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Byzantine, Early Modern, Contemporary***

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SUBLIME DIPLOMACY: BYZANTINE, EARLY MODERN, CONTEMPORARY

Iver B. Neumann

Introduction

Sublime a. (~r, ~st), of the most exalted kind, so distinguished by elevation or size or nobility or grandeur or other impressive quality as to inspire awe or wonder, aloof from and raised far above the ordinary

To the student of diplomacy, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary's* definition of the sublime sounds a familiar note.¹ Diplomats are often accused of being aloof, and diplomats themselves often talk of their work and of one another as being distinguished. Most studies of diplomacy touch on its historical association with nobility. However, since only that which has no history may be defined, there is analytical and historical work to be done before we may say how and in what ways diplomacy is sublime. I try to tackle the task by breaking down the sublime into the fuzzy sets of meaning that the concept has had in its three heydays: antiquity, early modern Europe, and contemporary Europe. Using the appropriate meaning of the concept, I attempt to appraise concurrent diplomatic practices. In Byzantium, elevation was key, in early modern Europe, terror rather than awe, and now, size. I conclude that there is a cumulative quality to diplomacy's sublimity, in the sense that all these elements are still at work.

Longinos/Byzantium

Antiquity's great work on the sublime is *Peri hupsus*. *Hupsos* means height, and *peri hupsus* has been translated as about the sublime, or on sublimity. The text survived in only one, incomplete copy. From its political positioning and choice of literary problematique, it may be inferred that it was written sometime during

1) Paper delivered at Millennium's annual conference, London, 28-30 October 2005.

the first century A.D. For our purposes, it is important that the only surviving manuscript is a copy made by the Byzantine scholar Parisinius during the tenth century, and that it seems unclear to Parisinius who had written it. Parisinius has 'Dionysius Longinus' on the title page, but 'Dionysius and Longinus' in the table of contents. The most recent English translator of the book, D.A. Russell, who is also the editor of an annotated Greek version, writes that since the inception of the 19th century, it has been generally held that where the authorship is concerned,

we are in fact presented simply with a pair of plausible guesses on the part of some Byzantine scholar. It is not that the name Dionysius Longinus is an impossible one, but that Dionysius and Longinus are exactly the names which we should expect to be attached to an anonymous work of criticism in the late empire and in Byzantine times.²

The reason why this is of interest here, is simply that it establishes that the text was widely known and discussed in Byzantium. Pseudo-Longinus' book is presented as, and is invariably read as, a book about how to write.³ However, antiquity was full of such manuals. Longinus is not of particular interest either historically or to us for his inventory of the rhetor's toolbox. Rather, Russell points out, his originality lies in his attempt to prescribe rules for a different category, namely 'the production of a certain kind of effect. Whatever *knocks the reader out* is 'sublime'.⁴ So what knocks the reader out? Excellence of discourse, which may be due to great thoughts, strong emotion, figures of thought and speech, noble diction, combination of words. Longinus gives as a key example a love poem by Sappho 'When I see you only for a moment, I cannot speak; My tongue is broken, a subtle fire runs under my skin; my eyes cannot see, my ears hum; Cold sweat pours off me; shivering grips me all over; I am paler than grass; I seem near to dying...', and he comments:

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- 2) D.A. Russell 'Introduction', in Longinus *Peri hupsus* [On the Sublime], (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964) p. xxv.
 - 3) See, for example, Russell (1964), p. ix.
 - 4) D.A. Russell 'Introduction', in 'Longinus' *On Sublimity*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) p. xiii.

Do you not admire the way in which she brings everything together -- mind and body, hearing and tongue, eyes and skin? She seems to have lost them all, and to be looking for them as though they were external to her. She is cold and hot, mad and sane, frightened and near death, all by turns. The result is that we see in her not a single emotion, but a complex of emotions. Lovers experience all this; Sappho's excellence, as I have said, lies in her adoption and combination of the most striking details.⁵

Furthermore, Longinus is interested in what kind of people that may produce such an effect. His answer is that it is the great and the good:

First then we must state what sublimity comes from: the orator must not have low or ignoble thoughts. Those whose thoughts and habits all their lives are trivial and servile cannot possibly produce anything admirable or worthy of eternity. Words will be great if thoughts are weighty. This is why splendid remarks come naturally to the proud...⁶

However, and this is key, Longinus insists that if you wear your greatness on your sleeve, the effect is not sublime:

In ordinary life, nothing is truly great which it is great to despise; wealth, honour, reputation, absolute power,-- anything in short which has a lot of external trappings -- can never seem supremely good to the wise man; because it is no small good to despise them. People who could have these advantages if they chose but disdain them out of magnanimity are admired much more than those who actually possess them.⁷

When read with a view to politics, two things stand out. First, whereas Longinus focuses on language, his examples bear out that what language should denote and connote is a maximum number of senses. His reading of Sappho is a key example. Secondly, the power dimension. The great and the good are the ones who have it in their power to be sublime, among other things by abstaining from blowing their trumpet. This will only have an effect on the educated man, however; in order for

5) 'Longinus', *On Sublimity*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) pp. 14-15 (10.2-10-3).

6) 'Longinus' (1965), pp. 9-10 (9.3).

