

The problem of harm in world politics: implications for the sociology of states–systems

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In the 1960s Martin Wight and his colleagues on the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics wrote several papers on the great states–systems, including the ancient Greek and Chinese systems, medieval international society and the modern international order. A book on the sociology of states–systems was anticipated—a successor to Butterfield and Wight’s *Diplomatic investigations*—but the project was not completed.¹ It would have been the first volume of its kind in international relations and its impact on the discipline would have been immense in a period in which several major works on historical sociology were published by leading sociologists.² In more recent times, students of international relations have called for large–scale historical–sociological accounts of world politics, and several works have demonstrated what the field can contribute to the broader project of historical sociology.³ As a result, the ‘sociology of states–systems’ now occupies a more central place in the study of international relations than it has at any other time.

From that ‘first period’, Martin Wight’s *System of states* stands out as the central work which did most to set out a grand vision of the comparative sociological analysis of states–systems. On the twenty–fifth anniversary of its

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¹ For more detailed discussion, see Tim Dunne, *Inventing international society: a history of the English School* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 124ff. Martin Wight’s *Systems of states* (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1977) and Adam Watson’s *The evolution of international society* (London: Routledge, 1992) are the chief legacy of the British Committee’s study of historic states–systems.

² Among the most influential of these works are Anthony Giddens, *The nation–state and violence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985); Michael Mann, *The sources of social power*, vols 1 and 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986 and 1994); Theda Skocpol, *States and social revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Charles Tilly, *Coercion, capital and European states, AD 900–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

³ Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International systems in world history: remaking the study of international relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Christian Reus–Smit, *The moral purpose of the state: culture, social identity and institutional rationality in international politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Steve Hobden, *International relations and historical sociology* (London: Routledge, 1998); and Steve Hobden and John Hobson, eds, *Historical sociology of international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

publication, I want to pay tribute to Wight's remarkable contribution to the study of international politics. I will do so here by reflecting, first of all, on his inspiring sociological vision, and considering, secondly, how his argument can be extended from a cosmopolitan standpoint which draws on key theoretical developments in international relations since *Systems of states* was published a quarter of a century ago.

Having offered a brief explanation of the subtitle of this article, it is important to offer some comments also on the first element of the title, 'The problem of harm in world politics'. Brutality has been the norm in world politics. Equality and reciprocity, to paraphrase Tzvetan Todorov, have been the exception rather than the rule. Appropriately, harm, hurt, injury—and unprecedented suffering caused by total war—brought the academic study of international relations into being more than eight decades ago. The question of what is to be done with the state's 'power to hurt'—to use Thomas Schelling's expression—has dominated the study of world politics ever since.⁴

Over the decades, central debates in the field have focused on whether harm in the shape of violence and coercion is an inescapable feature of states-systems, whether it would be eradicated if humanity could only agree on some basic moral principles, or whether all we can hope is that separate states will use diplomacy, international law and institutions to reduce the suffering they cause each other.

The English School has been at the centre of these disputes about how far states have made, and can make, progress in controlling the power to harm. Its members regard the society of states as crucially concerned with restraining violence; they value international order, knowing that its collapse will bring widespread suffering to peoples everywhere. But as Hedley Bull argued, the need for order can so easily come into conflict with the goal of justice, and international order may or may not promote world order whose purpose is the well-being of individuals rather than the security of states.⁵ So, in addition to asking how far states have made progress in maintaining international order, we can ask how far they have enlarged their common enterprise by striving to protect individuals everywhere from avoidable harm. The English School—and John Vincent in particular—has addressed this question most notably in the study of humanitarian intervention and human rights.

These cosmopolitan orientations are central to the sociological approach to harm in world politics which I want to outline here. What is most interesting from this point of view is how far different international systems have thought harm to individuals a moral problem for the world as a whole—a problem which all states, individually and collectively, should labour to solve—and have developed what might be called cosmopolitan harm conventions. These are moral conventions designed to protect individuals everywhere from unnecessary

⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and influence* (London: Yale University Press, 1966).

⁵ See Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society: a study of order in world politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), ch. 4. The distinction between international and world order is introduced on p. 22.

suffering, irrespective of their citizenship or nationality, class, gender, race and other distinguishing characteristics.⁶

In world politics, unnecessary suffering or superfluous injury—expressions used in the Hague Conventions—usually result from state-building, conquest and war, from the globalization of economic and social relations, and from pernicious racist, nationalist and related doctrines. The function of a sociology of harm conventions is to ask to what extent different states-systems drew on the idea of a universal community of humankind to create agreements that individuals should be protected from the harm such phenomena cause—moral conventions which reveal that human sympathies need not be confined to co-nationals or fellow citizens but can be expanded to include all members of the human race.

It may seem slightly odd to pay tribute to Martin Wight's sociological project in this overtly cosmopolitan manner. He argued that cosmopolitan and other radical approaches are an important reminder that states-systems contain deep moral imperfections, but he doubted that such approaches, or indeed progressivist tendencies in general, would ever enjoy lasting success. As is well known, he did have a keen interest in what he called revolutionism, and at times he comes close to Kant in stressing that we should value order because without it, efforts to promote justice are set to fail.

I will begin with some comments about Martin Wight's pessimism, followed by brief consideration of how his writings on ancient Greece reflect his broader interest in whether or not the idea of the universal community of humankind has influenced the development of different states-systems. I will then offer some observations on different forms of harm which it is important to consider in formulating a cosmopolitan approach to the sociology of states-systems. Finally, I will turn to the question of whether the modern states-system can be said to have progressed in making the unnecessary suffering of individuals a moral problem for humanity as a whole.

Wight's pessimism

Martin Wight described states-systems as 'the loosest of all political organizations known to us; hence in part [their] fascination'—the loosest because states have no superior, although each may acknowledge the independence of the others; fascinating because the absence of a higher authority does not necessarily spell anarchy and chaos but is perfectly compatible with order and society.⁷ He had in mind what he called the primary states-systems: those of

⁶ Andrew Linklater, 'Citizenship, humanity and cosmopolitan harm conventions', *International Political Science Review* 22: 3, 2001, pp. 261–77.

⁷ Wight, *Systems of states*, p. 149. See also p. 23, where Wight maintains that a states-system exists when each state ('by "states" we normally mean "sovereign states", political authorities which recognize no superior') claims 'independence of any political superior' and recognizes 'the validity of the same claim by all the others'.

ancient Greece; China in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods; and the modern European, now universal, system of states which was born in Italy during the Renaissance.

