

From Cinderella to Beauty and the Beast: (De)Humanising World Society

Written by Matthew Weinert

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MATTHEW WEINERT, FEB 4 2016

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For Barry Buzan to describe world society as the Cinderella concept of the English School was to announce that the time for glass slipper fittings has drawn nigh.[i] Imprecision regarding the concept and uncertainty as to what value it brought to our understanding and explanation of international relations owed to at least two sources. First, English School theorists tended to equate world society, ambiguously as it were, with humanity as a whole (a residue of earlier philosophical imaginations),[ii] and, later, human rights and cosmopolitanism which tended, unintentionally or not, to blur if not conflate world society with solidarist international society.[iii] Second, scholars from diverse theoretical orientations have further confused matters by attaching the label 'world society' to civilisations, communications systems, (international) crime, democracy, the economy, education, empire, the environment, global civil society, global governance, health, institutions, integration, law, migration, non-governmental organisations, regionalism, religion, security communities, technology, and transnational social movements.[iv] More theoretically inclined works assay world society in the international relations terms of system, structure, and process, or the sociological ones of society and community. The sheer diversity of subjects linked to it suggests that world society has become something of a trope to capture a web of relations between diverse actors distinct from and operating outside the formal rubric of state governance reflective of (presumably) a commonality of interests, values, and normative commitments. On that reading, the systems or transactional view of world society, defined in terms of communication networks and the interaction capacity of systems,[v] is wed to the social view, defined in the (cosmopolitan) normative terms of shared values, rules and institutions.[vi] Treated as a conceptual midden, it is no surprise that the very notion of world society eludes.

But Cinderella, so the fairy tale goes, rises from obscurity. Various trans-border processes, environmentalism, globalisation, and humanitarian sentiments no doubt have piqued interest in world society – even in ways that suggest world society, equable with global civil society, may also contain uncivil elements. This chapter aims to inject some energy into the concept, but does not do so by challenging the very notion that perhaps confuses world society: its equability with humanity writ large. Rather, in this limited space, I engage the world society as humanity notion in a way that might help extricate world society from the clutches of the international society of states so as to do for world society what has been done for international society: to develop an account of its primary institutions and pave a way forward for world society scholarship.

Certainly 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.'[vii] Implication, though, is not certitude, and thus Buzan could aptly describe some views of world society as incredulous: it 'doesn't exist in any

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substantive form, and therefore its moral priority is unattached to any practical capability to deliver much world order'.[viii]

Martin Wight anticipated that misgiving; none of the three methods he outlined for constructing world society have come to fruition.[ix] 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 historically have been met with overwhelming force. Finally, cosmopolitanism, which prioritises 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'.[x] Yet on this reading world society appears as code for domestic policy homogenisation, which occludes world society's distinctiveness.[xi]

The need for (analytical and ontological) clarity may have compelled Bull to equate world society with 'all parts of the human community',[xii] which James Mayall echoes with the 'view that humanity is one'.[xiii] But what this means in practice is questionable. It captures the aggregate of inter-human discourse and exchange. But contractual arrangements as exponentially increasing features of an increasingly globalised, 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 that bind humanity as a whole, may help:[xiv] 'the task of diplomacy is to translate this latent or immanent solidarity of interests and values into reality'.[xv] Non-English School scholarship – e.g. Theodor Meron's work on the humanisation of the laws of war, Ruti Teitel's *Humanity's Law*, and Erin Daly's study of dignity and comparative constitutional law – illustrate the extent to which Mayall's point has been realised in theory and practice.[xvi] However, while Mayall's approach 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 human beings together in ways that constitute and shape world politics, it replicates Wight's assimilationist, and in the end state-centric, view. World society disappears into the recesses of interstate social relations.

At this point, Buzan, seeing Cinderella donned in the most pedestrian of garb, completely re-outfits her: if her humanity-style failed to dazzle, perhaps a make-over focused on structural regularities, e.g. the world economy and even sub-global/regional projects that shape identities, interests, and roles, would prove to be the dressing gown that would transform her into a (not the) belle of the ball.[xvii] Leaving aside the thematic focus (e.g. the economy, sub-regionalism, environmentalism, etc.) suggested by his approach, this attention shift offers two important lessons for world society scholarship. First, it disposes of normative homogeneity implied by world society (e.g. its presumed solidarism). Actors come to have disparate interests and normative commitments based on their (uneven) roles in the world economy. Great variation in depth of commitment to regional integration projects likewise signify varying degrees of fragmentation. Second, the approach acknowledges there are multiple value and interest commitments held by individuals and the collectives into which they have allocated themselves (e.g., pluralism).[xviii] As earlier intuited by Wight and Gong, world society may not be that civil after all; Cinderella could actually be a dominatrix in disguise. Put differently, if we subject the broad vision of world society as human community to an organisational 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.

