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The hierarchicalization of political community

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To respond to Andrew Linklater's *The Transformation of Political Community* is to walk a very fine line between admiration and perplexity. I have admiration especially for his willingness to confront some of the most important and difficult questions of contemporary political theory. To pursue the claim that we need to rethink the accounts of political community that anyone with credibility as a political analyst would much prefer to leave as a constitutive assumption of almost everything they want to say, takes some courage. And this is certainly a bold book, both in its sweep and its ambitions. It is one of the very few books in the contemporary theory of international relations that provokes more than passive surrender to the tediously familiar and the three-fold typology. Even so, I remain perplexed at the way Linklater manages to keep retying himself up in all the knots he tries so vigorously to disentangle.

There is much that I agree with in Linklater's analysis. Not least, I agree with his insistence that we should pay greater attention both to contemporary patterns of inclusion and exclusion and to a wide range of historical and structural tendencies now forcing us to rethink our fundamental assumptions about universality and difference. This is, I think, to agree with quite a lot. But there is also much with which I am not sure I agree or disagree. One of the challenges of reading the book, in fact, is that it covers so much ground, and so many theoretical controversies, that I am left more with an impression of how the central argument is supposed to work than with any clear sense of either its logical or empirical force. Many of its key theoretical engagements remain elusive and difficult to evaluate.

There is also, of course, much with which I disagree quite strongly, and it is here that I will focus my necessarily brief remarks. Not least, I have considerable trouble recognizing many of the theorists and theoretical controversies that mark the main signposts telling us where the argument is going and why. It would be especially worth looking much more systematically at Linklater's treatment of Kant than I have the space for here, but Kant certainly seems to me to be a much more difficult site for thinking about politics than Linklater suggests. Not least, while Linklater's Kant may be a popular stock-in-trade of international relations theorists who become interested in his more explicitly political writings about a 'universal peace', I am entirely unpersuaded that this is sufficient for an analysis that places so much weight on the need to rethink Kant's account of the proper relationship between universality and diversity. I would have expected, for example, a more extended engagement with Kant's central philosophical interests in, among other things, finding a place for universality *in* particularity, and with how Kant's later writings grow out of and indeed express his difficulty in framing an appropriate relationship

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between universality and particularity as a philosophical *problem*. The extent to which Kant struggled with the paradoxes and contradictions of modern subjectivity—with a *relation* between unity and diversity in a modern subjectivity of freedom and autonomy and not simply with the some moral impetus towards universality—is kept rather quiet in Linklater's analysis. This has significant implications for the way in which Linklater's entire argument proceeds. It is especially helpful in enabling him to evade any serious engagement with the problems of modern subjectivity, despite their significance for several other philosophical positions he seeks to engage. It also explains, I think, the lack of any engagement with Weber as one of the paradigmatic political realists of this century, one who sought to salvage some sort of Kantian subjectivity from Nietzschean critique. Instead, and tellingly, we find only the usual easy references to the singularly uninteresting realists and neo-realists of contemporary Anglo-American IR who so dutifully perform in accordance with the required stereotypes.

Related difficulties arise with his treatment of all the post-Kantians. Thus, if I catch glimpses of the Hegel of *The Philosophy of Right* in Linklater's account of the conventional defenders of statist forms of community, it is a Hegel whose logical power is magically shorn of its capacity to insist on a dialectical *relationship* between universalizing and particularizing practices. I see, for example, no place in which the force of Hegel's logic is effectively challenged by some other logic showing how we must move on up some ladder of universalization rather than reaffirm the universality in particularity that is the modern state. Similarly, Linklater's Marx seems to have neglected to write, say, the chapters on money in *Capital*. His Habermas is innocent of any awareness of how difficult it is to take on Carl Schmitt's account of sovereignty and win. His poststructuralists are all to be understood as manifestations of Lyotard's claim about scepticism towards universalizing metanarratives, rather than as serious philosophers struggling with the way we moderns are all so beholden to historically specific accounts of the *relationship* between universality and difference. Even I appear as one of those who want us all to move from '(s)upposedly neutral accounts of the world out there' to 'the normative analysis of the possibilities for the transformation of political community', (p. 3) something that makes absolutely no sense to me at all except as an odd appropriation of a position that has tried to point to the absurdity of talking about 'the normative' in this way.

Now differences in the interpretation of massively over-interpreted texts may not be something to cause anyone to lose much sleep. I mention these specific instances, however, because in each and every case Linklater's strategy is to take what he thinks is useful and then discard the rest. And what is useful is always some sort of argument for a greater universalization, and what can be discarded is the tattered residue of particularity. Much more crucially, indeed the primary condition under which Linklater can put this strategy into effect, is that the conclusion he wants to draw forces him to systematically minimize the extent to which all of these thinkers insist on working through a *relationship* between the claims of universality and those of diversity. In fact, none of them, in my view, can be understood simply as resources for anyone's teleology of universalization, though Kant, Hegel and Marx have all been extensively appropriated in this way before. They would hardly be interesting thinkers if they could. They would not still be able to force us to think, and think again, about difficult philosophical puzzles; about finitude, autonomy, subjectivity, identity, alienation, reification, space, time, and the rest. Similarly, the

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Critical Theorists and poststructuralists would be of no interest if all they did was to equate 'the normative' with either universalization or differentiation. The fact that we are all now deluged with such awful secondary literature on such thinkers should not stop us from trying to see how they are still struggling with serious problems that are not a million miles removed from problems that have driven the Kants, the Hegels and the Marxes for quite some time, and which are not going to quickly evaporate in the face of moral commitments to either universality or diversity.