Primary states-systems fascinated Wight because there are so few examples in human history.⁸ He focused on the three examples just mentioned, adding that there may have been a fourth in ancient India. Barry Buzan and Richard Little have extended this list in their recent book, referring to city-state systems in what is now Pakistan, southern Mexico and west Africa.⁹ A recent work on medieval frontier societies notes that an embryonic states-system may have existed in Wales for much of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁰ No doubt this list could be extended further.

Martin Wight's fascination with states-systems owed something to their remarkable flair for self-destruction. Earlier states-systems had ended in empire; none survived for more than a handful of centuries. He therefore asked whether certain laws or patterns have existed in all states-systems, and suggested by way of a preliminary answer that three phases seem to recur. In phase one, the number of independent powers declines sharply as small states are eliminated, casualties of military expansion and war. In phase two, increasingly violent competition among the surviving great powers dominates the system. In phase three, we witness the end of the states-system as one of the remaining predators achieves the goal for which it has been striving—preponderant power and the ability to law down the law.

Martin Wight did not advance the comforting thought that the modern states-system will be the first to break the mould. His argument was that every states-system ultimately rests on the balance of power, which is inherently unstable and is eventually destroyed by the struggle for domination.¹¹ Conceivably, he believed the modern states-system, reduced at the time he was writing to two superpowers weighed down with nuclear weapons, was moving inexorably towards a violent end. In all this, we can see Martin Wight at his most fervently realist—the Wight remembered in the textbooks for maintaining that international politics is the sphere of recurrence and repetition, the sphere in which progress just does not occur. We know from his undergraduate lectures at the LSE that he was not persuaded by the cosmopolitan argument

⁸ Wight distinguished primary states-systems from secondary states systems and suzerain states-systems. See *Systems of states*, ch. 1.

⁹ Buzan and Little, *International systems in world history*, p. 174.

¹⁰ Rees Davies, 'Frontier arrangements in fragmented societies: Ireland and Wales', in R. T. Bartlett and A. Mackay, eds, *Medieval frontier societies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

¹¹ Wight, *Systems of states*, p. 44. Wight (*ibid.*, p. 179) argued that 'triangles, like duels, are relationships of conflict, and are resolved by war. The triangle of Russia, China and the United States has not yet been so resolved, but the historical precedents permit no other generalization.' Bull underlines the point by maintaining that Wight believed that particular wars were 'avoidable' but war itself was 'inevitable'. See Hedley Bull, 'Martin Wight and the theory of international relations', in Martin Wight, *International theory: the three traditions*, eds, G. Wight and B. Porter (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), p. xvii.

that the human race could or would come together in a universal community free from destructive sovereign states and poisonous nationalism.¹²

Wight added that cosmopolitanism 'is theoretically the least important' form of radical thinking about world politics. He went on to say that no major work of international political theory had propounded this doctrine, although it had enjoyed some influence in practice.¹³ Cosmopolitans might choose to respond by arguing that the doctrine should be more influential now than it has been in the past, for it is the obvious remedy for so many of the world's ills; but Wight was quick to stress that cosmopolitan perspectives harbour their own peculiar dangers. Here, it is important to remember his claim that the modern states-system has known systemic war and international revolution in almost equal degree; our system has been unusually susceptible to the horizontal divisions that result from conflicts between transnational ideological or religious movements over universal political goals, and from messianic struggles which threaten international order by weakening respect for sovereignty and encouraging intervention.¹⁴ But pessimism is not the same as fatalism, and it must be stressed once again that Wight claimed that order is not an end in itself but, potentially, a staging-post to greater justice.

Two concepts of cosmopolitanism

Despite 'the long peace', events may yet prove that Wight was correct in thinking that our states-system would be destroyed by violence—although analysts propounding 'the end of geopolitics' and the 'obsolescence of war' offer a more optimistic reading of future possibilities. We do not know if progress in curbing violent impulses will last indefinitely or if the modern states-system will revert to type as the great powers rediscover their enthusiasm for imperial domination and their appetite for unlimited war. The literature that defends the idea of an extending peace raises the questions of whether the modern system will reinforce existing constraints on the power to hurt, and whether the human ability to extend compassion across national boundaries will come to have unusual success. In this context, one might ask if Martin Wight focused too

¹² The cosmopolitans' goal, he wrote, was that of 'proclaiming a world society of individuals, which overrides nations or states, diminishing or dismissing this middle link. [They reject] the idea of a society of states and [say] that the only true international society is one of individuals . . . This is the most revolutionary of Revolutionist theories and it implies the total dissolution of international relations'. Cosmopolitanism was understood to be one of three forms of revolutionism. The other two are doctrinal uniformity and doctrinal imperialism. The first, which is attributed to Kant, argues that a world consisting exclusively of republican regimes would be a peaceful world. It favours 'ideological homogeneity'. The second, which is attributed to Stalinism, favours doctrinal unity through the efforts of a great power 'to spread a creed and impose uniformity'. Wight also referred to pacifism or 'inverted revolutionism'. See Wight, *International theory*, pp. 40ff.

¹³ Wight, *International theory*.

¹⁴ The belief that revolutionism is a divisive force in international society is equally pronounced in the writings of Bull; see *The anarchical society*, p. 26. This is not to say there was total agreement between Bull and Wight. Bull seems to not have shared Wight's personal revulsion against progressivist approaches to world politics, which are the secular equivalents of eschatological approaches to history. See Bull, 'Martin Wight and the theory of international relations', p. xvi.

much on the dangers inherent in cosmopolitan doctrines which hope for the withering away of the state and the dissolution of national sentiments—and too little on cosmopolitan perspectives that complement his own rationalist thought.¹⁵

Helpfully, the *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies two forms of cosmopolitanism. The first holds that provincial attachments should yield to the allegedly higher ethical conviction that our primary loyalties are to the whole of humanity. The second does not reject national ties altogether, but opposes them when they ignore the legitimate interests of outsiders. The *cosmophil*, defined by the *OED* as someone who is ‘friendly to the world in general’, exemplifies this second approach. On this view, one should not defend or celebrate national affiliations and cultural differences when they burden outsiders with intolerable costs; cosmopolitans need to combine loyalties to co-nationals with moral obligations to the members of other societies which include the duty to do no harm. This is roughly the position taken by Stoic philosophers such as Cicero.¹⁶

The observation that societies can agree on some basic universal moral rights and duties, however much they are divided on other scores, is one point on which the Kantian and Grotian traditions of thought converge.¹⁷ Pointing to the harmony between them, Martin Wight argued that Kant and Grotius shared the belief that independent political communities have moral obligations to three constituencies: to fellow citizens, to the wider society of states and to the all-inclusive universal community of humankind.¹⁸ Raising one of the most important themes of *Systems of states* in the first chapter, he asks if parallels to these three moral constituencies existed in other states-systems, and if powerful commitments to human equality worked their influence on the behaviour of states. The chapters on the ancient Greek city-state system, and on relations between Greece and Persia, explored the question of how far different states collaborated to reduce unnecessary harm and superfluous injury.

