for an intelligent and well-educated person to master.

This claim to multiple expertises may be given some plausibility by lowering our expectations about what it means to possess a good general education, but the real difficulty with the repository-of-skills rationale for their existence is that diplomats seem to exercise a monopoly over none of the ones that are usually mentioned. As a senior budget officer of a great power said at the aforementioned conference on diplomacy, all of them could be outsourced to private organizations at great saving to the public purse. Diplomats seem to have few answers to this line of attack. Indeed, in a strange reaffirmation of their allegedly former preoccupation with high politics, some diplomats greet the outsourcing of certain kinds of commercial work to private agents, and even nationals of the receiving state or a third party, with considerable equanimity, placing a reserve only on what they continue to term “political work.” In so doing, they would seem to fly in the face of several of the received academic wisdoms of the last half century regarding the erosion of the distinction between the political and the economic, the elevation of what was once low politics into high politics, and the relegation of what was once high politics to a last instance that borders on the operationally irrelevant.

They do so with great confidence, for if diplomats are on the defensive, they are so in a context characterized by the ubiquitous need for more diplomats, or at least more diplomacy. The diplomatic system has continued to expand in recent years. The republics of the former Soviet Union and the former republics of Yugoslavia all established their own foreign services and diplomatic networks. All the postcommunist states sought to transform, rather than truncate, theirs. Nationalist movements, like the Palestinian Authority, continue to believe that securing diplomatic recognition in many ways precedes achieving political independence and goes a long way to constituting it, while newer aspirants, like humanitarian and environmental organizations, play parts that transcend their “functional” origins. Diplomats are confident because the demand for whatever it is they do seems inexhaustible.


26As one of them expressed it to me, “If diplomacy is in decline, then why am I so busy?”
The continuing demand for diplomats stumps the academics. A recent exchange in *International Security* between proponents of “diplomatic history” and “international relations theory” contained some of the best and worst hits that historians and social scientists are capable of landing on one another, nicely bundled with phrases about mutual respect and complementarity. Significantly, no author actually discussed diplomacy. Its place as a theoretical and methodological firing line was merely implied by the silence on both sides. In contrast, there is nothing implied about the status of diplomacy in the second exchange that I wish to cite here. This excerpt is from a paper presented at a conference held in honor of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Department of International Politics at the University of Wales, the first such department to be established in the world. In it, the author maintained that students would learn more about international relations from studying “the bones of the earliest humans in the Rift Valley of Africa than from studying the sanitized entrails of governments in public record offices.” It is unlikely, he continued, that we would learn “through archival mining any more about the character of intergovernmental relations than we know already.” According to the author, unless IR adopted a more global perspective, it was doomed to become “a diplomatic history backwater.”

The *International Security* exchange recalls an old and dated bifurcation in the way IR used to be authoritatively presented. On the one side are a declining group that tenaciously clings to stories about states and those who act for them as a badge of its grounding in common sense. On the other side are the swelling ranks who regard this position as heresy by those who refuse to face facts. Neither camp finds it easy to take the other seriously. They prefer to leave each other alone, for contacts usually take the form of the occasional shell lobbed across the cease-fire line, and occasional shells can always lead to barrages or worse.

The comments from the conference in Wales suggest more, for they are fed by two different and possibly conflicting sentiments: one that diplomacy is “old hat” and the other that it is also “bad hat.” Diplomacy is said to be bad hat in the sense that it serves a system of power relations, while those who study it on its own terms help to obscure the oppressive character of these relations.

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is said to be “old hat,” not in the sense that it is morally bankrupt, and either cannot or will not solve important human problems, but in the sense that either the practice of international relations or the theory of IR/IS has developed far beyond it. We may still identify the formal diplomatic system as an institution of international society, but it is no longer possible to regard it as “the master-institution” for international relations now flow above, below, around, through, and in spite of diplomacy.

