

Review - Social Closure and International Society

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PETROS PETRIKKOS, SEP 19 2019

Social Closure and International Society: Status Groups from the Family of Civilised Nations to the G20
By Tristen Naylor
Routledge, 2019

With international society branching out to a more globalised audience, managing its day-to-day functions, institutions, and participation collectively has become a complicated process. A far more complicated process, nonetheless, is found in the competitive nature of actors striving to secure a seat at the global table that manages these practices. When referring to concepts such as 'international society', we go beyond simple definitions in the arena of world politics. The term is understood as a platform whereby states form institutions in the global domain to participate in exchanges and common dialogue (Bull and Watson, 1984: 1). Through this process, new rules have emerged for controlling and checking on international participation and cooperation.

Tristen Naylor's *Social Closure and International Society* fosters a multi-dimensional framework for addressing the way state and non-state entities alike compete and seek to maintain order and status within international society. The framework specifically focuses on a conceptualisation of international order. Naylor's main objective is to assess whether and how international society itself changes to accommodate a plethora of competing actors, and how these actors attempt to move through the international "social ranking" apparatus by utilising the existing institutional norms, beliefs, ideas, and values international society sets.

The book's core concepts revolve around revisiting and improving three main concepts: social division, social stratification, and social closure. The first one refers to the sub-categorisation of the social order into groups; the second one further establishes a hierarchical apparatus; the third one is about how actors as rational maximisers seek to contain and control participation by restricting and cutting off access to the management of international society (p.20). The author places emphasis on what he calls a "social division" between state and non-state actors, who are inside and outside international society respectively (p.142). This collective bundle shows that there are "pre-existing" social conditions actors are subjected to in terms of inequality and power relations (Bottero, 2005: 3).

Simultaneously, international trade systems and the level of development of participating actors contributes to the shifting paradigm of relations and mobility of states (Bornschiefer and Trezzini, 1997: 430). This means that there are both economic, as well as social and political reasons for the behaviour of actors within international society. Naylor addresses this by introducing 'international social closure' within the English School Theory of International Relations. The concept is understood as emphasising nationhood and state sovereignty of privileged actors, something that Naylor recognises as "exceptional" (p.22). How actors are included, excluded, and/or incorporated into the management of international society are determined by sovereignty, as well as the established norms and perceptions that govern the system. As Naylor puts it, "[c]losure is thus a result not only of the monopolisation of material advantages, but also of the ideational advantage to successfully exercise productive power" (Ibid).

Naylor also focuses on three key groups – namely the Family of Civilised Nations, the Great Powers' Club, and the G-20 Summitry. The reason for selecting these three groups are down to membership (p.7-8), as all three groups require monitoring their membership and retain an international social status. The 'elitist' nature of these groups focuses on maintaining a hierarchical structure, preserving the existing system, and if necessary, absorbing new

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players into their nexus, provided that by doing so, their interests are preserved, or even furthered (p.55, 86, 131). This has mainly been the case for considering state-actors, as non-state actors are seen as a threat to traditional state sovereignty by the established international elite (p.24, 153). By doing so, state and non-state entities compete for recognition. Naylor brings forth examples of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), such as the Gates Foundation, Oxfam and ActionAid, to indicate the way international society “mimics” governmental institutions, in how they appoint and selectively include or exclude others during high-profile summits (p.103-104). “Mimicry”, as the author puts it, is a tool that enables INGOs to be included in international society (p.104). The Gates Foundation, in this case, and these organisations alike are brought in as successful cases where non-state actors overcome the boundaries set by traditional state sovereignty, and are thus included and incorporated into the ‘elitist’ clubs of international society.

Moreover, upon being recognised, actors compete further to be included in the ‘management’ of international order and society. The least successful tend to be “excluded” from the said management scheme. Naylor clearly sums this process up in the following way: “[.] insiders guard their positions through exclusion strategies and mobility dampeners; outsiders try to overcome closure barriers, but mostly do so in such a way that the status quo is largely perpetuated” (p.114). Those more successful are incorporated into the agenda by these ‘insiders’ who are in charge of international institutions and organisations, often in partnership with member-states part of those ‘clubs’. In other cases, membership in some clubs like the G-summitry was increased, in order to pacify those who posed a threat to its members. Even when, for instance, Germany and Japan objected to the idea of expanding the G-summitry into the G-20 due to concerns over losing privileged status or the inclusion of potential rivals such as China, the Summit had to include outsiders to minimise external threats (p.132-133).

Theories of social stratification and social closure are reminiscent of the approach introduced by Lukes’ three-dimensional faces of power model, and to some extent that of Bachrach’s and Baratz’s on *Two Faces of Power*. Although usually applicable at a smaller, local and/or nationwide scale, the *faces of power* models account for everything Naylor mentions via ‘international social closure’: exclusion, inclusion, and incorporation. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) recognise that insiders already equipped with superior resources are capable of setting and controlling the agenda and participation of other actors in their day-to-day endeavours. Lukes (2005) also brings in the third dimension of power, which looks at how insiders can selectively include or exclude others by manipulating norms, ideas, beliefs, values, thus controlling the rest of society.

It is precisely these similar concepts that Naylor attempts to introduce in his book. Although a rather innovative concept that brings forth new understanding and additional tools to the English School theory, the theory of ‘international social closure’ is not particularly new when introduced to defining the management of international society. The way actors and institutions behave, as well as the techniques they employ in containing participation and competition are highlighted throughout the book. Controlling participation also provides a system of checks and balances that preserves the status quo and helps the ‘elites’ of international society hold on to their post.

What makes it interesting, however, is the combination of social, political, and economic reasons for inclusion, exclusion, and incorporation into the management of international society, as presented by Tristen Naylor. Not only that, but Naylor also brings in the issue of non-state actors and how these also compete for a position within international society (p.14, 42), something that has not been addressed enough in other literature. With specific reference to the findings on non-state actors, Naylor explains that these groups are in a radically different position compared to state actors. While state actors have ‘ease of access’ to the mechanisms of international society due to the concept of sovereignty, non-state actors have to compete in an uneven field of power relations (p.142-143). As a result, they start disadvantaged, as the main objective of members of international society institutions is to preserve and ensure the indefinite continuation of the status quo (p.154).

Although power relations can be understood via a plethora of frameworks, including the different ‘dimensions/faces of power’, *Social Closure and International Society* revisits social stratification and addresses the gap in literature on the actual management of international society. It does not merely offer an overview of how actors behave. Rather, in addressing the conflicting reasons behind membership in international ‘clubs’, Naylor has effectively presented the elitist nature of international society, which is just like any other handpicking elite who chooses who enters their club

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and who does not. The latter seems to be of growing relevance in the case of non-state actors, but even for those state-actors who seek to challenge the existing hierarchy of social relations in the international system.

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