Towards a genealogy of 'society' in International Relations

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Introduction

In international theory, the concept of society and its cognates have long been invoked in order to understand and explain the nature of international relations. While theories of international society are based on a sharp distinction between a society of states and a mere system of states, theories of world society assume that relations between states are embedded in a global social context. In those instances, the concept of society is thought to be more or less directly applicable to the international domain, or in need of some serious stretching to make it fit a global context. Although the above theories are *prima facie* compatible with a wide range of methodological orientations, constructivists of different stripes have invoked the existence of a societal context in order to explain how the construction of international reality takes place. In this latter case, the underlying conception of society is rarely explicitly discussed, yet different notions of society are nevertheless implicit in, and foundational to, the entire constructivist endeavor.

Yet despite – or possibly because of – its crucial role in defining both domains and methods of inquiry, the precise meaning and function of this concept has remained unexplored within international theory. With the notable exception of the recent work by Owens (2011; 2013), the problem of society seems to have escaped attention within academic international relations. Yet however different the above usages alluded to above may seem, and however different meanings of the society they bring into play, this concept would seem at least to be indispensable in order to demarcate, define and explain the structure of the international and global realms as essentially *social* ones, and as such being susceptible to certain modes of inquiry and not to others. Yet by virtue of being crucial to identifying these domains of

inquiry and the appropriate methods for studying what goes on within them, there are reasons to suspect that the functions of the concept of society cut much deeper into the foundational presuppositions of modern international theory.

Thus, what I will offer in this contribution to the symposium is a genealogy of society within international theory (Geuss 2002). In contrast to author #1, however, I will be less concerned with its possible referent – the social – and more with the meaning and function of the *concept* of society as manifested in its actual usage within contemporary international theory. And in contrast to author #3, I will not dwell on those alternative conceptions of society that have been left wayside by theorists of international relations. Hence the first task is to unpack the senses of society by means of strategically chosen examples of these usages, and then to sketch a brief account of how these meanings have emerged and become taken for granted within international theory. Finally I shall point to some alternative conceptualizations that may help us handle some of the problematic consequences of the usages of this concept. As I shall suggest, the concept of society has fulfilled three main functions within international theory, all which have been crucial to the identity of academic international relations as a *social* science.

First, whenever used in a recognizably modern sense, the concept of society presupposes a distinction between the social and the natural domains, between man and world. The delineation of society from other adjacent domains of inquiry thus represents an escape from nature and an entry of human beings into the realms of history and culture (Yar 2002). In the context of international theory, this means that the concept of society is used to define the international and global realms as distinctively *social* ones in contradistinction to inanimate and non-human portions of reality. To the extent that international relations has been understood in such societal terms, its study is ultimately a study of relations between aggregates of men, not between them and nature. This further implies that these relations are

only accessible to knowledge by virtue of being artifices of *human* thought and action, something that make them intrinsically unsuitable for mechanistic or crudely causal modes of inquiry. Apart from detracting attention from the material substratum of international relations, this distinction has the obvious side effect of reifying society into a *sui generis* category that can be studied in relative isolation from other domains, and that reference to anything non-human – whether spiritual or material – thereby is barred from serious consideration.

Second, thanks to its long trajectory within legal and political thought, the modern concept of society is commonly thought to refer to a pre-political and self-contained order, existing prior to and independently of any structure of political authority. In the context of international theory, this meaning is manifest in the assumption that despite the absence of any overarching political authority, the international or global realms will nevertheless display some degree of spontaneous order, and also that this spontaneous order makes the subsequent emergence of political authority possible. In effect, this move conceals the extent to which international relations already is a manifestation of a prior imposition of political authority upon the world, as well as the extent to which such authority commonly has been legitimized with reference to the undesirable consequences that such a spontaneous and self-contained order might have for the prospects of peaceful coexistence.

Third, since the modern concept of society carries connotations of homogeneity and boundedness, the uncritical usage of this concept within international theory tend to impose such assumptions on all instances of human association regardless of their self-descriptions, while implying the existence of a heterogeneous outside of potential Others. Such presumptions of homogeneity and boundedness become especially problematic when the concept of society is used to subsume different forms of human association across a variety of historical and cultural contexts, thereby downplaying cultural and historical differences,

thereby inviting suspicions of historical anachronism and intellectual imperialism (Helliwell and Hindess 1999).

