

Studying world society

Keith Hart

HART_KEITH@compuserve.com

Cosmopolitan Right shall be limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality [the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory].

The peoples of the earth have entered in varying degree into a universal community, and it has developed to the point where a violation of rights in one part of the world is felt everywhere. The idea of a cosmopolitan right is not fantastic and overstrained; it is a necessary complement to the unwritten code of political and international right, transforming it into a universal right of humanity.

Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: a Philosophical Sketch* (1795)

Anthropologists are now studying transnational society, as this volume demonstrates admirably. For some time now I have been wondering what it would be like to study world society (see the Appendix on Terms of Association). These brief concluding notes point to some of the methods we might adopt to that end. Method comes from Greek meta-hodos, meaning before (or after) the road, preparation for a journey or perhaps its destination. Each of us makes an idiosyncratic journey through life and absorbs a personal version of society in the process. The life journeys of anthropologists are more varied than most. So, what version of society do we end up with and how? Could it be improved upon if some of us made it an explicit vocation to study world society as such?

Our journey is both outward into the world and inward into the self. Each of us, as Durkheim (1912) said, is at once collective and individual.

Society is mysterious to us because we have lived in it and it now dwells inside us at a level that is not ordinarily visible from the perspective of everyday life. Writing is one way we try to bring the two into some mutual understanding that we can share with others. Ethnographic fieldwork, requiring us to participate in local society as we observe it, adds to our range of social experience, becomes an aspect of our socialization, brings lived society into our sources of introspection. Now it is feasible for some individuals to leave different social experiences in separate compartments; but one method for understanding world society would be to make an ongoing practice of trying to synthesize these varied experiences. If a person would have an identity, would be one thing, oneself, this entails an attempt to integrate all the fragments of social experience into a more coherent whole, a world in other words, as singular as the self.

So there are as many worlds as there are individuals and their journeys; and, even if there were only one out there, each of us changes it whenever we make a move. This model of Kantian subjectivity, at once personal and cosmopolitan, should be our starting point; but it will not do for the study of world society. For much of my professional life, I have shadowed the African diaspora through an Atlantic world whose defining moment was slavery: England, Ghana, the Cayman islands, Liberia, the USA, Canada, Jamaica, South Africa, France, Scotland, Brazil, Norway. At some point - it was actually in Jamaica 1986-88 - I realized that what I was learning in the Caribbean helped me to integrate the other three legs of my journey to date (Europe, West Africa and North America), to see a pattern of relations. I saw how America was 'new', Europe and Africa 'old' and the Caribbean somehow both; and my guide was C.L.R. James who had traveled between all four points himself, leaving behind a series of books that were a revelation to me (Grimshaw 1992).

I was sitting on a beach in Jamaica reading a collection of James's occasional writings on cricket. The place had once belonged to Errol Flynn. My daughter was playing on the edge of the sea. James had been Neville Cardus's deputy as the *Manchester Guardian's* cricket correspondent in the 1930s. I found myself reading about my father's heroes in the Lancashire cricket team of that period as if it was today's sports news. I had been devouring everything I could by James since I came to Jamaica to help establish a new graduate school for social science research. I knew that he had lived in Lancashire when he left Trinidad for Britain. It occurred to me that we had lived in the same places - the Caribbean, Britain, America, Africa - in a different sequence, at different times and with very different trajectories. Now, watching my daughter play on that exotic beach, with my father's stories from childhood coming alive again, the gap between this old black man and myself was collapsed into a single moment by the compelling immediacy of James's prose. Generation and racial difference were erased in an epiphany of timeless connection. I felt compelled to meet him and so I wrote the first and only fan letter of my life.

I trace my self-reinvention as an anthropologist, the origin of this short essay, to that moment. I have long felt that the collective slogans under which my anthropologist colleagues make professional claims on the public are much less rich and interesting than their individual lives. And, if we look at the papers of this volume, it is not obvious that 'ethnography' is their common source. Marianne Lien's paper is methodologically very coherent and does make the case for repeated fieldwork visits over time to the same heterogeneous and globally connected place. But, although Christian Krohn-Hansen refers to two books by anthropologists and indirectly to his own Caribbean research, his essay is a complex rumination on national identity that smacks more of the study than the field. Signe Howell reflects on her personal and professional concern with adoption, on missionaries, colonialism and human rights, the Hague convention etc. Sarah Lund lived in the United States as a Norwegian American and was still planning to do fieldwork there when she wrote her paper. And so on. This is not to say that I or any of these authors don't have a complex relationship to the ethnographic tradition, just that our methods and sources are much broader and more idiosyncratic than we often let on.

