World Polity or World Society?
Delineating the Statist and Societal Dimensions of the Global Institutional System

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Introduction

The world society/polity research program has grown tremendously over the past three decades
(for canonical statements of this approach, see Thomas, Meyer, Ramirez, and Boli 1987 and
Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez 1997; for synthetic overviews, see Jepperson 2002a and
Drori and Krücken 2009). According to this perspective, social actors of all kinds—states,
individuals, and organizations—are embedded in and shaped by a global cultural, social, and
political environment, resulting in a great deal of decoupled isomorphism or structural
homogeneity among them.

Scholars in this tradition have amassed an impressive stock of empirical evidence in support of
their theoretical perspective. Despite obvious differences and rampant inequalities among
societies, institutions, policies, and even outcomes in a variety of domains tend to converge on
common models. Government ministries (Kim, Jang, and Hwang 2002), constitutions (Boli
1987a; Beck, Drori, and Meyer 2012), mass and higher education systems (Meyer, Ramirez, and
Soysal 1992; Schofer and Meyer 2005), curricular content (Benavot, Cha, Kamens, Meyer, and
Wong 1991; Bromley, Meyer, and Ramirez 2012; Frank and Gabler 2006; Frank, Wong, Meyer,
and Ramirez 2000; McEneaney and Meyer 2000; Meyer, Kamens, and Benavot 1992),
environmental policies (Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000; Schofer and Hironaka 2005),
management principles (Drori, Meyer, and Hwang 2006), legal structures (Boyle and Meyer
1998), and citizenship rights (Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan 1997) have all coalesced around
universal scripts and standardized templates.

At the same time, the empirical as well as the theoretical literature is conceptually imprecise in
one fundamental respect: the very terms by which the perspective is called—“world society” and
“world polity”—are used interchangeably and indiscriminately. This practice conflates distinct
concepts that refer to different aspects of the global institutional order. In this paper, I suggest the
utility of distinguishing between the global society and polity.

I propose, first, that the term world polity be reserved for the state-centric dimensions of the
global institutional system. The polity, in this view, includes not only states and interstate
relations, but also the organizations (i.e., intergovernmental organizations) and “regimes”
(Krasner 1982) that states create and in which they participate. Conversely, world society is the
domain of non-state (and non-economic) actors—it comprises, for lack of a better term, a global
“civil society” populated by international nongovernmental organizations (Boli and Thomas
1999), transnational activists (Keck and Sikkink 1998), and the like. Although these two aspects
of the global institutional system co-exist and co-mingle, the system itself has become much less
state-centric over time. Global civil society is exponentially more vibrant today than it was even
half a century ago. At the same time, the global polity and society have become increasingly
interpenetrated after World War II.

Defining “World Polity” and “World Society”
Before setting out to elaborate a proposed conceptual and theoretical distinction between the world polity and world society, it is first necessary to consider how these terms are defined in the extant literature.

**World Polity**

John Meyer coined the term “world polity” in 1980 to describe a global system of creating value through the collective conferral of authority. . . . It includes state action, as is conventional, but also other forms of collective action that might in the modern social scientific lexicon be dismissed as merely ‘cultural.’ The rules involved may be formed and located in collective cultural or religious processes, but are now often located in state action. (Meyer [1980] 1987:44)

Although this definition refers obliquely to non-statist “forms of collective action,” early global institutionalist theorizing focused almost exclusively on the state—its origins, structures, and actions (Thomas and Meyer 1984). Even world culture itself, the product of “collective processes” stretching back to medieval Europe, was thought to operate in and through states.¹ Preliminary definitions and expositions of the global institutionalist system therefore had a distinctly statist flavor.

Early work in the world polity tradition emphasized the geographical expansion and structural intensification of state structures (Meyer 1987; Boli 1987b; Thomas and Meyer 1984). These efforts were seen as a corrective on overly economistic and militaristic analyses of globalization (see, e.g., Meyer 1982). Meyer’s approach represented a radical departure from work that viewed states as enmeshed in systems of unequal capitalist exchange (Wallerstein 1974) or military competition (Tilly 1992). For example, as Europeans colonized the globe, they did more than incorporate peripheral zones into the expanding global market; they also established the foundations for the modern nation-state system.² Colonies, after World War II, became sovereign (and strikingly isomorphic) nation-states in their own right, so that today virtually the entire landmass of the globe is divided into mutually exclusive and exhaustive national jurisdictions (Strang 1990, 1991).