This is presented as a temporal argument. Diplomacy may once have been very important, but it is on the road to becoming unimportant. Unclear is where we presently are on the continuum. This is important for the “bad hat” approach in that, if marginalized practices deserve less scholarship, then we might expect marginalized wickedness to attract less judgment and condemnation. It is important for the “old hat” approach in that we have little idea how much attention we should be paying to the newer forms of interaction between old and new actors. To what extent is attention to “track two” and “field” diplomacy in the former republics of Yugoslavia fueled by a judgment about the alleged shortcomings of “traditional” diplomacy, as opposed to an assessment of the capacity of newer forms to shape what actually happens there? By refusing to reflect on where we are on the continuum, it is possible to maintain a general disposition against diplomacy. Until recently, we have been able to acknowledge the paradoxes of presenting it as a minor instrument of foreign policy while acknowledging that it is everywhere, and anticipating its decline while witnessing its expansion, without feeling any compelling need to explain, let alone resolve, them.

Very little on diplomacy appears in International Studies Quarterly and nothing is considered by Diplomatic History that is not based on archival research. Of the major journals, only in Review of International Studies do we find articles on diplomacy, their position being somewhat analogous to the political theory articles that the American Political Science Review feels obligated to publish.

**Diplomatic Studies**

Consequently, individuals interested in the study of diplomacy have resided, until recently, on the periphery of what might be termed “mainstream” IR/IS. To be fair, it must be added that this marginalization has suited many of them. Some students of diplomacy have continued to adhere to the notion that theirs is an esoteric business, even if those whom they study profess to have relinquished the idea. Nevertheless, a rich body of work has emerged on the margins. In recent

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years, in the University of Leicester’s Discussion Paper series alone the results of research, for example, on state visits, state funerals, resident embassies, diplomatic theory in Ernest Satow, Abraham de Wicquefort, and Francesco Guicciardini recognition practices and summitry have been presented, as well as work establishing a research agenda for European diplomacy based upon constitutive approaches and studies of the practical application of new information technologies to the processes of negotiation.\(^{31}\)

The most obvious centers for the study of diplomacy, of course, are established foreign service schools such as those at Georgetown, Harvard, Tufts, Kentucky, and the diplomatic academies that in many other countries are associated with their respective foreign ministries.\(^{32}\) In recent years, these programs have been supplemented with new programs in diplomatic studies in places like Leicester, Seton Hall, Malta, and Westminster in the United Kingdom. In programmatic terms, diplomatic studies are prospering. Many reasons may explain why. The increasing importance of diplomacy in post–Cold War international relations is certainly a factor, but others appear to be more salient. These include the recent proliferation of new and often poor states requiring diplomatic representation, the decision of some states to outsource some aspects of diplomatic training to reduce costs, and, more broadly, the current pressure on academic administrators from legislators, business communities, and parents to make liberal education appear career-oriented.

New or old, a principal purpose of all these programs is to educate and train aspiring diplomats, although beyond what this should involve, some controversy has emerged.\(^{33}\) What is more important for an aspiring diplomat to know? Whether an archbishop takes precedence over a rear admiral at an official

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\(^{32}\)For example, the Instituto de Altos Estudios Diplomáticos, “Pedro Gual” of the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Venezuela, the Diplomatic Academy of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Portuguese Diplomatic Institute of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Portugal.

\(^{33}\)See, for an early example, Smith Simpson, *Instruction in Diplomacy: The Liberal Arts Approach* (Washington D.C.: American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 1972); and more recently, A. James, “Diplomacy and Foreign Policy.”
dinner? The latest reflections on the representations of “otherness” in frontier journals and fiction of the American West or the most recent incarnations of Star Trek? Of course, this is a caricature of the debate that uses the worst images the protagonists have of one another, yet it reflects a sense on both sides that diplomacy and IR/IS are different and that one of them is not very important. In practice, most programs seem to have settled the debate with a compromise, offering a combination of basic diplomatic theory and case study predicaments “from the field,” with the tamer, saner (lamer?) bits of contemporary IR/IS. If anything, the compromise tends to be skewed toward the latter. The relationship between the two remains problematic. Does the aspiring diplomat, for example, learn what Susan Strange, Stephen Krasner, and John Ruggie have to say about the centrality of international political economy because it will inform their professional practice, or because it is a part of their professional makeup to “be informed” in these areas in much the same way as they need to know about wine, opera, and art? The answer ought to be the former, but I suspect it is often the latter, partly because, as in most professions and for most people, theory remains remote until it acquires life through subsequent practical experience. In addition, a real gap exists between the study of diplomacy and the study of most of the rest of international relations.