In exploring these different functions, I shall proceed by exemplifying some of the ways in which the concept of society is used in contemporary international theory. I shall then argue that these functions derive from the uncritical import of this concept from late nineteenth-century sociology and social theory, which thereby have been allowed to contaminate the contemporary study of international relations with ontological baggage from that point in time. Against uncritical usages, I shall suggest that the emergence of the concept of society should be understood as a response to concerns peculiar to that context, such as the desire to achieve scientific autonomy for the early social sciences, coupled with a search for a pre-political conceptions of human association that could be used in order to support or debunk the modern state, as well as a corresponding need to define the contours of such associations with reference to the sameness of its members and their distinctness to outsiders.

This implies that we should refrain from attributing any timeless connotations to the concept of society, and then use them as starting points for further analysis of the theoretical and empirical manifestations of the social in the contemporary world. Instead, to my mind, we should try to carefully recover and understand the notions of human association peculiar to each historical and cultural context before attributing any explanatory power to them. Doing this would hopefully permit us to construct less biased and more productive accounts not only of how different conceptions of human association have emerged and changed across time and space, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to understand how such conceptions have been involved in the shaping of modern international relations up to the very recent point in time when that domain was believed to be saturated within sociality.

The uses of society

Perhaps the most well known invocation of the concept of society within international theory is that of the English School, evident in its core assumption that relations between states are better understood in social rather than in mechanistic terms. Even though Martin Wight himself never explicitly made such a distinction, his use of the concept of system indicates that he assumed that some degree of linguistic and cultural unity was necessary in order for a system of states to develop, possibly in contrast to an outside deemed less civilized by the members of the former (Wight 1977: 33-35). But from *The Anarchical Society* (1977), we learn that the existence of a society presupposes that the elementary goals of social life can be fulfilled, since 'a constellation of persons or groups among whom there existed no expectation of security against violence, of the honouring of agreements or of stability of possession we should hardly call a society at all' (Bull 1977: 5). When transposed to the international realm, this essentially Humean account implies that international order only exists to the extent that the primary goals of international society can be sustained, such as the preservation of international society itself along with the independence of its parts. Thus, Bull famously wrote, an international society 'exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions' (Bull 1977:13). Such an international society presupposes the existence of an international system of states, the latter being formed when 'two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave -- at least in some measure -- as parts of a whole' (Bull 1977: 9). While an international system is characterized by mechanistic interactions between its component parts, an international society is based on some degree of sameness and community that sets it apart from such a system. Thus, Bull continued, 'a common feature of

these historical international societies is that they were all founded upon a common culture or civilisation, or at least on some of the elements of such a civilisation: a common language, a common epistemology and understanding of the universe, a common religion, a common ethical code, a common aesthetic or artistic tradition'(Bull 1977: 15). To Bull, the existence of such a unity and cultural homogeneity facilitates communication and understanding between actors, and also indirectly helps foster common values and interests among them. But in the present international society, a modicum of order between states still exists even in the absence of any social or cultural unity among its members. Hence, and in contrast to Wight, Bull argued that a diplomatic culture based on shared conventions and common institutions might help to create and maintain order between states despite their different cultures and ideological orientations (Bull 1977: 316). Yet however defined, such an anarchical society is not the outcome of a prior and willful imposition of political authority upon a disorderly world, but rather constitutes the pre-political ground from which international order can evolve and be maintained through secondary institutions such as international law and diplomacy.

Both Wight and Bull backed their claims about the social nature of international relations with reference to what they held to be the rationalist or Grotian tradition of thought. Representing a *via media* between Hobbesian realism and Kantian utopianism, the Grotian tradition was thought to embody the idea that sovereign states form an international society held together by common norms and institutions (Bull 1992; Wight 1991; Kingsbury 1997; Cutler 1991). Yet as others have argued, these traditions of thought are neither distinct nor continuous enough to permit such easy leaps from past to present. While Grotius and Hobbes certainly had different views of the state of nature and human sociability, no recognizably modern conception of society of the kind used by the English School can be found in their writings. Furthermore, while they also differed on the possibility of legal order among states, they both

