

World Society as Humankind

Written by Matthew Weinert

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MATTHEW WEINERT, MAY 14 2013

World society never attracted as much attention as its sister concept, international society, which has served in the classical English School tradition as the *via media* between realism/international system and revolutionism/world society. Broadly construed, world society “implies something that reaches well beyond the state towards more cosmopolitan images of how humankind is, or should be, organized.”^[i] Implication, though, is not certitude, and thus Buzan could aptly characterize some views of world society as incredulous: it “doesn’t exist in any substantive form, and therefore its moral priority is unattached to any practical capability to deliver much world order.”^[ii]

Martin Wight lends credence to that view, since of the three methods he outlined for constructing world society,^[iii] none have come to fruition. Structural uniformity (e.g. Kant’s plan for perpetual peace as a federation of states with republican constitutions) might inflame the expectations of modern-day democrats, and one might plausibly argue that successive waves of democracy have extended a realm of peace, but the inherent state-centrism of the perspective deflects attention away from *world* society and towards *international* society. Doctrinal or ideological imperialism (e.g. messianic universalism, whether secular—Napoleonic empire, Nazism, communism—or theological—al Qaeda’s call for a resurrected caliphate) may attract followers, but such movements have been met with overwhelming force. Finally, cosmopolitanism, which prioritizes the individual above (and perhaps against the state), may have the most traction for a contemporary audience predisposed to championing human rights and associated international public policies and institutions framed around improving human welfare, and thus offers promise for deep development in ways that “assimilate international to domestic politics.”^[iv] Yet on this reading world society appears as code for domestic policy homogenization, which occludes world society’s distinctiveness.^[v]

The need for (analytical and ontological) clarity may have compelled Bull to equate world society with “all parts of the human community,”^[vi] which James Mayall echoes with the “view that humanity is one.”^[vii] But what this means in practice is questionable. It may capture the aggregate of inter-human discourse and exchange, but contractual arrangements as exponentially increasing features of an increasingly globalized, commodified world constitute relations of exchange, yet do not lend any lasting depth to world society since contracts by definition terminate once their terms have been fulfilled. Mayall, taking a cue from Bull who defined world society in terms of commonality of interests and values, may help:^[viii] “the task of diplomacy is to translate this latent or immanent solidarity of interests and values into reality.”^[ix] While the conception tasks the researcher with identifying such interests and values, producing an account of how and why they arise, and assessing how they link otherwise disparate parts of the human community together in ways that constitute and shape world politics, the position replicates the assimilationist view proffered by Wight.

Buzan attempts to extricate world society from the clutches of state and international society by looking beyond human rights to consider structural regularities like the world economy and even subglobal/regional projects that shape identities, interests, and roles.^[x] Doing so disposes of normative homogeneity implied by world society (e.g. presumed solidarism) and recognizes multiple value and interest commitments held by individuals and the collectives into which they have allocated themselves (e.g. pluralism).^[xi] Put differently, if we subject the broad vision of world society as human community to an organizational schematic that does not hinge on a singular, cohesive logic but that admits multiplicity, then we expose the potentialities of, and the fractures impeding, world society’s conceptual and practical development.

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We might, then, tackle world society from a more primordial standpoint: membership. Gerritt Gong and Martin Wight previously demonstrated the contingency of membership in humanity, tethered as it were to notions of civility and legitimacy, and reveal that fragmented visions of world society cohabit the same analytical space as unitary notions of humankind.[xii] As ethically appealing as the thesis that all *Homo sapiens* are human may be, we must recognize that varying conceptualizations of what it means to be human have been the source of a whole lot of world (dis)order, especially if we think that imperial and apartheid systems were built upon the depravity of racially constructed notions of civilization. From various “-isms” (e.g. racism, sexism, nationalism) and sundry other psychologically and socially embedded frames of reference have precipitated a range of dehumanizing, exclusionary, and oppressive practices—all laundered through the states-system which has magnified the effects of sometimes hierarchical, nearly always discriminating notions of world society qua humanity framed from particular, exclusive collectivist vantage points. By putting cruelty first, we are theoretically compelled to destabilize the very notion of what it means to be human and with it constructs of world society. That is, forms of world society necessarily stem from varying conceptions of human *being*.

