

Abstracting the World Government Question

A.C. McKeil

Posted: 28 February 2018

Aaron McKeil recently completed his PhD International Relations titled, 'Searching for a World Polity: The World After International Anarchy Question' at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His recent publications include, 'A Silhouette of Utopia: Constructivist and English School Conceptions of a World Society', *International Politics* (2018), and, 'Global Societies are Social Things: A Conceptual Reassessment', *Global Society* (2017).

Introduction

I have been following the activities of the World Government Research Network and the 'World Orders Forum' with great interest, so am thankful and glad to have been invited to discuss the theoretical aspects of my research. In this brief essay, I discuss my outlook on the problems behind, as well as the thinking underpinning my research on world polity formation theory. The point I wish to highlight in this discussion is that conceptual and theoretical benefits can be gained from abstracting the world government question in terms of "systemic unification", meaning the question of if and how systems of multiple independent polities can become one polity.

The Problem of World Disorder

I became interested in this theoretical puzzle of systemic unification, largely because of the practical deficiencies of our contemporary world order. The search for a politically unified world order is in many ways a pragmatic response to the international problems of war, division, imperialism, inequity, and numerous other issues, many of which are ancient problems and some that are unique and existential in a modern context. In the Warring States period of ancient China, the follower of Confucius, Mengzi, made the case that 'stability is in unity'.^[1] In what we might refer to as the Warring States period of modern Europe, Kant made the case for a federation of republics. Yet, the modern world is seemingly no less prone than eras past to conflict between democracies and non-democracies. The ancient Peloponnesian War between the city-states of Sparta, Athens, and their allies was, amongst other concerns, a war between democracies and monarchies. Equally, the modern internationalist idea of peace through law and the newer constructivist idealism of peace through norms, struggle to have practical effects, largely because the great powers overturn norms and law when they deem necessary. Perhaps more fundamentally, the modern idea that there is an international society of states with shared institutions is indeed "cold comfort" to the majority of humankind made existentially vulnerable by persistent great power mismanagement. In modern times, for a variety of reasons, the great powers continually subvert one another and ultimately threaten to destroy one another and

thereby undermine and threaten to destroy all humankind by effect. As such, the case for a more politically unified world order has a pragmatic basis in the persistent impracticalities of the modern great-power-centric world order. This is not to say that more local government is not also needed too and it is not to say that world unity is a solution to all world order problems.

Climbing the Ladder of Abstraction

If the idea that stability is in unity is entertained, however, questions arise of how unity comes about and what kind of unity, if any, would be practical and sustainable? These are ancient questions, with a growing and sophisticated literature in modern International Relations theory. In my research, I have been attempting to contribute a fresh take on these questions. When studying the theoretical literature, I found a general presentism, an intellectual fixation on the puzzle of integrating and unifying the contemporary international system, often emphasizing the condition of globalization. With this observation, I recalled the question James N. Rosenau used to ask his students, ‘Of what is this an instance?’,^[2] and so I put forward the question of what the unification of the contemporary international system would be an instance? In the theoretical portion of my research, I have explored the idea that the unification of the contemporary international system would be an instance of the formation of a single “polity” out of a system of multiple independent polities.^[3] A world government is primarily the concept of hierarchical governing structures, but its practical functioning would also require its involvement in a world polity, entailing an ability to mobilize resources and the solidarities and burden sharing of a “weness” collective identity. Is the “systemic unification” entailed by world polity formation possible in a late modern context, what are its contributing processes, and what are its conditions? Explicitly posing these questions, slightly higher up Rosenau’s ladder of abstraction, invites a theoretical revisiting of the unification question.

Theorizing “Systemic Unification” in World History

There has never been a world polity, but as Hedley Bull suggested, ‘there has never been a government of the world, but there has often been a government supreme over much of what for those subjected to it was the known world.’^[4] If there were a unified world polity in future, its inhabitants would look back on those past “world spanning” empires as analogies to their own unified world, just as we moderns look back to the divided eras of ancient Greece and the Warring States period of ancient China as somewhat analogous to our own politically divided world. One of the insights of Arnold Toynbee and the world state literature is the observation that historical international systems have often been subsumed under a suzerain power. The question of unity, at a higher level of abstraction, however, grants the conceptual distinction between the concentration of power in a system and the unification of multiple polities into a single “supra polity”. A suzerain power, in principle, is the suppression of a system of polities under a single polity. The question of systemic unification, in abstract terms, is the unification of a system of independent polities into a single system-wide polity. As such, systemic unification entails collective identity formation on a system-wide scale, which legitimates hierarchical governing structures, and the burden sharing of resource mobilization. With this angle on the question, considering world historical cases of international systems, such as the Roman Empire, for instance, some evidence of a unifying process is identifiable, meaning a degree of *unification* is discernable, but by no means a maximal *unity*. Romanization and Roman stoic doctrines of

unity in the ‘world city’ and *communis patria*, the gradual expansion of Roman citizenship, amongst other features, are at least suggestive of unification, albeit in a limited and imperial form.

Beyond this, the theoretical task of unpacking the specific conditions and processes of world polity formation, that is, systemic unification, can benefit from an abstract view, not only for exploring world historical cases, but also for a theoretically more abstract approach to the puzzle. The formation of a system-wide polity entails a “supra polity” identity, meaning a polity in which all others are nested. As such, a world polity, as the outcome of a process of systemic unification, is an emergent property of international systems under certain conditions. Further, what narrative of unity could be marshaled in our late modern world is also debated. In my research, I explore the “trans-civilizational” and ecological narratives of a collective supra polity identity for humankind in a late modern context.

Conclusion

Thinking the question through in the abstract terms of “systemic unification” brings a fresh perspective, inviting conceptual and theoretical insights into the question of a world political unity. It is hoped this small point can be of help to the important work associated with the World Government Research Network.

[1] Yuri Pines *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 11-18.

[2] James N. Rosenau and Mary Durfee *Thinking Theory Thoroughly: Coherent Approaches to an Incoherent World*, 2nd Edition (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), p. 3.

[3] Yale H. Ferguson, and Richard W. Mansbach, *A World of Polities: Essays on Global Politics* London: Routledge, 2008), p. 60-61. I do not mean the ‘World Polity Theory’ of John Meyers.

[4] Hedley Bull *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* 3rd Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1977]), p. 244.