An effort is under way to bridge this gap, often from within diplomatic studies programs or at their prompting. Much of this is focused on academic service. In recent years, for example, diplomatic studies sections of the British International Studies Association and International Studies Association have been established. They organize panels on diplomacy for their annual conferences, either alone or in collaboration with other sections. Party work such as this has been accompanied by explicit attempts to recruit newcomers to diplomatic studies by stressing the centrality, breadth, and interdisciplinary character of their scope.

More important, research is emerging that seeks to close the gap between diplomatic studies and IR/IS from both directions. Building on the middle power and principal power literature of the 1980s, for example, Andrew Cooper and Richard Higgon apply insights from both the constructivist and the organizational

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34 For those interested, details of seating arrangements, gun salutes, and other aspects of protocol may be found in John R. Wood and Jean Serres, *Diplomatic Ceremonial and Protocol: Principles, Procedures, and Practices* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970). The aspects of “otherness” referred to were the subjects of papers presented at recent conferences of the British International Studies Association and the International Studies Association. Although presented as worst-case opposites to make a rhetorical point, one purpose of this article is to show that the respective authors would have a great deal to say to one another about the presentation and maintenance of identities in sparse or ambiguous social contexts.

35 See, for example, Cohen, “Putting Diplomatic Studies on the Map”; and Sharp, “Who Needs Diplomats?”
science literature to the behavior of both individual diplomats and diplomatic services. Cooper and Brian Hocking have written on resident ambassadors. Hocking invites us to see them as catalysts of collective action on a wide range of internal and external policy questions in the states to which they are accredited. Cooper examines attempts by two ambassadors to use the World Wide Web to publicize their countries’ respective positions and advance their interests on particular issues that had aroused, or potentially could arouse, public interest. The thrust of their work is twofold: to emphasize the transformed environment of actors, issues, and modes of communication within which diplomats function; and yet, to demonstrate the continuing centrality of conventional diplomats to most of what happens in contemporary international relations. This kind of work builds back to diplomacy from IR/IS. The dynamics of niche diplomacy, for example, will be familiar to anyone conversant with Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye’s accounts of international relations under complex interdependence conditions, the main difference being that agency is no longer implied. Now we are invited to look at how agendas are set and issues are linked.

Conversely, other research in diplomatic studies attempts to build from diplomacy to IR/IS. It does so by taking advantage of our increasing ability to step back from and contextualize the modern state system rather than—whether we think it is permanent, changing, or declining—theorizing only from within its frame of reference. For example, Raymond Cohen and others have brought the work of historians and archeologists on the Amarna system before students of diplomacy and international relations. To be sure, this initially sparked a debate on whether Amarna could be, in the Nicolsonian sense, properly regarded as a “fully fledged” diplomatic system rather than an international system exhibiting some diplomatic features. The emerging consensus is that we get into more trouble discounting Amarna than accepting it, despite arguments about what is properly diplomacy and what is not.

Once beyond this controversy, we begin to see not just the “same old melodrama” of international politics and foreign policy, but also the predicaments of

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those who serve as diplomats. How do we represent a king of kings to a king who will be a god upon his demise, or to one who claims to be a god already? And how do we convince our host that a delay in the delivery of gifts or their disappointing quality upon arrival is neither a sign of disrespect nor a reason for registering displeasure at our expense? Charged with conducting relations across the great divides between political communities, those who represented their leaders had a personal and a professional interest in seeking to stabilize the identities they represented, the terms on which they were represented to one another, and the modalities by which this was undertaken.

