

The Diplomatic Corps of Things

Jason Dittmer

For *Diplomatica* 1(1)

The launch of *Diplomatica* is an occasion to be savoured. Not only does it show the strength of recent work in Diplomacy Studies and the growth of the field, it promises to highlight the diversity of theoretical approaches to an object of study that has for too long been understood one- or two-dimensionally. In this short essay, I wish to take up the subtitle of the journal – *A Journal of Diplomacy and Society* – to highlight one of the directions of travel that can be highly generative for the field.

The subtitle is exciting in that it juxtaposes two words that are rarely laid alongside one another. *Society* is of course a foundational word for the social sciences, pointing to the collective that serves as the object of our investigations. As such it can take many forms, dependent both on the specific time/place to be investigated but also our epistemological approach to the subject. Next to it we find *Diplomacy*, a term which has previously been seen as divorced from society, or at least divorced from the kind of society with which most of the social sciences have been concerned. Rather, when diplomats have been considered part of a society, it has been their own: an international society that shared a ‘common stock of ideas and values possessed by the official representatives of states,’ (Bull 1977, 304). This society was defined by its association with the state system, and by its distancing from the more everyday use of the term ‘society’.

Timothy Mitchell’s (1991: 89) demolition of the state/non-state binary has called this distinction into question for a whole generation of scholars:

The statist approach always begins from the assumption that the state is a distinct entity, opposed to and set apart from a larger entity called society. [...] Yet we have seen that in fact the line between the two is often uncertain. Like the systems

theorists before them, advocates of a statist approach have been unable to fix the elusive boundary between the political system or state and society. An alternative approach to the state has to begin with this uncertain boundary.

This brings our attention to the last part of the sub-title, perhaps the most important word: *and*. The opportunity for *Diplomatica* is to be the journal of the *and*, exploring not diplomacy, not society, but the conjunction of the two. This is partly about de-exoticising diplomacy, juxtaposing it with other workplaces and political projects, but also about bringing it from the aether back down to the material world.

In my recent work, I have sought to do just this, in one case literally showing the uncertain foundations of the Nineteenth Century Foreign Office building (Dittmer 2016). My analyses have drawn attention to the materiality of diplomacy through assemblage theory (DeLanda 2006), which I find a particularly good fit for diplomacy, because it is all about relations. An assemblage is a heterogeneous combination of various elements – bodies, objects, discourses – that cohere (for a time) and allow for some form of emergent agency. A great example of an assemblage is the state, which is composed of a range of material objects (buildings, ballots, border checkpoints, paperwork, etc.) as well as bodies (elected politicians, civil servants, juries, military personnel, etc.) that come together in particular ways in particular space-times. When this happens consistently, it produces not only what Mitchell called state effects, but also state *affects*. I will address each in turn.

With regard to state effects, Mitchell argues that the state, or the public sphere, is itself an effect of the coming together of various things and people that otherwise would be seen as non-state. A sheet of paper is simply a sheet of paper, until the state's letterhead is put on top of it. And in their home a person is just a person, until she goes to work at the courthouse and become a policewoman by putting on her uniform. We can see here not

only the permeability of the state/non-state boundary (described above) as ‘regular’ items or people become the state for a time, but also the contingency of the whole operation. Just as human bodies require influxes of energy to remain alive and agentic, states require people and things to ‘show up’ and re-perform the state each day, or else they fail to persist in space-time. State effects – the ‘thing-ness’ of the state and its ability to be perceived as such – require constant effort.

State affects, however, require us to look outside the state. They refer to the capacity of the state to establish relations with other entities (state or non-state) and to both affect and be affected by that other entity. That is, they represent the difference, or change, that is made by entering into relations of any kind. Such an approach calls into question the stability of the self, by showing how the self is always rooted in an affective field of forces that relies on others. We can connect state effects and state effects in diplomacy most obviously through the long-standing (and teleological) idea that states are states because they are recognized by other states. Mutual recognition both shores up the performance of state-ness by each party, and also indicates the affective vulnerability of each to the other: each owes part of its state power to the other.

This abstract discussion of assemblage is indicative of its attention to relations, and hence to the actual material connections between states. These could be embodied relations – as in traditional ambassadorial exchanges – or they could be material connections, such as shared databases. While both kinds of relation can serve as vectors for affect, they nevertheless matter in their specific materiality, and this can be a subject of empirical investigation. Elsewhere I discuss these materialities as different forms of diplomatic protocol (Dittmer 2017), each of which serves to align and coordinate assemblages so as to enable flows of discourse and affect. The traditional diplomatic

protocol entails standardization of embodied diplomatic performances to produce affects of mutual respect and to avoid negative affects that might be caused by misjudging the formality of a diplomatic encounter (e.g., insult). In the same category of embodied relations, but less traditionally classified as 'diplomatic', we can think of a wider sphere of inter-governmental protocols operating at all scales of government, for instance the establishment of common procedures among NATO militaries for a range of activities where soldiers and sailors must be interoperable, or the bureaucratic enmeshing of foreign policy-making procedures between EU member states' MFAs and the European External Action Service. Assemblage, therefore, enables us to think of the ways in which bodies are trained to operate with one another across the edges of state bureaucracies. Just as Mitchell argued that the same objects and people could be either in the public and private sphere depending on the context, here we can see how people can be part of multiple assemblages at once (e.g, the French foreign ministry and the EEAS policy-making apparatus) and thus serve as vectors of affect that has the capacity to re-shape both assemblages.