My two primary concerns with Linklater's analysis flow out of such differences in the interpretation of key texts. First, the overall logic of the argument comes uncomfortably close to being circular. The primary conclusion is already announced as the major premise. It is a premise which permits, indeed requires, a strategy of reading all and sundry as potential converts to the cause of normative universalism; 'widening the boundaries of dialogic communities,' (p. 5) or 'widening the moral boundaries of political communities,' (p. 2) as he calls it in different places. And second, this major premise is precisely a claim that the crucial problem that has to be addressed is the need to rethink and 'transform' the way in which modern conceptions of political community force us to accept an account of citizenship that is radically dualistic. It is an account that is built on a choice between being a citizen of a particular community and being 'subjects of universal duties and rights'. (See especially the middle paragraph on p. 2) Posing the problem as a dualism of universality and particularity, Linklater wants to persuade us of the virtues of universality.

Now, there are three things to be said about the way the problem Linklater wants to address is articulated in this specific way. First, it is a formulation which is very widely shared. In fact, given the manner in which the contemporary disciplines of international relations, political theory and ethical philosophy have been constructed, it is quite difficult to think of people who do not subscribe to some version of this formulation. Second, it is, as far as it goes, exactly the right question to be addressing. We are all aware that we are somehow entangled in the legacies of all those dualisms of the early-modern era. The grand choice between 'men' and 'citizens' can be appropriately read as the version of this legacy that is most urgent for theorists of international relations and others who are concerned with the consequences of a radical split between our political identity and our supposed humanity, or, as some prefer to say, between our politics and our ethics.This is why for all its looseness of argument, Linklater's analysis has such rhetorical force.

But third, framing the problem in precisely this way is, I believe, profoundly misleading. For it is simply not the case that 'cosmopolitanism', as Linklater understands this term to refer to an affirmation of all those universal rights and duties, can offer 'a critique of the sovereign states-system.' (p. 2) It cannot do so because cosmopolitanism is *already* a constitutive principle of the 'sovereign states-system'. The core issue cannot be posed as a simple choice between citizenship and humanity, between the necessities and tragedies of statist power politics and the potentials of some more ethical, more rational, more communicatively competent humanity. *That* choice is the one that is *produced* by the account of a politics of modern sovereign states in a states-system. Moreover, the way in which this choice is produced depends not on a radical dualism but precisely on a specific *relationship* between the claims of universality and those of diversity.

This is the relationship that is expressed in the claim to state sovereignty, and in the practices of modern subjectivity more generally, and which Kant and the post-

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Kantians posed as a rather difficult problem. Sovereignty and subjectivity express the possibility of resolving the relationship between universality and diversity *in* a particular place. They do so, to put it in the shortest formulation I can come up with, by resolving all relations of unity and diversity, space and time, and self and other in a space/body that is in principle capable of attaining universality in its particularity while taking its proper place as one particular space/body among other particular spaces/bodies. In this way, state sovereignty and subjectivity express a series of relationships. But having been constructed through all those long and complex practices that went into making the modern self and the modern state, state sovereignty then poses all those dualistic problems with which we are so familiar and which Linklater articulates so well. But it is quite futile to stay working to resolve dualisms of universality and difference on the terms they have been given to us by state sovereignty and the modern subject as specific relations between universality and difference. It is entirely misleading to read the poststructuralists, for example, as yet another Romantic celebration of difference opposed to some Enlightenment celebration of universality. It is equally misleading to read 'globalization' as a universalizing challenge to the particularism of the modern state.

State sovereignty and the modern subject may work hard to present us with an apparent choice between universality and difference in this sense, but they work because universality and difference are already set up in a specific relationship in state sovereignty and the modern subject. To put it differently, Linklater plays out precisely the options that Hobbes and other early-modern thinkers laid out for us all; Kant included. He does not enquire into the moves that Hobbes and the rest made to ensure we would drive ourselves silly replaying the same tired moves over and over again. Rather than affirming the universalizing conclusions contained in his initial premise, therefore, I would have prefered Linklater to have engaged more sharply with the ways in which this set of impossible alternatives was set up in the first place. Not least, I think, this would have forced him to engage more rigorously with the key texts that he believes can sustain us on the road to universality but which I believe only show us how we have come to be trapped within specifically modern accounts of what the relationship between universality and particularity must be.