operated within the same broadly humanist framework and addressed roughly similar problems about the sources of legitimate political authority. Thus the founding fathers of the English School appear to have employed a modern conception of society in order to make sense of the world in terms at once 'social' and statist, while simultaneously projecting this conception onto a past to which such notions simply were unavailable (Bartelson 1996; Tuck 1999; Kingsbury and Straumann 2010). In a recent attempt to make sense of the different 'social' relationships that could be said to characterize international relations, Buzan has revived the distinction between society and community. While the concept of society refers to the rational and contractual modes of intercourse prevailing in the society of states, the concept of community refers to a sense of common identity and shared values that possibly might result from interaction between them (Buzan 2004: 108-118). According to Buzan, the 'main advantage of the move is that it divorces society and community from a particular interpretation of history, and makes them available as concepts for analyzing the rather different world of second-order societies…at the levels above the state' (Buzan 2004: 111). Yet by divorcing the concepts of society and community from their historical context, Buzan implies that these concepts can provide the basis for transhistorically valid explanations of the structure and evolution of the international system during periods and in places in which these concepts would have failed to make sense to the actors themselves.

A second attempt to use the concept of society for explanatory purposes is found in theories of world society. These theories come in two main versions, which both require considerable stretching of the concept of society beyond its modern connotations of boundedness and homogeneity in order to do the job. While the first version posits the existence a world society in order to explain why states display such a high degree of functional and institutional isomorphism, the second version understands world society as the eventual outcome of intensified interaction and increased interdependence between states. Thus, according to the

first version, world society is comprised by nation states that derive their sovereignty and legitimacy from exogenous sources in world society, and are 'structurally similar in many unexpected dimensions and change in unexpectedly similar ways' (Meyer et al. 1997: 145). Their relative similarity has to be explained with reference to social and cultural forces operative in world society, since the 'world level of social reality is culturally transcendent and causally important' (Meyer et al. 1997: 148). According to the second version, rather than being composed of distinct and bounded societies, world society refers to a single society on a planetary scale that has emerged as a consequence of exchange between previously bounded societies, gradually making the boundaries between them analytically irrelevant. Thus, as Shaw has argued, such a society is constituted by 'a common consciousness of human society on a world scale: an increasing awareness of the totality of human social relations as the largest constitutive framework of all relations' (Shaw 2000: 19). This view of a world society as effectively transcending the world of states finds additional support in recent scholarship on differentiation in international relations. According to some of these theorists, the territorially segmented international system is either coexisting with, or in the process of being replaced by, a world society differentiated along functional lines, with political authority being divided between different sectors rather than between territorially demarcated states (Cerny 2010; Kessler 2012; Albert et al. 2013).

What these conceptions of world society share in common is their tendency to stretch the modern concept of society to fit circumstances in which some of its defining characteristics are weak or absent. Other attempts to apply the basic categories of sociological analysis to the global realm have avoided this difficulty, but at the cost of making the concept of society redundant in the process (Urry 2000: 1-20). Still others who have conceptualized the global realm as a society have done so by extending the range of reference of this concept by invoking it in a very thin sense (Shaw 2000: 67-97). But to the extent that sociologists have

been able to talk coherently of a society on a global scale -- despite the apparent lack of sociocultural homogeneity in this realm -- they have thereby unwittingly transposed the two other features of the modern concept of society onto that realm. Thus the concept of world society is taken to imply the presence of a pre-political order, firmly separated from the realm of nature. So irrespective of whether we conceive of nation states as outcomes of the homogenizing forces of world society, or conceptualize a world society as the possible end result of globalization, the notion of a world society refers to a pre-political order devoid of any overarching political authority, yet firmly separated from the more mechanistic relationship between actors and structures characteristic of older world system theories (Wallerstein 1974). Under any of these descriptions, therefore, a world society is firmly rooted in the realm of culture, and while being shielded from brute natural forces, it is nevertheless the home of all those potentially disruptive socioeconomic forces that make the relocation of political authority to the supranational level seem both necessary and legitimate.

