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An Interview with Andrew Linklater

Interview by Shannon Brincat¹

Andrew Linklater is one of the leading thinkers in Critical International Relations Theory. He joined the Department of International Politics at the University of Aberystwyth as the 10th Woodrow Wilson Professor in 2000 and has also taught at Keele University, the University of Tasmania and Monash University. He is a member of the Academy of Learned Societies in The Social Sciences and a Fellow of the British Academy. His publications include: *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relation* (1982 and reprinted in 1990); *Beyond Realism and Marxism* (1990); *The Transformation of Political Community* (1998); *The English School of International Relations*, co-authored with Hidemi Suganami (2006), and; *Critical Theory and World Politics* (2007). His current work focuses on the issue of harm in world politics and is to be published in three volumes. This interview with Andrew Linklater was conducted on the 22nd of April, 2009 at the University of Aberystwyth, with Shannon Brincat. The following text is an excerpt of this interview and has been edited for this journal. Three other interviews were conducted with Andrew Linklater, the edited versions of which are to appear in a new edited volume *Thirty Years of Critical Theory in World Politics*.

Shannon Brincat: Your Ph.D thesis, subsequently published as *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*,² has had a dramatic impact in the formation of Critical International Relations Theory (CIRT) and is of continued relevance in the so-called normative turn in IR theory. What first drew you to emancipatory thought and to question the relationship between ‘men and citizens’ in world politics, that is, to problematise the distinction of moral obligation between insiders and outsiders? Why has this problem been the consistent focus of your research and how has it been reformulated today?

Andrew Linklater: There are two answers. First of all, I stumbled across the Carnegie Foundation, *Classics of International Law series*, in the early 1970’s. In the course of reading Pufendorf and Vattel’s writings on international law,³ the theme that struck me most was the relationship between the law of nature that governed all human beings in the original state of nature, and public law, or the law of the state, pertaining to relations between citizens. Reading these texts got me interested in the tension between the two moralities, and in the watering down of the laws of humanity the moment that people divided into separate states.

Secondly, when I was an undergraduate studying Politics and International Relations at Aberdeen University in the late sixties and early seventies, I couldn’t quite

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² Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*, London: Macmillan, 1982, republished with ‘Postscript on Habermas and Foucault’ in 1990.

³ Linklater is here referring to E. de Vattel, *The Law of Nations or Principles of Natural Law Applied to the Conduct and to the Affairs of Nations and of Sovereigns* (1758), (Intro. A. de Lapradelle, Tans. C.G. Fenwick), *Classics of International Law*, Carnegie Institute, Washington, D.C, 1916 and S. von Pufendorf, *The Two Books on the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law* (1682), (Trans. F.G. Moore) *Classics of International Law*, New York: Oxford university Press, 1927.

understand the fact that political theory and International Relations seemed to be almost entirely unrelated areas. At that time, there was almost no literature on what we now call international political theory, but two works on course reading lists encouraged me to think that there was something wrong about that state of affairs, something peculiar and puzzling. The two works that pointed the way forward were Arnold Wolfers' book, *Discourse and Collaboration*⁴ and Stanley Hoffman's *The State of War*.⁵ Those books dealt with Rousseau and Kant, in Hoffman's case, and Weber in Wolfers case. They got me thinking about how to build links between political theory and International Relations.

To go further, I was taught by Brian Midgeley, a Thomist natural lawyer, who had researched the ethical issues surrounding nuclear weapons and who was an expert in the just war tradition. I received a great deal of encouragement from him about how to think about international ethics of international political theory. At the time, very few people were involved in such research. I must have also been reading Rousseau about that time who, as you know, discusses the tension between how we treat each other within states and how we treat outsiders. By the time I started my Ph.D, and having read many of Hegel and Marx's main political writings (thanks to a postgraduate course at Oxford), the notion of tensions and contradictions in society was a theme that attracted me. So by that peculiar route, I ended up with the sense that there were contradictions in the way in which we manage obligations between citizens and duties to other human beings. In some ways, I am still working on that topic, but in ways that are now more influenced by sociological writings than by political theory.