The idea of diplomats as stabilizers of problematic and problematized identities that have to be represented to one another is not new. What is new is the fluidity of concepts like sovereignty and immunity on which modern diplomacy is based. From a professional point of view, this is both bad and good news. It is bad because the work of stabilization that establishes the first principles of interaction is never really completed, although it may appear so for periods of time. This is also the good news, for it is hard to conceive of how we may interact without diplomats in the absence of a single, undifferentiated human community. This is born out in a second kind of research that, like Cohen et al., seeks to build from diplomacy to IR/IS. Unlike Cohen, people like Richard Langhorne and Luc Reychler seek to advance in very different ways beyond some of the contemporary and commonplace observations about how international relations are changing. They are interested in the role of “new actors” in circumstances of state breakdown and sub- or trans-state ethnic conflict. Arguably these features constitute the “high politics” and certainly the “power politics” of contemporary international relations. Reychler speaks for what is becoming a large army of researchers attracted to “track two” and field diplomacy by events in the Balkans and elsewhere. The researchers argue that these new diplomats bring certain conceptual and practical advantages over their conventional counterparts to the process of resolving conflict and seeking peace. Although it does Reychler some injustice to summarize it so, his argument is that such new diplomats offer more, precisely because they do not represent states.

Langhorne, by contrast, has gone beyond noting the newness and potential of the nonstate diplomats to observing how humanitarian agencies, in particular, actually perform vis-à-vis states today. Langhorne’s main point is that governments and associations of them will fund agencies to pursue objectives that the governments in question find difficult to pursue directly. Agencies need money

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to function and, as both the presence of agencies funded primarily by the European Commission in Afghanistan and their subsequent withdrawal when the money was cut off suggest, the relationship between the two has a marked political dimension.

Second, Langhorne and others have begun to chart the response of such agencies to these kind of predicaments. Their emergence is conventionally presented in narratives of the decline, transformation, or disintegration of the contemporary international system, a presentation that has often been aided by the oppositional posture of the agencies themselves toward conventional diplomacy as “part of the problem.” Nevertheless, as Langhorne argues, the success of such agencies has brought with it the need and the appetite to “become diplomatic.” It is no longer sufficient to have the logo-side of t-shirts worn by field workers turned toward the television cameras. Agencies want to stabilize and secure recognition of their identities within the framework of the present diplomatic system to gain access to and participate in the policy processes by which their funding and their operating conditions are secured. To be sure, this involves making demands upon a system with no clearly defined place for such actors (at least the sort they would want). Still, the needs of the moment, in terms of performing their missions more effectively and the dynamics of organizational self-interest that develop with success, strengthen the incorporative dimension to these demands at the expense of the transformative dimension. To be a player, an actor needs to be recognized as such.

Present in all the work in diplomatic studies surveyed above is a sense of diplomacy’s transcendent quality as a discrete human practice. Cohen and his colleagues identify it in records of the international relations of some 1,500 years BCE. Cooper and Hocking present it as inherent even in an international system greatly changed from the one with which diplomacy is conventionally associated. Langhorne detects its influence upon the operations of some of the newer actors in international politics, widely expected to become more important in the future. Paradoxically, it is outsiders who have provided the theoretical grounding for this transcendent or even essentialist conception. It is a double paradox, for the two principal contributors, James Der Derian and Costas Constantinou, both reject essentialist formulations of ideas and concepts in social theory and practice. They are best regarded as visitors to diplomacy who departed before they got bored, but left some very useful and interesting presents.41

We need not accept the general theory of social reality that may inform the work of Der Derian, Constantinou, or others, or the critical perspective that anchors their accounts in claims about alienation and oppression, to find their arguments insightful when they are applied to the practice of diplomacy. They

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are insightful because they draw our attention away from positivist interpretations of diplomacy that focus on how the substantive interests, ends, and means of actors whose identities are treated as unproblematic are set, and then increasingly struggle to find a place for diplomacy in that process. Instead, Der Derian and others direct our attention to how much of diplomacy is about representation, the production and reproduction of identities, and the context within which they conduct their relations. The great puzzle from orthodox and critical positivist perspectives is why diplomacy has lingered and even expanded with apparently so little to do. From the perspectives outlined here, in very different ways it is possible to see that if the modern diplomatic system no longer is the master institution of international society, diplomacy still remains its central practice, as it would of any thin society of collectives that value their unity, autonomy, and identity. By diplomacy, the actors and their relations are “constituted.”