This brings us over to the third and potentially most problematic invocation of society in international theory, that of constructivism broadly conceived. Having defined the domain of inquiry in 'social' terms, it follows that the methods appropriate for studying what goes on within that domain is limited to those that take its societal character into serious consideration. A commitment to the social nature of international relations entails that international reality is accessible to knowledge by virtue of being made rather than found. But although the attempts to make sense of the international realm in societal terms discussed above do not necessarily entail that constructivism is the only appropriate method for studying what goes on within that domain, any prior commitment to constructivism – whether in its weak or strong version – will entail that the domain of inquiry is accessible to knowledge *only* by virtue of being social in character.

While the founding fathers of the English School hardly could be labelled constructivists in any contemporary sense of this term, it is clear that their emphasis on shared norms and ideas in international society displays some important affinities with later constructivist work (Dunne 1995; Reus-Smit 2002). And although theories of world society rarely contain explicit methodological commitments, some of them are based on a phenomenological or constructivist analysis of the nature of social institutions and actors (Meyer 2010).

Yet if we consult the pioneering statement of constructivism in international relations theory, the connection between the social nature of international relations and the method appropriate for its study is made much more explicit. As Onuf starts by arguing in a *World of Our Making* (1989), 'international relations form a bounded and distinctive social reality' (Onuf 1989: 6). Elaborating further on the social nature of international relations, he then suggests that 'such claims have plausibility if they are taken to refer to the ensemble of activities engaged in by a bounded and slowly changing set of entities conventionally denominated by the term 'states''(Onuf 1989: 16). Understood in this way, this implies that our knowledge of international relations must take its social character into full account. In order to grasp the makeup of the social world, we must start by assuming that 'people *and* societies, construct, or constitute each other' (Onuf 1989: 36). While this does not imply that material reality does not exist independently of the activities of the human mind, it does 'find socially made content dominant in and for the individual'(Onuf 1989: 40). It follows that 'human beings, with whatever equipment nature and/or society provides, construct society, and society is indispensable to the actualization of whatever human beings may 'naturally' be; society constructs human beings out of the raw materials of nature, whether inner nature or, less problematically, the outer nature of their material circumstances'(Onuf 1989: 46).

While there is little in Onuf's account to indicate that this society has to be bounded or homogeneous in order to qualify as an object of inquiry, it nevertheless presupposes an

anterior separation between the natural and the social worlds in order to constitute the pre-political ground against which the emergence and makeup of international relations can be understood. Yet there is something very puzzling about the way in which the concept of society is used in this account. Provided that international relations are inherently social and therefore accessible to inquiry only as such, we are compelled to accept that international relations are constructed by people out of resources available to them in society. Yet if we agree that this society indeed is both *made as well as made up* by people who in turn are made by society, it would seem to follow that the very society within which the construction of society takes place ultimately must construct itself out of itself. While this virtuous circularity once constituted a welcome antidote to the once predominant mechanistic and rationalistic view of international relations, it implies that what is to be explained also to some extent is presupposed by the explanation, since the construction of social reality presumably also is a *social* construction of that reality.

Similar ambiguities transpire from Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999). What makes a constructivist account of international politics imperative are the facts 'that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and…that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature' (Wendt 1999: 1). While its constructed character has led scholars to assume that social life only is accessible to inquiry through various forms of interpretation, Wendt argues for a rigorous scientific realist approach in order to explain the formation and outcome of such social facts (Wendt 1999: 49, 68). To him, the social basis of international politics consists of common knowledge and shared beliefs among actors. Wendt makes this essentially Durkheimian point in serveral steps. First, he argues that 'ideas or social structures have constitutive effects when they create phenomena…that are conceptually or logically dependent on those ideas or structures'(Wendt 1999: 87-88). Second, and