**World Society**

Whereas preliminary institutionalist statements and studies emphasized how “the world polity organizes more and more social value in the state” (Meyer [1980] 1987:48), later efforts paid

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¹ The *world culture* concept, while not my primary focus here, is nevertheless central to the world polity/society perspective. World culture comprises an array of ontological frameworks, cognitive blueprints, and normative prescriptions that (1) specify the core identities, capacities, and purposes of social actors; (2) provide these actors with schemata for making sense of the world; and (3) set parameters around what is “proper” or even thinkable in a given historical moment (Lechner and Boli 2005). It is embodied, expressed, conveyed, and purveyed by international nongovernmental and governmental organizations (Boli and Thomas 1999; Drori 2005). Thus, world culture operates in and underlies both the world polity and world society.

² Prior to his 1980 statement on the world polity, Meyer subsumed the same general ideas under the generic “world system” label (Meyer and Hannan 1979). The term *world polity* was no doubt coined in part to distinguish the institutionalist perspective from Wallerstein’s global economic approach.
greater attention to the role of non-state entities in the global institutional system. The focus shifted away from the state as such and toward the collective actors—“rationalized others”—that constitute, organize, instruct, and advise states (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez 1997; Meyer 1999). These “others” include international nongovernmental organizations (Boli and Thomas 1999), epistemic communities (Haas 1992), and consultants of all stripes. Other civil society entities—perhaps less “rationalized” (because they lack the requisite disinterested posture) but no less important—include principled transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998) that give voice to subnational groups and pressure states to acknowledge and respect these groups’ rights.

Individuals also began to take center stage in global institutionalist thought. Meyer’s ([1980] 1987:45, 61) original description of the world polity emphasized that the “two great constructed primordial social units of the modern world are the individual and the nation-state,” but that “the modern state, perhaps even more than the modern individual, is given legitimated primordial status in the world polity.” The dialectical tension between individuals and states was resolved, according to Ramirez and Boli (1987), in the “mythology of citizenship.” This synthesis, however, gave individuals standing and status only as members of their respective nation-states; it was wrought within a distinctly state-centric framework.

As the global institutional system became less statist and more “societal” in nature, there was a marked shift from the logic of citizenship to that of personhood (Bromley, Meyer, and Ramirez 2012; Ramirez 2006; Soysal 1994). Individuals are no longer defined exclusively, or even primarily, in terms of their national identities; rather, they legitimately assert a wide array of identities and lay claim to universal, “deterritorialized” rights (Frank and Meyer 2002; Meyer and Jepperson 2000; Meyer 2009; Soysal 1994). They are empowered to act autonomously of—and even, sometimes, directly against—states.

With the transition from a state-centric world polity to a more ontologically diverse and expansive world society after World War II, a plethora of non-state actors burst onto the scene. The global institutional system grew to include not only newly decolonized states (Strang 1990, 1991) and individuals with rights and standing independent of state membership (Soysal 1994), but also racial and ethnic groups (Kingsbury 1992; Olzak 2006), nongovernmental organizations (Boli and Thomas 1997, 1999; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourichas 1999), and transnational regimes (Krasner 1982; Donnelly 1986; Meyer, Frank, Hironaka, Schofer, and Tuma 1997). Whereas international politics was once the sole domain of sovereign nation-states and their agents, a panoply of “civil society” actors now play active roles in global affairs.

This decidedly less state-centric view of the global institutionalist system was articulated in an influential 1997 paper, “World Society and the Nation-State” (Meyer, Boli, et al. 1997), whereupon the term world society began to displace world polity in the literature. Figure 1 plots the usage of these terms over time, beginning with Meyer’s foundational statement on “The World Polity and the Authority of the Nation-State” in 1980. Although use of both terms was quite sparse until the mid-1990s, “world polity” was clearly preferred during the early period.

