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## Is There a Global Society?

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### Introduction

The concept of globality is today commonly used to describe a condition characterized by the existence of a single sociopolitical space on a planetary scale. Such a global realm is believed to have resulted from the gradual dissolution of boundaries brought about by intensified exchange and increased interconnectedness between territorially bounded and distinct societies. But while there is a broad agreement to the effect that it is necessary to posit a distinct global level of analysis in order to be able to explain and understand a wide range of phenomena which transcend the boundaries of individual states, the social ontology of this purportedly new domain remains largely unexplored. Arguably, unless we are able to make sociological sense of what goes on in this domain, the very notion of globality and all that goes with it will be of little analytical value to the social sciences (see for example Rosenberg 2005). In this context, one important question has recently been raised by Mathias Albert (2007), who has asked "whether the tools of social theory—or, more specifically, theories of society—are applicable to the global realm." Implicit in this question is that we need to be able to conceptualize the global in societal terms in order for other sociological concepts, like those of differentiation and rationalization, to become applicable in a theoretically fruitful way.

Yet the concept of society has proven difficult to use with reference to the global realm. As I shall suggest, the theoretical difficulties we encounter when we try to apply modern theories of society to the global realm are indicative of the extent to which our conceptions of human association have been *nationalized*, rather than of any limitations intrinsic to the global realm itself. As I would like to argue, as a consequence of conceptual nationalization, we ended up with a profoundly particularistic social ontology which has made it hard if not impossible to make coherent sense of human associations other than bounded ones. Hence also the constant but futile attempts to overcome the restrictions of this social ontology by means of domestic analogies. This contention will lead me to argue that if we want to be able to make sense of the concept of a global society,

we will have to look beyond modern social theory for inspiration, by recovering those earlier universalistic notions of human association which largely have been forgotten by modern political and social theory. When dusted off, these conceptions might help us to conceptualize global society as a larger social whole, rather than as the sum total of individual human beings or particular societies. We would then be free to ask questions about how and why this global society has been differentiated into distinct and territorially bounded communities, as well as under what conditions this compartmentalization of mankind is likely to give way to higher degrees of functional integration. I shall start by a brief overview of some of the problems encountered by those who have tried to conceptualize global society, and then go on to suggest an alternative way to conceptualize global society that draws on earlier and boundless conceptions of human association.

### The Problem

The difficulties in coming to terms with the concept of global society have been especially evident within academic international relations. Most theories of international relations still habitually assume that their field of inquiry is delimited to the interaction between bounded political societies in a context defined by the absence of centralized authority. Given this basic understanding of the topic of international relations, a distinct global realm becomes hard to envisage other than perhaps as an epiphenomenon to interstate interaction and interdependence. As Beck (2006) has remarked, “the cosmopolitanization of reality appears as the enemy of international theory, for it seems to undermine the authority of the theory of the state, to abolish the political monopoly of the national state and international relations.” Hence, to the extent that the possibility of a global society has been taken seriously at all within international relations theory, it has been conceptualized as an end state of a set of processes which originate in the international system, rather than as a *sui generis* form of human association capable of existing prior to or independently of the international system of states (Ruggie 2004; Sassen 2006).

At first glance, sociologists would seem to be better equipped to conceptualize the global in societal terms. Sociological concepts seem to have been less burdened with nationalist baggage than those of international relations, and hence easier to stretch to fit a condition in which social and political life is believed to be increasingly unbounded (Wagner 2000; Inglis and Robertson 2008). This semantic plasticity is evident from some contemporary efforts to apply categories of sociological analysis to the global realm, while making traditional conceptions of society look increasingly incoherent and redundant in the process (Urry 2000). Yet simultaneously, however, sociologists have found it difficult to argue that the global realm constitutes a society in its own right, since the global realm seems to lack precisely the traditional defining properties of societies and communities, such as a common culture or a common historical memory that could bestow such a society with a common identity. To the extent that historical sociologists are willing to speak of anything resembling a society on a world scale, it is widely believed to be an outcome of intercourse between territorially bounded societies (Rosenberg 2006). Being an outcome of interaction within the international system, a global society would ultimately depend on a fragile global consciousness of its existence. As Martin Shaw (2000) has put it, global society is constituted by “a common consciousness of human society on a world scale.” Thus, many of those who have tried to argue that the global realm indeed constitutes a society have had to face conceptual difficulties stemming from their particularistic social ontology, according to which forms of human association have to be both bounded and homogeneous in order to qualify as societies in the first

place. Consequently, the concept of society becomes hard to apply to the global realm without thereby stretching its meaning beyond the limits of intelligibility posed by modern social theory.

