

Thoughts on *World Statehood* by Heikki Patomäki

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I am grateful to have this opportunity to engage with Heikki Patomäki's interesting and important book, [*World Statehood: The Future of World Politics*](#). As requested, I will begin with some comments on my reaction to the concept of world statehood and then move on to discuss some of the topics discussed in the book.

1. World statehood

I come to this topic from a background in astronomy, and from this perspective (see figure showing Earth from the Moon as seen from Apollo 8) it seems natural that a single planet somehow *ought* to have an overarching political identity. Afterall, what would we think if we discovered an intelligent alien species and found that their planet was divided into 200 independent political units, constantly competing and fighting each other? Would we not think that to be a dangerous and inefficient (and perhaps immature) way to organise a planet? Of course, their (like our) political arrangements would presumably have resulted from a complex historical evolution, so perhaps we shouldn't be too judgemental. But still, looking at their society from the outside, wouldn't we find it surprising (or even disappointing) that they hadn't managed to overcome historical and tribal differences to enable the efficient and peaceful management of their world?



Regardless of what may be occurring on other planets, our own case is clear enough: we are faced with a large number of potentially existential problems, including, but not limited to, climate change, biodiversity loss, global pandemics, endemic warfare, and the proliferation and potential use of nuclear weapons. Even without appeal to the cosmic perspective, it seems clear that dealing effectively with these issues will require much stronger institutions of global governance. In my view, this implies the need for some level of world government, and thus a concept of world statehood¹. I am therefore delighted that this concept is once again being taken seriously by international relations scholars.

2. The need to move beyond nationalism and build global institutions

It is inherent in the cosmic perspective, and the global nature of our common problems, that we need to move past the all-pervasive assumption of nation-state sovereignty, which, as Patomäki (p. 1) rightly observes, has captured the contemporary political imagination². As he goes on to argue (p. 250):

*the requirements of technological civilisation have outrun the limited problem-solving capacities of national-territorial states and ... some new state-like institutions are needed on a global and planetary scale.*³

I fully agree and was delighted to see the repeated calls for stronger global institutions throughout the book (e.g., pp. 150, 154, 170-71, 196, 250, 314). The recognition that institution building is itself cumulative, and that new institutions can create new context for further evolution (e.g., p. 314), seems especially important.

Of course, other authors have also argued for stronger international (and transnational) institutions. Here I particularly wish to highlight those advanced by the economist Barbara Ward (aka Baroness Jackson) in her slim book *Spaceship Earth* (1966, p. 17):

¹ I am mindful of Eva Erman's (2019) injunction not to conflate 'statehood' with 'government' and very much endorse her important concept of 'sufficient stateness'. If I understand correctly, Erman associates the term 'government' with the executive functions of a state, whereas the legislative and judicial functions of statehood might be implemented without an overarching executive, and therefore without a central government in this sense. I agree that much progress in global governance might be made by gradually building up to a level of 'sufficient world stateness' in different functional areas, although I suspect that many people would view the development of a global legislature and/or judiciary as elements of a world government as colloquially understood.

² Strictly, Patomäki here refers to "state sovereignty" as having captured the political imagination. From the context, I have taken him to be referring to *nation-state* sovereignty, but I would welcome being corrected if I have misunderstood. Other authors have also drawn attention to this problem, and I especially agree with Bartelson (2009, p. 4) that this 'nationalization' of worldviews is a "tragic outcome" of political evolution, and with Lord Acton (1862), writing when nationalism was very much on the rise, that "[t]he theory of nationality ... is a retrograde step in history."

³ Although I fully agree with this statement, the sentence begins a little optimistically with the assertion that "There is broad agreement that ..."; it seems to me that while there may be broad agreement on this point among international relations scholars (I hope that there is), the hold of the nation-state on the popular imagination and on practical politics appears as strong as ever – it appears that the case for stronger global-level institutions still very much needs to be made.

The essence of our international anarchy today is that the functions of order and most of the functions of welfare still stop at the arbitrary boundaries of states. The greatest institutional gap in our world is created by an inescapable, planetary, interdependence which breeds common grievances and creates common needs and opportunities, yet is matched by virtually no instruments of worldwide order and welfare.

Ward goes on to argue that to make progress we will need to “go beyond existing institutions and national restrictions and rethink our world on a new scale” (p. 74), and that this will require the development of “a new planetary loyalty” (p. 145) amounting to “a patriotism for the world itself” (p. 148).⁴ Patomäki’s arguments in *World Statehood* point in the same direction (although it is disappointing that so little progress has been made between the publication of the two books).