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3 The trends are based on a Google Scholar search for the number of scholarly items that use the terms world polity and/or world society in each year. To ensure that only the global institutional literature is reflected in these counts, I also included search terms for “John Meyer,” “John W. Meyer,” or “Meyer, John.”
After 1997, “world society” became the term du jour, in some years outnumbering the use of “world polity” by a factor of four-to-one.

Figure 1 also shows that both terms are often referenced in the same study. My own reading of this literature suggests that, in these instances, the terms are used merely to situate work within a single approach that happens to go by two names, rather than to describe different features of the global institutional system. For example, Schofer’s (2003) analysis of the expansion of science proceeds from “the core argument . . . that national societies are surrounded by and embedded in trans-national organizations, culture, and discourse, often referred to as ‘world society’ or the ‘world polity.’” The terms, in this usage, are treated as synonymous and hence interchangeable.

The terminological shift depicted in Figure 1 was certainly not invested with any deep meaning among practitioners. In their overview of global institutionalist lines of thought, Drori and Krücken (2009: 17) note that:

In spite of the emphasis on the notion of world society, the label for Meyer’s comparative work as late as 2003 was “world polity.” The subsequent terminological shift—from highlighting the polity to emphasizing society—does not represent a shift of the basic tenets of the approach. Rather, it reflects the roots of world society theory in the intellectual context of American sociology: Meyer’s hesitation to employ the term “society” comes as a reaction to the pre-1960 grand theories and from the post-1960 sociological rush to regard society as an aggregation of individuals.

I argue that the lexical change from world polity to world society was in fact accompanied by an implicit conceptual reorientation that is worth explicating and preserving.

Adumbrating the Distinction

Few scholars make a conceptual distinction between the state-centric and non-statist aspects of the global institutional system. Schofer (2003:738) alludes to it; he points out that “the social networks and shared culture that preceded international organizations constituted an earlier world polity.” He referred to the early global institutional system a “world society” because that term “connotes a lesser degree of centralized organizational structure.” Rather than peg the polity/society distinction to the degree of centralization or organizational structuration in the external environment, I emphasize the extent to which the system—or different aspects of the system—is dominated by nation-states. Contemporary world society, after all, is highly structured by dense networks of international nongovernmental organizations. Alternatively, the world polity can be quite decentralized, as it was prior to the widespread development of intergovernmental organizations after World War II.

Beckfield (2008:422) also flirted with the notion of a world polity/society distinction. He references, in a footnote, the existence of an “international civil society” that is “counterpoised” to the “interstate system” and the “international market economy.” But his primary focus was on the interstate system (world polity) and market economy (world system) to the exclusion of

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4 Nevertheless, Schofer (2003:738) noted that “in the broader neoinstitutional literature, ‘world polity’ and ‘world society’ are virtually synonymous.
international civil society. He writes: “Characterization of the world polity as flat contrasts with the vision of the world system as a hierarchical network of nation-states bound by competitive, unequal relations” (p. 424). Thus, while Beckfield delineated the system of juridically equal nation-states from the international market-based economy—a delineation that global institutionalists have emphasized from the beginning—he obscured the distinction between the world polity and society. He does mention, again in a footnote, that his focus on intergovernmental organizations masks the multidimensionality of the world polity, which also consists of international nongovernmental organizations. I wish to amplify this distinction between the intergovernmental or statist polity and the nongovernmental or non-statist society.

Scholars who take Hedley Bull’s (1977) English school as a point of departure have distinguished more forcefully the statist and non-statist dimensions of the world system. Buzan (2004:1), for example, defines international society as “a clearly bounded subject focused on the elements of society that states from among themselves,” but notes that world society “implies something that reaches well beyond the state towards more cosmopolitan images of how humankind is, or should be, organized.” Similarly, Clark (2007:22) treats international society as a system of states, but defines world society as the “non-state social world that takes a transnational form, and is distinct from the society of states.” He argues that, since the nineteenth century, world society has become increasingly autonomous from international society, although the two “societies” are mutually reinforcing. “World society,” he writes, “needed international society to give some juridical basis to its norms, and to enforce them; at the same time, international society began to acknowledge merit in extending the scope of its traditional norms, to accommodate those arising from world society” (p. 33). The world polity/society distinction I propose would enable global institutional scholars to address similar issues within their own theoretical and empirical framework.