consequently,'because those beliefs must be accurate beliefs about others' beliefs, it is also an intersubjective phenomenon which confronts actors as an objective social fact that cannot be individually wished away' (Wendt 1999: 160). Third, this does not entail that all social beliefs always are shared, since 'sometimes international politics has no culture. It is an empirical question whether actors share any ideas, and sometimes they do not' (Wendt 1999: 158). In such a situation, the societal character of the international realm comes into question, since when 'various beliefs are not shared, when there is no cultural definition of the situation, then actors are likely to be surprised by each other's behavior, and the outcomes of their interaction will call their beliefs into question' (Wendt 1999: 186-187). Yet if the interests and identities of actors are to be explained with reference to shared beliefs and common knowledge, these latter presuppose some kind of social context within which the very sharing of beliefs and the formation of common knowledge can take place. Making sense of international politics in social terms thus presupposes the existence of social context prior to the formation of actors and the sharing of beliefs and knowledge among them. But since such a social context is a condition of possible inquiry rather than an object of inquiry in its own right, its existence cannot be coherently accounted for in terms themselves socially constructivist. The fact that constructivist accounts of society seem to generate a remainder that remains unaccounted for on its own terms should perhaps compel us to recognize the limits of constructivist accounts of society. As Luhmann has pointed out, if society is 'quite evidently a self-describing object', then it would follow that 'theories of society are theories in society about society' (Luhmann 1992: 68). Thus, by virtue of being both the object as well as the condition of possible inquiry, the concept of society takes on a tail-chasing quality. While this might not limit the scope and validity of sociological analysis, it certainly raises the question of how the constructivist conception of society itself has been constructed.

The above analysis of the various usages of society in international theory has indicated that

this concept fulfills a series of important functions when it comes to delineating the field of inquiry and identifying the methods most appropriate for studying what goes on within this field. The above analysis has also pointed to some strange side effects of these usages within international theory. First, since there is a tendency to impute universal and timeless content to the concept of society, there is a corresponding tendency to apply this concept for analytical purposes across a series of very different historical and cultural contexts. Second, there is a tendency to stretch this concept beyond its recognizably modern connotations so as to fit circumstances in which at least some of its traditional features are weak or absent. Third, there is a tendency to short-circuit ontological and epistemological commitments by taking society to be *explanandum* and then reintroduce it as *explanans*. Hence, taken together, these tendencies raise a series of questions about the limits of social inquiry in international theory, as well as about the possibilities of re-conceptualizing the foundations of such inquiry in ways that bring less philosophical baggage and anachronism into play.

Towards a geneaology of society

But how did we get into this predicament? Let us start by noting that the concept of society is able to fulfill the functions discussed above only by virtue of having been having acquired a series of basic connotations without which this concept would lose its analytical specificity and theoretical applicability. Arguably such a concept of society was articulated in late nineteenth- and early twentieth century European sociology and social theory, and ought therefore to be seen as a response to concerns peculiar to this historical context. In this section, I shall describe how the modern concept of society emerged and took on its core connotations as a consequence of the efforts to provide early social theory with scientific legitimacy while simultaneously catering to the perceived political and moral problems of *fin*

de siècle Europe.

The first and perhaps most pressing problems confronted by early social science concerned its problematic epistemological foundations and its shaky scientific legitimacy. Frequently posed in terms of a tension between historically oriented scholarship and the methodology of the natural sciences, early social theorists struggled to establish the intellectual and institutional autonomy of their newborn enterprise by arguing that their field of inquiry was categorically distinct from those of history and natural science, and therefore also necessitated distinct methods of inquiry. For example, to Weber, the specificity of this domain of inquiry was defined by the fact that actors attribute meanings and purposes to their own acts, and that these acts therefore are accessible to knowledge only through an interpretation of these inherently subjective meanings and purposes. As he stated, 'in the social sciences we are concerned with psychological and intellectual phenomena the empathic understanding of which is naturally a problem of a specifically different type from those which the schemes of the exact natural sciences in general can seek or solve'(Weber 1949: 74). To Simmel, in sharp contrast to the realm of nature, 'society is the objective unity which has no need of the observer not contained in itself'. As such society represents a phenomenological structure of relations, 'an order of elements, each of which occupies an individually determined place…which are objective and in their social significance full of meaning if not always full of value' (Simmel 1910: 375, 389). That is, to both Weber and Simmel, the fact that social relations are saturated with subjective meaning is precisely what allows us to attain objective knowledge of them through an understanding of their intersubjective basis, and this possibility of objective knowledge is what entitles us to speak of a social science categorically distinct from both history and the natural sciences.