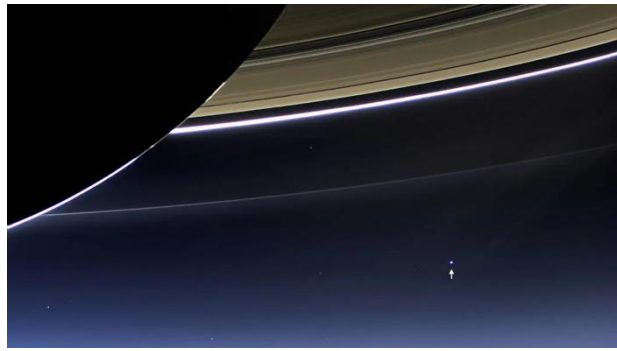
As noted above, my own view is that the logic of these arguments implies the desirability of a global government. However, given the cultural diversity of humanity, and existing loyalties to nation-states, I think we should have in mind a *federal* world government/state, where the principle of subsidiarity applies, rather than a monolithic global Leviathan. Importantly, the checks and balances inherent in federal systems of government may go some way towards minimising the otherwise all-too-real risk of a unitary world state devolving into a global tyranny.

3. Need for a common planetary imaginary

I agree with Patomäki (e.g., pp. 9, 253, 301, 308, 321) that progress on developing global political institutions will require a stronger sense of global community. In particular, I agree that this “is unlikely to emerge or be sustainable without a civilising and story-telling process involving a global and planetary imaginary constituting ... a sense of “we”-ness” (p. 321). In the context of (world) state-building, I note that Hans Morgenthau came to the same conclusion long ago when, reflecting on the difficulties of creating a world state, he wrote that just as “the community of the American people antedated the American state ... a world community must antedate a world state” (Morgenthau 1948, p. 406). This line of reasoning follows logically from an extrapolation to a global scale of Benedict Anderson’s famous observation that a nation is “an imagined political community ... *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members ... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1991, p. 6; his italics). I have elaborated my own thinking along these lines elsewhere (e.g., Crawford 2021), but broadly I think there are two mutually reinforcing ways in which a scientific worldview can contribute to a planetary imaginary, and thus a stronger sense of global community:

⁴ There is much in Ward’s book that is relevant to this discussion, and I urge colleagues to read it. As her title, *Spaceship Earth*, implies, Ward’s own thinking about the need for global institutions was in part inspired by the cosmic perspective provided by the early years of space exploration.

(1) Enhancing a sense of the cosmic perspective on our common planetary situation (as discussed above). Such a perspective is provided by modern astronomy, astrobiology, and space exploration, and is arguably one of the most important *societal* benefits of these scientific activities. Patomäki discusses the importance of a cosmological perspective



underpinning political cosmopolitanism in Chapter 2, and I broadly agree with this discussion (as I do with Bartelson’s comprehensive study from 2009). What I would say (fully aware that this may appear like the arrogance of a physical scientist) is that we now have a much better idea of our true cosmic situation (and I am prepared to assert that it is ‘true’ to a sufficiently close approximation) than has existed at earlier times. An Earth-centred cosmos with crystal spheres will not return – we are, *in fact*, all co-existing on a tiny speck (see figure showing the Earth, arrowed, from Saturn as imaged by the Cassini spacecraft), alone in a vast and, as far as we can judge, uncaring universe. My view is that it would be beneficial if this perspective were more widely held, and that it provides a stronger cosmological foundation for cosmopolitan political philosophies than has existed in the past.

(2) Reinforcing the cosmic perspective with a matching temporal perspective, and especially a stronger sense of humanity’s common evolutionary history. The relatively new academic discipline of ‘Big History’ (BH) aims to integrate human history with the deeper evolutionary history of the universe (Christian 1991), and thus provides a vehicle for disseminating this perspective more widely. Patomäki engages with BH mainly in Chapter 3, where he notes that it may “help to establish a widespread awareness of belonging to a planetary whole” (p. 61)⁵. In the same vein, Leinen and Bummel (2018, p. 126) have noted that:

⁵ Although I agree with Patomäki on the importance of BH in this context, I don’t agree with all of his interpretations of BH as a discipline. For example, the sentence I quote here begins with “The explicit purpose of BH is to ...”; however, although this may be the stated purpose of some individual ‘big historians’, the only explicit purpose of BH itself that I am aware of is to provide a scientifically accurate evolutionary history of the universe and humanity’s place within it. I agree that wider societal implications follow from the BH perspective, but this doesn’t make them the explicit purpose of the discipline itself (and at least one pioneer scholar in the field has argued that there is no such wider purpose; Spier 2016). Similarly, I think that some of the criticism of the scientific content of (current) BH accounts is misplaced; for example, it is true (p. 61) that the current BH account follows the standard Big Bang cosmology, because that is our current scientific understanding, but the significance of BH for society would not be affected in any way if this cosmology were (as seems entirely plausible) replaced by another one – what matters is that all humans (and all other species that exist, have existed, or will exist in the universe) share the *same* ultimate origin; the details of that origin, while important scientifically, are essentially irrelevant as far as the societal implications are concerned. And, if I may offer one further critique, the assertion (p. 62) that “BH ... seems to share several end-in-death scenarios with the liberal-capitalist worldview” appears designed to associate BH with a particular political philosophy. However, I can’t see any logical support for asserting such an association – I don’t know if the ‘liberal-capitalist worldview’ is indeed predicated on an ‘end-in-death’ philosophy (that suggestion is new to me), but a scientific account of the evolution of the universe, such as BH aims to provide, has no option but to take account of the second law of thermodynamics (unless or until that scientific principle is shown to be wanting).

Big history provides an account of the origin of all existence and of life on Earth on a strictly scientific basis. The cosmological worldview thus helps us on the path to an integral consciousness and creates an important frame of reference for planetary identity.

To my mind, one of the clearest enunciations of why the perspectives provided by BH and related disciplines have the potential to help unite humanity was made by the biologist Ursula Goodenough (1998, p. xvi):

*Any global tradition needs to begin with a shared worldview: a culture-independent, globally accepted consensus as to how things are. ... our scientific account of nature, an account that can be called *The Epic of Evolution*. ... this is the story, the one story, that has the potential to unite us, because it happens to be true.*

By combining these cosmic and evolutionary perspectives, we may be able to create a global planetary imaginary (or strengthen one that is perhaps already forming through other aspects of globalization). I agree with Patomäki (and with the logic of Morgenthau and Anderson) that such an imaginary is probably required as a psychological precondition for the formation of stronger global political institutions. As Patomäki importantly observes (p. 195) “new levels of human consciousness make new social practices and institutions possible” and an enhanced consciousness of cosmic and evolutionary perspectives would surely help.

4. History is open and will increasingly be shaped by conscious actors

Some of the most optimistic themes running through *World Statehood* are the multiple assurances that the future is not pre-ordained (e.g., pp. 122, 150, 197, 200-302, 317), and will therefore be increasingly affected by the choices we make as conscious actors (e.g., pp. 6, 58, 131, 227, 321). As our actions will in some measure be based on our knowledge and beliefs, and as human understanding (certainly of nature, but also arguably of ethics and politics; e.g., pp. 65, 116, 317) increases cumulatively, human progress (including political progress towards a world state) is surely possible. However, as Patomäki stresses, the fact that history is open does not render any particular evolutionary trajectory inevitable (p. 317). Still, accepting that progress towards stronger global political institutions, such as might lead to world statehood, is not inevitable, the realisation that the future is not fixed, and that we are actors with agency in our world, provides optimism that such progress is achievable.

I agree with Patomäki that this would comprise “a normatively compelling direction to world history in the twenty-first century” (p. 318), and is something we all have a duty to work towards. Indeed, one could argue that even conceiving of a better way of organising the world may introduce a teleological pull towards its realization. I am reminded of Pablo Gilabert’s (2012) insight that:

Ambitious political pictures can inspire political action, setting long-term agendas for dramatic improvements of social life. If we look at liberalism, socialism, and other important political outlooks, we can see that they involve quite ideal demands whose realization could perhaps only be attained progressively and in the long-term. But they have inspired the political action and experimentation of generations, and enabled some extraordinarily important historical achievements ...