**The Global Institutional System’s Statist and Societal Dimensions**

The core difference between the “world polity” and “world society” analogizes the distinction between state and society, a distinction that, perhaps ironically, has been quite central in comparative global institutional theorizing and research (e.g., Jepperson 2002b; Dobbin 1994; Meyer 1983; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourichas 1999; Soysal 1994; see also Nettl 1968; Badie and Birnbaum 1983). Jepperson (2002b) has clearly articulated this distinction. “Statist visions,” he says, “locate collective authority in a differentiated, insulated, and charismatic organizational center,” whereas “more societal visions locate purpose and authority in society at large” (Jepperson 2002b:66).

A similar distinction can be made with respect to the statist and societal dimensions of global institutional system. Global institutionalists frequently invoke Tocqueville’s description of the early American polity to describe the basic features of the contemporary global institutional system. Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez (1997:145) drew a parallel between the “cultural and associational life in the nearly stateless American society of the 1830s” and contemporary world society, whose operation “through peculiarly cultural and associational processes depends heavily on its statelessness.” Earlier, Strang and Meyer (1993:503) suggested that the existence of structurally isomorphic states and organizations in world society is analogous to the homogeneity of individuals and groups in early American civil society, as noted by Tocqueville.
And more recently, in discussing the proliferation of organizations in world society, Meyer, Drori, and Hwang (2006) cited Tocqueville’s musings on the tendency of Americans to establish associations of all shapes and sizes.

The multitude and multiplicity of associations in early American society intrigued Tocqueville because they filled a void that did not exist in his native France. In the United States, where the central government was weak, civil society “organized itself” (Badie and Birnbaum 1983). Conversely, in France, a strong bureaucratic state insisted on the maintenance of direct ties with its citizens, unobstructed by intervening commitments or organizational memberships (Bendix [1964] 1996; Jepperson 2002b; more classically, Rousseau). The tendency of individuals to organize was therefore comparatively much weaker in statist France than in “stateless” America. Likewise, in some hypothetical global institutional system with a central state, the propensity of world society to organize itself would presumably be much weaker than it is today (Meyer, Boli, et al. 1997).

The Tocquevillian analogy is indeed apt, as it nicely captures the “stateless” nature of world society—in the absence of a global state, organizations of all shapes and sizes have been established. But the analogy has overlooked a key point. Although the collective political order in nineteenth-century America was indeed quite weak, the federal subunits—the states—were not. As the “primordial” sovereigns of the federal union, states figured prominently in the American polity, much as nation-states are the primary political units in the world polity. (And in the United States, “states’ rights” discourses resemble the grumblings of politicians who bemoan the usurpation of national sovereignty by international regimes such as the United Nations.) If contemporary world society is reminiscent of America’s vibrant civil society, the stateless world polity recalls, in shadowy fashion, early America’s decentralized political structure.5

The analogy extends yet further. Much as the U.S. federal government has grown appreciably over time, the world polity has expanded and become densely structurated. Intergovernmental organizations were rare before 1920 (Boli and Lechner 2001). Absent these organizational carriers and conduits, world-cultural ideas and institutions diffused via direct linkages among states themselves. Schofer (2003), for example, showed that scientific associations spread throughout the pre-World War II polity in a variety of ways. First, colonization directly facilitated the transmission of organizational models and practices from core to periphery. Metropolitan powers transplanted practices and institutions to the colonies, and colonial elites who studied in metropolitan universities brought “core” ideas home with them. Second, scientific associations were actively promoted by itinerant elites or “gentlemen” who, like the high priests of medieval Christendom, were not bound by place or secular allegiances. Third, diplomatic ties among sovereign states also served as important conduits for diffusion.

