Linklater’s body of work as a whole may be characterized as a response to the Wightian lament that there is no international theory, and this collection of essays epitomizes this by weaving a persuasive and integrated argument that draws on interdisciplinary sources in a convincing and holistic fashion. His argument here is forthright, but remains sensitive to and considerate of possible objections. The chapters in the volume offer an insightful discussion of an approach to contemporary world politics grounded in English School theorizing and the social theory of Kant and Rousseau, while integrating the post-Marxist critical theory of Habermas and the historical sociology of Elias, to culminate in the defense of an embodied cosmopolitanism through a discussion of cosmopolitan harm conventions in international society. As a consequence, the book will be of most interest to those interested in International Relations (IR) theory, normative theory, sociology and critical social theory.

Linklater initiates and grounds his discussion by addressing the conflict between the obligations of citizenship and those of humanity: a moral conflict that he regards as being fundamental to people’s experience of the modern states-system (Linklater, 2008:16). The general direction of his argument is to respond to Hobbesian approaches to international theory by drawing on the social theories of Rousseau and Kant in order to challenge statist approaches to IR from a cosmopolitan point of view. However, while his point of departure comes almost as second nature to theorists of IR, it remains to be seen whether this dichotomy is an accurate representation of the majority of humanity’s experience of world politics, or whether it is primarily a corollary of a West European perspective on the nature of politics in the contemporary world. After all, the Westphalian states system emerged as a consequence of the European religious wars of the seventeenth century, and of which the contractarian tradition of thought is a powerful philosophical corollary. While the states-system has been subsequently globalised, if it was primarily a particularist response to political and philosophical circumstances in late medieval/early modern Europe, then it may be objected that Linklater’s universalisation of this particular experience is insufficiently attentive to the multicultural nature of world politics; as opposed to affording respect to the freedom of human subjects differently constituted to be self-directing within their own historical, philosophical and cultural narratives (and hence according to obligations derived in different ways than through contractarian or universalist thought, and from alternative political imaginaries to that of the nation-state).

As a consequence (and beyond the scope of Linklater’s book and this short engagement), it might be interesting to think through the implications of examining
alternative social theories that are also concerned with reflecting on human social relations and the idea of human freedom. It may be the case that rather than following Linklater’s course through intellectual history (from Rousseau and Kant, through Hegel to Marx, Habermas and Elias) one could take an alternative reading of Hegel, through to Heidegger and their contemporary European inheritors (such as Derrida, Deleuze, and Levinas), integrating aspects of their work into an emancipatory approach to international theory.

This would be intriguing in part because Linklater’s leap from statist-communitarianism to a prioritization of species-community is not wholly convincing. The pluralist nature of world politics, and the potentially particularist nature of his argument, means that his story may only refer to a Western experience of world politics, which begs the question: how are we to interact with those people of different cultures (such as Islamic, Hindu, African and Confucian) who may not share our experience (and hence Linklater’s terms of reference) of world politics? Perhaps the terms of reference for a critical theory of world politics ought to be more directly related to an analysis of human subjectivity that is not premised on the categories of men and citizens. While Linklater’s main strength is that he does attempt to go beyond the states-system, it might be the case that a different starting point could be more persuasive.

Perhaps more significantly, Linklater’s dismissal of alternative perspectives on the nature of politics and morality may not resonate with some readers who are differently theoretically inclined. He directs his criticism against moral particularism, but the effect can be said to be the same for ‘historicism’ and ‘post-structuralist’ approaches. He writes:

If the states-system is an artifact imposed upon a pre-existent world morality then the legitimacy of this division must be questioned [...] What is at issue, therefore, is the existence of particularistic social moralities that centre the individual’s moral sensibilities on the immediate political group. (Linklater, 2008:20)

Nevertheless, to give one example of a particularist challenge to the idea of a ‘pre-existent world morality’, Michael Walzer’s work would support the claim that morality ought to be understood as a creation of human agents; one that is developed, inherited, and rearticulated in various ways through the historical and contemporary relations between peoples and groups of peoples, and hence should be regarded as social, contingent, and in its specific differentiations from alternative schemas, is often idiosyncratic. The task a critical approach to world politics then, is to combine a respect for different ways of thinking about politics that recognize the significance of pluralism, though employed with a critical edge. Perhaps combining the immanent nature of inter-subjective relations with the contingency of both our inherited moral positions, and the attempts of global ethical theorists (such as Linklater) to transcend these moralities.

It then seems sensible from this point of view that rather than seeking to transcend these moralities based on arguments that draw on universalist thought, that instead we should be critically reflective about all our schemas, challenging them from the inside rather than above, and ensuring that they are more responsive to the relations between humans that prefigure these moral codes. In this way we may hope to effect the progressive, organic and contextual development of human social
relations by transgressing (rather than transcending) the multitude of social forms that we have inherited in an emancipatory way.