As such, these concerns were not new, but rather represented an accentuation of a problem that had animated debates about the sources and limits of political order since the early-

modern period. As Brett (2011) has shown, the creation of the modern state was premised on a divorce between the realms of nature and culture, and depended on the successful assimilation of human beings into the latter. At the heart of this was the issue in what respects human beings were different from members of the animal kingdom by virtue of possessing free will and hence being subject to legal and moral obligations. As Brett (2011: 60) has pointed out, the 'dividing line between human and animal agency, as the dividing line between free and necessary agency, is taken by all confessions to be the ultimate dividing line between the political and the non-political.' Without such a distinction between men and animals, the notion of society being a voluntary association of men would hardly have made sense, nor would the idea that the legitimacy of political authority depended on the prior submission of individual wills to the person of the sovereign. Hence the notion of society being the pre-political ground of political authority is coeval with the distinction between society and nature. So when international theorists put the concept of society to analytical use, they thereby also bring the conceptual prerequisites of a peculiar European process of state making to bear on parts of the world in which this hardly would make any sense other than as an imposition.

Downstream from this, the concept of society helped early sociologists to make sense of the rather dramatic change that the relationship between political authority and political community had undergone as a consequence of the rise of popular sovereignty. Many of the exemplary texts of early sociology were complicit in constructing society as distinct from political authority in general and that of the modern state in particular in order to explain the genesis of the latter in terms of the structure of the former. For example, to Durkheim's teacher Fustel de Coulanges, the political institutions of classical antiquity were conditioned if not determined by the religious and social practices of the ancients, to the point that the former hardly could be understood other than as manifestations of the latter (De Coulanges

2006). As Wagner has argued, the construction of society as an object of knowledge occurred in opposition to the then prevalent focus on the state as the main category of political analysis (Wagner 2000). When so doing, they could capitalize on prior conceptual changes in political thought. As Foucault has noted, a recognizably modern concept of society first emerges during the seventeenth century, and then as a counterpoise to state sovereignty, 'made up of a certain number of individuals, and which has its own manners, customs, and even its own law' (Foucault 2003: 134). The notion that society not only had evolved independently of political authority but also constituted its source and limit ha been a recurrent theme during in early-modern political thought. As Istvan Hont has shown in great detail, Pufendorf was among the first to reject the Hobbesian account of social order by arguing that societies had emerged in order to overcome human neediness and want, rather than as a consequence of the imposition of authority from above (Hont 1987; Hont 2005: 159-185). Similar ideas to the effect that society constituted a natural counterpoise to political authority were salient in the writings of Smith and Ferguson before they found their way into theories of civil society during the nineteenth century (Riedel 1975; Hont and Ignatieff 1985; Stedman Jones 2001). By the same token, the notion that society is the ultimate source of legitimate political authority surfaced during the French Enlightenment until it found its final expression in revolutionary rhetoric. From Montesquieu's account of the customary basis of constitutional arrangements, via Rousseau's assumption of an *état social* being prior to the emergence of sovereign authority, to the attempts by Guizot and Tocqueville to understand the social preconditions of democracy, the concept of society gradually comes to connote a totality of human relations within a given territory and a potential source of legitimate authority rather than a site of perennial discord between groups and classes (Wokler 1987, 1994; Richter 2004). So when international theorists use the concept of society in order to makes sense of contemporary international relations, they impose the net result of a particular European

experience of Enlightenment and revolution onto parts of the world in which nothing of the kind has happened other than as a consequence of the dissemination of these ideas.

A third problem confronted by early social theory was how to understand the transition to modernity and how to handle its morally undesirable fallout. In response to such concerns, both Tönnies and Durkheim posited sharp and to some extent coeval distinctions between pre-modern and modern forms of social organization. To the former, a community held together by thick social bonds among its members had gradually been replaced by a society characterized by thin contractual and instrumental relations (Tönnies 1964). To the latter, the rise of modernity had meant that mechanical solidarity had been replaced by organic solidarity, the former signifying simpler social forms based on the sameness of their members and the latter more advanced and complex forms of social life based on cooperation between autonomous individuals (Durkheim 1997). Yet while doing so, both these authors took the territorial framework of the modern state for granted, and hence assumed that societies are distinct and bounded entities by default. And although both saw modernity as corrosive of the kind of sameness and homogeneity that allegedly had been characteristic of pre-modern communities, the very presumption that societies have to be bounded to qualify as such implied that there was an intrinsic limit to how much diversity and difference that could be comprehended in strictly *social* terms, since society presupposes at least some degree of collective consciousness in order to be possible and accessible to knowledge. This being so since even if 'there are societies whose cohesion is due essentially to a community of beliefs and sentiments…it is from these societies that others have emerged whose unity is ensured by the division of labour' (Durkeheim 1997: 219).

