



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Political Obligation in the World Society

JONATHAN TREJO-MATHYS

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AT BOSTON COLLEGE

*IN CONVERSATION WITH **ERIK OWENS**, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE BOISI CENTER*

OCTOBER 2, 2013

- Owens: What is the nature of the world society as you describe it? What keeps its members together?
- Trejo-Mathys: There are different ways of thinking about the notion of the social order at the global level. There is a conceptual question and there is also an empirical question about when a social order at the global level emerged, because there was presumably not always one. It is very difficult to argue that, for most of early humanity, there was any such kind of order. And once human beings spread out across different continents, there was often very little or sporadic contact between them.
- Owens: So it is not a category of existence, but a connection based on some sort of exchange or community.
- Trejo-Mathys: It depends partly on questions of sociology about how you define social relationships or social phenomena. This concept of a world society is meant to contrast with the realist view in international relations theory, which states that the society concept can only be applied to politically organized social groups—states—and there are no lasting kinds of social relationships or social norms that integrate all of the different states into some wider kind of social unit. This comes out in the description of the social order at the global level, an international system of states that is often qualified as anarchy. If you think about it sociologically, it is like anomie in Durkheim's sense.

The world society concept is definitively meant to rule that out, both at a conceptual and at an empirical level. There are ways of thinking about international relations that have incorporated a somewhat thicker, more social element, so that it is not just about strategic interaction, causal influence, maybe some thin kind of diplomatic relations, as in the realist model.

In the realist model, what determines the shape of the global order is ultimately the differential distribution of material capacities—like power, wealth, control of certain resources and their deployment by self-interested actors—so that, between the actors, there is really not any kind of social bond. There is just an attempt, by each actor, to choose strategies and actions that maximize their own utility or allow them best to achieve their own goals.

Owens: There is connection but no affinity, no bond?

Trejo-Mathys: You could say that. There is no shared understanding about any norms or rules that are meant to constrain the choices available to the actors. That is in fact just another way of saying that there is no social relationship between the actors. You can argue that, even in those kinds of contexts, a certain kind of shared understanding is required in order for there to be seriously intense conflict over a certain kind of thing, because that thing has to be seen by both parties as valuable for some kind of goal, so that it is possible to say that, even in extreme cases of conflict, among species like human beings, there is a kind of shared understanding that the object of contention is important. But you do not have to push that all that far.

The so-called English School of international relations theory offers another way of thinking, according to which, over time, there emerges a certain thin set of shared values and norms that polities in the international system mutually endorse in their practice, so that there is a kind of culture, so then they use the concept of a society of states.

The world society concept is meant to go further and to suggest that there are intense enough social relationships at all levels of social organization to make it the case that the only non-arbitrary level at which to apply the society concept is the world level, because all other applications of it require various kinds of qualifications. Historically, the use of the society concept has tended to be often more or less unconsciously biased by the contingent political organization of human beings into different groups, so that society has tended to mean nation-state society. The model that I find most attractive, although I understand why some find it a bit doubtful, is a model that understands social relationships as fundamentally communicative. Here, the people that I am most inspired by are the German social theorists Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann.

It is important to point out that Kant was already thinking in this way, as was John Dewey, who emphasized that with the technological and economic developments of human interaction, we have reached a point at which, even at the face-to-face level of interaction, there is an implicit awareness that the interaction could play out in such a way that you could refer to any part of the globe. One might go with the person to some other part of the globe, or talk about a mutual acquaintance from some other part of the globe, so that the entire world is the implicit horizon of available references for communication. Earlier in history, this was not the case, in part because there was not that much interaction or there was not the kind of technological and economic infrastructure for transportation, exchange, communication, etc., to support the notion that, in principle—potentially, possibly, virtually—every human being is a social interaction partner with every other.