Ancient Greece

In those chapters Wight argues that loyalties to the polis were far stronger than loyalties to either Hellas or the world at large. Ideas about the solidarity of the

¹⁵ Of course, the period in which Wight wrote hardly encouraged optimism. Like Bull, Wight thought that superpower rivalry, and the two major wars of the twentieth century, were evidence enough that the progressivist or solidarist vision was premature (Bull, *The anarchical society*, p. 240).

¹⁶ Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield, eds, *Cambridge history of Greek and Roman political thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 24.

¹⁷ Wight, *International theory*, p. 15. See also Stanley Hoffmann, ‘International society’, in J. D. B. Miller and R. J. Vincent, eds, *Order and violence: Hedley Bull and international relations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 23, who argues that Bull is guilty of misreading Kant, ‘who was much less cosmopolitan and universalist in his writings on international affairs than Bull suggests’.

¹⁸ Wight, *International theory*, pp. 73–5. Both thinkers, it might be added, defended the Stoic idea that the members of the universal community have fundamental, perfect or non-optional duties not to harm one another. ‘And not only nature, which may be defined as international law, but also the particular laws by which individual peoples are governed similarly ordain that no-one is justified in harming another for his own advantage’. *Cicero on Obligation*, with introduction and notes by J. Higginbotham (London: Faber, 1967), p. 144.

Hellenes and the unity of the human race clearly existed; but they were far too 'hesitant' to check egotism in foreign policy.¹⁹ Some states made noble pledges not to destroy one another, or starve one another's peoples or endanger their precious water supplies in peacetime or in war, but oaths to avoid cruelty to outsiders were rarely effective.²⁰ The modern ethical conviction that certain violent acts of state so shock the conscience of humankind as to invite or demand humanitarian intervention had no counterpart in the ancient world.²¹ Nothing quite like the modern law of war or the universal culture of human rights existed—though the Greeks' apparent disgust at human sacrifice and their alleged intervention in Carthage to bring an end to child sacrifice arguably tended in this direction;²² their horror at the Carthaginians' habit of drowning foreign sailors revealed, in Wight's view, that the Greeks had some respect for human life outside the state of war.²³ But there were no ingrained habits of creating cosmopolitan harm conventions to protect all Greeks, or individuals everywhere, from unnecessary suffering.

While Wight may not have been persuaded by the argument for any cosmopolitan ethic, he was clearly intrigued by the sociological question of how far visions of the universal community of humankind have shaped the evolution of different states-systems. At no point did he argue that all states-systems can be measured by some common ethical yardstick—indeed, such an exercise may have been anathema to him. Be that as it may, some of the foundations for a cosmopolitan approach to the sociology of states-systems can be found in his specific comments about cruelty in ancient Greece and elsewhere in statements of his rationalist position.

The problem of harm in world politics

As noted above, it is hardly surprising that an interest in harm has long dominated the discipline of international relations. Many or most states and empires in history have been in the business of warring with, conquering, enslaving, injuring and otherwise disadvantaging the members of other societies. Perhaps the will to harm has been the dominant pattern in world politics since the appearance of the Sumerian city-state system and the establishment of the first empires.²⁴ On this point the theorist must defer to the historian. Scattered

¹⁹ Mann, *The sources of social power*, vol. 1, ch. 7.

²⁰ The 'only restraints on savagery were . . . a dim fear of committing impiety on the part of the conservatives, and prudential calculations on the part of the progressives': Wight, *Systems of states*, pp. 50–1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67ff.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition of harm highlights distress and suffering. A broader definition is needed in the light of claims about obligations to future generations. Such duties are not necessarily or even mainly about avoiding pain or suffering but about reducing demands on the environment because of the burdens that will be imposed on future generations. In this case, harm is best understood not as pain or suffering but as 'setbacks' to vital interests. On this last point, see J. Feinberg, *Harm to others: the moral limits of the criminal law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

references to harm and injury are plentiful in the academic literature, but there is no distinguished body of work, no great tradition, no emergent sub-field of enquiry which examines how harm to individuals has been understood, managed and controlled in different states-systems. This is something to remedy.

The English School has said more than most approaches about the problem of harm in world politics.²⁵ Its members are fascinated by societies of states because they are constructed through conventions that place moral and legal constraints on the power to harm or the right to hurt.²⁶ And, as noted earlier, the question of whether it is possible to extend cooperation to prevent harm—for example, by strengthening the human rights culture or by creating new principles of humanitarian intervention—has long been central to the English School.

The approach outlined here takes this debate further by starting with the assumption that the universalization of the ‘harm principle’—the global extension of the principle that obliges us to avoid harming others unnecessarily—is a crucial part of a world ethic.²⁷ The harm principle is only one part of that ethic, and it would be a mistake to claim too much for it; other vital ingredients include altruism, benevolence and charity. That said, there are at least two reasons why the harm principle is a central part of a global ethic and a core element of a sociology of states-systems with a cosmopolitan intent.

There is, in the first place, the need to deal with what the philosopher Geoffrey Warnock once called the ‘damaging effects’ of ‘limited sympathies’.²⁸ Warnock’s point was that loyalties to particular groups often lead members to be cruel to outsiders or to adopt a stance of complete indifference to ways in which group behaviour damages the interests of outsiders—whether by accident or design. He added that many basic moral conventions in domestic societies are designed to protect the vulnerable from the negative consequences of limited sympathies. This is just as true of international society, of course, where loyalties to particular sovereign states have familiar dangerous effects.