The material connections between assemblages can similarly be crucial to how affects are modulated, and therefore what their political effects are. As an example, I have examined how the British and American signals intelligence apparatuses were linked together during the Second World War by their adoption of a common encryption device – the Combined Cipher Machine (Dittmer 2015). This device – created by literally dropping a common flywheel into the encryption machines used by the British and Americans – allowed each to communicate with the other, creating a conduit through which signals intercepts could be passed back and forth between the two states. It also – in combination with the two countries' collaboration in cracking the German and Japanese codes – meant it was very difficult to keep secrets from one another. Thus, the communications conduit

enabled by the protocol of the common flywheel enabled affects of trust and commonality to form, re-shaping each actor's sense of their own interests. This is most clearly evidenced by the persistence of the UKUSA signals intelligence community until the present.

What do all of these protocols, assemblages, and affects mean for the study of diplomacy? I would argue that there are three major implications of thinking diplomacy through assemblage. First, as was described earlier, it becomes very hard to sustain the argument that the state – and therefore diplomacy – is distinct from the wider force relations of society. That is, the practices of diplomacy will necessarily be affected by the 'private' assemblages with which it is enmeshed. This is uncontroversial to anyone who has examined – for instance – how the advent of Twitter has changed diplomacy and statecraft more widely (especially since 2016). Rather, empirical attention ought to be focused on the ways in which diplomacy is made to *seem* a separate field – the state effects, so to speak.

Second, an assemblage approach to diplomacy asks us to widen the range of things that we think of as diplomacy to include materials and their diplomatic agency in our analyses. If diplomacy is framed exclusively as person-to-person discourse among representatives of states, we miss out on a wide array of affective vectors that undoubtedly make a difference in the shape of the international system. It also makes diplomacy occasional and elite-oriented, rather than everyday and operating at all levels of government. Just as Latour (2005) asks us to consider a Parliament of Things, or *Dingpolitik*, I ask us to consider the Diplomatic Corps of Things. By opening our analyses to the complex material interconnections that make up not just the state, but the world-of-states, we open ourselves up to a diplomacy studies that is less sure of human agency and less confident of our ability to predict, but more aware of the sea of inchoate forces that shape the subjectivities of civil servants, elected politicians, and diplomats themselves. We, and our

interests, are not so clearly defined anymore; the outside is always already inside the black box of policy-making.

Finally, if we accept that states are assemblages whose emergent affects shape the subjectivities of those decision-makers enrolled in them and acting on the state's behalf, and if we further accept the idea that those states are also engaged in a world of diplomatic relations that open states up to affects that shape policy-makers' and diplomats' behaviours, then we have to start thinking about the diplomatic assemblage as emergent with affective force of its own. That is, the world of states generates its own affects which engage in the flux and flow of the material systems within it and adjacent to it. This can be a disconcerting assertion because we are so used to imagining a person at the top of any institutional hierarchy in whose name we are acting. It is the President's foreign policy, for instance, that is enacted by the State Department. There is a decision-maker who is ultimately responsible. However, the world of assemblage outlined here lacks a leader; it is pure force relations. Like the global climate system, in which processes unfolding at different temporalities produce differentials and intensities (in sunlight, etc.) that in turn generate wind, rain, and even hurricanes, an assemblage approach to diplomacy studies highlights how patterns form from complexity, but always exceed our ability to predict. Further, there is no single policy-maker who can be held responsible. Rather, the topologies of connection and disconnection must be engineered to produce the right kind of policy-making subject, and to avoid allowing forces to resonate in ways that generate diplomatic hurricanes. But this is a responsibility that falls upon us all, if not equally.

To conclude, I hope that *Diplomatica* becomes a forum for interrogating the relationship between diplomacy and society by focusing on the relation, the *and*. It is time

for diplomacy to be brought to earth and considered in relation to the other material forces in play.

Bibliography

- Bull, H. (1977) *The Anarchical Society: A study of order in world politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- DeLanda, M. (2006) *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage theory and social complexity* (London: Continuum).
- Dittmer, J. (2015) 'Everyday Diplomacy: UKUSA Intelligence Cooperation and Geopolitical Assemblages,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105(3): 604-619.
- Dittmer, J. (2016) 'Theorizing a More-than-Human Diplomacy: Assembling the British Foreign Office, 1839-1874,' *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 11(1): 78-104.
- Dittmer, J. (2017) *Diplomatic Material: Affect, assemblage, and foreign policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
- Latour, B. (2005). 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: or how to make things public,' In: Latour, B., and Weibel, W. (eds) *Making things public: atmospheres of democracy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 14–41.
- Mitchell, T. (1991) 'The Limits of the State: Beyond statist approaches and their critics,' *American Political Science Review* 85(1): 77-96.