In addition to these “nodal” mechanisms of diffusion, self-conscious emulation—what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) called mimetic isomorphism—was also common. Countries that existed

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5 Within this decentralized political structure, states are formally equal members of the American union; as such, they enjoy equal representation in the Senate. In practice, however, states are far from equal. This fact is demonstrated each presidential election season, when candidates focus their attention and resources on states with large numbers of electoral votes. The juxtaposition of de jure equality and de facto inequality also characterizes the world polity.
outside the ambit of the European-based polity, but that aspired to become full-fledged members of it, strategically imitated European nation states. Examples abound: Peter the Great’s modernizing reforms in Russia, including his decision to move the capital to the “European” region of his country; the Tanzimat reforms of the Ottoman Empire, wherein the government reorganized its legal, financial, educational, and military systems along self-consciously European lines; and Meiji Japan, which cobbled together a Frankensteinian state based on English, French, Prussian, and American models. Nodal contacts shaped these borrowings. “Japan,” according to Schofer (2003:740), “drew most upon those nations with whom it had direct ties via diplomatic exchange, trade relations, and missionary contacts.”

Direct interstate linkages continue to form an integral part of contemporary world polity, but these linkages have assumed new forms in the postwar era. Slaughter (2004) argues that patterns of direct interaction and intellectual exchange among states increasingly occur among their disaggregated subcomponents. High court judges from different countries meet regularly to discuss relevant case law, which facilitates the diffusion of legal norms. Legislators and parliamentarians also network informally with their counterparts abroad. Such disaggregation makes it difficult to entertain the notion, common among theorists of a realist bent, that states exist as highly integrated and unitary actors.

The world polity is also structured by “dependence networks” (Goodliffe and Hawkins 2009), or the security, trade, and organizational relations among nations. These networks have proven quite influential. For instance, Goodliffe and Hawkins (2009) showed that countries were more likely to support the International Criminal Court—an institution that violates core tenets of national sovereignty—if their key trade partners also supported the institution. Along similar lines, Torfason and Ingram (2010) found that military alliances facilitate the diffusion of democratic reforms.

Despite the continuing importance of direct interstate linkages in the world polity, Schofer (2003:751) concluded that “as ‘world society’ became structured in concrete international associations after 1945, direct ties among nations mattered somewhat less.” Horizontal ties among nation-states are increasingly supplemented by vertical ties between states and international organizations. These organizational linkages serve as “receptor sites” (Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000: 96) that “receive, decode, and transmit signals from world society to national actors.” They also represent network nodes that connect different countries to one another (Hughes, Peterson, Harrison, and Paxton 2009; Torfason and Ingram 2010), thus providing a new “second-order” form of interstate linkage.

Although much recent work has focused on nongovernmental or “world society” organizations (Boli and Thomas 1999), intergovernmental organizations—world polity institutions par excellence—remain important purveyors of world culture. In a recent study, Torfason and Ingram (2010:356) concluded that “the network forged between states through their joint memberships in intergovernmental organizations” was a primary conduit for the diffusion of democratic norms and institutions. What mattered in this case were not only the kinds of organization-to-country ties most often emphasized by global institutionalist scholars (i.e., how many organizational memberships a country has), but also the bilateral country-to-country ties that occur within the structural and interpretive frameworks provided by intergovernmental
organizations. Organizational memberships influence countries directly, but they also provide formal arenas for interstate communication and diffusion (see also Hughes, Peterson, Harrison, and Paxton 2009).

Interpersonal linkages also promote diffusion. Clark and Hall (2011:871) argue that international migration and telecommunications are “an important sector of the world polity.” Migrants, they contend, carry world-cultural norms and scripts across national borders. Cross-national telephone traffic, too, serves as an important conduit for diffusion. I suggest, however, that these kinds of informal networks are best described as forming part of world society, rather than the world polity. Migration and telephone conversations belong to the more private, civil society dimensions of the global institutional system, rather than to the system’s more statist elements. Indeed, the state’s growing inability to curb these cross-border movements of people and ideas is often regarded as an indicator of diminished state sovereignty in a globalizing world (Krasner 1999).