7) 'Longinus' (1965), p. 7 (7.1).

a display be truly sublime, we may infer that it must speak *both* to the educated man, *and* to the populace. After all, the key is the effect, and so it may be worthwhile for the man producing the effect to debase himself by using tricks that are really below him, if that is what it takes to produce the effect in a given audience. Indeed, Longinus seems to indicate as much, for when he sums up the part where the former statement is made, he notes that ‘When people of different training, way of life, tastes, age and manners all agree about something, the judgement and assent, as it were, of so many distinct voices lends strength and irrefusability to the conviction that their admiration is rightly directed’.⁸

Let us juxtapose what Longinus has to say about the sublime in literature to a contemporary Byzantine practice, diplomacy. After the fall of Rome, the key challenge to Byzantium was to maintain a set of relations between itself and sundry neighbours that embodied and so maintained its imperial status. These neighbours included the Germanic peoples, the Visigoths in Spain, the Franks and the Lombards, the Huns and the Avars, the Bulgars and the Slavs and also the Arabs. They all lacked a key resource that Byzantium had taken over from Rome, namely a formalised legal structure that could shore up their claim to being an ordered political entity. As the Byzantine historian Evangelos Chrysos points out, when these peoples achieved settlements and set about forging formal political institutions, they were dependent on the empire. The road was open for Byzantine diplomacy to draw them into a network of international and inter-state relations which was controlled by the empire. This process revolved around treaty-making, and the treaties often had a formative character for the new states.⁹ Chrysos postulates a three-layered process at work.¹⁰ First, the new ruler was welcomed into the family of kings.¹¹ Secondly, there was an assimilation of

8) ‘Longinus’ (1965), p. 8 (7.4).

9) E. Chrysos ‘Legal Concepts and Patterns for the Barbarians’ Settlement on Roman Soil’, in *Das Reich und die Barbaren*, eds. E.K. Chrysos and A. Schwarcz (Vienna: Böhlau, 1989), pp. 12-23.

10) E. Chrysos, ‘Byzantine Diplomacy, A.D. 300-800: Means and End’, in *Byzantine Diplomacy. Papers from the Twenty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Cambridge, March 1990*, eds. J. Shepard and S. Frankling (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992), pp. 25-39, on p. 35.

11) They could be titled *basileus*, even *archibasileus*, and be ranked on a par with the emperor as his brother, as was the Persian shah, but the usual thing was for them to be represented as

Byzantine social attitudes and values. Thirdly, and as a formalization of the second layer of the process, there were laws. In order to drive this process, the Byzantines availed themselves of a number of, mostly diplomatic, practices. For example, embassies to Constantinople would often stay on for years. A member of other royal houses would routinely be requested to stay on in Constantinople, not only as a potential hostage, but also as a useful pawn in case political conditions where he came from changed. A key practice, however, was to overwhelm visitors by sumptuous displays. Consider Liudprand of Cremona's report of his first visit in 949:

Next to the imperial residence at Constantinople there is a palace of remarkable size and beauty which the Greeks call *Magnaaura*, the name signifying 'fresh breeze [...] Before the throne of the Emperor there rose a tree of gilded bronze, its branches full of birds fashioned of the same material, all singing different songs according to their kind. The throne itself was so contrived that at one moment it stood low on the ground and the next moment it would suddenly be raised high in the air. It was of immense size, made of either wood or bronze (for I cannot be sure), and guarded by gilded lions who beat the ground with their tails and emitted dreadful roars, their mouths open and their tongues quivering. Leaning on the shoulders of two eunuchs, I was led into the Emperor's presence. Immediately the lions began to roar and the birds to sing, but I myself displayed no terror or surprise at these marvels, having received prior warning from others who were already well acquainted with them. After I had three times made my obeisance I raised my head and lo! He whom I had seen only a moment before on a throne scarcely elevated from the ground was now clad in

the emperor's sons. The Ethiopian negus and the sultan demonstrated that it was possible to go from being a son to being a brother; this also happened in times of crises between Persia and Byzantium. The best known example from the West is the presentation of the royal crown of Hungary (the crown of St Stephen) to Geza by emperor Michael VII Ducas in the 1070s, making him part of the family of kings. See A. Kazhdan, 'The Notion of Byzantine Diplomacy', in *Byzantine Diplomacy. Papers from the Twenty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Cambridge, March 1990*, eds. J. Shepard and S. Frankling (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992), pp. 3-21, on p. 20. For caveats, see Chrysos, 'Byzantine Diplomacy', p. 37.

different robes and sitting on a level with the roof. How this was achieved I cannot tell...¹²

Protestations to the contrary, Liudprand sounds pretty knocked out. It got worse. During a banquet some weeks later, he was treated to a luxurious meal and acrobatic entertainment that was so stunning that 'I was so bewildered that the Emperor himself noticed my amazement. He therefore summoned an interpreter and asked me which seemed to me the more wonderful'.¹³ The effect striven for and the means chosen bear a close resemblance to those Longinus recommends for the orator. The throne was placed at a superior height, and it was of superior size.¹⁴ Special care was taken to stimulate as many of the senses in as high a degree as possible. Brightly lighted things to see, terrifying sounds, wafting perfumes, tasty food, silk and other materials soft to the touch. The technical means used were of necessity different, since what was doing the knocking-out was not the spoken word alone. The lions, the organs and the birds were all powered by compressed air produced by bellows (the organs were occasionally brought along on embassies as well). The body technique of the acrobats and skills of the cooks were, of course, appropriate to their own domains, and not to that of literature. The diplomatic set-piece of having barbarians standing around the throne wearing their native gear (axes at the right shoulders for Vikings) and holding rods and swords belongs to a domain of staging not covered by Longinus. But the effect striven for, usually successfully, was indeed a knock-out effect.¹⁵ It

12) J.J. Norwich, *Byzantium. The Apogee*, (London: Viking, 1991) pp. 169-170. Note the use of the concept of the aura, which crops up again in Proust as that quality of a momentuous event that makes it visible at a distance (for example a great military battle) and as a fully theorised concept in Benjamin ('the unique manifestation of a distance, however close at hand'). See, for example, R. Shiff, 'Digitized Analogies', in *Mapping Benjamin. The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, eds. H.U. Gumbrecht and M. Marrinan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 63-70.

13) Norwich (1991), p. 171.

14) Besides *hupsos*, Longinus also used *megethos*, size, and he did not clearly distinguish the two concepts. Russell (1965), p. xvi, reports that he has used 'sublime' for both concepts.

