



Publication details, information for authors and referees and full contents available at: <http://global-discourse.com/>

ISSN: 2043-7897

Suggested citation:

Heath, A. (2010) 'Review of "Critical Theory and World Politics: Citizenship, Sovereignty and Humanity" by Andrew Linklater', *Global Discourse* [Online], 1: 1, available from: <<http://global-discourse.com/contents>>.

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**Critical Theory and World Politics:  
Citizenship, Sovereignty and Humanity  
by Andrew Linklater**

*Review by Amelia Heath<sup>1</sup>*

Andrew Linklater's *Critical Theory and World Politics Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Humanity* combines arguments from his previous books and articles in an attempt to reconcile a critical theoretical outlook and moral approaches to international politics. The book is accessible, eloquent, and thought provoking. It raises some of the 'big questions' related not only to the necessity of a moral dimension in theorizing international politics, but also to the practical achievement of international normative standards. One highly thought provoking aspect of the book, and the focus of this review, is the discussion on the problem of harm and the sociology of state systems as seen in part three.

Linklater's chapters in part three set up what he calls a typology of harm, which can be used in studying the development of Cosmopolitan Harm Conventions (CHCs) and specifically to consider if cosmopolitan ideas of citizenship have affected modern state systems. The two main types of harm that underlie the analysis are concrete and abstract harm.<sup>2</sup> Concrete harm is "the harm that particular human agents intentionally inflict on specific others who are placed outside the formers' moral community because of religious, racial or other supposedly morally decisive characteristics."<sup>3</sup> By implication, abstract harm is the harm unintentionally inflicted upon persons, groups, or the global commons (such as economic or environmental harm).<sup>4</sup>

Linklater's harm analysis addresses two problems in establishing his method for the sociology of CHCs. First is that previous sociological studies of harm are driven by the analysis of modern forms of harm created by the fact that state communities claim sovereignty to harm others outside the community and even to harm those within their own communities. As such these analyses do not give proper consideration to abstract forms of harm. He identifies a limitation of the English School as not taking adequate account of abstract harm.<sup>5</sup> He attempts to correct for this by incorporating Marxist and Critical Theory perspectives on harm into the

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction of concrete and abstract harms arises further to a discussion of active and passive harms. Active harms are those resulting from actions which inflict "grief, sorrow, pain, trouble, distress or affliction," on persons and can be both intentional and unintentional and physical as well as emotional, mental, psychological etc. (Andrew Linklater, *Critical Theory and World Politics Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Humanity*: 131; and pp. 133-134). Passive harms arise from *inaction* in promoting the welfare of human beings and other acts of omission (P. 130).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Linklater, *Critical Theory and World Politics Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Humanity*: 138.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 140-141

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 141-142

sociological approach to studying responses to harm in world politics.<sup>6</sup> Second is that previous sociologies of harm are limited to a context of state systems rather than being placed in a global context. This links the problem of harm with the problems of citizenship and community that form the rest of the book. Specifically, Linklater wants to break away from notions of bounded state communities and move toward the discussion of a truly cosmopolitan (global) humanity.

It is not clear though if his synthesis of the three schools of thought is entirely effective when also using the sociology of CHCs approach. The very language used in the discussion sets up a hierarchy of harms by which certain types of modern harm associated with state systems (such as violence and discrimination) are methodologically emphasized and prioritized within the analysis over other types of global harm (non-violent coercion of individuals, economic harm, harm to the global commons, etc.). The following three examples suggest that the focus on modern forms of harm associated with state systems are perpetuated by using the sociology of CHCs.

The first example lies in the distinction between concrete and abstract harm. The terms ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’ refer to the respective temporal and spatial assumptions being implied about these types of harm. The definition given to concrete harm not only places the discussion within a particular historical context, but also within a particularly structural one. Though the aim is to ultimately extend an analysis of harm beyond a discussion of modern state systems, the definition of concrete harm has been grounded firmly within a historical sociology of nineteenth century types of harm associated with the inside/outside nature of the modern state system. For example, in chapter 8 the problem of harm becomes synonymous with the problem of discrimination created by the perception of natural law and Western supremacy.<sup>7</sup> An additional result is that concrete forms of harm are discussed with a tone of urgency and immediacy, while abstract harm is projected as less urgent and farther off in the future. For instance, it is noted that only limited measures have so far been taken to protect future generations from “unforeseeable consequences of (environmental and technological) development.”<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that Linklater addresses the danger of treating abstract harm as if it is created by “vast impersonal forces”<sup>9</sup> (which, he explains, deemphasizes its importance) his typology of harm still classifies abstract harms within the categories of “unintended harms,” “negligences,” or “omissions,” resulting in a lack of accountability.<sup>10</sup> The language shifts responsibility for abstract harm away from any particular referent that directly inflicts the harm and toward vast impersonal forces and processes that are unintended and/or unable to be helped. At the same time the forceful language of “deliberate harm” demands consideration of accountability.

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<sup>6</sup> Marxist analysis can make up for the shortcomings of the English School by drawing more attention to harms created by modern capitalism (p. 142), while Critical Theory can add insight into common emotional and psychological responses to harm.