Akin to the effect of migration patterns, Tsutsui and Wotipka (2004) found that tourist flows positively influenced citizens’ level of involvement in human rights INGOs by diffusing human rights norms and connecting domestic publics with external activists. In this particular case, international travel, nongovernmental organizations, and transnational advocacy networks combined to form a non-statist nexus of the world society.

Quite apart from the importance of interstate, organizational, and interpersonal networks to diffusion, world culture is also lodged in what John Meyer has called the “social ether.” The norms, models, and scripts that constitute social reality are often so highly theorized (Strang and Meyer 1993) that they no longer depend on nodal linkages for their diffusion and adoption. In Durkheimian fashion (Meyer 2009), world-cultural influences become increasingly diffuse and indirect. Policies and practices are assimilated by states (and other social actors) as if by osmosis through acculturative processes, in addition to the more direct mechanisms of socialization and coercion (Goodman and Jinks 2004). The global institutional system, in other words, is not merely an organizational field through which structures and practices spread (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). It is also a highly institutionalized environment or “sacred canopy” that shapes the identities, structures, and purposes of social actors in highly disembedded fashion (Meyer, Boli, et al. 1997).

Diffuse effects of this sort abound. They help explain, among other things, the dramatic increases in school enrollments we witness among countries without mandatory attendance laws (Ramirez and Boli 1987); the rapid postwar expansion of higher education enrollments via the processes of global democratization, scientization, and structuration, net of direct national-level characteristics and effects (Schofer and Meyer 2005); the “drift” toward improved environmental outcomes in the absence of formal policy changes designed to protect the environment (Schofer and Hironaka 2005); the higher wages for nonunionized workers in regions and industries with strong unions (Western and Rosenfeld 2011); the uptick in reports of rape in countries that have not undertaken rape-law reforms (Frank, Hardinge, and Wosick-Correa 2009); and the positive effect of international human rights treaties among non-ratifying countries (Cole 2012a). The shift is from a world polity structured primarily by interstate linkages and toward a world society...
in which diffuse cultural and multifaceted associational dynamics figure much more prominently.

**Toward an Explicit Conceptual and Operational Distinction**

If Tocqueville’s observations about nineteenth-century America have provided a useful touchstone in describing the basic contours of contemporary world society, I suggest that T. H. Marshall’s inquiry into the nature of citizenship offers an illuminating way to think about the coexistence of the world polity and society. Marshall ([1950] 1992) grappled with the tension between the legal equality and socioeconomic inequality of citizens. In much the same way, contemporary nation-states are constituted as juridically equal actors despite gross economic inequalities and widespread variation in their structural capacities (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; McNeely 1995; Krasner 1999; Hironaka 2005). The world polity is premised on the (fictitious) principle of sovereign equality among recognized states. Not all countries, of course, are created equal, even with respect to legal or juridical status. Although the United Nations functions as a “membership club” for nominally equal states (McNeely 1995)—in much the same way that citizenship serves as a membership club for nominally equal citizens (Brubaker 1992)—some countries (e.g., permanent Security Council members) enjoy a privileged “primus-inter-pares” status. Still, the fiction endures.

The Marshallian analogy can also be extended to highlight diachronic changes in the geographical scope and organizing principles of the global institutional system. Much as citizenship was extended to subpopulations—men without property, women, minorities—incrementally, so that today citizenship is a uniform status that extends to all members in a polity, membership in the world polity was originally restricted in all but a few exceptional cases to European states but has since been extended to countries with starkly disparate cultural traditions and levels of economic development. Membership in the polity, before World War II, was predicated on the notion of “civilization.” According to Keal (2003:103), prominent international jurists such as Oppenheim and Westlake opined that “to enter the international society of ‘civilised’ states non-European entities had to meet the requirements of the standard set by European states.” These standards produced an early wave of isomorphic changes in state structures, as the Westernizing reforms of Petrine Russia, Tanzimat Ottoman Empire, and Meiji Japan attest.