Shannon Brincat: In the 'Introduction' to your most recent book, *Critical Theory and World Politics*, you seem to suggest that there is a real historical possibility for a movement to some form of cosmopolitanism that expands the community of humanity and reduces unjustified exclusion.⁶ In other places however, you seem to suggest that there is only a possibility for moral change towards greater forms of inclusion. So do you think that emancipatory change is likely or indeed possible in world politics today?

Andrew Linklater: That is a very good question. The first point to make is that the *Men and Citizens* book tried to establish that there has been a degree of progress in social and political theory – particularly in the Kantian tradition, wrestling with the questions of sovereignty, citizenship and cosmopolitanism. I was trying to establish in that book that there had been a degree of progressive thinking – though it should not be mistaken as a linear process – but, nevertheless, it seemed possible to point to advances in social and political thought. It was possible to compare, for example, ancient Greek thinking which was centred on the polis, and international relations thinking from the birth of modern, secular natural law that seemed to be struggling more than the Greeks did with some notions of the moral equality of all people that is

⁴ Linklater is here referring to Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays in International Politics*, London: The John Hopkins University Press 1965.

⁵ Linklater is here referring to Stanley Hoffman, *The State of War: Essays on the Theory and Practice of International Politics*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965.

⁶ See Andrew Linklater, "Introduction", in *Critical Theory and World Politics: Citizenship, sovereignty and humanity*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.

central to cosmopolitanism – and with agonising about what cosmopolitanism meant for the fact of humanity’s division into separate political communities.

The reason for writing the second book, *Beyond Realism and Marxism*,⁷ was that theory and practice do not exactly converge, and so the question was how to begin to think about how societies might ‘bridge the gap’ between current realities and a more cosmopolitan order. I felt that Marx and Marxism were especially important because, within key writings on nationalism particularly, there were fascinating discussions about the boundaries of community (how they have changed over time), and about how far obligations extend beyond the nation (and can embrace the whole species). I thought that by reflecting on Marxism I might get nearer to understanding possibilities for change in world politics – or perhaps more accurately about how to create a conceptual framework that can cast light on continuity and change.

Reading the Marxist literature also forced me to think about questions of method. When I was writing *Men and Citizens*, I wasn’t particularly aware of Critical Theory – indeed, it did not really enter the IR discussion until Robert Cox published his influential essays in *Millennium*. In the late seventies while teaching at the University of Tasmania, and spending a great deal of time in the company of sociologists, I read works by Richard Bernstein, Brian Fay⁸ and others who had explained the critical alternative to positivism and hermeneutics. That also influenced the approach that was taken in *Beyond Realism and Marxism*, and the interest in immanent potentials that runs through my work on citizenship and community in the 1990s.

Regarding the question about the possibilities of emancipation from exclusionary communities, what I would say is that *The Transformation of Political Community*⁹ was an attempt to try to answer that question. I argued that there has been some movement towards creating what Habermas calls post-national citizenship and post-national communities; that there are sensitivities to the various forms of suffering incurred by distant strangers, and that there is the whole realm of NGO activity that is concerned with reducing transnational harm. I wanted to argue that the universalistic and egalitarian discourse that is central to the modern state encourages various groups that have an emancipatory purpose in releasing the more cosmopolitan dimensions of modern culture. In more recent writings, I’ve wanted to link that with the challenges of governing rising levels of human interconnectedness, challenges that look likely to increase the decades and centuries that lie ahead.

At the same time, there is the ‘dark side of modernity’, against which those groups react: extraordinary state powers as expressed in total warfare, genocide and so forth. It is only in more recent times that I have discovered the language that seems to capture those different dynamics rather well. I am thinking of the writings of Norbert Elias who emphasises in *The Germans* and elsewhere that civilising processes and de-

⁷ See Andrew Linklater, *Beyond Realism and Marxism*, London: Macmillan, 1990.

⁸ Andrew Linklater is referring to Richard Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976 and Brian Fay, *Social Theory and Political Practice*. London: Allen and Unwin., 1975.