15) Amongst the many who have not grasped the importance of this kind of diplomacy we find Arnold Toynbee, who writes that 'Could even the most simple-minded barbarians have taken seriously the mechanical toys in the imperial throne-room that were set working for the edification of foreign ambassadors to whom the emperor was giving audience?' A.J.

could be argued that all this is too external, too base, to be subsumed under the rubric of the sublime. Did not Longinus lionize the powerful man who foregoes all these things when he *could have* used them? He did, but as will be seen from Liudprand's description of his attire, the Emperor made a point of varying it. Furthermore, he would frequently meet with foreign dignitaries, particularly upon arrival, in plain clothes, in unassuming places like inside a tent. We may read this as the Emperor signalling that he did not really need all the props. We may conclude that Byzantine society's idea of sublimity, as it is laid out and celebrated by Longinus, is isomorphic to the aesthetics that characterize Byzantine diplomacy.

The Byzantine empire collapsed in 1453, but Longinus did not go down with it. During the 16th century alone there appeared three translations into Latin and Italian.¹⁶ Following Boileau's 1674 translation into French, further translated into English in 1712, Longinus achieved vast popularity throughout Europe. Where England is concerned, '[I]t is the appearance of the three translations of Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime*, in 1712, 1724, and 1739, which frames most of the debate until mid-century'.¹⁷ From the end of the century onwards, however, much of the fashionable philosophical speculation on the sublime seems not to have been particularly dependent on Longinus' ideas. For example, according to Longinus' translator Russell,

the main contentions of Burke's essay on 'The Sublime and Beautiful' – owes little or nothing to L[onginus] or even to [his translator] Boileau except the initial impetus to discussion.¹⁸

Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 498. Well, we have a number of eyewitness accounts like Liudprand's, and the Byzantines kept embellishing the practice at considerable cost for a millennium.

16) Russell (1964), p. xliii.

17) P. de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime. Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) p. 32.

18) Russell (1964), p. xlv. Although Longinus' ideas were not widely drawn upon after mid-century, he kept being invoked as a legitimating authority, someone who secured a long, honourable and serious-minded history for the subject, see N. Hertz, 'A Reading of Longinus', in *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*, (New York,: Columbia University Press, 1985) pp. 1-20. As the very name 'renaissance' betrays, this is

To the social scientist, such a change in problematique suggests an accompanying change in social practices. Let us have a look at the correlation between the change in ways of understanding the sublime on the one hand, and change in diplomatic practices on the other.¹⁹ Our example will be the key early modern work on the sublime, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.²⁰

Burke/Old Diplomacy

Burke's theorisation of the sublime, which first appeared in 1757, differs from Longinus' already at the level of inquiry. Where Longinus took the human being as a given, and was interested in laying out how the sublime worked given that a human being was such and such a thing, Burke asks what a human being is, and how the experience of the sublime confirms and shores up the human being: 'Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.'²¹ Anachronistically, we may say that to Burke, the sublime is constitutive, aesthetics 'permeates his presentation of self from his earliest days', as one Burke

the key function ancients and ancient texts played into the period of early modernity, so it is small wonder that it crops up here.

19) I do not posit a direct break between two representations of the sublime here. The Italian renaissance probably had its own understanding of it, as had the Middle Ages, and there may be others. The point here is not to draw up a genealogy of the sublime, but to see how the sublime may be part of a diagramme that also informs IR practices, *in casu* diplomacy.

20) E. Burke (ed. Adam Phillips), *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1757] 1990). Only 33 years separates it from Kant's work on the sublime, and so this periodisation may be open to question. I lean on the conceptual historians and others who have seen the 17th and 18th centuries as a transitional period (*Sattelzeit*) here; this will place Burke in the transition, and Kant in modernity (of only as its portal), see *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, eds. O. Brunner, R. Koselleck and W. Conze (Berlin: Klett, 1972 - 1997).

21) Burke ([1757] 1990), p. 53.

scholar has it.²² Burke encapsulates his age, for a conclusion of Peter de Bolla study of the thousand or so 18th century works on aesthetics is that

...the debates surrounding the sublime show, during the course of the century, a marked tendency towards the adoption and adaptation of a theory of mind that has most commonly been associated with psychology. [...] where, for example, in the early decades of the century sublime sensation might be explained in terms of the qualities inhering in the object, through recourse to a taxonomy of the natural which used vocabulary such as 'grandeur', 'simplicity', 'distinctness' and so on, towards the end of the century such explanations would be phrased in terms of the interior workings of the human mind, through recourse to a vocabulary of the passions, sentiment or imagination.²³

What is ontologically given for Burke, and here again he is symptomatic, is the passions. The sublime activates certain passions by stimulating certain senses in specific ways, and this process constitutes the human being. To Burke, the key passion is fear or terror:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.²⁴

Treating fear in this manner was a commonplace of the period.²⁵ Burke's twist is the following:

22) L. Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland. Aesthetics, Politics, and the Colonial Sublime*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 16.

23) de Bolla (1989), p. 33.

24) Burke ([1757] 1990), p. 36; see also p. 119 *passim*.

25) In Hobbes, of course, but see also, for example, B.J. Smith, *Politics and Remembrance: Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke and Tocqueville*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

The passions which belong to self-preservation, turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough from any idea of positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime.²⁶

Where the effect of a phenomenon is not tinged with terror, but is simply pleasant (pleasure being a weaker passion than pain), there is no sublimity, only beauty. This foregrounding of fear is not, by contrast, typical of antiquity, when fear was important, but tended to be treated not as a foundation, but as a challenge to be lived down.²⁷ Furthermore, Burke's focus on the passions means that he concentrates on the bodily experience of the sublime. The body was of interest to Longinus, too – all the senses should be stimulated and everything should come together – but Longinus' knock-out point was the brain. Burke highlights the same effect, and talks about it in terms of astonishment, stupefaction, amazement²⁸ – but stresses in a higher degree how the knock-out goes via the body and, to use another anachronism, via the subconscious. Where Longinus concentrates on what comes out of and surrounds the body when he discusses the sublime, Burke concentrates on the body itself; as a thing to be stroked, for example, but first and foremost as a thing to be watched, preferably at a certain distance (given that terror is involved, certainly at a distance that ensures no direct involvement):

Chuse a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their

26) Burke ([1757] 1990), p. 47.

