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Really existing communities

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It seems almost churlish to criticize a book as well-intentioned and clearly argued as *The Transformation of Political Community*. There is much in the volume to admire and to endorse. But there are also problems—there always are—and I will move to address these shortly. First, however, I want to point to some of the book's undeniable strengths. Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of Linklater's argument is the manner in which he takes on board a number of the perduring vexations of political and moral theory and addresses these within the context of international relations. For too long political theory and 'IR' have occupied separate niches, as if these two enterprises had little to do with one another. The result of the separation has been an impoverishment of both realms. 'IR' could move along as if questions of war and peace, security, order, power, engagement, citizen and soldier were not inescapably political and ethical issues impossible to deal with adequately in a manner that models sophisticatedly but falls flat conceptually. Too many underlying presuppositions in such undertakings are not brought to the surface and dealt with as is painfully evident in rational choice accounts with their impoverished views of what makes human beings tick.

But political and moral theory do not get off scot free either, especially those of a strenuously philosophical bent. The problem in this case is addressing social and political life, whether 'domestically' or 'internationally', in so abstract a manner that it is nearly impossible to discern what connection *this* formulation had to do with what some of us sometimes still call 'the real world'. Here a bit of force feeding of Thucydides or St. Augustine might have a salutary effect. But Thucydides is not read by political philosophers because he is a 'historian' and Augustine gets ignored by most because he is a 'theologian'. Too bad. Augustine, for one, is second to none in cataloguing the discontents of the 'earthly city'. No elegant theory of justice; no morally edifying paeon to discourse theory; no high-minded appeal to cosmopolitanism over and above 'lesser' or 'lower' loyalties is going to blanket the globe with a warm layering of normativity. The effort to make more sturdy a regime of international human rights tells this tale, surely. These and other initiatives involve their advocates in the daily grind of politics in a Weberian sense: as the slow, patient boring of hard boards.

One strength of Linklater's argument is that he understands full well the ways in which multiple traditions of inquiry have impoverished themselves by walling off their practitioners from challenges and enriching conversations. Such disciplinary boundaries are now softened and, although they will not fall, they are surely being breached daily and this is a salutary development. Linklater exemplifies the possibilities of such boundary crossing at its best. He is, for example, well aware of the fact

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that it is altogether too easy either to dismiss questions arising from what usually gets cast as 'universalism' versus 'particularism' as narrowly and uninterestingly 'philosophical'; hence, of little note to IR. Similarly, it is by now a bit of a scandal, on my reading of the situation, that what Linklater calls 'strong emotional attachments to specific communities' get such short shrift in the work of so many political and moral philosophers, though there is some slippage in Linklater's treatment of these matters, as I point out below. But it is undeniably important to pay attention to Linklater's insistence that the international environment is, in fact, open to 'normative visions of radical political change.' I would drop the 'radical' here in light of the mordant Weberian and Augustinian references above, but normative change, certainly, and this is something conspicuous by its absence in nearly all realist and neorealist accounts.

A final strength of Linklater's analysis lies in his insistence that the sovereign state, codified at Westphalia, is open to challenge and scrutiny. This isn't a startling new theme, of course. Many of us have advanced critical views on the state for years. But the fact that so many are now taking up the cause suggests that confident presuppositions that began with state sovereignty as a kind of metaphysical first principle are not nearly so persuasive now as they once were. I'm not going to spend too much time on the sovereignty theme here as I have addressed it elsewhere.[1] But this is the point at which I must move to engage the slippery and, finally, unpersuasive elements in Linklater's argument.

Let's begin, in fact, with the state. Surely Linklater is right that those gesturing toward a world of more fragmentation in the sense of proliferation of sub-state communities with no final, overarching adjudicator in sight (neo-medievalism, he calls it) need to spend more time addressing rudimentary questions of security, order, and rights. This is, of course, not the 'new form' of political community Linklater believes we ought to be moving toward; indeed, gestures in this direction he calls 'nostalgic' and 'antiquarian'. Unprogressive, in a word or two. What is his preferred alternative? Here Linklater makes the case for a 'universal communication community', the basis of which already exists, on his view, in forms of globalisation and strong construals of human rights. There are seductive temptations to avoid if one goes down this path, too, and Linklater points out and frets about a 'false universality' lodged in an ahistorical approach dependent on natural law, or on a strongly teleological 'progressivist' interpretation of human development, as if things are just going to work out one day. This isn't the sort of universalism he seeks. What is? At this juncture his own *desiderata* grow impossibly abstract despite his efforts to avoid such an outcome. Here's how it works. The task of philosophical inquiry, Linklater insists, 'is to defend the dialogical imperative'. This imperative, this 'discourse, ethics' distinguishes 'dialogic cosmopolitanism' from false forms of ethical universalism. In what, then, does the dialogical imperative leading to a 'universal communication community' consist? So far as I can tell the *raison d'etre*

[1] See, for example, Jean Bethke Elshtain, *New Wine and Old Bottles. International Politics and Ethical Discourse* (Notre Dame University Press, 1997.) This is a monograph consisting of my Hesburgh Lectures at Notre Dame with critical commentaries by Fred Dallmayr, Martha Merritt, and Raino Vayrynen. Another reference is my essay, 'Feminist Inquiry and International Relations,' in Michael Doyle and G. John Ikenberry (eds.), *New Thinking in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 77–90.