Linklater explains that for the historicist approach to international relations - because they represent the outcome of human political creativity - the diversity of states actually represents an enhancement of human freedom rather than an obstacle to it. Given humanity’s experience of states (in their internal and external relations) in the twentieth century, he is right to be critical of this position. But it may remain that different forms of social life (including those of which we may have little or no experience) are still the creations of free human beings, and hence deserving of our respect. A historical materialist would likely refute this, and it is at odds with Linklater’s universalism. Nonetheless, it seems intuitive that when thinking about politics on a global scale, we ought to take the plurality of societies seriously and, if we value freedom, commit ourselves to their organic development on their own terms and from the bottom-up, thus cautioning us of universalist ideas that attempt to integrate the multitude of human societies into one particular way of thinking about global politics.

Linklater would perhaps respond to this suggestion by citing the changing nature of the states-system over the course of the past century driven by processes of globalisation (and increasingly so given the intensity and extensity of the interconnections that mark our contemporary global condition). He might claim that given this interconnected world, that particularist moralities are a shackle to the development of human freedom which ought to be cast aside in favour of ethical thinking that has humanity as its referent object; after all, particularist moralities are conservative and self-regarding and hence are of little use to the theorisation of contemporary global ethics.

While Linklater’s diagnosis of the changing nature of the states-system is insightful and largely convincing, the particularist nature of our moralities is not something that can be cast aside, and the move to inaugurate humanity as a compelling referent object of morality is a tough one to make because the obligations associated with it are abstract and indirect rather than immanent and compelling. Furthermore, moral particularism is more forceful than Linklater recognizes. And contrary to Linklater’s claim, viewing morality as essentially particularistic does not necessarily entail that the object of those moralities must also be particularist: just because the source of value is local and particular, its corresponding object need not also be. In other words, particularist moralities are not by definition self-regarding.

Nevertheless, moral particularism does require a substantive rearticulation in order that it may adequately respond to the changes in the contemporary global condition and the transformation of the social bond that has seen inter-subjective relations become increasingly unbound by the borders of the nation-state. To put it differently, Linklater’s universalist approach to global ethical theorizing sets a benchmark for present-day relevance and sophistication that alternative accounts of global politics must aim to match if they are to have any purchase on the theoretical approach to contemporary IR.

So this is not to deny the force of Linklater’s argument. Twenty-seven years after the publication of ‘Men and Citizens’, his work should still be considered to be the most potent articulation of a critical theoretical approach to world politics: one that demands great attention and should be read widely. Especially by those interested in the application of the thought of Kant, Marx and Habermas to world politics (which is why it is surprising that Linklater’s writings are not given greater consideration in
courses in political theory). Yet there are areas that could, perhaps be better substantiated. These relate to fairly existential questions concerning the nature of human subjectivity and freedom. Specifically, a more substantial elaboration of the conceptions of subjectivity and morality in chapter one, and conceptions of freedom and human agency in chapter three. (Though the latter chapter - on the achievements of critical theory – should be read in its own right for its forthright exposition of the Marxist approach to critical international thought).

Further, more may also be said about the understanding of freedom that underwrites Linklater’s approach to ‘emancipation’. What does it mean for an individual to be free, and upon what account of the human subject is this view based? Clearly people should have control over their own destinies and the social forms of their existence, but there is something about the idea of a universal history that is disconcerting given the plurality of political societies in world politics. Does a commitment to enhancing human freedom not entail a commitment to an undetermined future? If so, perhaps Linklater’s universalism oversteps the bounds of freedom due to its implicit hegemonic aspirations existing in tension with the pluralist nature of world politics. As a result, a case might be made that freedom in a multicultural world is better served by letting other people be rather than attempting to assimilate other people’s worldviews into our own.

It is likely that Linklater’s response would involve Habermasian discourse ethics to suggest free and open dialogue between people. This would follow Habermas’ move from a monological to a dialogical conception of morality (i.e. from Rawls’ original position to Habermas’ discourse ethics). But there are still problems associated with this, relating to the opaque nature of language, the existence of a diversity of languages, and the challenges to the idea of a unified logos posed by continental philosophers in the twentieth century. Moreover, on what basis are we to opt for a dialogical understanding of morality as opposed to perhaps a “plurilogical” approach that might be more adequate given the existence of multiple moral codes in world politics?

These reservations aside, although taking their departure from more substantial accounts of subjectivity and freedom, and perhaps taking moral particularism more seriously, future work in International Relations should continue in the same emancipatory vein that Linklater has opened. This is because the advancement of human freedom seems to be the most auspicious aspiration for theorists of contemporary global politics, and which is why critical international thought should be considered a potent force in IR. Linklater’s ‘Critical Theory and World Politics’ is essential reading for anyone who is not convinced of this claim.