This 'methodological nationalism' implicit in the classics of modern sociology has been much lamented, and been seen as a major obstacle to the creation of a truly international or global sociology (Rosenberg 2006; Inglis and Robertson 2008). In the present context, however, it is

perhaps more interesting to understand the emergence of the modern concept of society in early sociology as a culmination of a series of attempts to carve out a notion of human association distinct from earlier universalistic and boundless conceptions within the tradition of natural jurisprudence. Also, some of the conceptual requirements essential to our understanding of society as being distinct and bounded had been handed down to the founding fathers of modern sociology by their Romantic predecessors, struggling to articulate conceptions of community better aligned with emergent national historiography. That the analytical boundaries of society came to coincide neatly with those of the nation is perhaps unsurprising given their common origin in the same context of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary rhetoric. From that point onwards, the notion that society exists independently of, and historically prior to, political authority came to be crucial to most attempts to justify the existence of political authority in democratic terms, since the necessary *demos* or nation in many instances was thought to be coextensive with the society within which political authority was to be exercised (Jaume 2003). So when international theorists use the concept of society to make sense of our contemporary world, they bring tacit assumptions to the effect other polities are likely to follow similar paths from tradition to modernity, and that homogeneity and boundedness are default characteristics of human associations.

But apart from reflecting some nostalgia for primordial forms of community that might never have been, early social theory was certainly instrumental in shaping the reality to come. The crafting of society as an object of inquiry was not merely an intellectual exercise undertaken to make sense of late-nineteenth century political experience, but was also actively involved in the constitution of society as an object and instrument of government in its own right. While early social theory gradually gained scientific credentials, it was also a matter of identifying pressing social and political problems and suggesting remedies against them. Handling the undesirable fallout of modernization meant defining the perceived ills of that

age in terms that made them susceptible to both scientific analysis and political intervention. Secularization, suicide, crime and anomie were perceived as sources of social disintegration in modern societies that prompted governmental intervention. As Rose has argued, 'the social sciences would play their part in stabilizing the social as a domain *sui generis*, whose reality no longer could be ignored. Simultaneously, political forces would now articulate their demand on the State *in the name of the social*: the nation must be governed in the interest of social protection, social rights, and social solidarity' (Rose 1996: 329).

But quite irrespective of whether 'the social' today has been superseded by new objects of governance or not, we should not be surprised to learn that the uptake of this concept within international theory has reproduced many of these meanings and projected these onto a much wider world to which those meanings would make little sense. As I have tried to show above, the price paid for doing so is that what thereby is made accessible to analysis will be but a mirror image of a distinctively European experience of modernity (Seth 2013). Whether instantiated in theories of international society, in theories of world society, or in constructivist analyses of what goes on within these societies, the concept of society carries a distinctive semantic baggage that reflects a series of intellectual commitments once made in response to problems of political and scientific legitimacy perceived to be pressing at the threshold of European modernity. As a consequence of being a point of condensation of all these concerns, there are reasons to doubt that the concept of society will be of much help when trying to make sense of the past and present of international political life outside its context of emergence. As I have suggested, rather than being seen as a *resource* for inquiry, the concept of society should rather be seen as a *topic* of inquiry in its own right.

Conclusion: international theory beyond 'society'

But where do we go from here? Rather than abandoning the concept of society altogether, I would like to suggest that we should broaden our research agenda to cover those instances of human association that cannot be neatly subsumed under a modern definition of this concept. I here use the deliberately vague term 'forms of human association' not only to allow for more historical and cultural variety, but also in order to draw attention to the fact well before the emergence of the modern concept of society, the default understanding was that such forms are boundless and heterogeneous rather than bounded and homogeneous.