²⁵ Michael Donelan has argued that the main principles of the rationalist approach to international society can be summarized as the negative duty to minimize injury. See his *Elements of international political theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), ch. 4. See also R. Jackson, *The global covenant: human conduct in a world of states* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. ch. 8, and his comments on an ethics of prudence on p. 154.

²⁶ See Bull, *Anarchical society*, pp. 4–5, on the fact that international society offers its members some security against ‘violence resulting in death or bodily harm’.

²⁷ The harm principle is famously defended in Mill’s *On Liberty*: ‘the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community . . . is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant’: see J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. M. Warnock (London: Collins, 1962), p. 135. The point of the harm principle in Mill’s writings is to place limits on government authority and to defend human freedom. The main function of the harm principle in this article is to curtail liberties to act as we please and to create responsibilities to other persons. On the relationship between liberty and harm, see H. L. A. Hart, *Law, morality and society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

²⁸ See Geoffrey Warnock, *The object of morality* (London: Methuen, 1971), esp. ch. 2 and pp. 80ff, for a discussion of the claim that a duty of non-malificence is ‘a’ but not ‘the’ foundation of morality. Warnock adds benevolence, fairness and the duty not to deceive. Warnock’s claims about universality can be found on pp. 147–50. W. D. Ross, *The right and the good* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), pp. 21ff, argues that the duty of non-malificence is the fundamental moral duty.

There are parallels here with the notion of the cosmophil, in that it is the harsh consequences of limited sympathies and not the existence of bounded loyalties that a global ethic needs to address. A second and related point is that such limited sympathies are tied up with the fact that not all human collectivities have the same conception of the good society or good life. This is a central theme in the English School, and particularly in Hedley Bull's claim that societies of states are possible only because independent political communities recognize—despite their radically different conceptions of the good—the attractions of 'mutual forbearance', including the need to maintain constraints on force.²⁹

Rousseau maintained that a state can die without any of its members being injured. Perhaps. But since the rise of modern nationalism, it has been impossible to distinguish harm to the state from harm to its individual citizens. And, as E. H. Carr argued, struggles to make states correspond with nations—struggles that led to the displacement of minorities and encouraged total war—made it imperative that the society of states evolve new principles to protect individuals in and of themselves.³⁰ Because of nationalism, it has become even more important to judge international order by the extent to which it promotes world order as defined by Hedley Bull. Bearing all this in mind, we can explore the development of cosmopolitan harm conventions in modern world politics, and we can ask how the modern system compares with states-systems of the past.

The varieties of harm

Analysing the dominant cosmopolitan harm conventions in different states-systems is one way of trying to build on Martin Wight's sociological imagination, one way of exploring further the regions where the Grotian and Kantian traditions intersect, one way of making the Kantian ethical ideal of 'a cosmopolitan condition of general political security' more central to the English School than it has been in the past.³¹ To develop this further, it is useful to identify different forms of harm, different ways of causing distress, suffering, apprehension, anxiety or fear—different ways of damaging vital interests. I want to distinguish five types of harm; five different reasons why international society needs stronger cosmopolitan harm conventions. In what follows, they will be treated as if they lead separate lives, but the events of 11 September and the war

²⁹ On the need for mutual forbearance in the context of 'human vulnerability', see Herbert Hart, *The concept of law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), ch. 9, section 2.

³⁰ 'The driving force behind any future international order must be a belief, however expressed, in the value of individual human beings irrespective of national affinities or allegiance and in a common and mutual obligation to promote their well-being'. Edward Hallett Carr, *Nationalism and after* (London: Macmillan, 1945), p. 44.

³¹ Kant's notion of a cosmopolitan condition of general political security can be found in 'Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose', in Hans Reiss, ed., *Kant's political writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 49.

against Afghanistan have more than any other recent event demonstrated their close interconnectedness.³²

Deliberate harm in relations between independent political communities

The most obvious example of this first type is war. Now, as noted above, Martin Wight believed that all states-systems have enjoyed temporary success in limiting the use of military force, but that no states-system had succeeded, or seemed likely to succeed, in bringing violence to an end. He was drawn to analysing institutions, such as the balance of power, diplomacy and international law, which preserve order in world politics. A cosmopolitan variation on the approach focuses on past and current efforts to prevent unnecessary suffering in war, raising along the way the question of what constraints militaries have observed, and what risks they have been prepared to run, to prevent unnecessary suffering to others. It is important to know more about how far different states-systems have attempted to protect individuals from unnecessary suffering caused by the first form of harm—more about rules concerning the treatment of civilians, especially women, and more about the rights of prisoners of war.

Deliberate harm caused by governments to their own citizens

The desire to spare individuals suffering in war has been the main reason for the development of cosmopolitan harm conventions. But serious human rights violations in the modern world have led to the conclusion that it is just as important to protect individuals from their own governments. My second type of harm is therefore that which governments inflict on some of their own citizens by waging war against them.

As noted earlier, members of the English School have long been interested in sovereignty, human rights and intervention. In recent times, and especially since the implosion of the former Yugoslavia, sharp differences have emerged between those who believe that humanitarian intervention erodes support for national sovereignty, so weakening one of the central constraints on great powers, and those who believe the current international order can bear the burden of experiments in humanitarian intervention, and is indeed obliged to do so if conventions on genocide and declarations of human rights mean anything at all. Wherever these debates may lead, the modern states-system seems unusual, and may be unique, in creating legal and moral conventions that so erode the sphere of domestic jurisdiction, and in reflecting on the moral problems that arise for 'bystanders'.³³ Here at any rate is a second reason for creating cosmopolitan harm conventions.

³² For further thoughts on this subject, see Andrew Linklater, 'Unnecessary suffering', in Ken Booth and Tim Dunne, eds, *Worlds in collision: terror and the global order* (London: Palgrave, forthcoming 2002).

³³ On this latter theme, see Victoria J. Barnett, *Bystanders: conscience and complicity during the Holocaust* (London: Praeger, 2000).

The problem of harm in world politics

Deliberate harm by non-state actors

I have in mind here the harm caused by pirates and mercenary armies, by contemporary transnational criminal organizations involved in the traffic of women and in the international drugs trade, by transnational economic organizations and by international terrorist movements. Cross-border or transnational harm is a third reason for designing harm conventions with universal scope.