Some time after my Jamaican epiphany, I was able to place myself at different points in my Atlantic journey by an act of the imagination, even in several places at once. I think of this visualizing process as 'cubist', the ability to see the picture from several perspectives at once (Berger 1992). Caribbean people, whose history of movement has never given them the

security of viewing the world from one place, developed this capacity without benefit of art or anthropology. Perhaps I learned this cubist practice from following the Africa diaspora through the main points of their Middle Passage. Atlantic history has some claim to being the crucible of modern world history; but it is not the world. Nor is movement in the world - transnational flows or whatever - the world itself.

How can we approach world society as a whole? Well, we can give it a singular name. Bush the Elder announced, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that we now live in a New World Order. Later, in their bestseller of that name, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri announced the arrival of *Empire* (2000), a united form of global sovereignty meant to supervise a neo-liberal world economy. Immediately, the destruction of the World Trade Centre played on television screens everywhere and we learnt that we were all to be part of Bush the Younger's 'war on terrorism', even if this hardly seemed to be the denationalized version of universal sovereignty Hardt and Negri had in mind (Kapferer 2002). It does not pay to confuse social reality with simple ideas; and I for one think of the unity of world society more as a potential than as a fact..

We tend to think and talk of society as an economy these days. Globalization is usually taken to refer to the reduction of political barriers to trade and the consequent freedom of capital to move where it will. Certainly networks established through buying and selling are more far-reaching than ever before, lending some credibility to the idea of a 'world market'. And money itself, increasingly detached from any objective form, circulates the globe without territorial restriction, a rising tide capable of swamping national economies at any time (Hart 2001). This apotheosis of capital is closely tied to the development of global communications. The convergence of telephones, television and computers into a single digital technology has already produced as its great symbol the internet, the network of networks, expanding faster than any previous innovation in this field. Mobile telephones have brought instant communication to places where expensive landlines were underdeveloped. And global TV audiences for major sporting events are well over the 2 bn mark, meaning that as many people now sometimes watch the same thing at once as were alive on the planet in 1945.

Mention of the population explosion should remind us that statistics were invented to allow states to count their people. It would have seemed odd in 1861 to generalize in quantitative terms about some feature of the Italian people as a whole; but we now easily absorb the information that Italian women have the lowest fertility rate in the world. United Nations organizations have been collecting statistics about world population for some time; but we are not yet habituated to think in terms of them, except perhaps for the total (six billions and climbing). Quantity has been made social in some areas more than others. Counting heads, money, time or energy is more plausible than measuring the quality of life, for example, although this has not prevented many from attempting the latter task.

When it comes to saying something about world society using these indicators, there is much controversy concerning the measures used. But the real issue is whether we think the present condition of humanity is scandalous or not. Thus Robert Wade (2001), against the prevailing orthodoxy that the liberalization of markets is the best antidote to poverty, has attempted to establish that world society is growing more unequal. I have suggested (Hart 2002) that the world is divided into a club of rich countries (the OECD) constituting about

15% of the global population and the rest, the poor masses who have hardly any money to spend (45% have less than \$2 a day to live on). Moreover, this division is marked by race, region, age and gender as well as by wealth, leading me to argue that contemporary world society resembles nothing so much as the old regime of pre-revolutionary France.

We can say something about the changing morphology of human society too. Anthropologists have known about social networks at least since the Manchester School (Bott 1954). But the idea that social relations are now more readily constituted as open-ended networks than as closed corporate hierarchies (see the Appendix under 'society') is more recent. No-one has done more to argue the case than Manuel Castells (2001:1-2):

"A network is a set of interconnected nodes. Networks are very old forms of human practice, but they have taken on a new life in our time by becoming information networks, powered by the Internet. Networks have extraordinary advantages as organizing tools because of their inherent flexibility and adaptability, critical features in order to survive and prosper in a fast-changing environment. This is why networks are proliferating in all domains of the economy and society, outcompeting and outperforming vertically organized corporations and centralized bureaucracies. Networks were primarily the reserve of private life; centralized hierarchies were the fiefdoms of power and production. Now, however, the introduction of computer-based information and communications technologies, and particularly the Internet, enables networks to deploy their flexibility and adaptability, thus asserting their evolutionary nature. At the same time, these technologies allow the coordination of tasks, and the management of complexity. This results in an unprecedented combination of flexibility and task performance, of coordinated decision-making and decentralized execution, of individualized expression and global, horizontal communication, which provide a superior organizational form for human action."