Furthermore, before this concept took on its modern connotations, in Roman Law the term *societas* meant little more than partnership or fellowship voluntarily entered into by individuals on the basis of a common interest or purpose. And although we do encounter theories of human association that do assume that human beings could survive and indeed thrive even in the absence of a common political authority, most conceptions of political community in the history of political thought have presupposed or implied that political authority indeed is constitutive of human associations rather than the other way around. It thus makes little sense to saddle early-modern theorists of natural law with a concept of society akin to ours, and even less sense to use this concept in order to understand human intercourse in contexts that recognize no such requirements of sameness and boundedness, let alone an anterior split between culture and nature. While Lebow (2012) and Yack (2012) have made us increasingly aware that assumptions of homogeneity and boundedness are contingent upon conceptions of political identity peculiar to European modernity, Chakrabarty (2001: 73) has listed the imposition of the divide between nature and culture among the many sources of Western blindness. Thus, as long as we allow the modern concept of society to limit our understanding of the possibilities human association, we will not only remain blind to its immense variety across time and space, but also to the extent to which this historical variety has conditioned the emergence of the modern international system and its assumptions of

functional similarity and historical continuity.

To my mind, a first step towards amending this situation would be to carefully reconstruct those conceptions of human association that antedated the emergence of the concept of society in European political thought, and then explore how these conceptions have shaped the rise of the European states system. To some extent this has been accomplished in recent historical scholarship, yet many of its implications remain to be digested by theorists of international relations. For example, the study of the ideological foundations of early-modern and modern imperialism has been especially illuminating in this regard, since it has shifted focus away from statist to boundless and heterogeneous conceptions of political order (Metha 1999; Armitage 2001; Pitts 2005; Morefield 2005; Bell 2007). Other historical accounts have emphasized how attempts to project imperial authority onto vast spaces led to highly variegated forms of rule over heterogeneous populations and very diverse forms of community (Benton 2002, 2010). Thus, what some theorists have been inclined to identify as an international or world society must be seen as the cumulated consequence of previous attempts to impose order by means of such conceptions, however alien they might seem to us now. As Armitage has pointed out, understanding the transition from a world of empires to a world of states requires more attention to those boundless conceptions of political authority that antedated the emergence and subsequent globalization of the modern nation state (Armitage 2013: 17-56, 191-214). From this point of view, it would hardly make much sense to speak of an international society before this transition had been completed, and before the scope of international law had been widened to accommodate non-European peoples (Lorca 2010).

The second and perhaps more difficult step would consist in recovering conceptions of human association from other parts of the world, and explore their role in the shaping of modern international relations before they were marginalized and forgotten. Doing this require us to

move beyond the postcolonial complaint according to which these conceptions will remain inaccessible as a result of our Eurocentric predispositions (Chakrabarty 2001). The proper way to proceed, then, would be to reconstruct pre-colonial forms of human association while guarding against the tendency to superimpose our own conceptions of society on alien sources, and then embark on the laborious task of re-describing modern international relations as the outcome of multiple encounters between the abundant diversity of pre-colonial forms of human association with the equally abundant diversity of imperial projects, European as well as non-European.

There is no shortage of rich and sophisticated accounts that could be harnessed for this purpose. For example, Sheldon Pollock has described how the process of vernacularization impacted on Sanskrit culture to produce the distinctive political formations characteristic of South Asia in comparison to similar processes in Europe (Pollock 2006). Furthermore, as Vasileios Syros has shown, there are some striking affinities between early-modern European conceptions of political authority and community and those found in the Islamic empires of the Near East, especially regarding the functional requirements of social cohesion and the causes of imperial decline (Syros 2012, 2013). Or, to take a final example of findings that become possible when we relax assumptions of homogeneity and boundedness that have afflicted the notion of society: as James Scott has shown, peripheral peoples in South East Asia have been able to successfully resist attempts to centralize authority precisely by forming communities whose composition and extension defy such assumptions (Scott 2009). Incorporating insights like these into the core of international theory would allow us to understand the contemporary world as the outcome of historical processes of interaction between many different forms of human association, rather than being based on *one* specific conception. None of this implies that the classics of modern social theory are irrelevant to contemporary concerns. Rather the opposite. But instead of uncritically applying *their*

conceptions of society transhistorically and transculturally, we may instead reformulate *their* questions in order to gain a better understanding of a world that is *ours*.

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