We might, then, tackle world society from a more primordial standpoint: how interhuman dialogue and social practices (re)constitute membership in the human community in both beautiful and bestial ways.[xix] Gong and Wight previously engaged the notion that membership in humanity was contingent on understandings of civility and legitimacy, and thus illustrated that fragmented visions of world society cohabit the same analytical space as unitary notions of humankind.[xx] As ethically appealing as the (cosmopolitan, biological) thesis that all *Homo sapiens* are human may be, we must acknowledge that distinct conceptualisations 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

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the depravity of racially constructed notions of civilisation. From various ‘-isms’ (e.g. racism, sexism, nationalism) and sundry other psychologically and socially embedded frames of reference have precipitated a range of dehumanising, exclusionary and oppressive practices – many 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.

World society scholarship must invariably set and measure its cosmopolitan underpinnings against a history of dehumanisation. It makes little sense to replicate the dreams of the humanists given that Bosnians, Croats, Serbs, Hutus, Tutsis, capitalists, communists, rich, poor, middle class, whites, blacks, gays, straights, men, women, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Arabs and countless ‘types’ of human beings have harboured, *and harbour*, animosity towards others (always under the guise of some iconoclastic justification). In some cases, groups have denied recognition of others *as (fully) human* and acted violently against those who they detest, or erected legal and political strictures to ensure their marginalisation or exclusion from socio-political relations and the protection of the law. Hate, disregard, and disparagement as social practices are too prevalent in human life, and have informed perverse organisational logics; we must, therefore, construct even our most aspirational of theories on dystopic facts.[xxi]

Kimberly Hutchings outlined the problem I underline here. The human being is ‘fundamentally defined by the gap between “essence” and “existence”’. That is, unlike a table or a tree, ‘the being of any particular human does not coincide with any given list of attributes’.[xxii] I recast the matter as a distinction between *humanbeing* and being *human*. By the former I refer to a set of intersubjective understandings and standards, always specific to any given context, that determine who is recognised as fully human. These, in turn, are both informed by and limit being *human*, or the panoply of activities, projects, commitments, identities and memberships that give our particular lives meaning. Stated differently, being human refers to the various modes of becoming individual selves in ways that accord with the social yardstick of the human being. On this reading, dehumanisation stems from incongruity between one’s particular mode of being human – say, a Jew in Nazi Germany, a woman in an androcentric society, or homosexual in a homophobic one – and prevailing conceptions of human being.

To capture this socially constructed phenomenon, I proposed a notion of making human centred on five processes 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.[xxiii] Much of the work of making human occurs at the micro level of the individual, underscoring it as an interhuman, and thus world society, practice: 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 stigmatised, or coming to appreciate our neighbour not as an Other but as a decent human being. On this view, empathy and the hard work of introspection 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 suitable for inquiry in world society scholarship.

Examination of these processes does not take human standing in society for granted. Rather, it poses new kinds of questions germane to understand how humanity (re)constitutes itself: how do various forms of inter-human interaction inform collective social structures and generate distinctive systems to organise the mass of human beings? In what ways does the categorisation 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 organisational schematics with varying degrees of autonomy? Beauty, it seems, is right at home with the beast. The point of the world society concept, then, is to explore those many homes.

Clearly, I am concerned with developing the world society concept. In particular, might we tease out a set of primary (and by implication, secondary) institutions distinctively world society in orientation and hence do for it what has been

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done for international society?