Unintended harm

Thus far the emphasis has been on deliberate and coercive harm, but there are forms of harm that do not share these characteristics. Addressing what we now know as globalization, Engels noted how new technological developments in Britain could destroy entire livelihoods in China in a single year.³⁴ The actors at the source of this long-distance harm were not always aware of how their actions affected foreigners; it would have been futile to criticize them for intending to cause harm. Engel's insight was that the growth of the world market exposed an increasing proportion of the human race to unintended, long-distance harm. For Marx and Engels, a double revolution in world history was taking place. Old types of deliberate harm caused by warring states and expanding empires were rapidly being replaced by diffuse forms of harm transmitted across frontiers by global capitalist forces; thus an extended sense of moral responsibility to the human race was necessary—and would emerge, they believed, with the advent of global socialism.

Whatever one thinks of their skills as forecasters, and whatever one makes of their utopian vision, Marx and Engels were surely right to stress the growing importance of unintended or long-distance harm, and correct to defend (although they did more than this) universal conventions which protect the vulnerable from global market forces.³⁵ In our own time, the increase in what Ulrich Beck has called the imperceptible harms which are inherent in global risk society has underlined their central point.³⁶ Environmental degradation is the best contemporary example of how the repetition of everyday actions which are seemingly harmless in themselves can, with the passing of the generations, create outcomes that no one desired.³⁷ Many approaches to global governance and environmental ethics, and many international legal conventions, respond to this phenomenon by arguing for new responsibilities to avoid harm.³⁸ There is thus a fourth reason for developing cosmopolitan harm conventions.

³⁴ Friedrich Engels, 'Principles of communism', in *Selected works* (Moscow: Progress, 1969).

³⁵ Wight was quick to dismiss the importance of Marx and Marxism. See 'Why is there no international theory?', in H. Butterfield and M. Wight, eds, *Diplomatic investigations: essays in the theory of international politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966, p. 25).

³⁶ Ulrich Beck, *Risk society: towards a new modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).

³⁷ Feinberg, *Harm to others*, pp. 227ff, calls this public accumulative harm.

³⁸ For a discussion of key theoretical issues and international legal conventions, see M. Mason, 'Transnational environmental obligations: locating new spaces of accountability in a post-Westphalian order', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26: 4, 2001, pp. 407–29.

With some exceptions, the English School has not been particularly concerned with this form of harm;³⁹ however, in his study of human rights, John Vincent highlighted specific ethical issues raised by harm which is not intentionally exported from one society to another but transmitted across frontiers haphazardly by global forces. His argument that every human being has an equal right to be free from starvation is worth recalling at this point. Vincent's central contention was that the affluent have a moral duty to show compassion towards the starving; but he added that their awareness of how they benefited from global structures which bring terrible hardship to others should strengthen their moral resolve to end starvation and reduce global inequalities.⁴⁰

John Vincent identified an orientation to global moral responsibilities which has grown in importance in recent years as individuals reflect on what Ted Honderich has called the 'wrong [we do] in our ordinary lives'.⁴¹ Whether the focus is on child labour, sweatshops in the fashion industry, fair trading, socially responsible investment or ethical tourism, there is evidence of a growing concern with the problems that our associations with various institutions create for our moral lives. The point is that such institutions may cause harm that individuals would not do in their own right.⁴² The core moral issue is complicity in the misery of others—complicity in the sense of benefiting from their exploitation or suffering.⁴³ A further reason for developing cosmopolitan harm conventions is provided by the structures that bind the affluent and the vulnerable together. One important ethical question which arises in this context is whether causing harm is always morally worse than benefiting from the harm that befalls others and doing nothing about it.⁴⁴

Negligence

My list concludes with negligence—the failure to take reasonable precautions to prevent the risk of harm to others.⁴⁵ Two examples are 'nuclear colonialism'—

³⁹ Note, however, that Donelan, *Elements of international political theory*, pp. 69–70, addresses the problem of abstract harm in the form of the 'blight of mass tourism' and the 'depletion or pollution of earth, sea and sky'. He adds that states abet these injuries by indulging corporations. Liberal states are especially culpable through their 'indiscriminate encouragement of most forms of international traffic, regardless of the nuisance caused'.

⁴⁰ Vincent quotes Chomsky's question, 'Do we really care about the human consequences of our actions?'; see John Vincent, *Human rights and international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 147. There are echoes of this in Aristotle, who in the *Nicomachean Ethics* defines injustice as 'an excess of the harmful and a deficiency of the beneficial, contrary to the rule of fair apportionment'. See Aristotle, *Ethics*, ed. J. A. K. Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), book 5, ch. 5.

⁴¹ Ted Honderich, 'Our omissions and their violence', *Violence for equality: inquiries into political philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1980).

⁴² Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: ethics and law for a collective age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴³ Alan Wertheimer, *Exploitation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ For a sophisticated discussion of these matters, see Feinberg, *Harm to others*, ch. 4. Kutz, *Complicity*, deals interestingly with gradations of individual responsibility.

⁴⁵ Negligence is 'the failure to take a reasonable precaution against risks of harm'. See Kenneth W. Simons, 'Negligence,' in E. F. Paul, F. D. Miller and J. Paul, eds, *Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 54.

testing nuclear weapons in the South Pacific with seeming indifference to the health of local populations);⁴⁶ and ‘environmental apartheid’—the practice of exporting hazardous waste to societies where environmental safeguards are lower than in the West.⁴⁷ In each case, we are dealing with moral indifference rather than cruelty—although, interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not care for the distinction.⁴⁸ The crucial point is that the negligent knowingly expose others to risks and hazards deemed unacceptable in their own lives.⁴⁹ Here, then, is a further reason for weaving cosmopolitan harm conventions into the structure of international society.

A cosmopolitan approach to the sociology of states-systems

The current ‘war against terrorism’ has at one point or another brought all of these forms of harm into focus. My main interest here is in using the taxonomy to carve out some basic questions that a cosmopolitan approach to the sociology of states-systems should strive to answer. For example, we can ask if all states-systems developed moral conventions with the aim of preventing unnecessary suffering in war; we can ask if they all developed moral conventions which declared that the harm governments do to their citizens concerns the world as a whole; we can ask if all states-systems developed conventions which offered peoples everywhere protection from private international violence, from the effects of long-distance harm, from unintended harm, from harm caused by exploitation, complicity and negligence.