27) Cf. the Greek concept of *catharsis*, to which Burke's analysis bears a striking resemblance. The interesting thing to note is that Longinus and his followers did not link the sublime and katharsis. A typical genealogical point can be made here; these two concepts meet in Burke, but although they both existed in the same time, at the same place, centuries before, they were then treated as unrelated, just like two of my great-great-grandmothers hailing from the same country and living at the same time may never have met.

28) Burke ([1757] 1990), p. 54 *et passim*.

minds are erect with expectations, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy.²⁹

We also see here that Burke discusses how the sublime is at work in other social practices than literature, and indeed that he insists on how they may take precedence over literary experience. Again, when he discusses which kinds of phenomena are sublime, he chooses examples from other realms than literature. He insists that ‘All *general* privations are great, because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence.*’³⁰ Largeness, infinity and regularity are sublime. If there is a change in pattern, the imagination may find a check, as Burke formulates it. However, succession and uniformity of parts precludes the possibility of such a check, and they are therefore sublime. Burke’s example is architectural: a rotund. To Burke, then, the sublime is part of the social in general, and is to be found in a number of practices.

Burke is quite explicit when it comes to how there is a power dimension to all this. In a section named exactly ‘power’, which was added to the second edition of the book, which appeared two years after the first,³¹ he insists that ‘I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power’; since we look upon the world in fear, ‘In short, wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror, and contempt the attendant on a strength that is subservient and innoxious.’³²

To sum up, where Longinus is interested in the specific point of human interaction where speaker meets listener, and in the specific social practice of literature, Burke is interested in the entire human being that interfaces with the sublime – how it comes to be affected, what the experience does to it – and he is interested in how this plays itself out in a variety of social practices. Peter de Bolla suggests that Burke’s text appeared exactly in the breakthrough years for this kind

29) Burke ([1757] 1990), p. 43.

30) Burke ([1757] 1990), p. 65.

31) de Bolla (1989), p. 61.

32) Burke, *Enquiry*, 59, 61.

of thinking, and that a key development that hastened the breakthrough was the Seven Years' War (1757 - 1763). The principal parties to the war, England and France, both incurred huge increases in their national debts. This inculcated further progress in the debate about private economic initiative and responsibility as one way to alleviate the debt, not least in the areas of banking and finance. Property rights became a key site for the furthering of the kind of individualisation which was also afoot in Burke's text, de Bolla argues.³³ I do not have the required expertise to judge whether this argument holds up in its specificity, but I am ready to defend its key thrust, which concerns the logic of government. As demonstrated by Michel Foucault, during the 16th and 17th centuries, we see a shift in political rationality, away from a model where the king rules his subjects by the threat of the sword, towards a model where the state governs society by orchestrating its productive work. The key here was exactly to turn subjects into individuals, to inculcate 'governmentality' amongst humans and groups.³⁴ The discourse on the sublime, with its individualising thrust (psychology, passion, responsibility), suits this paradigm hand in glove. What about diplomacy?

The social specificity of diplomacy in Absolutist Europe has perhaps been best captured within Christian Reus-Smit's general theorisation of how systems of states are defined by the moral purposes they share.³⁵ To Reus-Smit, the system of states exists by dint of its constitutional structures, defined as '*coherent ensembles of intersubjective beliefs, principles, and norms that perform two functions in ordering international societies: they define what constitutes a legitimate actor, entitled to all the rights and privileges of statehood; and they define the basic parameters of rightful state action*'.³⁶ He then argues that these structures have three primary normative

33) de Bolla (1989), chap. 4, esp. pp. 122-31.

34) See M. Foucault 'Omnes et Singulatim': Toward a Critique of Political Reason', pp. 298-325 and 'Governmentality', pp.201-22, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954 - 1984, vol. 3: Power*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000); and G. Oestreich (eds H.G. Koenigsberger & B. Oestreich), *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

35) C. Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State. Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) p. 30. For substantiation of this claim, see I.B. Neumann 'The English School on Diplomacy: Scholarly Potential Unfulfilled', *International Relations*, 2003, pp. 341-69.

36) Reus-Smit (1999), p. 30.

elements, the moral purpose of the state, the organising principle of sovereignty, and the norm of procedural justice. On empirical grounds, the first of these takes precedence, for 'Historically contingent beliefs about the moral purpose of the state have provided the justificatory foundations of sovereign rights, and as these beliefs have changed from one society of states to another, so too have meanings attached to sovereignty'.³⁷ The upshot is that, whereas sovereignty is still definitional of international society, it is so only as a part of a single, coherent normative system where it takes second place to what actors think is the point of existence, the meaning of life and so on. To Reus-Smit, the 'old' diplomacy of absolutist Europe rested on a moral purpose that defined the entire period, namely that of heavenly salvation. Earthly powers were ordered in a hierarchy of descending closeness to God, with France on top, then other Christian rulers, then non-Christian rulers (and, one may add, people who were seen to be without rulers altogether). Having broken away from the overlordship of the church, these emerging states 'reimagined' the world:

the moral purpose of the state was defined as the preservation of a divinely ordained, rigidly hierarchical social order. To fulfil this purpose, monarchs were endowed with supreme authority – their commands were law [and law was first and foremost command rather than an outcome of negotiation, enacted ritual, codification, or the like]. Procedural justice was thus defined in strict, authoritative terms. God's law and natural law were the ultimate arbiters of what constituted justice, and they received worldly expression in the commands of the dynastic monarchs.³⁸

Law became a divinely sanctioned instrument of, rather than a frame for, the circulation of power. By isomorphism, emerging international law (increasingly understood as *ius inter gentes* rather than *ius gentium*) was also rooted in something divine, namely human nature – as natural law.³⁹ These social conditions, Reus-Smit argues, were specific prerequisites for the emergence of 'old' diplomacy. Negatively, the facts of sovereign inequality and the lack of a concept of legal

37) Reus-Smit (1999), p. 32

38) Reus-Smit (1999), p. 94.