I construe making human as a primary institution of world society, meaning 'durable and recognised 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'.^[xxiv] Though discrete, the five humanising processes that constitute what I call in the aggregate making human 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',^[xxv] much like the 'resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. [that] overlap and criss-cross'.^[xxvi]

Yet at least one question remains: what is the logical connection between humanising and dehumanising practices? How can both the beautiful and the bestial form world society? As practices designed to govern and manage human diversity and hence the very notion of human being, both humanisation (making human) and dehumanisation aim to construct world society in particular images: one ostensibly from a universal, inclusive standpoint, the other from a selective, exclusive standpoint. Interpreted dispassionately, both hint at a neglected insight into world society found in Hedley Bull's 1983 Hagey lectures. Writing about ecological matters, Bull observed that measures undertaken with respect to the dangers of disequilibrium between population and resources and other ecologically orientated issues 'take us beyond the sense of solidarity or common interests among governments' and into recognition of a common human interest 'in maintaining itself'.^[xxvii]

The awful truth is that human beings – the irreducible elements of world society – may seek to maintain themselves and the broader society they presumably form by acknowledging and accepting the diversity of ways of being human, or by protecting and conserving specifically defined communities of people against the presumed malignancy posed by hated others. In the end, world society as humanity is both beauty and beast; the concept thus ought 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.

Notes

[i] Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Structure of Globalisation [FIWS?]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11. Buzan reframes the traditional triad of international system, international society and world society as interstate societies (asocial, Hobbesian, Pluralist, Solidarist, Kantian and [con]federative types), transnational societies (pure medievalism, transnational coalitions across type and among similar transnational associations, competing transnational associations and no transnational associations), and interhuman societies (constituted by universal identities, large-scale imagined communities or fragmented ones in the form of families/clans) at 133.

[ii] E.g. 'The world society, the social cosmos – there could be other terms for it – is sometimes, in particular, referred to as the multi-state system (the system, that is, of many sovereign states). But the subject to be studied is not just the system of states. It is human society, comprehensively, as a whole.' He continues in a manner that anticipates Buzan's reconstruction of the English School conceptual triad:

'call it the many-levelled society, with the multistate system as the layer at the top, not altogether unlike the water-lily-covered surfaces of a series, or system, of ponds (the lilies drawing nourishment from mostly invisible sources down below). Two below-the-surface levels, at least, require separate recognition. Basic to the whole is the level of human life as physically, biologically, and psychologically lived—the life of men and women and of men-and-women-to-be. And intermediate between the actual life of human units, and the notional life of states, there is the complicated habitat in which there live and have their hybrid part-actual-part-notional being the numberless and variegated assortment of groups, groupings and organisations, in and through which men associate together to strive the more effectively for ends they have in common.' C.A.W. Manning, *The Nature of International Society* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1975), 34.

[iii] E.g. R.J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations: Issues and Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge

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University Press, 1986); and R.J. Vincent, 'Grotius, Human Rights, and Intervention', in *Hugo Grotius and International Relations*, eds Hedley Bull, Benedict Kingsbury and Adam Roberts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

[iv] This accounting is based on a simple search of the term 'world society' in the academic database JSTOR.

[v] Niklas Luhmann, 'World Society as a Social System', *International Journal of General Systems* 8:3 (1982), 131-38.

[vi] See Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations*.

[vii] Buzan, *FIWS?*, 1.

[viii] *Ibid.*, 36.

[ix] Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, eds Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1992), 40-48.

[x] *Ibid.*, 46.

[xi] 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.

[xii] 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), 337.

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

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

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

[xvi] Theodor Meron, 'The Humanization of Humanitarian Law', *The American Journal of International Law* 92:2 (2000), 239-78; Theodor Meron, 'The Martens Clause, Principles of Humanity, and Dictates of Public Conscience', *The American Journal of International Law* 94:1 (2000), 78-89; Ruti Teitel, *Humanity's Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Erin Daly, *Dignity Rights: Courts, Constitutions, and the Worth of the Human Person* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[xvii] Barry Buzan, 'International Political Economy and Globalization', in *International Society and its Critics*, ed. Alex J. Bellamy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115-33. In the same volume, Matthew Patterson considers the environment. 'Global Environmental Governance', 163-78.

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

[xix] On the concept of practice, see Cornelia Navari, 'The Concept of Practice in the English School', *European Journal of International Relations* 14:4 (2010), 611-30.

[xx] See Martin 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).

[xxi] On this point I write in the spirit of Judith Shklar, 'Putting Cruelty First', *Daedalus* 111:13 (1982), 17-27.

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[xxii] Kimberly Hutchings, 'Simone de Beauvoir', in *Critical Theorists and International Relations*, eds Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009), 67.

[xxiii] *Making Human: World Order and the Global Governance of Human Dignity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

[xxiv] Buzan, *FIWS?*, 181.

[xxv] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, 1958), 31.

[xxvi] *Ibid.*, 32.

[xxvii] Hedley Bull, *Justice in International Relations* (Waterloo, CA: University of Waterloo, 1983), 14.

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