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that drives the entire effort is to 'release societal potentials for achieving levels of universality and difference'. Indeed, the language of 'universality and difference' becomes, after a time, something of a slogan rather than a tough-minded imperative based on an equally tough-minded analysis. We are told that this universal communication community is itself 'the unfinished project of modernity', a project requiring that the 'prospects for wider communities of discourse' must be released from the strangle-hold of 'powerful systemic constraints', primarily the sovereign state in its most unattractive aspects: as the defender of rigid forms of exclusion.

Now Linklater recognizes that every political community, every form of civic membership, is erected on the basis of terms of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion.' As Hannah Arendt insistently argued, you cannot be a citizen of 'the world' as you can be a citizen of a particular, bounded political community—the category of 'the world' is vague and hopelessly vacuous. Linklater tries to deal with this by talking of reconciling 'universality and difference' rather than capitulating too readily to one or the other. And what differences does he have in mind? Various hierarchies based on grounds of unacceptable and invidious difference—gender, race and ethnicity are mentioned explicitly and Linklater warns that no one should 'underestimate' either the power of the nation-state or 'the tenacity of hierarchical conceptions of race, gender, ethnicity.' But this begs a critical question: what would non-hierarchical conceptions of race, gender, and ethnicity look like? In the universal dialogic community such distinctions do not go away, surely? Indeed, they should not, following Linklater, because that would be to eradicate certain possibilities for enriching by contrast to debilitating and nasty difference. Of course, conceptions of race, gender, and ethnicity would be radically transformed in and through the very process of becoming the subject of an 'unapologetically universalistic' discussion. But it is hard to see how.

In fact, and this is the biggest problem with Linklater's analysis overall, it is nearly impossible to discern what this international dialogue is going to be about. Perhaps part of the problem lies in the fact that he seeks too strenuously a mode of reconciliation rather than a way to forestall turning certain principles of difference into deadly conflicts. Injunctions to citizens to 'reconcile' their identity as citizens of a particular polity with 'their conception of themselves as subjects of universal duties and rights' is central, he tells us, to his analysis. But the vast majority of the world's peoples surely do not think of themselves as subjects of international duties and rights. Rights, perhaps, if they are aggrieved. But they have frameworks Linklater never touches upon within which to situate such grievances. First and foremost among these is the already extant international communities that command transnational attachment, namely, those grounded in universal religions. Not all religions and not in the same way, of course, but Linklater's text includes no entry in the index for religion and no discussion at all of religion.

This is, alas, not too surprising given the terms of academic exclusion I noted at the outset: religion is for theologians and other traffickers in arcane knowledge. But the universalistic requirements of various faith traditions require as a fundamental principle of belief that the state and all extant political bodies be relativized. No state can command the highest loyalty. A plurality of forms of membership, loyalty, and identity are recognized. At times, commitment to a particular community may take precedence. But one is also a member of an international, plural body consisting of trans-national forms of memberships.[2] Such actually existing forms of

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membership do promote the universalistic discussion Linklater calls for. Absent such forms of membership, and it is hard to know what anyone would be debating or criticizing or endorsing. There are millions of people in the world, unnoticed by Linklater, who have already widened 'the moral boundaries of political communities' in light of the universalistic communities in and through which they were formed. They have, as Augustine argued, 'dual citizenship'. Surely any compelling account of the whys and wherefores of a universalistic ethic must take account of such already existing ethics and whether they do or do not do at least part of the heavy lifting Linklater calls for.

The term 'cosmopolitan', Linklater's preferred name for his dialogical imperative, is somewhat unfortunate in this context. The history of the term suggests a kind of *luftmensch*, someone without a concrete location anywhere. Linklater would resist such a definition. But that is what cosmopolitanism conjures up—the affluent jet-setter, the sophisticate, the elite who can make themselves comfortably 'at home' anywhere, particularly if there is a four-star hotel. So let's get real about the situations in which the vast majority of the world's population finds itself. People are often just barely holding on, struggling daily to make ends meet and to care for their children. They are subject to the vagaries of ill fortune, whether natural or political catastrophe, and there is precious little the international community is prepared to do on their behalf save bind up some of the wounds. This is no small thing and I would never denigrate the efforts of Amnesty International or Doctors Without Borders, or the International Red Cross. But it is primarily wound-binding, as they would be the first to admit.

Such groups operate on the presupposition that borders are there to be crossed whenever and wherever rights violations occur or persons are suffering. But these are quite concrete activities launched on behalf of people who find themselves in particular situations, often of repression and horror. People in these situations are not in need of a new cosmopolitanism. They are in need of concrete action of a generous not contemptuous sort on their behalf. If they would enter into an international dialogic effort it would be about very concrete matters having to do with physical safety and distribution of resources. I doubt they would be much animated by the prospect of achieving new levels of 'universality and difference.'