39) Comp. K. Hamilton and R. Langhorne, *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration*, (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 68-9.

contract barred multilateral interaction. Positively, old diplomacy had four characteristics. It was incidental, bilateral, secretive and hierarchical:

incidental [rather than contractually regular] in the sense that absolutist states were less concerned with the negotiation of generalized, reciprocally binding rules of international conduct than with the resolution of particular conflicts and crises. [...] The incidental nature of old diplomacy privileged narrow, bilateral negotiations between conflicting parties over broader, multilateral negotiations [...Secrecy] suited the age, an age when monarchs considered foreign policy their private domain and thought themselves accountable only to God [...] The general assumption that sovereign states differed in status, and the preoccupation with preeminence and precedence this generated, gave old diplomacy a distinctly hierarchical character.⁴⁰

Reus-Smit's analysis has a blind spot: It is too close to Kingly claims, too far from removed from the practices they pursued to sustain those claims. It is true that 'monarchs considered foreign policy their private domain and thought themselves accountable only to God'. It is true that the negotiations of old diplomacy were highly secret. But it is also true that the old diplomacy is characterised by diplomatic pageants and ritual. After all, in his path-breaking study of diplomacy James Der Derian quite fittingly developed his generalisation that 'it is as much the 'petty' *rituals* and *ceremonies* of power as it is the 'great' events of power politics or the famous developments of international law which define diplomacy' in his discussion of the 'old' diplomacy.⁴¹ It does not follow from the fact that Kings only held themselves accountable to God that he did not need to show himself to all the people in all his splendour. This theme permeates the age (to note just one example, the plays of Shakespeare), and it permeates old diplomacy. Consider, for example, the arrival of a new ambassador, which was usually

an ostentatious display of the greatness and wealth of the ruler he represented. Sometimes for this reason civic dignitaries or merchants trading with the country from which the ambassador came would turn out to swell

40) Reus-Smit (1999), pp. 107-109.

41) J. Der Derian, *On Diplomacy. A Genealogy of Western Estrangement*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 114. Reus-Smit's error may stem from his being too eager to set old diplomacy apart from renaissance diplomacy, which to him is *the* example of ritualistic diplomacy.

the column of men and vehicles and deepen the impression made on those who watched. This was, again as in the past, a genuine form of public entertainment; printed programmes giving details of the time and place of the entry and of the carriages and costumes were sometimes sold to potential spectators. Elaborate descriptions, usually illustrated with engravings showing the sumptuous costumes and the carving and gilding of the coaches, might be published to commemorate the event.⁴²

M.S. Anderson, who is the author of this summing up, is at one with previous scholars in seeing the point of the display in the aggrandisement of the rule of a foreign King. Burke's theory of the sublime sensitises us to an additional aspect; these arrivals were representations of a foreign power, which, by the lights of the day, was to say a foreign threat. In Burke's vocabulary, the possibility of terror was present. Now, where was the counterforce to this possible terror to be found? It was close at hand, it was the watching subjects' own King. The King stems the terror at hand, the King is sublime. So is diplomacy, which is a social institution that serves to keep imminent terror always at bay.

Although the arrivals of new ambassadors was certainly part of old diplomacy, it was, as we see, nothing that was new to this age. On the contrary, Anderson notes that, by the time of Burke, in Western Europe, these pageants were on the wane. And since they are nothing new, they are not something that dovetails nicely with the kind of subjectivation in the theorising of the day's theorising of the sublime. I note them here simply to make the point that the displays of diplomacy to subjects may have the characteristics that Burke sees as indicative of the sublime. What remains for me to demonstrate isomorphism between the age's new theory of the sublime and the age's new practices of diplomacy is to find new and additional practices where diplomacy may appear as sublime to the quickly individualising subjects. I contend that the key factor here is right under our noses. It is the practices connected with the new printed media of the age and their dissemination in a nascent public sphere.⁴³ It was here, in *The Spectator* and elsewhere, that the new debate on the sublime was kindled, and it

42) M.S. Anderson *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy 1450 – 1919*, (London: Longman, 1993), p. 56.

43) J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

was here that a broader spectrum of the citizenry could read about diplomacy. The point here is not that this diplomacy was, these negotiations were, secret. The point is that an ever larger number of citizens crowded around to follow and guess what was going on in diplomacy, and to be suitably relieved when terror was kept at bay. In this way, the mystique of Kings was, as it were, broadcast more broadly.

What seems to be happening here, is that diplomacy is lifted further out into the social. A deepening of the reach of power into the social and political life-worlds of the public follows. The spectacle of diplomatic relations between the sovereign and other sovereigns serves as a way of deepening relations between rulers and ruled in the host country. The change is not clear-cut: The presence of foreign dignitaries in Constantinople was part of the legitimating spectacle of power as well. In Constantinople, however, there was no public sphere, no debate about what might be going on in diplomacy. There was no focus in the theory of the sublime or in the consideration of diplomatic practices on how these generally impinged on the constitution of subjects (the body), or on the constituency (the body politic). The practices of literature and of diplomacy aim deeper into subjectivity, on both the individual and social levels. Kings, Burke insists, are sublime because they appear to be able to negotiate relations with the unknown, such as the representatives of other sovereigns. The Kings are players in the world at large, but their subjects cannot live at large, they are rooted to their abode, and are struck by fear when they behold how Kings soar above specific places and specific situations and take on the unknown. They keep the possible terror at bay, and that is a delight to their subjects. What is new is that this delight is present in more settings, to more people, and that this fact involves new persons in the individualisation game.