<sup>7</sup> See Andrew Linklater, *Critical Theory and World Politics Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Humanity*: 138 and 142

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid*, 142 and 158

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 140

<sup>10</sup> See *ibid*, 151-153; 175.

A second example lies in a discussion of the “civilizing process.”<sup>11</sup> Linklater hopes to incorporate Norbert Elias’s ideas into Martin Wight’s sociology of state systems.<sup>12</sup> Certain forms of cruelty are treated as concrete harms, the prevention of which demonstrates increased empathy and sensitivity to harm, indicative of a “civilizing process.”<sup>13</sup> Here again though, despite attempts synthesize perspectives in order to break away from modern modes of thought, the analytic language is self-limiting. A portion of the chapter is dedicated to defending the language of a “civilizing process” against the good/bad, advanced/backward distinctions implied by accounts of teleological advancement and Western superiority. However, it is not entirely clear how the distinction between civility<sup>14</sup> as a ‘process’ and a ‘condition’<sup>15</sup> decreases the potential ways in which we draw lines between ‘insiders’ (the civilized) and ‘outsiders’ (the uncivilized). Nor does it help to reflect upon the question of *who* determines the standards of ‘civility.’<sup>16</sup> It would seem that the terms civilized society necessarily imply that there still exists a non-civilized society. If so, are only those who are bound to international legal conventions via their membership in a state system, or in a state that recognizes a global society of states, a part of civilized society (and does this not still draw a boundary of those inside and those outside the line of civility)? In other words, how does a discussion of the civilizing process, which has exclusionary implications, move us toward “a new age of genuinely cosmopolitan as opposed to merely global harm conventions that satisfy dominant interests”<sup>17</sup>?

Finally, within his analysis Linklater uses the priority given to modern forms of harm as an example of the standard of progress in the evolution of CHCs. There is no single measure given for progress, but examples scattered throughout chapters 8-11 suggest that English School progressivism of abolishing discriminatory harm and establishing humanitarian laws for war becomes the dominant measure of progress.<sup>18</sup> Examples include:

- The argument that advancements against discrimination become synonymous with the progress of establishing harm principles. There is a focus on progress in “dismantling belief systems that defended harm to the racially or culturally different (slavery, slave trade, ethnocide and apartheid”) and legal conventions that limit state created war violence (pp. 137-141).
- A discussion of the ‘civilized progress’ in curbing violent impulses through legal codification (pp. 148; 161-162).
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<sup>11</sup> The development of changing attitudes to cruelty and suffering and constraints on violence; Andrew Linklater *Critical Theory and World Politics Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Humanity*: 171.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid*, 166-172

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid*, 162 for a discussion of the term “civility.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 165

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2000: 3-21. Brian Mabee, ‘Discourses of Empire: the US ‘empire’, globalisation and international relations’, *Third World Quarterly*, 25(8), 2004: 1361-1364.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Linklater *Critical Theory and World Politics Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Humanity*: 136.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 155

- An examination of the progress in further contractual legal restrictions on state violence (pp. 151-152 and 157-158).
- A discussion of progresses in human rights through codified systems of law made possible within global state systems (pp. 156-157).
- Further development of the typology of “deliberate” and “unintentional” harms whereby actors of identifiable state or non-state entity type can be accountable for deliberate harms (p. 175).<sup>19</sup>

Despite attempts to overcome limitations of modern state system analysis, by using standards of progress defined by English School progressivism, and by making this type of progress a supposed indicator of the development of CHCs, the analysis has been predominantly focused on measuring modern (concrete) forms of harm. This approach has devalued an in-depth consideration of the accountability for abstract forms of harm. Measures of progress are furthermore limited to reactive responses rather than proactive responses.<sup>20</sup> On these standards of progress, Linklater is able to show that there has been measurable progress in dealing with concrete harms. However, he also notes that there has been less success in dealing with abstract harms. Moreover, this measure of less progress in dealing with abstract rather than concrete harms does not adequately address the problem of accountability.

The previous examples serve only to consider ways in which the sociology of CHCs remains bound by theoretical parameters of modern forms of harm created by modern state systems.<sup>21</sup> This review does not question the achievements that Linklater’s sociology demonstrates to have occurred within modern state systems in limiting harm and establishing internationally recognized CHCs. Rather it considers the context of these achievements and attempts to raise questions of how the sociology of state systems approach, while providing a contextual grounding, limits the analysis to specific types of harm created by specific circumstances. Consequentially, it is unclear to what extent this approach to the problem of harm is capable of being the vehicle for a much needed discussion about the possibilities of “genuinely cosmopolitan” consensus on harm prevention.

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<sup>19</sup> In contrast discussions of abstract harms are addressed on p. 142 in the example of the Rio Conventions; See Andrew Linklater, *Critical Theory and World Politics Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Humanity*: 158-159.

<sup>20</sup> Progress in reacting to harm that has already been done in contrast to progress in acting to prevent harm. See *ibid*, 130; 133; 137.

<sup>21</sup> See RBJ Walker, *Inside/Outside International Relations as Political Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993: 52-60.

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