To capture this socially constructed phenomenon, I am working on a notion of making human.[xiii] Much of the work of making human occurs, I suspect, at the micro level of the individual: e.g. encountering the other, bracketing attitudes and prejudices for the purposes of social cooperation if not harmony, learning that difference is not something necessarily to be feared or stigmatized, or coming to appreciate our neighbor not as “insert-derogatory-term-here” but as a decent human being and one of us. Empathy and the hard work of introspection on this view deliver us from solipsistic fear and disgust of difference. Yet we do not (or cannot) always disentangle ourselves from socially and doctrinally sanctioned prejudices that become an inherent part of our psycho-social makeup. Likewise, collectives cannot always force ideologues, racists, sexists, xenophobes, and zealots to accept the other; the problem of making human thus extends beyond individual, psychological confines and presents itself as a macro phenomenon. Might there be socio-political mechanisms that perform the work of humanization—that, in other words, substitute for our resistances, failings, and prejudices?

My response to that question centers on five mechanisms that operate within and through (international) institutional sites: reflection on the moral worth of others, recognition of the other as an autonomous being, resistance against forms of oppression, replication (of prevailing mores), and responsibility for self and others. Inquiry into these mechanisms, operating at multiple levels and in multiple fora, does not take human standing in society for granted, but opens inquiry to particular kinds of questions: how do various forms of inter-human interaction inform collective social structures and generate distinctive systems of organizing the mass of human beings? In what ways does the categorization of human beings help us better explain and understand the world society concept? In what ways do institutions of international society respond to more elemental forms of inter-human interaction that discern and then allocate “types” of human beings into different organizational schematics with varying degrees of autonomy?

Since the mechanics of making human constitute modes of governing and managing human diversity and hence the very notions of human being, I propose thinking of making human as a primary institution of world society, by which we mean “durable and recognized patterns of shared practices rooted in values commonly held” that in the end “play a constitutive role in relation to both the pieces/players and the rules of the game.”[xiv] Though discrete, the mechanisms exhibit what Wittgenstein called “family resemblances.” Even if they may “have no one thing in common,” they “are all related to one another in many different ways,”[xv] much like the “resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. [that] overlap and criss-cross.”[xvi] Framed differently, we might do for world society what has been done for international society: develop an account of primary institutions of world society to capture the complexity of ways human beings manage the very plurality of the human condition, and grapple with the paradox that while we can belong anywhere, nowhere has proven more vexing than belonging to humanity itself.

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of Michigan, forthcoming). *His research explores moral and legal dimensions of global change as evolve from tensions between international society and world society. This article is part of e-IR's edited collection, System, Society & the World: Exploring the English School.*

[i] Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Structure of Globalisation [FIWS?]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1; see also Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, in Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (eds), (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1992), 40-48.

[ii] Buzan, *FIWS?*, 36.

[iii] Wight, *International Theory*.

[iv] *Ibid.*, 46.

[v] R.J. Vincent quoted in Buzan, *FIWS?*, 51: "a fully solidarist international society would be virtually a world society because all units would be alike in their domestic laws and values on humanitarian intervention." See also Fred Halliday, "International Society as Homogeneity: Burke, Marx, Fukuyama," *Millennium* 21:3 (1992), 435-61.

[vi] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 269. See also Barry Buzan, "From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School," *International Organization* 47:3 (1993), 327.

[vii] James Mayall, *World Politics: Progress and its Limits* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 14.

[viii] Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 269.

[ix] Mayall, *World Politics*, 14.

[x] Barry Buzan, "International Political Economy and Globalization" in Alex J. Bellamy (ed.), *International Society and its Critics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115-133. In the same volume, Matthew Patterson considers the environment "Global Environmental Governance," 163-178.

[xi] See John Williams, "Pluralism, Solidarism, and the Emergence of World Society in English School Theory," *International Relations* 19:1 (2005), 19-38.

[xii] See Wight's chapter on "Theory of Mankind: 'Barbarians'" in *International Theory*, 49-98, and Gerritt Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilization' in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

[xiii] *Making Human: World Order and the Global Governance of Human Dignity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).

[xiv] Buzan *FIWS?*, 181.

[xv] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, 1958), 65, 31.

[xvi] *Ibid.*, 67, 32.

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