Before I turn to the present day, I should like to make one more point. Reus-Smit is right in highlighting the hierarchy of old diplomacy. We may draw a parallel between Byzantine diplomacy, which circled around the universal empire (*oikumene*) of Byzantium, with its one God and its one ruler (*basileia*), and old diplomacy, which circled around France, monotheistic Christianity and the Sun King and his descendants. It will be seen, however, that just as there is a thickening in social relations generally at this point in time, so it is in diplomacy. In Byzantium, the ruler was the one to evolve diplomatic practices, the others copied. In early modern Europe, this was not the case in the same degree. It is true that, during the 18th century, French became the diplomatic language, and it

is true that France was the lead state in evolving practices which pointed in the direction of a professional diplomatic service and a separate Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Still, other sovereigns and other courts played significant roles. Furthermore, they had full-blown diplomatic relations with one another. The point may be made that the growing subjectivation of a growing number of persons that characterised the day, and that permeates the discourse on the sublime and diplomatic practice both, did not only go for individuals, but also for that other kind of juridical persons, states.⁴⁴

Lyotard/Contemporary Diplomacy

A number of contemporary writers have theorized the sublime, but by dint of having re-opened the problematique and of having been widely referenced, that of Jean-François Lyotard stands out. The key text was an essay based on a lecture delivered in 1983 and published within the next two years in German, French and English.⁴⁵ Taking Burke as his point of departure, Lyotard fastens on a key characteristic of the Burkean delight that overcomes us when terror does not happen, namely the delight we feel when it becomes clear that infinite (and therefore terrible) repetition is not going to rule the day after all. This threat may be counteracted, he argues, by someone or something bringing into play something *new*. The context for the discussion is avant-garde art and what happens when a new work gives a new answer to the question of what it takes for us to see. 'What is terrifying is that the *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening', as Lyotard puts it.⁴⁶ A work of art that demonstrates how the

44) Where new rules empower new actors, there will always be exclusions. The broadening and deepening of European diplomacy happened in an imperialist age, where the colonial subalterns paid the price. They are excluded from agency and relegated to subjects both within the discourse of the sublime and in diplomatic practices. Again, one place to start an analysis of this would be Burke's writings; see Gibbons (2003), chap. 7.

45) J.-F. Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' in *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 89-107. This essay is, for example, the only work on the sublime amongst the 35 texts anthologised in the widely used *Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. C. Cazeaux (London: Routledge, 2000).

46) Lyotard (1991), p. 99.

new may yet arrive, brings a change, an end to there being privation of anything new, and so it is sublime. However, Lyotard also follows Burke in presenting his argument as a general one. Where Burke's argument turned on subjectivation as a sign of the times, Lyotard's turns on the overflow of information. To Lyotard, 'There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it admits of no nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an Idea – infinite wealth or power.'⁴⁷ There is always more to spend, the possibilities seem endless, and hence sublime. Within such an order, 'The experience of the human subject' hangs on having information:

...what merits attention is the disappearance of the temporal continuum through which the experience of generations used to be transmitted. The availability of information is becoming the only criterion of social importance. Now information is by definition a short-lived element. As soon as it is transmitted and shared, it ceases to be information, it becomes an environmental given, and 'all is said', we 'know'. It is put into the machine memory. The length of time it occupies is, so to speak, instantaneous. Between two pieces of information, 'nothing happens', by definition. A confusion thereby becomes possible, between what is of interest to information and the director, and what is the question of the avant-gardes, between what happens – the new – and the *Is it happening?*, the *now*.⁴⁸

In lectures delivered three years later, in 1986, Lyotard reflects on the importance of this difference in other settings. With reference not only to Proust's sensibility to the social and Cézanne's to colour, but also to Freud's mode of listening to his patients, he prescribes that

you have to impoverish your mind, clean it out as much as possible, so that you make it incapable of anticipating the meaning, the 'What' of the 'It happens...'. The secret of such asceticism lies in the power to be able to endure occurrences as 'directly' as possible without the mediation or protection of the 'pre-text'.⁴⁹

47) Lyotard (1991), p. 105.

48) Lyotard (1991), pp. 105-6.

49) J.-F. Lyotard, *Peregrinations. Law, Form, Event*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 18.

It is particularly apposite to our undertaking that Lyotard postulates ‘an analogy’ between art and politics. It is true, Lyotard writes, that what is at stake in politics is doing something, whereas what is at stake in art is ‘is feeling something oneself or making other people feel something’.⁵⁰ But the analogy between the two fields is that ‘Undoubtedly both belong to the process of thinking that Kant called reflective judgement, which implies the ability of the mind to synthesize data, be it sensuous or socio-historical without recourse to a predetermined rule.’⁵¹ However over-determined a case may be, however strong the pre-text is, to Lyotard a case-specific response is still required. But, his argument seems to imply, this is a rare occurrence. We are so preoccupied with looking for new information that we can hardly hatch or perceive new information ourselves. The new is so rare that when it happens, be that in art or politics, it is sublime.

Where Longinus took the human being as a given and Burke emphasised that the sublime was constitutive of the human, Lyotard, who writes after the events of Burke and academic psychology, makes a point of specifying the level of the psychological system on which the sublime happens. He stresses the level of the symbolic – language and knowledge – in producing the effect, and the role of the body in receiving it.⁵²

To sum up, where Longinus placed the sublime in the quality of the effect of an experience (being knocked out), and where Burke placed the sublime in the non-happening of an anticipated experience, namely privation of terror, Lyotard places the sublime in the happening of an eagerly awaited experience. This is the experience of the new. He does, however, complicate his argument by adding that capitalism, by being a systemic precondition that makes the new possible, by guaranteeing that there is always something new to spend, is also sublime. By touching on the similarity between art and politics, Lyotard also invites the question of the respects in which contemporary diplomacy is and is not sublime.