Admittedly, it is difficult to compare how different states-systems have responded to long-distance harm, because earlier systems did not experience the level of global interconnectedness that now exists. But the virtually universal phenomenon of slavery raises questions about how far guilt about benefiting unfairly from the vulnerable, and concerns about the problem of complicity in the suffering of others, have appeared in all states-systems.⁵⁰ With such questions in mind, we can build on Martin Wight’s discussion of the extent to which visions of a universal community of humankind influenced the evolution of the major states-systems.

⁴⁶ See J. Diblin, *Day of two suns: US nuclear testing and the Pacific islanders* (London: Virago, 1988). The idea of nuclear colonialism is found on p. 205.

⁴⁷ Henry Shue, ‘Exporting hazards’, in P. G. Brown and H. Shue, eds, *Boundaries: national autonomy and its limits* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1981), ch. 4. See also Vandana Shiva, ‘Ecological balance in an era of globalization’, in P. Wapner and L. Edwin J. Ruiz, eds, *Principled world politics: the challenge of normative international relations* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, ch. 9).

⁴⁸ Cruelty is taken to mean ‘indifference to the pain or misery of others’ and not just the ‘disposition to inflict suffering’.

⁴⁹ Shue, *Exporting hazards*.

⁵⁰ Buzan and Little, *International systems in world history*, discuss different levels of cross-border interaction in different international systems.

Modernity and progress

A cosmopolitan perspective, then, is less concerned with uncovering laws or tendencies that may have appeared in all states-systems than with understanding what different states-systems have accomplished in preventing avoidable harm. It is hard not to ask if any states-system, and particularly the modern one, outruns all others. But perhaps the temptation to ask this question is one temptation to resist. Whose conception of cruelty or unnecessary suffering should inform the analysis? Where is the Archimedean viewpoint that allows meaningful comparisons to be made? Perhaps the sensible task is to try to decide whether or not the more recent phase in the development of the modern states-system represents an advance beyond its bloodier past.

Interestingly, Martin Wight argued (though possibly more to question than support) that the idea of progress was a factor in the study of states-systems in which he, along with Herbert Butterfield, Adam Watson and others, was involved.⁵¹ The assumption that states-systems are better than other forms of world political organization ‘underlies’, he wrote, ‘[the] choice of states-systems as a subject of study’.⁵² Robert Jackson goes further, arguing that the society of states is the best form of world political organization yet devised for promoting peaceful coexistence among separate communities.⁵³ Important issues arise here which deserve further investigation. A useful place to start is with three perspectives on whether the idea of progress should be built into a sociology of harm conventions.

The progressivist interpretation of international relations

The first is the ‘progressivist interpretation of international relations’, an approach that Martin Wight famously rejected. This is the view that steady progress has occurred in world politics not only in recent decades but, more profoundly, over the whole course of human history. Studies of the unique liberal democratic peace and the growth of the universal culture of human rights offer the best contemporary academic statement of this approach.

The English School is usually thought to be at odds with progressivism, although Hedley Bull and Adam Watson defended a progressivism of sorts when discussing advances in the nineteenth century in abolishing the slave trade and slavery, and in developing the humanitarian law of war. In his influential Hagey

⁵¹ Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, *The expansion of international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). See also John Vincent’s essay on racial equality in that volume.

⁵² Wight, *Systems of states*, p. 44.

⁵³ The pluralist conception of international society ‘is the most articulate institutional arrangement that humans have yet come up with in response to their common recognition that they must find a settled and predictable way to live side by side on a finite planetary space without falling into mutual hostility, conflict, war, oppression, subjugation, slavery, etc.’ See Jackson, *Global covenant*, p. 181. Arguably, the same sentiment exists in Bull and Watson’s implicit normative belief that the near-universal acceptance of the European principle of sovereign equality is to be welcomed. See Bull and Watson, eds, *Expansion of international society*.

The problem of harm in world politics

Lectures, Hedley Bull referred to progress in human rights and in applying the welfare principle to international relations.⁵⁴ John Vincent and Nick Wheeler see some progress in the area of human rights.⁵⁵

But such progressivism is surrounded by major reservations; it comes with an emphasis on the precarious nature of international order and on the fact that conventions designed to prevent harm to individuals are controversial in their design and in their application. In Martin Wight's comments on Kant in his LSE lectures we find reasons for treating the idea of the liberal peace with great care.⁵⁶ He points to the dangers of thinking that all societies should be committed to the same principles of government. To apply this to the liberal peace, there is the danger that it will be grounded in a sense of superiority to the non-liberal world, in a lack of interest in the suffering of non-liberal peoples and in the belief that the principles that apply in the liberal world do not apply in wars with illiberal states.⁵⁷ But that is not to say that progress is nowhere to be found; the area of human rights, for example, suggests otherwise.⁵⁸

The anti-progressivist standpoint

The anti-progressivist standpoint denies that there has been progress in history or anything other than short-lived digressions from more persistent trends. In the sombre conclusion to *Mankind and Mother Earth*, Toynbee states there has been no progress in human history outside the technological sphere.⁵⁹ On this view, there are no grounds for thinking that the modern states-system outperforms earlier states-systems in its desire to reduce human suffering.

Liberals will protest that the Assyrian and Roman empires, and the Mayan, Aztec and other Amerindian civilizations, differed from the modern states-system by specializing in physical cruelty.⁶⁰ Certainly, ancient Romans seem to have derived unusual pleasure from public 'spectacles of death' in which enemies,

⁵⁴ Hedley Bull, *Justice in international relations* (The Hagey Lectures, University of Ottawa, Waterloo, 1984).

⁵⁵ Vincent, *Human rights and international relations*; Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving strangers: humanitarian intervention in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁶ It is a short step from the observation that order in all states-systems has rested in part on distinctions between the civilized and the uncivilized world to the more specific observation that the democratic peace depends on similar dichotomies. See Wight, *Systems of states*, pp. 34–5 on external 'cultural differentiation'.

⁵⁷ See J. M. Goldgeier and M. McFaul, 'A tale of two worlds: core and periphery in the post-Cold War era', *International Organisation* 46: 2, 1992, pp. 467–91; and Y. Sadowski, *The myth of global chaos* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998) on the American abandonment of the illiberal world to its fate. Michael Doyle, 'Kant, liberal legacies and foreign affairs, parts I and II', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12: 3, 1983, pp. 205–35 and 12: 4, 1983, pp. 323–53, deals with the fact that the interliberal peace does not extend to relations with the non-liberal world.

