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Societies are not the only source of multiplicity

Olaf Corry

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Justin Rosenberg has done colleagues in International Relations (IR) and related fields a great favour by initiating a discipline-vitalising debate on the fundamental problem of the international, arguing very persuasively that it boils down to ‘multiplicity’. Doing so he aims to upgrade IR from being an academic ‘mop-up’ operation, picking up the issues left outside the remit of Political Science and re-launching it as a discipline proper focused on the precise yet far-ranging ‘consequences of societal multiplicity’.

The clarity and clarifying effects of this move make it thoroughly compelling and its impact on the discipline is already noticeable. Just as the ‘end of IR theory’ was being proclaimed, Rosenberg fired the starting shot of a discussion at the level of grander-than- grand theory, but with potentially profound repercussions all the way down via middle range theorising to empirical inquiries into the international. Concerns so far have focused mainly on the concept of ‘multiplicity’. But perhaps a more serious substantive question mark hovers above the concept of ‘societal’. Rosenberg – and his critics in the Forum – assumes ‘society’ and specifically ‘human societies’, communities of difference (Jackson) or human individuals (Shepherd) as the units experiencing and causing ‘multiplicity’.

This continues a modern tradition within IR (and other social sciences) of abstracting the social and the human from the natural and the non-human. As a direct causal factor, nature was squeezed out of IR after WW2 when the ‘crude geographical determinism’ of *geopolitics* was rejected by Morgenthau and other realists.¹ Instead of the topography of the Earth, the oceans and local climates, *human* nature held the key to understanding world politics. Waltz and the *neo-neo* debate later did away also with the psychological ontology to leave us with a sparse and abstract structural model made of ‘units’ with ‘capabilities’, entangled in institutions perhaps, but free from strictures of history, culture or forces of nature. Constructivism revived the social in an ideational direction, but continued the marginalisation of materialism such that nature found a place in the discipline only as a collective action problem of ‘the environment’.²

Now, Rosenberg aims to revive the social in IR, but the ‘human’ epithet remains firmly in place. This is happening just as developmental trajectories are increasingly recognised to be conditioned not just by a multiplicity of other *societies*, but by ecological processes and entities such as the climate, and of course by technological ones such

as the global energy apparatus that permeates both humans and non-human matter. China’s *volte face* between Copenhagen in 2009 and Paris in 2016 on climate change mitigation cannot, surely, be seen in isolation from the geophysical changes going on at different ends of the planet and the chemical content of the air of its cities.

At the very moment when the human-centric assumptions of both IR and other social sciences are being questioned³ not least via the Anthropocene concept,⁴ IR may be building a fresh edifice of anthropocentrism via the idea of ‘societal multiplicity’. Rosenberg is right that Waltz’s isolation of the international from the social was artificial and theory-driven, but societal multiplicity is similarly located within a wider set of relations of exchange, competition and dependence involving a multiplicity of ontologies. Together they arguably make up the conditions of ‘Anthropocene politics’, and IR should think hard before excluding, by definitional fiat, perhaps the most fundamental source of multiplicity, namely, that which exists between social, natural and technological spheres.

Notes

1. Olaf Corry, *The Nature of International Relations: From Geopolitics to the Anthropocene* (Posthuman in International Relations). (E-International Relations Publishing, 2017).
2. Olaf Corry and Hayley Stevenson, ‘IR and the Earth: Societal Multiplicity and Planetary Singularity’, in Olaf Corry and Hayley Stevenson (eds) *Traditions and Trends in Global*

Environmental Politics: International Relations and the Earth (Earthscan, 2017).

3. Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *Posthuman International Relations* (London: Zed, 2011).
4. Cameron Harrington, 'Posthuman Security and Care in the Anthropocene', in Clara Eroukhmanoff and Matt Harker (eds) *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2017, pp. 73–86).