50) Lyotard (1988), p. 28. As a Nietzschean, I take it that Lyotard would be the first to dedifferentiate his own binary opposition, for surely making someone feel something is doing something.

51) Lyotard (1988), p. 20.

52) This takes the form of an embracement of Merleau-Ponty and a critique of Lacan. See Lyotard (1988), esp. pp. 10-11.

Contemporary diplomacy is an integral part of state bureaucracies. Embryonic foreign ministries emerged in most European states during Burke's lifetime, and in most states, they were merged with the consular and diplomatic services in the early tens of the previous centuries. The idea that each case requires a specific response runs directly counter to the very principle of bureaucracy, which rests on what Kant, in contrast to reflective judgement, called determinant judgement. When I was assigned my first task at Norway's Moscow embassy in 1980 and asked a secretary for advice about how to go about it, her response was 'you should look in the dossiers'. Lyotard describes the logic as follows: 'a concept being defined, one must find the available cases to be subsumed under it and so doing begin to validate the concept that each case should be subsumed'.⁵³ So bureaucracy is not sublime. To the extent that diplomacy is bureaucratic, it cannot be sublime either. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the self-understanding of diplomats is that they are *more* than bureaucrats.⁵⁴ Part of this is to do with the fact that, once posted abroad, they are working with information gathering in other social settings. They gather 'knowledge of the current situation and how it is likely to develop rather than of the pattern of past regularities', as Hedley Bull puts it.⁵⁵ This, however, is exactly what Lyotard thinks characterizes the present social order as such: we are always on the outlook for information, always asking what is/is it happening? To Lyotard, this is exactly the antithesis of the sublime.

Lyotard's analysis does, however, point us toward another site, namely policy planning. Institutionally, since the Second World War, Foreign Ministries have evolved planning functions exactly in order to add some reflective judgement to the everyday determinant judgement surrounding diplomats on all sides. The question asked by policy planners should ostensibly be 'Is it happening?' Are pandemics a new challenge for diplomacy? Will this state go on to acquire that resource? And indeed, policy planners do ask these questions. If we are to follow Lyotard, sublimity hangs on the extent to which the question of what is

53) Lyotard (1988), p. 21.

54) I.B. Neumann, 'To be a Diplomat', *International Studies Perspectives*, 6:1 (2005), p. 72-93.

55) H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 181.

happening now is distinguished from the question what actually happens, that is, what is new.

During my two-year stint as a policy planner in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I had the opportunity to experience in what degree that was the case. I attended and arranged a series of internal meetings between planners and other diplomats. What characterised these meetings was meticulous attention to detail. Physical planning was important: in which room should they be held, what, if anything, should be served, how participants should be placed, what time should be allocated to the different speakers and so on. Meetings were, without exception, planned to take place between units, and not between individuals. The question of participants was, therefore, first and foremost a question of levels. During meetings, interventions from representatives of other units invariably took the form of comments on what had already been placed on the table by the political leadership or the planners. In short, the communication was representative, not deliberative.

Before I started my work in planning, I had attended a number of seminars and conferences organised by the Ministry in my capacity as a researcher and a Russia specialist. I can recall a number of occasions when I said something that struck participants as new, but I cannot recall a single one occasion where this sparked any interest. On the contrary, the presentations that were lauded were the ones structured as a *tour d'horizon*; broad, factual overviews. Back as a researcher, I presented one of these on new regions along the old East-West border, and asked one of the diplomat organisers, who was also a friend, what he thought. 'Just what we were looking for, something general that won't stand out too much from other business at hand', came the answer. At a number of occasions, as a planner and as a researcher, I have asked diplomats who have attended scholarly presentations what they got out of it. The usual answer is that it is nice to look beyond quotidian business (*godt å løfte blikket*, literally nice to stare further; cf. the expression 'thinking outside the box'). What diplomats seem to be looking for on these occasions, are ways to gather and organise large amounts of information. They are definitely not looking for anything new in Lyotard's sense.

Turning now from the interface between Policy Planning and the rest of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the work being done within the Policy Planning unit itself, the five of us working there would have weekly meetings, where we would spin out ideas about what might be happening, in order to find out which cases to look at and plan for. I would suggest new areas and issues, and the

answer I would receive from our Head was invariably 'It is too early' (*Det er for tidlig*.) If I went ahead and drew up a memo anyway, it would not leave the hands of the Head. In a bureaucratic chain of command, a document needs the endorsement of your superior in order to make it towards the political leadership. Mine were inevitably shelved, and always because it was too early. A younger colleague actually remarked on this, saying that he thought I must be bored stiff. 'The first fifteen times he [i.e. the Head] did it very elegantly', he said, 'but I suppose you must be pretty impatient by now'. I simply nodded. An outburst, which would have been my pre-diplomatic reaction, is considered as proof that you do not have yourself under control, and so is to be avoided, even amongst colleagues in private. Into my second year, news broke that India and Pakistan had now both confirmed a nuclear capability. Since one of my suggestions had been to have a look at what Cold War arms races and its balance of terror could tell us about a scenario where a number of Asian powers had a nuclear capacity, I rushed into the Head's office (having, I am afraid, forgotten that even agitation is to be held under control). Don't you think this accentuates the need for an analysis of the kind we have discussed? I asked. He thought for a moment, and then he said 'There will be so many others working on this now that there is no point'. In other words, it was too late. It was always either too early, or too late. To read him with Lyotard, the instant that the information he deemed to be inherent in a possible piece of planning about a certain event was either too far off, or it had already passed. As a consequence, the new never happened, and Norwegian policy planning remained everything but sublime.