### **The Solution**

In my view, the main reason why we have ended up with such a particularistic social ontology is to be found in the nationalization that sociopolitical concepts have undergone during the last centuries. In this context, nationalization implies that the range of reference of sociopolitical concepts gradually was brought to coincide with the spatial boundaries of the modern state, and that their meaningful employment was equally restricted by the imagined necessity of such boundaries. In most instances, such nationalization of sociopolitical concepts took place well before a politicization and ideologization of the same concepts could take place in different national contexts. But before processes of conceptual nationalization started to gain momentum during the seventeenth century, the predominant way of understanding human association in Western political thought was by regarding the human species as one immanent and universal society, by virtue of its members sharing the essential capacities for forming social bonds. Societies of lesser scope were frequently regarded as instantiations of such an immanent society of all mankind, the enigmatic but apparent cultural differences between particular communities being explained with reference to an accidental geographical dispersion of different peoples to different places with different natural characteristics (see for example Headley 2002). All the way from the Stoics via Dante to Kant and Herder, the assumption of a universal and boundless society of all mankind constituted the default setting of much Western speculation on the origins and conditions of human associations, and also served as an important starting point for critiques of despotism, imperial expansion, and colonial exploitation (see for example, Muthu 2003). Thus, a universal society of all mankind was not thought to result from the transcendence of a plurality of particular communities, but rather thought to be always already present in the shape of a primordial social bond between human beings by virtue of their shared capacity for social intercourse. To many writers, this shared capacity for social intercourse and the concomitant propensity to form societies were thought to derive from the use of language and reason by members of the human species, not from the use of a specific language or from a specific principle of reason.

To many scholars, such universalistic theories of human community are of little but historical interest, since they lack any obvious relevance in a world of nation-states. And indeed, most of these theories are based upon assumptions that are hard to defend in secular or scientific terms. But they also make one very useful assumption about the nature of human association, by positing the existence of a larger social whole: a society of all mankind constitutes such a larger social whole simply by being something more than the sum total of its individual parts, whether these are individuals or particular communities. So within this view, the existence of human community is not dependent on things like shared cultural values or a common historical memory. This being so, since members share characteristics in common that supposedly are exclusive to the human species, and which exist independently of its individual members. While this conception of human community is unlikely to satisfy modern nationalists, it might contain the seed values of what we need in order to make sense of the global in societal terms. A global society thus could be said to exist, not as a consequence of anything resembling a common global culture or a common global memory—although those things might well be there if we bother to look beyond modern sociology and historiography for clues—but rather as a consequence of two things: the relatively even dispersion of human beings on a planetary scale and the capacities for intercourse entailed by

human sociability. So instead of asking whether processes of globalization will take us from an international system of states into a boundless global society, we might rather ask why this global society was territorially differentiated into a system of states in the first place, how this particular differentiation has been legitimized by modern international relations theory and modern sociology to the point of being taken for granted by both, as well as under what conditions human intercourse on a planetary scale is likely to replace the compartmentalization of mankind with new forms of political community. Indeed, questions of differentiation become hard to pose at the global level in the absence of prior assumptions about the essential unity of mankind, and about the basic homogeneity of a global space. Otherwise, theories of differentiation will always beg the questions: *what* is being differentiated, and *where* does this differentiation take place? So to conclude in answer to Mathias Albert's question, I would like to suggest that we indeed can speak coherently of a global society, but only to the extent that we are willing to venture beyond modern theories of society, the latter which I take to be part of the problem rather than of the solution.

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## World Polity, World Culture, World Society<sup>1</sup>

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Expressing reservations about conceptualizing a world society, the question is posed: Can we use sociological theory and in particular a concept of society and still avoid "conceptualizing the question of globalization as one of homogeneity,

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