⁹ See Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community*, London: Polity Press, 1998.

civilising processes always develop in tandem;¹⁰ the question is what, at any particular moment, has the upper hand. That now strikes me as a particularly effective way of trying to capture those tensions within modern societies - that there are latent potentialities for more cosmopolitan communities in the way in which modern societies are constructed but, at the same time, they come up against various forms of power, domination and resistance. Or, as Elias puts it, the pressures to become sensitive to the needs and interests of people over greater distances has increased, but most people remain firmly wedded to a particular state, and to the belief that the interests of co-nationals or fellow-citizens come first. So there is still a major imbalance in the way we think about obligations to our own societies and to other peoples.

It is also crucial to add that those emancipatory ideals can sometimes serve – as the post-structuralist critique of ‘enlightenment thinking’ has shown – the ‘dark side’. Various social movements – Marxist most obviously – have harnessed the language of liberty and fraternity to commit terrible acts against other human beings – that is also part of the internal tensions within modern societies. All those points could be described as raising questions about the ‘material’ context in which, for example, the tensions between citizenship and humanity arise and are played out.

Shannon Brincat: So, regarding this question of the so-called ‘dark side of modernity’ and Elias’ dialectic between civilising processes and de-civilising processes, if I was to sort of push you on this point, what would you see has the upper hand in terms of contemporary world politics as a whole. Do you see processes leading to greater forms of inclusion, or do you see an increase in the practices of unjustified forms of exclusion?

Andrew Linklater: That’s such a difficult question... If you would have asked me that question after 9/11, I would have said that communities were closing in on themselves, that there was a revival of national security politics, a relaxation of the torture norm and so forth that was all very depressing – although resistance to the weakening of the torture norm indicated that many people remained commitment to some cosmopolitan commitments in the face of that challenge. Yet, the dynamics are forever shifting. If you ask me sum up the state of international affairs, I would have to confess that I can do that – but there are many people in IR who can do that very well. All I will add is that more can be done to strengthen the conceptual framework that underpins such analysis. I will say more about that in the next two of the three proposed volumes on the problem of harm in world politics, relying specifically on the idea of tensions between civilizing and decivilizing processes mentioned earlier.¹¹

Shannon Brincat: You have referred to the concept of freedom in the natural law

¹⁰ See Norbert Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1996, and Norbert Elias *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

¹¹ The first volume, *Theorising Harm: The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, is nearing completion. The second volume analyses civilizing processes in different states-systems in the West; the third analyses the problem of harm from the standpoint of world history.

tradition, as the “capacity to initiate action”, as a capacity for “freedom and agency”.¹² Later, you also refer to the Hegelian conception of freedom – shared by Marx – that cantered on humankind’s capacity for self-creation highlighting, to précis Marx, the potential for humanity to be the maker of its own history. So what is your conception of freedom?

Andrew Linklater: So, do I share the Hegelian/Marxist account? Yes, absolutely... and because of the crucial passage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*,¹³ where Marx states that ‘men make their own history but not under of their own choosing’ (this passage refers to ‘men’, as people did, until quite recently, when they were really thinking about humanity or human beings). It is an astonishing statement because at one and the same time it captures the point that human beings are initiators, individually and collectively, of history, and yet we have lost control of many of our creations; history is human product but it has been made in ways that people do not really understand and do not control. This is manifestly Marx’s view in the *Grundrisse*¹⁴ - and elsewhere - where he discussed how relations of personal dependence in early societies gave way to relations of personal independence under capitalism. Capital was really liberated according to Marx. In modern societies, human beings become more free in some respects, but their freedoms come with subjection to impersonal forces and structures which were clearly made by people but not necessarily consciously or with a real understanding of where their actions would lead. The issue then for Marx is the problem of the Enlightenment: how can humans use their rational powers to understand social systems and to transform them so that people can live under conditions that people have chosen for themselves rather than in conditions that have been forced on them.