A different way of thinking of that is that most human beings in the world today can understand that there is an intelligible way in which a conversation could develop and one of the conversation partners could make an understandable reference to any arbitrary state of affairs in some other part of the world. Niklas Luhmann describes it as the “and so on” of the interaction. The horizon of possibilities that could give content to the “and so on” of any given interaction at this point is, arguably, the entire world. You can also think about it like the six degrees of Kevin Bacon game, with instances of communication. Nowadays, it is probably the case, as with the six degrees of Kevin Bacon idea, that any given instance of human communication could be connected, in some intelligible way, with almost every other.

Owens: Would that mean that people with a limited horizon of understanding of the rest of the world would not be a part of the world society?

Trejo-Mathys: I think you have to allow empirically for a spectrum or degrees of inclusion in world society. There is a threshold of interconnection that has to be reached in order to justify the application of the concept. I think it is extremely difficult to make that threshold precise, but it is not so different than other processes of continuous development, like learning a language. You cannot say that on April 1, 2006, my son finally knew English. There is no specific date at which, suddenly, world society emerges like Athena from the head of Zeus.

It is also the case that there are some human beings who are not included at all. I remember reading a story a year or two ago about a tribe being discovered in the Amazon by the outside world. It had little, if any, contact with the outside world. They would not have been included in the world society, but now they are. Even if, at first, it was somewhat asymmetrical, in the sense that we were communicating about them and talking about images that were taken of them from a helicopter, it is just a matter of time.

Owens: I gather that you find this understanding of world society more useful or more descriptive than a concept of global citizenship. Could you speak to the difference?

Trejo-Mathys: Well, you can mean different things by global citizenship. You could mean a kind of ethical or moral attitude or orientation. I do not have any objection to that. I think it is probably a very good thing if people think about themselves in that way, so long as they are not neglecting the old sort of objection to cosmopolitans, that they do not care about their kindred but talk all the time about how they love humanity.

From the point of view of a political philosopher, citizenship has an inevitably legal and political reference. There it becomes somewhat problematic, because it is not entirely clear what that would mean. Michael Walzer at one point said something like, "I don't know what sense there could be to calling myself a world citizen. I've never received a passport from the world state."

On the other hand, though, there is an increasing entrenchment, in principle, of certain kinds of legal and political normative standards that we call human rights and initial steps towards legal and political mechanisms for securing compliance with those standards. That is, I think, at least a step in the direction of a kind of world polity that has certain minimal normative standards that are institutionalized, with mechanisms to try and protect them, analogous—faintly, at least—to the kinds of mechanisms familiar from relatively well functioning constitutional democratic states. To that extent, there is a kind of movement towards the inclusion of human individuals as legal subjects of international law and nascent steps towards the institutionalization of political mechanisms for enforcing those legally codified norms. This, I think, gives a credible, empirical reference point to some notion of global citizenship or membership in a world polity—not just a world society, but a world polity.

A world society can exist simply by virtue of the global interconnections of communication and, in that sense, interaction. But the world could still be divided, as sociologists say, segmentally into different political systems. There might be no central political institution or organization. We have seen steps towards an increasing centralization of various kinds of legal and political mechanisms. Still, we are very much a state-dominated system in the political sphere.

Another reason for thinking about world society is the fact that there are many other kinds of actors who play an important role in global politics, whether it be transnational networks that are sort of loosely integrated, like al-Qaida and the mafia, or much more highly integrated organizations and networks like multinational corporations.

Owens: What are your thoughts on the idea of obligation here? What is the moral relevance of political boundaries? What normative value do political boundaries provide or prevent us from having?

Trejo-Mathys: That is a very central question, one that I do not personally have a well worked out answer to. One of the things that I think of myself doing is providing a framework for thinking about what our political obligations might be as individuals, as opposed to providing specific answers. At the fundamental level, however, whatever sense there is to holding that there are certain genuinely universal human rights—understood not just as moral aspirations or ideals, but as legal and political ideas—the significance of political boundaries is morally relevant insofar as they serve the purpose of protecting those human rights. Even if it is a set that is smaller than what you find in some of the international treaties.

