

# Reviews

*International Legitimacy and World Society*, Ian Clark (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 248 pp., \$65.00 cloth.

Ian Clark's *International Legitimacy and World Society* is an ambitious companion to his *Legitimacy in International Society* (2005). The earlier book laid out an argument for how legitimacy principles gain consensus among states, noting that these principles can come from sources outside the norms and institutions that states themselves share as members of international society. This volume builds on that insight, adding the puzzling notion that international society increasingly adopts norms that seem to undermine the states system, especially norms that privilege individuals. Such norms, Clark argues, can come from *world society*, "the realm of the individual, of the non-official group or movement, and of the transnational network of non-governmental agents" (p. 6).

From here one might expect an argument for how world society is progressively eclipsing the society of states. But Clark stakes out a more challenging middle ground. The relationship between international and world society is one of "accommodation" and "reciprocity," where world and international society interact in a productive tension, neither dissolving into the other (p. 10). Clark develops this nuanced position historically and analytically. Historically, he uncovers the "actual negotiations whereby norms have been transmitted from the one social sphere to the other" (p. 14), examining nineteenth and twentieth-century cases of norm adoption. Analytically, his goal is to put some "flesh" on the "skeletal"

concept of world society, a concept that has long been part of the English School lexicon—an approach in international relations theory that emphasizes the role of norms and institutions in moderating the clash of power among states—but whose contours and role remain imprecise (p. 3).

The book has much to recommend it. In its historical sensitivity and detailed recovery of political processes, Clark's work exhibits the finest aspects of the English School. Moreover, and usefully for those not steeped in the English School tradition, Clark links his argument to other international relations scholarship on NGOs, transnational activist networks, and global civil society. In addition, his accounts of the Vienna, Hague, and Versailles negotiations make clear that nonstate actors long have had voice and effects in international politics, joining a growing body of scholarship that contextualizes claims about the rise of individual-centric norms in the era of globalization.

Analytically, however, the book is less satisfying. Of course, historical and analytical approaches are difficult to combine, and Clark acknowledges that international and world societies are not always empirically distinct, and that many consider world society "too diffuse and amorphous" (p. 6) to be amenable to social-scientific analysis. Still, conceptual clarification is one of his goals, and yet even by the end of his analysis the boundaries and causal power of world society remain unclear.

From an English School perspective, the question is how to distinguish world society from international society. Clark often refers to what he early on calls a “putative logic” (p. 5) or “core business” (p. 6) of international society—that is, what states would do if not for the interventions of world society. But this world-society-free baseline is not specified, and at times seems so bare as to bleed into what English School scholarship would define as “system,” not society. The problem is that, if interstate norms without the influence of world society are no more than *realpolitik*, it is difficult to sustain an analytical distinction between international and world society, which makes the causal language of world society *affecting* international society awkward. Rather, it would seem that world society constitutes or gives life to the societal dimension of interstate relations in the first place.

Stepping outside the English School, three additional concerns arise. One is a mismatch between the causal processes Clark highlights in the narratives and the causal processes that would seem to have explanatory importance. Take, for example, Clark’s account of how ending the slave trade came to be part of the 1815 Vienna Treaty. Clark shows how the British Abolition Society influenced British and other governments by means of a transnational network of activists, through petitions, letters, and the dissemination of information on the human costs of the slave trade. Clark argues that the abolitionists’ arguments were persuasive to other international actors only because antislavery principles were seen as legitimate, reflecting the importance of the “developing normative context” (p. 53) of world society. The problem is that there is a competing, instrumentalist account of

the same outcome. In particular, Robert Pape and Chaim Kaufmann have argued that once Britain responded to domestic pressure and ended its slave trade, it had to make sure others would not benefit while Britain’s own hands were tied. Lobby groups affected domestic policy; antislavery states then acted strategically.

With this counterargument in mind, substantiating Clark’s claim that the antislavery clause of the Vienna Treaty was due to the power of world society would require some specification of this developing normative context and a discussion of how such contexts evolve and produce outcomes. It is somewhat surprising, then, that Clark recognizes the need to address the instrumentalist counterargument but then shies away from that task, noting only that such an argument would be a “more difficult case to sustain” (p. 59) than the story he focuses on. Perhaps Clark’s point is that both causal pathways are part of a world society theory. But if that is the case then both logics would need to be developed, and their relationship specified, in order for Clark’s world society argument to be fully persuasive.

The second issue is how to characterize the agency of world society. Throughout the text, Clark’s terminology suggests world society is a single unified agent. But the central nonstate actors differ in the chapters: domestic interest groups in chapters two and four; individual entrepreneurs in chapter five; and interest groups with transnational ties in chapters three, six, and seven. How do these varying actors manifest a unitary world societal agent? Many in the field of international relations even have difficulty accepting the assumption that states have agency—and states are hierarchically organized unitary actors on the world stage. World society,

in contrast, is nonhierarchical, decentralized, and comprised of both individuals and groups. It is not clear what such a plural agency would look like.

Finally, Clark usefully focuses on the principled arguments in each of the cases, but he does not fully commit to a discursive approach and often seems tempted by a motives-based frame. For example, he asks whether states really wanted the human-centric positions they came to espouse or whether adoption was a response to political pressure, and he contrasts normatively good motives to instrumental ones. The problem with this ambivalence is twofold: first, even if states adopt norms insincerely, they could be responding to pressure from world society; second, even insincere norm adoption can have effects—to use Clark’s words, often “effects outstrip intentions” (p. 104). Admittedly, Clark makes clear that he is not sure how much the sincerity of a given argument matters, but by retaining motives as a partial focus he passes up an opportunity to deepen his suggestive comments about the effects of discussions among states and between states and nonstate actors.

In sum, throughout the book Clark seems caught not just between two concepts—international and world society—but between his two goals: the historical goal of

recovering the politics of world society, and the analytical goal of specifying the concept. He clearly succeeds at the former, bringing us into the various smoke-filled rooms where norms were negotiated, and highlighting the complex interactions between those who represent states and those who represent other interests. On the analytics, however, too often Clark does not go beyond pointing out the difficult questions. When breaking new ground, such question-raising certainly is understandable, if not inevitable. But at least this reviewer would have settled for fewer sweeping questions in order to get greater analytical depth on one or two of them.

On a more positive note, in its shortcomings this book raises productive questions for future research by English School and non-English School researchers alike. How differentiable is world society from international society? What kind of agency, if any, can we ascribe to the kind of diffuse entity that world society must be? And what is the role and power of public discussion in world politics? Insofar as this book points to such promising avenues of research, it is an important contribution indeed.

—JENNIFER MITZEN  
*Ohio State University*