This is an elementary point, though it is often strangely difficult to grasp. There are several other conventional ways in which it can be made.[1] One can remember, for example, that the sovereign states-system developed along with a capitalist world economy, and think about why we have such a hard time reconciling their respective 'logics'. One can remember that the sovereign states-system developed along with some form of over-arching 'culture', which one might then identify through the usual historical sequence of Christianity, Europe and Modernity. More significantly, one can remember that sovereignty cannot be, either logically or practically, *simply* a claim to a monopoly of authority in a particular site.

Sovereignty, as all kinds of people have told us, requires something beyond itself, some other form of authority, both so that the claim to a monopoly can be recognized and so that the claim can be put into effect. Sovereignty is a claim to

[1] I draw here on a longer discussion of Linklater's account of citizenship in Walker, 'Citizenship and the Modern Subject', in Kimberly Hutchings and Roland Dannreuther (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Citizenship* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

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particularity that can be meaningful *only in relation* to something more general. This something more general, of course, is open to various practices of naming: the logic of anarchy, the society of states, modernity, and the United Nations Charter spring to mind immediately. None of these are quite what Linklater has in mind when he refers to the widening of boundaries of dialogic communities and so on. They do suggest, however, that sovereignty cannot be the problem to which universalism can be the solution. What we so easily think of as simply particularity is unthinkable without the constitutive account of universality that makes that particularity possible. Consequently, to develop a critique of the states system must be not to attack particularisms with universalisms, but to rearticulate the relationship between the claims of universality and those of particularity or diversity.

In some sense, of course, this is exactly what Linklater claims to be doing. It is also exactly what, in my view, Linklater cannot be doing precisely because he is working within a set of problems produced by the claims of state sovereignty. The choice is effectively set up, once again, as another great debate between the realists and the idealists, except that this latest representative of the idealists has begun to temper his universalistic tendencies with an appropriately late-modern attention to difference and diversity. The upshot is predictable, not only in the sense that we can all imagine the usual realist, nationalist and republican response, but in the sense that Linklater moves in the only direction available to him—upwards. It is a direction that seems entirely natural, and will make perfect sense to a great many people.

For Linklater, it turns out, is working not towards the 'transformation' of political community, but towards the hierarchicalization of political community. Where we have all become so tired of the eternal return of the sovereign state, we now get instead the eternal return of the Great Chain of Being and the celebration of new 'levels' both below and above. Both are returns to the same set of possibilities enabled by the spatial terrain of the modern sovereign state; and enabled also by the spatial framing of the way in which all relations of universality and diversity are resolved at the point at which the universality in particularity inside shifts to the particularity in universality outside. But the spatial metaphors of above and below are no more useful as guides to the transformations we see all around us than the metaphors of here and there that work to naturalize the modern state. If state sovereignty is under challenge, then not only do we have to think long and hard about the possibility of new ways of thinking about universality and difference but also about space and time and self and other.

If the challenges to state sovereignty are as serious as Linklater suggests they are—and in this I am in considerable agreement with him—then the consequences for our understanding of contemporary politics are considerably more dramatic than Linklater would suggest. These consequences go to the core of what we mean by politics, of what kind of legitimate authority is being constituted by and over what kinds of subjects, and will not be engaged by trying to bring a cosmopolitan ethics to bear on what we already know politics to be.

As long as sovereignty is treated simply as an affirmation of particularity and fragmentation (or, conversely, as the tacitly universal ground on which political theorists can go on about freedom, obligation, democracy and difference) there is simply no possibility of 'transforming' political community. Our modern conceptions of particularity, of states, of communities, of nations, of individuals, and of

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subjects, already embody accounts of universality. Attempts to get at ways in which we might think more productively about how to rearticulate the relationship between universality and particularity *must* involve more than working within the dualisms produced by a specifically modern account of subjectivity. The way forward cannot be framed as seizing the new moment with an improved and difference-sensitive form of universalism. It must involve an engagement with the conditions under which we have all become so easily persuaded that the dualisms that arose with modern accounts of sovereignty and subjectivity are the appropriate way of posing questions and answers about the future of political life. It must also involve an engagement with the ways in which modern sovereignties and subjectivities are now proliferating, fragmenting, becoming highly mobile and embedded in networks of relations, and are being reshaped in spatiotemporal practices that make very little sense in terms of the histories and cartographies through which we have come to naturalize the state as the only thing that *can* reconcile universality and particularity, space and time, self and other.

Our emerging histories and practices, it is fairly safe to predict, will not be dominated either by the territorial lines or the hierarchical levels suggested by claims about the eternal return of the state or the eternal return of the Great Chain of Being. It may even be that we will soon be forced to give up using terms like citizenship and community as if they give us a firm purchase on what is going on anywhere. Then we might start to find out what it really means to take seriously the claim that sovereignty is an inadequate grounding for contemporary politics. Foucault has famously remarked that 'We need to cut off the King's head: in political theory that still has to be done.'[2] In Linklater's analysis, however, the king's head looks up and it looks down, but it shows few signs of decapitation.

[2] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–77*, edited by Colin Gordon, (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 121.

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