DIPLOMACY AS REPRESENTATION:
SOME THEMES FOR A RESEARCH AGENDA

Recent research suggests that diplomacy is much more about representation than either diplomats or those who study them have yet realized. I have sought to argue that it follows that international relations are much more about diplomacy than we have realized. The less obvious or “natural” the identities of the agents appear and the thinner the social context in which they operate, the more diplomacy is needed. Conversely, we would expect to see less diplomacy in the relations within a family, where identities appear self-evident, or within a religious or legal setting, where roles and rules are clearly marked and accepted. If this is so, then there are at least two consequences for IR/IS research.

First, students of diplomacy in the narrow sense must continue to execute their own conceptual jailbreak. Their isolation is in part self-imposed and results from the state-centric character of the genre in which they write. There is nothing wrong with being state-centric per se, but only certain kinds of positivists who are interested in sparse hypotheses about a very narrow spectrum of behavior can afford to ignore the practical and theoretical challenges to the primacy of the state that have been made in recent years. If we accept that states and others have, in what Iver Neumann calls “arms and legs,”42 as well as consciousnesses, then we cannot rest content with the essentially legal argument that states are sovereign and the position and significance of everything else derives from that status. To persist in doing so exposes us to the charge of being engaged in perfecting and embellishing familiar bricks in a long-established wall whose foundations

42 Neumann’s phrase comes from a private conversation. His attempt to capture what the diplomats see as belonging and not belonging to them may be seen in his “The Foreign Ministry of Norway,” DPDSP 35 (1997).
may be crumbling. I suspect they are not and think they ought not. Yet neither hunch nor prejudice can be taken for granted if we want to join in the fitful and fragmented conversations that presently constitute IR/IS.

Getting into debates about who are the actors may be difficult for many students of diplomacy, but it will be made easier if they realize that the fate of diplomacy does not ride upon the fate of the modern state system, and especially the effectiveness of the latter’s capacity to go on saying who is and is not a player. Once diplomacy is seen again in terms of representation rather than as an instrument of more substantive foreign policies, then it becomes possible to see how it expresses a human condition that precedes and transcends the experience of living in the sovereign, territorial states of the past few hundred years. Rather than seeing diplomacy as an institution of the modern state system, both the practice and context should be seen as responses to a common problem of living separately and wanting to do so, while having to conduct relations with others.

Second, students of diplomacy need to be brought back into the mainstream not only to benefit from the broadening of their horizons, but also because they and those they study have something important to say. As already suggested, the strength of diplomatic studies is that it remains the place where the practitioners “speak back.” How then, do they make sense of what is going on? The writings and utterances of diplomats are obvious, but not necessarily the point of departure. The written and spoken record reveals that diplomats, like other professionals, make a distinction between and operate within two universes: the professional universe of how things are supposed to be, and the political universe of how they very often actually are. They also reveal that diplomats attach a great deal of importance to the ability to shift smoothly between these two universes and to recognize when such movement is or is not called for. Together with the capacity to pursue useful personal relationships effectively and maintain them, the smooth shift is regarded as one of those talents with which the good diplomat is born, rather than one that is acquired.