⁵⁸ N. Sznajder, *The compassionate temperament: care and cruelty in modern society* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), argues there has been significant progress over the last two centuries in combating cruelty. Also relevant are Keith Thomas, *Man and the natural world: changing attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984); Peter Burke et al., eds, *Civil histories: essays presented to Sir Keith Thomas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Peter Gay, *The cultivation of hatred: the bourgeois experience* (London: HarperCollins, 1994).

⁵⁹ Arnold Toynbee, *Mankind and Mother Earth* (London: Paladin, 1978) p. 590.

⁶⁰ Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of death in ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 134ff.

traitors and exotic animals were slaughtered in staggering numbers.⁶¹ Norbert Elias may have been right that the ‘civilising process’—in which aggressive impulses have been tamed and the pleasure derived from cruelty, if not the level of cruelty itself, has been suppressed—has made notable advances in the modern world.⁶² Others, most famously Michel Foucault, suggest that the picture is more complicated, since modern societies create new forms of power which are less manifestly cruel and less public than their predecessors, but impossible to reconcile with the idea of human progress.⁶³ Others still—Zygmunt Bauman, for example—link modernity with new forms of social interdependence and new opportunities for mechanized violence or industrialized killing in which large numbers of individuals could take part in genocide without having to face the human consequences of their actions.⁶⁴

The anti-progressivist point can be underscored in other ways. Progress in defending human rights and in promoting the humanitarian law of war has to be viewed against a background of human rights violations and civilian casualties in war which have few parallels in history. Progress in the struggle against racism has also to be placed in the appropriate historical context. Ancients Greeks and Romans do not seem to have been wedded to the later European idea that racial differences have deep moral relevance.⁶⁵ Progress in curbing violent impulses is taking place at the very moment when economic globalization determines the fate of an increasing percentage of the world’s population. Some forms of coercion are deemed to contravene international law, while various forms of economic harm are regarded as just the way markets work. None of this supports the claim that the modern system has made much more progress than all other states-systems in tackling human suffering.

Changing standards of international legitimacy

Elements of the progressivist and anti-progressivist standpoints can be combined to form an approach which focuses on standards of legitimacy in world politics. Here the question arises whether modern states are judged by higher moral standards than states in the past.⁶⁶ Standards of legitimacy are evident, first, in

⁶¹ Kyle, *Spectacles of death*. See also Samuel F. Finer, *The history of government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), vol. 1, p. 440.

⁶² Norbert Elias, *The civilising process*, vol. 1: *The history of manners* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), ch. 2, section x, ‘On changes in aggressiveness’.

⁶³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

⁶⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the extreme: moral life in the concentration camps* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).

⁶⁵ Ancient Greece, it has been argued, did not attach much moral and political importance to racial differences. F. M. Snowden, *Before color prejudice: the ancient view of blacks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) makes this case.

⁶⁶ I owe this formulation to Ian Clark. Wight, *Systems of states*, ch. 6, analysed the changing nature of international legitimacy. His study of legitimacy focused on the principles that govern membership of the society of states. We can extend this further, as Hedley Bull does, when he argues that the modern society of states will have a legitimacy deficit as long as it does not command the consent of the majority of the world’s peoples who live in the Third World. Further details can be found in Hedley Bull, ‘The international anarchy in the 1980s’, *Australian Outlook* 37, 1983, pp. 127ff.

the rules about how decisions should be made or in understandings about what counts as a fair procedure; and second, in the actual decisions that states reach about what is permissible in statecraft and what needs to be proscribed.⁶⁷

The English School has been especially interested in how the standards of legitimacy which decide rights of representation in world politics have changed over the centuries. Evan Luard argued that in the ancient Chinese states-system dynastic rulers made foreign policy by and for themselves. So did the absolutist states of early modern Europe.⁶⁸ Ian Clark has argued that new standards of legitimacy enlarged the boundaries of the decision-making community at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, when a concert of the great powers institutionalized consultation about matters of common concern.⁶⁹ Carrying the story forward, one might add that support for the idea of national self-determination gave the smaller nations the right to be heard in the global dialogue at the end of the First World War. The anti-colonial revolution, and to a lesser extent the revolt of indigenous peoples, have also transformed past assumptions about who has rights to be represented in global decisions. Many non-governmental associations and social movements that resist globalization are trying to take this process further, as does the vision of cosmopolitan democracy.⁷⁰ All these developments are relevant to the question of how the international order has changed—and can be changed more radically—so that the weak can protest against actual or potential forms of harm.

Such developments and demands would appear to be unique in the history of international relations. They seem to confirm the judgement of Barry Buzan and Richard Little that the idea of human equality had little causal importance in earlier states-systems. They suggest that no analysis of the modern states-system will be complete if it fails to note how the idea of human equality has influenced its principles of legitimacy—not only its decision-making procedures but what emanates from them, namely concrete decisions about what is permissible and what is proscribed in human affairs.⁷¹ It is no longer extraordinary in enlightened circles to argue that decisions should have the consent of everyone who may be harmed by them—although the realist, expressing the anti-progressivist viewpoint, will be quick to stress the gulf between principle and practice. There is no point denying this. But it is important to stress that modern standards of legitimacy as embedded in international law declare that individuals have the right to be spared what is usually called ‘serious mental or bodily harm’. This would appear to be a new development in the history of states-systems.

⁶⁷ See the distinction between ‘the *principles* on which international society [is] based’ and ‘the *procedures* by which such principles [are] formulated and conflicts resolved’ in Evan Luard, *Types of international society* (London: Free Press, 1976), p. 381 (emphasis in original). ‘Procedure’ refers to the rules and institutions which provide the framework for resolving disputes, and ‘principle’ to the shared moral values which may (or may not) emerge from the framework.

⁶⁸ Luard, *Types of international society*.

⁶⁹ Ian Clark, *The hierarchy of states: reform and resistance in the international order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 6.

⁷⁰ David Held, *Democracy and the global order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

⁷¹ Buzan and Little, *International systems in world history*, p. 340.

The universalization of the harm principle

The crucial question, then, is whether the modern states-system has progressed beyond its predecessors not only in the way in which decisions are made but in universalizing the principle that individuals should not cause unnecessary harm.