There is additional significance that I find hard to assess with respect to this more basic set of standards, one that arises from the importance that people attach to their identification with a particular group, whether it be a nation or whatever. This is clearly something that matters to people, but it is not clear, in debates about immigration, for instance, how it is supposed to have some independent moral role. Does it simply mean that a lot of white Americans do not like the idea of the population of the United States becoming more brown, so to speak? Usually, people do not argue like that at all. They usually argue that it is hurting the economy or that the immigrants are unfairly benefiting from things that we provide via our work and our taxes. Those are not ideas that appeal to a notion of shared belonging to some cultural or ethnic group.

The significance of political boundaries might vary from case to case but, to the extent that it is important to grant them a moral status, I would say it is because they serve some functional role in helping to ensure that human beings' human rights are fulfilled. For that reason, there is nothing sacrosanct about them, particularly because, historically, they are contingent on all kinds of factors that are, as philosophers like to say, morally irrelevant, or worse, morally objectionable. I think it is extremely difficult to argue that the US–Mexico war of 1846 to 1848 was any kind of a just war on our part: quite the opposite. Nevertheless, our boundaries were determined by it.

Politically, it is a totally different issue. I mean, imagine the difficulties of someone trying to use the injustice of our conduct in the US–Mexico War as an argument about legislation or policy in contemporary American politics. I think, in the long run, what might help to relativize or diminish the importance of political boundaries is going to be other social processes, particularly in the economic and cultural spheres. Migration, for example, increases interconnections and interdependencies to such an extent that it becomes clear that the existing political boundaries—which I suspect will still be reasonably stable for sheer reasons of institutional inertia and the force of habit and

custom—are going to diminish in salience in arguments about political decisions and collective actions that need to be taken.

Owens: Could you say a bit about the ways in which we, as individuals, ought to be mindful of our role in world society with regard to the obligations we have to others?

Trejo-Mathys: I have a fairly modest view of what philosophers, qua philosophers, can provide in this respect. I do not feel comfortable issuing detailed advice about what individuals ought to do. I prefer to offer a framework in which individuals can think for themselves about how it makes the most sense for them to try and be conscious of these kinds of issues and to try to address the issues themselves.

One of the reasons why there is not any set of political obligations or responsibilities that all individuals in the world share—except perhaps for some very, very basic ones like respect for others, tolerance of difference, human rights and so on—is that people are positioned very differently in global social processes. Because of that, people have different amounts of power and different amounts of stake in different processes. People have different amounts of ability to collectively act with others. People have different amounts of privilege. One would have to reflect on all of those different parameters in one's own case in order to determine what one's own obligations might be. Because we do not have transnational and global mechanisms of specifying what the obligations are—like electoral representative mechanisms, legal mechanisms, legislative mechanisms for specifying what our obligations to each other are at the national level—there is going to be an ineliminable element of discretion or reflective moral judgment that individuals have to exercise.

It could be the case that one has entirely morally contingent factors upon which to decide where one wants to put most of one's time and energy with respect to one's transnational and global political responsibilities. Inevitably, the latter are typically going to occupy a small part of the life of an average individual. For instance, I married a MexicanAmerican, so, for me, issues about U.S.–Mexican and U.S.–Latin American relationships have become much more salient. I think some of those issues are going to play a greater role for me than they might play for someone who does not have any kind of familial ties there; and that is totally morally contingent. As a U.S. citizen, it does not seem that I have any greater obligations to think about these issues or any greater obligation to act with respect to them than other U.S. citizens.

On the other hand, because we are all involved, and to some extent complicit in a number of processes—like having cell phones which use minerals mined in conflict zones in Africa—there is no way that we can each take action with respect to all of these issues at the same time in a coherent fashion. So

inevitably, we have to do our little bit with respect to one little part of this broader collective project.

[END]