Not surprisingly, within the professional universe we find an unproblematized account of international affairs. As the preamble to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations states, people have lived in nations “from ancient times.” International relations are presented as now having evolved to the point where states are authentic expressions of popular sovereignty and nations are authentic expressions of popular cultural identity. This is the realm of diplomacy as representation in the narrow, professional sense by which the international society of states and others is most directly constituted, be it the day-to-day socializing or the state ceremonies by which countries are recognized, territories are transferred, or commitments to collaboration or acceptance

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43The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and Optional Protocols (1961).
of rules and norms are affirmed. The sources of problems in the professional world are the passions, conceits, and ambitions of foolish or wicked men and women who lead people astray. The task of the diplomats is to curb these emotions in their own leaders and to manage their consequences in others. The extent to which the rhetoric of diplomacy’s professional universe is centered on the management of common affairs, rather than advancing particular interests, is remarkable. Peace is the objective, while the prince, often their own, is the constraining factor.

The political universe, in contrast, is full of ambiguities. The real world, as most diplomats are ready to admit in all but the most official of circumstances, does not always operate the way it is supposed to. Even the most fundamental organizing principles of the international system are vulnerable. Some entities clearly do not satisfy the preconditions of statehood, yet obtain recognition, while some who do are denied it. The claims of Kurds are ignored, for example, while the status of Panama, whatever the original sin of its conception, goes unchallenged. These are the easy ones, for to do otherwise would create more problems. Diplomats also have to perform the smooth shift in more difficult circumstances where situations are uncertain and policy has not been settled, as when the former Yugoslav republics declared their independence and the great powers were still arguing about how to respond.

Nor are these ambiguities of the political world restricted to crisis moments in diplomatic work. They permeate its daily operations and the accounts that diplomats give of them. Thus the dominant metaphors of contemporary diplomatic discourse recall ideas of cooperation, managing problems, and constructing orders. Diplomats can speak and write for hours in these terms and yet still say, when pressed, that their fundamental obligation is to advance and defend the “national interest.” It is not that these two discourses are irreconcilable. National interest may be presented as a constraining parameter from political reality on what might otherwise be desirable, or the tepid bromide that international cooperation is (in) the national interest may be offered. We rarely get explicit evidence of how diplomats juggle the demands of the two sets of rhetoric in their daily work, or learn by what motives and criteria this juggling is informed.

The tempting answer is that diplomats are driven by the desire for power or the desire to be close to it. In times of crisis, they will wait on the lead of policymakers and follow this wherever it takes them. While in the usual course of events, they may talk cooperation and order-building, they are pursuing a narrow conception of their own country’s self-interest. There is a distinguished, if sparse, paper trail of corroboration for this from Barbaro (the fifteenth-century Venetian ambassador to Rome), who suggested that the “first duty” of an ambassador is to “do, say, advise, and think whatever may best serve the preservation and aggrandizement of his own state,” to Charles
Hardinge’s observation that his “theory in the service was that ‘power’ is the first aim.”

Even if this is the case, it does not tell us much about how diplomats resolve the dilemmas of their political universe. Barbaro made his claim precisely because some of the ambassadors of the Renaissance period persisted in trying to serve their God and their consciences, whereas others sought proximity to power by committing grand and petty treasons. It is not clear how much being close to his king was an end or a means of Hardinge’s efforts. Arguably, even if diplomats are driven by this sort of self-interest, the relationship between it and the fortunes of the states they represent has never been straightforward and is less so today. For example, how might the ambitious diplomats of poor countries or even European great powers best advance their own interests, by seeking to become the permanent undersecretaries of their respective foreign offices, or by pursuing an equivalent position in the United Nations or the European Union?

Narrow self-interest is a poor predictor of what diplomats will actually do, given the complexity of circumstances they may confront. Evidence also suggests that self-interest does not guide them as often as the popular imagination expects. Rather, and perhaps surprisingly, that guidance is provided by an aspect of their professional role conception. Diplomacy, like other professions, provides its members with a privileging sense of distance from both its operational worlds, thereby enabling them to ignore their rules and cheat on their political masters, even their own political masters, when the need arises. It is politicians and citizens who, when they think about them at all, may take sovereignty, international law, and state prestige seriously to the point of precipitating national or international disaster, unless they are properly advised, managed, or circumvented by diplomats who know the whole thing is built on sand.