Physical cruelty in relations between states

We might start to answer this question by noting how physical cruelty came to be regarded as a problem for the world as a whole during roughly the past century. This is evident in fundamental changes in thinking about what is permitted and what is forbidden in war, as exemplified by the assault on sovereign immunity introduced by the Nuremberg Charter and restated by the resolutions which established the international criminal tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda. Along with the UN Security Council resolutions which include rape in war in the list of crimes against humanity, such developments embed the principle of human equality in international society; they enlarge the dominion of cosmopolitan or world law. We might also, to focus on a matter of great contemporary importance, cite evidence of reduced public tolerance for the direct targeting of civilians in war.

Physical cruelty in relations between governments and citizens

New standards of legitimacy regarding physical cruelty do not focus solely on violence in relations between states, but include the violence that governments choose to inflict on their own citizens. This is a second example of how physical cruelty has become a global moral problem. Several international legal documents, such as the conventions on the suppression and punishment of the crime of apartheid, on genocide and on torture, as well as the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, outlaw 'serious bodily or mental harm'.⁷² Outlawing harm to the members of different national, ethnic, racial or religious groups is a recurrent theme in these conventions. In this manner, significant steps have been taken towards realizing Kant's claim that the violation of human rights anywhere should be felt everywhere;⁷³ significant

⁷² The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide outlaws 'serious bodily or mental harm' to 'national, ethnical, racial or religious groups', a theme repeated later in, for example, the 1993 statute establishing the tribunal authorized to prosecute persons responsible for violations of the humanitarian law of war in the former Yugoslavia. For details, see M. Evans, *Documents on international law* (London: Blackstone, 1994, pp. 37, 393). Also important are the Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (*ibid.*, p. 218) and Article 1 of the United Nations General Resolution adopting the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, which defines violence against women as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life', as discussed in *The United Nations and the advancement of women* (New York: United Nations Press, 1996).

⁷³ Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual peace', in M. Forsyth et al., eds, *Theories of international relations: from Gentile to Treitschke* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970).

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progress has taken place in contracting the sphere of domestic jurisdiction. The question is whether any other states-system went down a similar route.

Changes in the areas just mentioned suggest that progress has occurred in expanding the geographical 'scope of moral concern';⁷⁴ that is, there has been movement in expanding the circle of those with rights to be free from unnecessary suffering. Of course, this is only part of the story. Critics of NATO's military action against Serbia highlighted the selective enforcement of international law.⁷⁵ One might wonder how far the new principles of legitimacy have made a difference to the women and children of Iraq, and many doubted they would make a difference to innocent civilians in Afghanistan (although humanitarian considerations seem to have had some influence in the recent war). For what it is worth, the tension between principle and practice in the modern world does not escape close scrutiny, and contemporary standards of legitimacy provide resources which states, NGOs and other actors can employ in their struggle against unnecessary suffering. From the resistance, from the contradictions, more ambitious experiments in universalizing the harm principle may yet grow. But others, of course, will prefer to draw conclusions which resonate with Martin Wight's pessimism.

Unintended harm and negligence

Those who wish to defend pessimism may do so in the following way. Maybe we can point to advances in developing an ethic which puts cruelty first.⁷⁶ This is partial progress along one axis. But there is a second axis which is concerned with the depth rather than the scope of moral concern, with the vertical rather than the horizontal dimensions of global morality. The importance of depth has been highlighted by those who criticize Western conceptions of human rights for stressing liberal and political, as opposed to economic, rights. Their point is that more radical harm conventions are needed to address conditions of unspeakable squalor and extreme vulnerability to global market forces. The recurrent theme is that the dominant harm conventions will lack legitimacy in the eyes of much of the world's population unless they address questions of depth as well as scope.⁷⁷ We have heard much about this in recent times.⁷⁸

Other states-systems did not face such a tangled web of moral issues to the same degree or at all, and that fact places limits on meaningful historical comparisons. But some judgements can be made within narrower horizons. The

⁷⁴ Onora O'Neill, *Bounds of justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 188.

⁷⁵ See Albrecht Schnabel and Ramesh Thakur, eds, *Kosovo and the challenge of humanitarian intervention: selective indignation, collective action and international citizenship* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2000).

⁷⁶ See Judith Shklar, *Ordinary vices* (London: Harvard University Press, 1984), ch. 1. My thanks to Hayward Alker for bringing this work to my attention.

⁷⁷ See Jim Richardson, 'Contending liberalisms', *European Journal of International Relations* 3: 1, 1997, pp. 5–33 on the tension between the 'liberalism of privilege' and the liberalism which aims for an order which is more 'humane and equitable'.

⁷⁸ Linklater, 'Unnecessary suffering'.

modern states-system seems unique in having to address the multiple forms of harm described earlier; it does not lack the moral resources with which to increase the depth as well as the scope of moral concern, but whether it will use them to tackle forms of harm caused by capitalist forms of production and exchange as well as by state-building and war, and by various doctrines of cultural, racial and religious supremacy, remains unclear. Recent events are hardly encouraging, but are far from the last word. The main issues are how far the modern states-system—and its dominant economic and political interests—will need to draw on cosmopolitan sentiments to ensure legitimacy, and how far actors with a reformist orientation can persuade the more powerful of the need for more radical harm conventions. It is hard to approach these issues without accepting some of Martin Wight's pessimism; but it is equally important to connect it with support for the requisite global ethic.

Conclusion

This article has relied heavily on two of Martin Wight's insights. The first is that the sociology of states-systems is a fundamentally important area of scholarly inquiry; we should know more about other states-systems, and more about how the modern system looks in comparison with them. The second is that we can usefully analyse the extent to which ideas about the universal community of humankind influenced different states-systems. My task in this article has been to develop these themes in a sociological project which focuses on the problem of harm in world politics. In taking this course, I have been influenced by Wight's comments about how the Grotian and Kantian traditions overlap in important respects, and by his important observation that international order is important because justice will not develop without it.

To bring Kant into the discussion is not to set revolutionism against Wight's realism. Because the struggle for power will never come to an end, and because the tensions between principle and practice are not about to disappear, the central question is how far the exercise of power can proceed with 'a minimum of domination',⁷⁹ with less cruelty, with lower levels of negligence or indifference; how far it can operate with maximum accountability to others, and especially to the most vulnerable members of world society. These moral matters enjoy both a certain permanence in human affairs and a heightened importance at the present time. This is why the problem of harm in world politics deserves pride of place in a cosmopolitan approach to the sociology of states-systems.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Jeremy Moss, ed., *The later Foucault: politics and philosophy* (London: Sage, 1998), pp. 20–1.