The implications of this idea for the study of world society are profound, even if its premises may be challenged. Is this the catalyst inaugurating Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, the cosmopolitan society whose human preconditions he explored in his *Anthropology* (1798), for the sake of which he invented the name of our discipline? Are we reaching the end of a world system of territorial states? If so, how will the law be administered? One way would be for networks to constitute themselves as self-regulating clubs. Notions of justice can be disseminated without a centralized administration. Nor should we imagine that network society is necessarily non-hierarchical or open, for that matter. A recent popular science text, *Linked: the new science of networks* (Barabasi 2002) claims that 'scaled networks' in a wide range of fields - social, technological and biological - conform to a mathematical model known as a power rule in which a few nodes (hubs) are highly connected and most are only weakly so. Think of the air transport network of the United States, for example, with its O'Hare and thousands of small airports. Such a model would explain why, left to its own devices, a world economy made up of unregulated market networks is becoming more connected and more unequal at the same time (Hart 2001).

It is not as if the problem of managing the infrastructure of world society would be entirely new. We already have the precedent of global institutions devised in the twentieth century, after the first and second world wars.

But there are others too. Several countries or federations of states are so large, so diverse and so self-contained as to constitute worlds in their own right. The United States, Russia, China, India and Brazil come to mind, while the European Union is the most dynamic political experiment on the planet. We could add to these examples some of the larger states formed in temperate zones by the British and Spanish empires or indeed any polity predicated on combining diversity. If we want to imagine what a world society might look like, we could examine these cases and ask which features should be adopted on a more inclusive scale. For our task is to make a better world society than the one we have, defined as it is by the myopia of national consciousness (Fanon 1959). We will discover that the modern principle of federalism is as old as that of the nation-state and much better suited to wide political association. The original word for society itself, *societas*, was for the Latins a loose-knit federal network, much less centralized than the constitution of the United States or Switzerland.

Making a better society means using the imagination for purposes of fiction, the construction of possible worlds out of actual experience. And this should remind us that thinking about the macrocosm is made easier through contemplation of microcosms. Alienation is an inability to make a meaningful link between ourselves and the world; and we need symbolic devices to bridge that gap. Works of fiction provide us with such devices. Novels and movies compress the world into a narrow stereotyped format that we enter subjectively on our own terms. In doing so, we encounter history without that crushing sense of being overwhelmed by remote forces. Whereas old versions of the universal (the Catholic church, European empire, economics) sought to dominate and replace particular varieties, the new universal will only be reproduced through cultural particulars. Great works of fiction show us this new concept of the universal, becoming more general as they plunge deeper into the circumstances of particular times and places. I have long thought that an anthropology of fiction would ask, not how specific works represent real societies, but how they construct convincing worlds of their own. The same question could be posed of the best ethnographies. And as a precedent for such an enquiry we could turn to Rousseau's extraordinary inventions of the 1760s: the *Social Contract*, *Emile*, the *New Heloïse* and the *Confessions*, through which he revolutionized European thinking about politics, education, sexuality and the self, each time with a new genre of fiction and each time pointing to a better world.

If society is hard to imagine, because it is inside us, not out there as we often believe, then we can follow Durkheim's prescription and make an external object of it, as nature (Durkheim 1912). The world may be considered scientifically as an ecology, a biological system, our habitat and home; and humanity is that part of life on earth that can think, the frontal lobes of the biomass. This confers on our species a certain duty of stewardship (Rappaport 1999). And it does seem that a green political agenda is more likely to mobilize humanity to do something about worsening world conditions than any attempt to address global social problems directly. I like to pose the following hypothetical question. Which news item is more likely to provoke the public's moral indignation: grey seals dying of oil pollution in the North Sea or a Mozambican killed by skinheads in East Germany? It is really no contest, since nature is out there and racism is inside all of us. Again, if global warming does melt the ice caps, the fate of coastal cities will be urgent enough perhaps to provoke some sort of global framework for collective action to materialize eventually. Humanity has apparently survived the threat of nuclear holocaust, for now, in part because it provoked a substantial

international peace movement. Here then is one likely focus for a world society animated by activist networks - the mitigation of global risks (Beck 1992).

At another level, the last half century saw us leave the planet's surface for the first time and generated concrete images of how the earth looks from outer space, a powerful symbol of human unity indeed. And natural science locates that unity in an intellectual vision that has given us, among other things, the machine revolution whose uneven development is the underlying fact of the last two centuries, drawing humanity into ever closer association. There are those (e.g. Latour 2002) who would assimilate this 'mononaturalism' and its twin, a condescending multi-culturalism (we understand the unity of nature, so they can have their little cultures) to a vision of western imperialism. Certainly there are few anthropologists today ready to sign up for the hegemony of natural science. So here too we have a pressing topic for discussion when we study world society.