Now Linklater could well come back at me and say that what I have just talked about is precisely what he has in mind: how do we stop the worst from happening? How do we build in a normative structure such that fewer people find themselves in the desperate situations I have noted above? If this is the move he would make in response to my concerns, then my riposte to him would be that he is going to have to spend much more time dealing with concrete structures and institutions of political power. These are noticeably absent from his analysis. I kept asking myself, as I read along: but what political body or bodies would be charged with this task or these tasks? How could one possibly 'reconcile' elimination of distinctions of a bad sort based on race, gender, and ethnicity with 'group differentiated citizenship' that 'bestows public recognition upon the special interests and needs of subaltern cultural groups'?

[2] Here it would be necessary, as I indicated, to look at the particularistic and universalistic dimensions of the world's great religions. Clearly I am privileging for the purpose of this discussion those that are not narrowly exclusivist or local.

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If I am to be persuaded along these lines, I want to know about what structures of government and interplay of institutions would be involved. How would one forestall sinking back into invidious difference if one 'bestows' recognition of particular 'subaltern' groups? And which groups would that be in any case? Are all 'women' such a group? This is just nonsensical. Some women are part of an elite power structure based on inherited status and wealth or acquired power and privilege or both. How do we sort out which women and to what ends and purposes? How do we not build in vast reservoirs of resentment on the part of those upon whom special recognition based on race, gender, or ethnicity is not bestowed but who are by no means masters of the universe themselves?

What, finally, would Linklater's international, universalistic, dialogic community dialogue about? I kept drifting off pondering what people would be pondering. This is none too clear. Abstract debates about 'higher levels of universality and difference' are good for an academic conference or two but are not the stuff of nitty-gritty power brokerage. It is no doubt well and good to endorse the ideal of 'freely chosen moral principles which further the autonomy of human beings' rather than to simply acquiesce in 'considerations of national power' or be driven 'by a concern for maintaining order and stability between the most powerful or potentially disruptive sovereign states.' Well, maybe this is well and good. But there is a figure lurking in the shadows here who goes by the name of Thomas Hobbes. I am no Hobbesian, but we must all confront the stark questions of power and violence and order and protection he puts on the front burner in his own relentless and no doubt reductionistic way.

Is there no legitimate and essential concern we all have for order and stability and 'potentially disruptive' nation-states? You bet there is. That is a central conundrum. Human communities are often on a razor's edge and the fall into killing and anarchic violence is an ever-present possibility. This is a difficult thing for citizens of the stable, ordered West to conjure with. Therein lies the final problem I will note with Linklater's book. He just doesn't take account of the rough realities of our fragile globe at century's end. His book is remarkably sanitized from conflict and torment and fratricidal or suicidal struggle. I would urge him to consider what his hope for a universal dialogical community looks like if you put that in. I do not believe it would require that he give up on his basic commitments; indeed, I for one, would not want him to do that because the basic recognitions imbedded in his argument are keen and vital. The problem is that his overall unpacking of those themes winds up being terrible abstract, too thin by far to do the necessary conceptual, historical, and concrete political work he embraces. Concrete attention to how concrete communities have tried to work out particular and universalistic commitments would help.

Let me conclude by quoting rather shamelessly from my own work, here the recently published monograph, *New Wine and Old Bottles*. In an analysis of the 'new nationalism' I argue as follows and it is with this that I will end, in ways that simultaneously buttress and put pressure on Linklater's project:

> Those who fear forms of nationalism that feed on hatred of ways of life have good grounds. But they go too far in claiming that this is *always* the direction nationalism tends to take; therefore, the sooner we have done with nationalist aspirations and identifications, the better. But much of the new nationalism of 1989 involved remarkable outbursts of civic energy from long-suppressed peoples, and the language in which these new citizens spoke was in and

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through a civic rhetoric that tapped universal as well as particular claims and concerns. The independence movements . . . protested their domination by the Soviet Union, first, because this domination violated principles of self-determination embedded in international law and widely shared understandings and customs and, second, because it trampled on basic human rights, including the right to participate in, and help to choose, a way of life. Such appeals are at once universal and particular, tapping old identities but energizing new political recognitions. Although this is a story in the making, peoples who proclaim their devotion to human rights as a universal principle can be held accountable, and will hold themselves accountable, in ways rapacious, nationalistic destroyers, who scoff at such niceties, cannot. This middle way—once again as an alternative to warring racial and ethnic groupings or the homogenized stability of efficiently managed imperialism—seems to me the only possible course that respects claims to self-determination yet holds forth the prospect of a painfully attained and perhaps, for that very reason, even more deeply cherished civic order based on universal principles of recognition.[3]

[3] Elshtain, *New Wine and Old Bottles*, pp. 30–31.

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