It gets worse. If planners should succeed in drawing up a scenario and have it accepted, so that it would be acted upon, then this would precipitate the newness of the event, should it occur. This has been famously discussed by Baudrillard, who concluded that the Gulf War never took place, exactly because it had been precipitated by so much planning and so much gaming. Perhaps we may still call an unexpected improvisation of the field-working diplomat that succeeds in creating a *fait accompli* sublime. But these are rare, and hardly characteristic of contemporary diplomacy. Must we conclude, then, that whereas Byzantine diplomacy and old diplomacy were sublime by the lights of their day, contemporary diplomacy is not? I do not think so. There remains a weak sense in which Lyotard's analysis may lead us to conclude that diplomacy is sublime. The globe is in constant need of mediation. The demand for the good offices of diplomats never stops, and it is infinite. There is always more diplomatic energy

to spend. If diplomatic practice cannot be said to be sublime, the task at which it is directed can.

Conclusion

Every social practice has its aesthetics. Any diplomacy or politics needs an aesthetics, preferably a sublime one that can make sense of the unintelligible stranger and that can make the chaos of one's relations with the stranger look like parts of one's cosmos. Since there is a relative dearth of studies which look at practices from this perspective within the discipline of International Relations, I suppose there is descriptive value in using an aesthetic concept to illuminate one of them, as I have done here.⁵⁶ Furthermore, since Byzantine diplomacy is primarily known for its 'meretricious aspect, fraudulent inspiration and manipulative technique', and the very adjective has become synonymous with 'complicated; inflexible; underhand', it should be a worthy task to demonstrate that the Byzantine diplomatic practice was no further removed from the aesthetics of its period than are old and contemporary diplomacy.⁵⁷ It follows that one cannot be skeptical of Byzantine diplomacy without being skeptical of an entire historical period. Since it is hard to imagine what it should entail to be skeptical of an entire historical period, a certain revision of our evaluation of Byzantine diplomacy seems to be called for. Finally, since there are still those who doubt the value of analyzing global politics as part of general social relations, preferring rather to privilege the system of states and to see international practices as derivative of the logic of the system, any analysis that may specify aspects in which this is the case should have a value.

I should like to conclude in a rather more speculative vein, however. My analysis was mainly synchronic, in the sense that it focused on how the understanding of the sublime in a specific period relates to that period's diplomatic practice. However, I have also made the diachronic point that the

56) For a general discussion, see R. Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory', *Millennium*, 2001, 30, no. 3, pp. 509-33, and for diplomacy, C. Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

57) See, respectively, G.R. Berridge and A. James, *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, (London: Palgrave, 2001) p. 25; *The Oxford Concise Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) p. 126.

understandings of the sublime under discussion here build on one another. Lyotard's main reference is Burke, and Burke's main reference is Longinus. Furthermore, Burke and the 18th century kept invoking Longinus as an authority, someone who could secure a long, honourable and serious-minded history for the topic of the sublime.⁵⁸ We could make a similar, if slightly different, argument where diplomacy is concerned. Different, because given the bad press associated with Byzantine diplomacy nowadays, invoking it may prove diplomacy's long history, but it would undermine diplomacy's standing as an honourable and serious undertaking. Similar, because I would suggest that there is a sense in which the three ways in which diplomacy has been pronounced sublime by the three ages discussed here may be said to be cumulative. The intimidation that knocked the visitor to the Byzantine emperor out survives in the timorousness with which the uninitiated approach diplomats at work. These days, ambassadors abroad will often arrange dinner parties for people in their host country who have made their mark in some way, or who have a certain tie to the country that the ambassador represents. A number of these people will not be outsiders both to diplomatic culture in general, and to the idea of a set dinner with all its paraphernalia in particular (chauffeured cars in the driveway, footmen, different knives and forks, printed menus, port that is passed this way and not that and so on). As an effect of this, they will be more receptive to the ambassador's way of running things than they would have been otherwise. Another practice in which one may observe the same effect at work is how the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will always list itself first when it co-arranges a meeting or co-sponsors an event, regardless of the division of the workload. The fact that diplomats not only get away with this, but are hardly ever even called on it, means that the superiority of diplomats remains in the doxic realm. A precondition for this seems to be that diplomatic splendour results in a nimbus that has a knock-out effect on outsiders. The sublimity of the Byzantines may not be dead.

Similarly, the new precondition that made it possible for old diplomacy to appear sublime at a distance for, namely the formation of a public sphere, is still with us in a matured and increasingly globalised form. People still follow and guess what was going on in diplomacy, and they are suitably relieved when terror was kept at bay. The mystique of diplomacy is still at work, particularly when

58) See de Bolla (1989) and Hertz (1985).

diplomats seem to succeed in averting terrible situations, or keep them from spreading. This seems to be the reason why someone like Richard Holbrook became a darling of the media. As the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, apprehension was often running high in a neighbouring state like Norway. I ran into a former fellow student one day in 1991, and she burst out that she felt so 'relieved' (*lettet*) when the Foreign Minister, Thorvald Stoltenberg, appeared on the nine o'clock news to announce that the Foreign Ministry had the situation in hand and that everything was all right. This is the sublimity of Burke, at work in contemporary diplomacy.

We may conclude that, despite the increasing bureaucratisation of contemporary diplomacy, it retains certain sublime qualities. Here as elsewhere, however, diplomacy seems to be living off old fat rather than evolving new resources. I set out by quoting the *Concise Oxford Dictionary's* definition of the sublime. I only quoted the first part, however. The second part goes as follows: 'Sublime [...] (of indifference, impudence, etc.) like that of one too exalted to fear consequences'. Contemporary diplomacy's resistance to innovation in an era of galloping change in global politics smacks of hubris. Even the Byzantine emperor had to work hard in order to maintain his sublimity. So should diplomats.