Shannon Brincat: At the end of the *Preface to Men and Citizens* you talk about the evolution of the international system, a movement “towards the condition in which the species is united to form, in Kantian terms, ‘a universal kingdom of ends’”.¹⁵ This is repeated at the start of Part II regarding the need to find a “secure basis from which to defend those internationalist aspirations”.¹⁶ Yet in the conclusion of the book you clearly affirm the Marxian vision of emancipation.¹⁷ So, is your vision then one that aims to realise the Kantian project of a World Federation of States, or does it follow another trajectory of the critical tradition i.e. the abolishment of class (Marx), the founding of discourse community (Habermas), or processes of mutual recognition

¹² Andrew Linklater, “‘Men and Citizens’ in international relations” in *Critical Theory and World Politics: Citizenship, sovereignty and humanity*, Abingdon: Routledge 2007, 24.

¹³ Andrew Linklater is here referring to the famous passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past”. See Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works in Two Volumes*, Moscow: Foreign languages Press, 1950, Vol. I, 225.

¹⁴ For an edited version of the *Grundrisse*, see David McLellan, *Marx’s Grundrisse*, Herts: Paladin, 1973.

¹⁵ Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*, London: Macmillan, 1982, xii.

¹⁶ Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*, London: Macmillan, 1982, 60-61.

¹⁷ Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*, London: Macmillan, 1982, 206.

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Andrew Linklater: Let me start by commenting on the relationship between the idea of the expansion of moral horizons or the expansion of community and the defence of freedom in Kant and Marx's thought. They were broadly agreed, despite their many differences, that human-beings can only really take control of their history and get rid of unnecessary force and surplus constraints if they co-operate in some kind of world-wide association – whether it the World Federation of Republican States that Kant talks about, or whatever political form Marx thought was appropriate to the condition of socialised humanity of universal social cooperation. Expanding moral horizons is not just about being ethically good, even for Kant. It is very much about gaining more control of social processes that have become global, that are beyond the control of existing institutions, and it is about eradicating as far as possible 'barbaric' force in Kant's case and false constraints, as Marxists are inclined to argue.

I make the point in *Beyond Realism and Marxism* that if realism is true, it is because the world is unfree, which is a formulation derived from reading the Marxian strand of critical theory. From that standpoint, the logic is that humans have to transform the ways in which they are organised – the dominant forms of political community for example – and the organising moral codes. So whether it's capitalism for Marx, or war for Kant, various global processes limit the freedom of all people; the upshot is that both Kant and Marx, again in different ways, make the case for cosmopolitanism as a practical necessity as well as a moral ideal. All of that lies behind the research I've been involved in down the years.

But you were asking about the nature of the political vision, I think, and whether it was essentially Kantian. The Kantian Republic of *sovereign* states is clearly limited, but there is a kernel of truth in what Kant argued - which is that the constitution or configuration of the state *matters*. He argued that if the domestic constitution has, at its core, the notion of human rights, then it is committed by its own discourse to treating outsiders as moral equals (and to harmonising obligations between citizens and duties to all human beings in the light of that moral commitment). Kant may not put it quite that way, but the point is that the discourse invites people to highlight tensions between universalistic commitments parochial or particularistic behaviour. That is why, for example, tensions between citizenship and humanity matter more in modern political theory and practice than they did for example in classical antiquity – to return to a point made earlier.

Marx never addressed such issues about the state and international politics, although he was clearly of the view that tensions within capitalism that produce conflict and so forth arise because the bourgeois ideology which insists that all people are free and equal is contradicted by actual social practices. But such themes did not lead Marx to reflect on what we would now call international political theory. Here Kant has the edge – the disadvantage of course is that he had little to say about class relations and the need for reconstructing economic and social relations globally. So the vision, if I can call it that, borrows from Kant and Marx. Both had an understanding of the constraints on change – they were not naive idealists. In Kant's case, that was expressed in the claim that 'nothing straight can ever be made out of anything as

crooked as human nature'.¹⁸ Admittedly, the early Marx seems more naively optimistic about the human perfectibility; his later position was probably a good deal more complex. The point is that they did not retreat into pessimism; they believed that humans possess certain capacities for reordering the world that may decades if not centuries to alter the bonds between them.