Diplomats with the consciousness of citizens could not manage the world, but citizens with the consciousness of diplomats would be unmanageable. Hence the desire to maintain a distinction between citizens and politicians who take their states and the international political world at face value, and professionals who know better, the better to manage the imperatives of the notional world and the consequences of the disjunctions and gaps between how things actually happen and its account of them. Thus representation appears in the political and professional universe of diplomacy, and is central to the smooth shifting between the two. Diplomats not only seek to represent their states to the world, but also seek to represent that world back to their respective states, with the objective of keeping the whole ensemble together.

Within the field of diplomatic studies narrowly conceived, viewing diplomacy as representation opens up several new lines of inquiry. On the principle that one only lives twice, it would be instructive to examine the activities and utterances of diplomats at the moment of state creation and state collapse. During the truncation of Yugoslavia, new foreign services were established in unstable and difficult conditions by a combination of internal efforts and assistance from other services, as well as the diplomatic studies programs discussed earlier. The formation of these services provides an opportunity for examining the inculcation of the professional and political values of diplomacy. What, for example, were recruits to the new Croatian service told about their respective obligations to peace and their prince and about the idea of being a restraining influence on the latter, and what did the successful ones among them learn?

With regard to state collapse, some work has already been done on the Soviet Union (USSR) that confirms how detached diplomats are from the process of dynamic political change. As expected, most Soviet diplomats continued to represent the USSR to the bitter end, partly for self-serving reasons, but also to keep stable the external aspect of the state, despite what was going on within. By the final year of international perestroika, it was clear that the principal interest of the diplomats in executing Gorbachev’s initiatives was existential rather than instrumental. They sought to keep the USSR as an international actor until, as they hoped, internal affairs had been clarified. They also attempted to use that identity to prevent domestic upheaval from spilling out over Soviet borders and becoming an international problem.

When the state finally collapsed, many Soviet diplomats simply shifted their allegiance to the new sovereign republics. This can be interpreted in terms of Hardingean narrow self-interest (although then one might have expected more of them to have deserted the Soviet state earlier than they did), but it is also consistent with the sense of professionalism described above. Diplomats will represent whatever is there and in need of representation. As the final Soviet experience suggests, much of their work is concerned with representation per se, being there, rather than doing something, on behalf of their client.

If this is so, then a new light is cast on what diplomats are doing when the pace of international negotiations has become particularly glacial and the content of their communiqués particularly vacuous. Rather than analyzed or ignored as examples of stalled instrumental behavior and bargaining, these situations may be examined as instances in which diplomats are engaged in the construction, maintenance, and representation of different identities to one another. To give a specific example, when the existence of the activities of the Oslo channel between Israelis and Palestinians became generally known in 1993, attention

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shifted to it from the high-profile, but deadlocked, negotiations in Washington with their associated press conferences and releases. Suddenly, Norway was where the real action was to be found. I am suggesting that the existential and declaratory representation in Washington deserves far more consideration than it received, and the currently disappointing consequences of the Oslo channel and the subsequent Oslo accords add weight to this claim.

**Beyond Modern Diplomacy**

Viewing diplomacy in representational terms provides a richer understanding of what diplomats do than does the conventional account of it as “one of the lesser tools of foreign policy.” The diplomats of the modern state system claimed that no one else occupied the position of detachment from the international society of states, or performed the role of representing its members to the world and the world back to them. Now, it is becoming increasingly plausible to claim that more people are so employed and more are “diplomats.” An obvious extension of the approach of viewing diplomacy as representation is to apply it to the “new” diplomatic actors of contemporary international relations.