What has anthropology been until now and what might it become? It began in the eighteenth century as a philosophy of human nature, asking what humanity has in common that might replace the arbitrary social differences of the old regime as a basis for living together. This Enlightenment vision underpinned the democratic revolutions of the period. The dominant paradigm shifted in the nineteenth century in order to explain a western imperialism fueled by machines. The Victorians found the world to be constituted as a racial hierarchy and they studied it by means of evolutionary history. After the first world war, the principle of nationalism was established everywhere and anthropology's chief method shifted as a result to ethnography, to writing about peoples considered to be naturally bounded units, symbolic microcosms of the nation-state. There was no world society as such in the twentieth century, just the wars of nations and their subsequent attempts to form associations with themselves as principal actors.

So what might anthropology become in the twenty-first century? My guess is that the general premise of universal movement will lead people to seek stable order in the least and most inclusive levels of human existence, that is in the self as an identity and the world as a unity; and especially in the construction of a meaningful relationship between the two. This is close to Durkheim's idea of religion as a bridge between the known and the unknown. We are each unique personalities and the world is, at least potentially, composed of humanity as a whole. We have hitherto put an enormous effort into exploring the varieties of classification and association that mediate these extremes. This was not the priority of the liberal founders of anthropology and it may not be the priority of students in future. If I were to name what the focus of a future anthropology might be, I would choose 'subjects in history' or perhaps 'self-in-the-world'.

There would be plenty of scope in such an anthropology for a world history whose antecedents cross-cut the discipline's previous periods and paradigms. Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1754) could well be taken as the basic text for an historical anthropology of unequal world society, with Morgan (1877) and Engels (1884) providing nineteenth century versions of the same and Jack Goody, among others, updating the project for late twentieth century audiences (Hart 2003). But our contemporary concern with subjectivity will require such grand narratives to be accompanied by individual and collective life histories of the sort pioneered by Sidney Mintz in *Worker in the Cane*

(1960) and Richard Werbner in *Tears of the Dead* (1991). Or they could be expressed in the form of novels and movies, of course.

Finally one might ask what anthropologists would actually do when they study world society. Let us assume that ethnographic fieldwork of the kind that we are now familiar with will remain an important source of professional knowledge. But this practice is coming under considerable political pressure (Grimshaw and Hart 1995). Each of us will try to resolve this problem in our own way. In my own case, I restricted the method of prolonged fieldwork to one stay in Ghana of two and half years, when I started out. Since then, I have preferred to visit new places under the auspices of a job rather than as a researcher. People expect visitors to do something for them these days and I would rather struggle with the bias of a known public position than try to explain that I am not a CIA spy. I have been most often a teacher or a development consultant in the employ of governments or international agencies. For the last five years, I have lived in Paris without either a job there or any pretension to carrying out local research. Wherever I am, I read a lot and I write. In recent years, I have begun to explore the possibilities of the internet, of web searches and e-mail. It is becoming ever more feasible to make universal connection without physical movement, without leaving home. All of this adds up to social experience. I make an anthropology out of that. Fortunately, I have had institutional support for this pretension. As Meyer Fortes said, after he helped to set up his trade union, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the U.K., "Social anthropology is what social anthropologists do" and he had the means of establishing their credentials. I am acutely aware that this trajectory is not readily available to others entering the discipline now. I just hope that each takes personal advantage of the historical opportunities and is not crushed by the constraints.

I have made a case in this Epilogue for research and writing in anthropology to be existentially motivated. The truth of social experience is always local, but we need to extend ourselves to grasp what kind of world society we live in. Such a global society is constituted by power relations, but the bridge to an understanding of our common humanity is moral. Morality is the ability to make personal judgements about the good and bad behaviour of people, including ourselves. Anthropology ought to be a means of helping us to do that more effectively. There is no guarantee that people in the future will want to employ experts on the human condition trading under a five-syllable word of Greek origin. But if they do, I hope they will ask anthropologists to make world society personally meaningful for their students and the public.

Appendix

Terms of Association

Associate: To connect or join together; combine.

Society: The totality of social relationships linking a large group of human beings.

Societas: (Latin) A league of allies committed to mutual support in the event of an attack on one of them (sokw-yo from root sekw-to follow).

Société: (Medieval French) A bounded unit with a single centre, i.e. a state.

State: Society centralized as a single agency.

Territory: The land and waters under the jurisdiction of a state.

Nation: A people who share a state.

Federation: A union in which power is divided between a central authority and the constituent political units.

Corporation: A group of people combined into or acting as one body.

Community: A sense of belonging to a group; people united by a common purpose.

Social Network: An open-ended, often informal set of interconnections.

Market: A social network constituted by buying and selling.

The Internet: The network of networks; the system of global communications.

Civilization: The ethical, rational and cultural standards by which a great people live.

Humanity: A collective noun for all people, past, present and future; a quality of kindness.

World: The earth with its inhabitants; universe; human society; people as a whole; all that relates to or affects the life of a person.

World society: The totality of social relationships linking the inhabitants of earth.

[Based loosely on *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1996]

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