To put this differently (as argued in *The Transformation of Political Community*), their legacy is threefold: (i) it is important to consider the principles that might underpin an alternative world order; (ii) it is necessary to develop a sociology – indeed an approach to world history – that explains how societies have developed to this point; (iii) it is crucial to have a praxeology – that is, an account of the cultural and other resources that people can harness to bridge ‘is’ and ‘ought’. In short, vision – or cosmopolitan vision – needs to be linked with those two other dimensions of critical international theory that is within the ‘tradition’ of Kant and Marx. I apologise for the length of the answer!

Shannon Brincat: What seems to animate all of your work is an attempt to ascertain “what it is that each member of mankind might reasonably claim from other men, and how their respective rights and duties are to be expressed in the structure of international society”.¹⁹ In your opinion, what is it then that we can ‘reasonably claim’ from others – is it a mere negative duty, for example, to do no harm to others, or is it more positive along the spectrum, that is, obligations to actively assist others?

Andrew Linklater: That’s an excellent question. Let me start with harm. Cicero says that the main obligation we have to all human beings is to refrain from harming them, adding that anyone who causes unnecessary harm is an enemy of the human race.²⁰ Interestingly, that idea runs through the natural law tradition, and is evident in Pufendorf and Vattel who presumably had read Cicero. It is also present in Kant’s writings (for example in *Perpetual Peace*). In short, it has long been central to the citizenship/humanity problem mentioned earlier.

As for whether the ‘harm principle’ gives rise only to negative duties – on some accounts the principle is more far-reaching. The crucial text is Feinberg’s *Harm to Others* which argues that the obligation to avoid harm extends from the more obvious proscriptions regarding killing, assault, exploiting the vulnerable and so forth to rescuing others (when there is no serious risk to the potential rescuer).²¹ Feinberg regards the failure to rescue as a potentially punishable offence and not, as some philosophers have argued, as a perfectly legitimate entitlement to withhold a benefit.

¹⁸ This is a reference to Kant’s famous passage in *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*. See Immanuel Kant, ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’, in *Kant: Political Writings*, (H.S. Reiss Ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

¹⁹ Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*, London: Macmillan, 1982, 8.

²⁰ See Cicero, *On Duty* (*De Officiis*), (Eds. M.T. Griffin, E.M. Atkins), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, Book I, 99.

²¹ Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others: The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomas Pogge's book on world poverty²² is important since he argues that the so-called negative obligation to avoid harm generates a positive responsibility to dismantle what he calls 'global coercive regimes' that disadvantage the global poor. Similarly, Onora O'Neil published an essay on transnational justice²³ where she argues that all people have the right to protest against the way in which they are bound together. It is possible to anchor that claim in the 'harm principle'. In short, the 'negative obligation' not to injure others – particularly under conditions of global interconnectedness where people in one part of the world affect the interests of 'distant strangers' in dramatic ways – has radical political implications. This can all be connected with studies of cosmopolitan democracy, transnational public spheres and so forth.²⁴

However, the harm principle should not be regarded as the whole of morality, and it is important not to claim too much for it. There are two dangers when relying on the harm principle to defend a cosmopolitan ethic: one is not claiming enough for it, or reducing it to not killing and so forth; the other is pushing the harm principle so far that it becomes co-extensive with the whole of morality. There has to be a distinction between being heroic acts and not harming. This is not uncomplicated, of course, and moral and legal philosophers continue to debate the issues in the specialist journals. But to return to our starting-point, the 'harm principle' now seems to me have special importance for thinking about the relationship between duties to citizens and duties to other human beings – and it has a special relationship with the sociological and praxeological dimensions of critical international theory. Those are issues that run through my current research on the problem of harm in world politics. But perhaps that is something to come back to later. Let me end by thanking you for very interesting and challenging questions.

²² See Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Second Edition, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.

²³ Onora O'Neil, 'Transnational Justice'. In D. Held (ed) *Political Theory Today*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1991.

²⁴ See David Held, *Democracy and World Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance*. Cambridge: Polity 1995, and Nancy Fraser, , 'Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24 (4), 7-30.