5. Domestic (and foreign) policies for Planet Earth

Coordinated global economic action, amounting to a domestic economic policy for Planet Earth (e.g., pp. 274, 287), seems essential if global economic development is to be managed efficiently at the same time as reducing global inequalities and minimising environmental disruptions. I think the concept of a *domestic* economic policy for the whole planet is extremely valuable and deserves to be developed further. It also sits nicely with the cosmic perspective discussed above. Debating the details of such a global economic policy are beyond my areas of expertise, but I find myself agreeing with Patomäki (e.g., pp. 264-70) that international taxes, such as a carbon tax (and possibly other Tobin-like taxes), would logically form part of such a policy.⁶ One could, of course, envisage other global domestic policies for which a world government might be responsible (e.g., human rights, disarmament, security, etc). However, such global domestic policies would require legitimate (ideally democratic) global institutions for their formulation and implementation. Patomäki (Chapter 12) advocates for a World Parliament, and such an institution could indeed be a key component of any future world government (e.g., Leinen and Bummel (2018); see also the Campaign for a UN Parliamentary Assembly: <https://www.unpacampaign.org>).

Interestingly, consideration of a *domestic* policy for Planet Earth begs the question of whether a politically united world might not also need a *foreign* policy. This, by definition, would relate to activities in space beyond our home planet, about which *World Statehood* also has important things to say and to which I now turn.

6. Space expansionism

I have long felt (e.g., Crawford 1993) that the twin topics of space colonisation and world government will prove to be deeply intertwined, so I was delighted to see this topic given prominence in *World Statehood* (e.g., pp. 9, 59, 67, 144, 230, 246, 252). I agree with Patomäki that, if properly managed, human expansion into space can help contribute to a sense of ‘cosmic hopefulness’ (e.g., pp. 59-60, 65)⁷ by providing humanity with a joint project and, perhaps even

⁶ I was delighted to see the references (pp. 270, 314) to the Brandt Commission (Brandt et al. 1980) in this context – this pioneering study is seldom cited these days and its excellent and farsighted proposals deserve to be better known. One might go further and suggest something akin to James Yunker’s (2014) ‘Global Marshall Plan’, which might very well need a world government to implement.

⁷ This is another important concept that would be well worth developing further. I agree with Heikki that discoveries in the fields of astrobiology and space exploration are likely to be central in the development of this concept.

more important, a sense of cosmic *worth*. Quoting Freeman Dyson to the effect that “[t]he expansion of life over the universe is a beginning, not an end,” Patomäki goes on to write (p. 59):

This scenario of the greening of the galaxy sets a future project for humanity; the expansion of life and culture into space may be one of the chief tasks awaiting humankind.

We don’t yet know how common life and intelligence are in the universe, but it is entirely possible that they are very rare. It is the job of astrobiology to answer this question (the importance of which Patomäki notes on p. 60), but if life is as rare as a cosmic phenomenon then the whole future of life in the universe may depend on *us*, including our political and ethical choices. As Patomäki notes (p. 59) “[t]his implies that the future of the cosmos is not only about the expansion of life but also about society and culture, and ethics and politics.”

I agree with this, but as Daniel Deudney (2020) has recently pointed out, human expansion into space will also come with grave geopolitical risks. Indeed, Deudney argues that the risks are so serious that humanity should refrain from expanding into space and ‘relinquish’ the relevant technologies. Yet, this would confine the human future (and, for all we currently know, the future of life itself) to this single planet. It would also prevent space exploration from becoming the unifying focus for humanity that Patomäki advocates, and result in many other missed scientific and cultural opportunities. My own view is that the answer to Deudney’s concerns can only lie in the creation of stronger international institutions to govern space activities. Ultimately, I think space activities should be seen as falling within the remit of a future (federal) world government, the creation of which is desirable for multiple other reasons as discussed above. I’m pleased to see that Patomäki comes to a similar conclusion, arguing (p. 252) that “a world parliament could also speak in the name of the world community and thus respond, among many other things, to the questions raised by space expansionism.”⁸

There is a lot more that could be said on this subject (my own views are elaborated elsewhere; Crawford 2022), but I agree with Patomäki that the close synergy between space activities and global governance fully justifies including the topic in a work devoted to the future of world politics.

7. Conclusion

As will be apparent from these comments, there is much food for thought in Patomäki *World Statehood*. Although the formation of a world state (ideally federal and democratic) still appears a distant dream, inserting the concept into public and academic discourse (and thus into the ‘Overton Window’) is an essential first step if such a transformation of human

⁸ I note that James Yunker (2007, pp. 60-61) made a similar point when he argued that a future world government may need a “Ministry of External Development” to manage human activities in space.

organisation is ever to occur. In my opinion, *World Statehood* makes a significant contribution to this objective.

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