To what extent does their “becoming diplomatic” involve these actors accepting and internalizing the professional and political worlds as these are presented by diplomacy in the narrow sense? To what extent do they bring something new to it? Could humanitarian agencies parlay a local and temporary acceptance, based upon expertise, knowledge, and control of resources, into a more lasting and extensive legitimacy—one recognized by states but not derived from states? An obvious expectation of the approach outlined above is that the new diplomats, like the diplomats of revolutionary regimes before them, will do much adjusting. Their ability to bring about change in the professional and political universes of diplomacy will be limited. This is not an argument in any simple sense of that term. New actors do not have to conform to the rules of the game as it is played by old actors (read rich and powerful) because that is what the old ones want. Rather, it is the representatives of actors for whom unity, autonomy, and identity remain important. They face similar predicaments, whether they represent the old or new, the rich or poor, the strong or weak. All face the problem of contributing to the production and reproduction of the identities they represent in, and by, their relations with one another. Other games—economic, military, political, and social—are going on too, but their significance varies by actor, policy, and context. Representation, as already discussed, is common to all actors in international relations and is particular to it.

This is not as big a claim as it may sound. The question of whether new diplomatic actors accept the political and professional worlds of diplomacy acknowledges that they also function in a wider world of international thought and action in which these other actors try to function with their own universes
and associated operational codes. Consider two established concepts, sovereignty and nation. Both appear as prominent bricks in the edifice of diplomacy’s professional and political worlds, yet both also belong to other worlds where the systemic and moderating preoccupations of diplomacy seem to have very little place. In addition to how diplomacy tames, manages, and uses these two ideas for itself, it is worth examining how diplomacy copes when others have different conceptions and priorities.

As James Mayall notes, diplomacy was one of the few international institutions to survive the onslaught of popular sovereignty and nineteenth-century nationalism.46 Mayall’s diplomacy, and nearly everyone else’s, is the diplomacy of the modern territorial state, with a practical and clearly identifiable sovereign site. We take this so much for granted that we may ask whether diplomacy in the absence of sovereigns may be properly termed “diplomacy.” Instead, we might ask, How did diplomacy survive modernity? Clearly the answer is adaptation.

How will diplomacy survive encounters with concepts beyond which it has traditionally not claimed, such as race, class, gender, and civilizations (not Civilization)? It is beyond my competence to speak about these ideas, other than to note that even at conventional conferences on diplomacy, papers on issues like “the problem of spouses and partners” are often presented.47 Discomforting though these approaches are to some of the participants, neither these themes nor the universes of arguments and assumptions about social life from which they stem will go away. Establishing an effective diplomatic mission today involves addressing patriarchy and identity issues, as well as the problems posed for security and institutional memory by electronic mailing systems.

Having said this, and having made a case for diplomacy as a discrete human practice capable of providing a focal point for most people engaged in international studies, I conclude by noting that it is not for everyone. The study of diplomacy and what diplomats have to say about it will appeal neither to structuralists nor to constructivists in their respective strong forms. Diplomacy presumes that structures do not explain all outcomes, nor even just the important ones, but it also takes existing structures seriously. Structures may be constituted by the practice of agents. In acknowledging this, diplomats are unlikely to concede that we have learned much about the likelihood of particular structures cohering, evolving, or collapsing—even if their own instinct is to bet on cohering.

46 James Mayall, Nationalism and International Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 35. I am not suggesting that Mayall is a hostile outsider to diplomacy, merely that in his work there is an account of the onset of hostile interpretations of the ideas in question.

The study of diplomacy, although it may be highly critical of particular individuals or styles, tends to be sympathetic to diplomacy per se and to those responsible for handling its predicaments. It also has tended to accept the identity claims of principal actors uncritically. Countries have been assumed to be more or less what those who act for them claim them to be, rather than something else, such as an instrument of oppression. There is no logical reason why this must be so, and why a critical diplomatic studies could not emerge, but its uncritical pedigree may prove an insuperable barrier for some.

Why? Because the study of diplomacy appears to offer one well-established way of accepting the constructed character of social reality, without having to regard it as in some way fraudulent. It directs the observers’ attention to the practices and processes of negotiation that help form and maintain identities in international relations. What each observer actually does with the insights provided by the newer approach to diplomacy outlined above is another matter. Suffice it to say that if a renewed emphasis on diplomacy makes it easier for people who do international studies to recover what it is they have in common and talk to one another about it, then it is well worth undertaking.