All this changed after World War II. Sovereign equality, not civilizational purity, is the postwar polity’s organizing principle. Just as the correlation between whiteness and citizenship status within Western nations declined over time, so too did the correlation between whiteness and sovereign statehood within the world polity (Cairns 2000:41). But in neither case—for citizens or for states—did the extension of formal equality lead to the eradication of substantive inequality. Far from it: the conferral of sovereignty to the newly decolonized countries of sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, gave rise to a host of juridically equal but structurally weak states plagued by civil war (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Hironaka 2005).

Beckfield’s (2003) analysis of inequality in the density of countries’ linkages to international organizations is apposite in this context. Beckfield found that cross-national variability in international nongovernmental organization (INGO) ties greatly eclipses variability in
intergovernmental organization (IGO) memberships. “States,” that is, “are much more evenly integrated into IGOs than are the societies in INGOs” (Beckfield 2003:418). He concluded that wealthy, Western, and “core” states are tied to far more INGOs vis-à-vis their counterparts in poor, non-Western, and peripheral states. But these economic and civilizational factors are much less important with respect to the number of states’ IGO memberships. He draws several conclusions from his findings (Beckfield 2003:418). Consistent with the global institutionalist emphasis on isomorphic processes, he posits that “there may be less inequality in IGO ties than in INGO ties because states resemble each other more than do societies.” State institutions are structurally (and ritualistically) similar, but formal institutions are often “decoupled” from on-the-ground realities. He also offers a more realist interpretation: “the world culture constructed by IGOs is less susceptible to domination by the core/West than that constructed by INGOs.” The fact that “rich, core, Western states fail to exclude poor, peripheral, non-Western states from existing IGOs” suggests that less powerful states use IGOs to balance against their powerful counterparts.

I offer an alternative interpretation. Inequality in IGO ties is relatively low not only because states are structurally isomorphic, as Beckfield suggests, but also because they are constituted as (formally) equal members of the international community. Status equality, in turn, translates into greater levels of equality in the density of states’ organizational ties within the world polity. National societies, conversely, are economically unequal and culturally dissimilar, which produces striking disparities in their organizational ties to world society.

In short, IGO memberships provide a useful measure of a state’s participation in the world polity, whereas INGO linkages tap the extent of its embeddedness in the world society. This distinction is often implicit in the empirical literature, as illustrated by several recent studies of the international human rights regime. In their analysis of human rights treaty ratification, Wotipka and Tsutsui (2008:742) include IGO memberships to measure “the impact of governments’ desire to look legitimate in intergovernmental arenas” and INGO linkages to “measure the influence of global civil society.” In a related analysis of human rights organizations, Tsutsui and Wotipka (2004:589) “attempt to sort out the different roles of intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations in global political processes. Global human rights ideas pose a threat to governmental actors because they tend to constrain state behavior in domestic political affairs. Nongovernmental actors, on the other hand, are less concerned about state sovereignty.” IGOs, in other words, represent the interests of states, whereas INGOs represent societal interests.

This argument echoes Boyle and Thompson’s (2001) analysis of individual abuse claims submitted to the European Commission on Human Rights. They found that the number of claims emanating from a country increased as the number of INGO ties increased, but decreased as a function of IGO ties. INGOs, they surmised, produce a “civil society that is particularly active with respect to global issues” (p. 329). INGOs help define new forms of human rights abuse, monitor existing abuses, and assist individuals who wish to bring claims against states. IGOs, on the other hand, assign “paramount importance” (p. 329) to the principle of state sovereignty. Because human rights norms pose a fundamental challenge to state sovereignty—namely, the ability of states to exclude external actors and influences from internal affairs (Krasner 1999)—IGOs are associated with lower rates of individual claims making.
Despite their different roles and functions in the global institutional system, IGOs and INGOs frequently belong to the same extended networks. Human rights treaties that authorize individuals to petition human rights bodies for redress of grievances (Boyle and Thompson 2001; Cole 2006) offer a telling example. Here, a treaty regime (to which only states can belong) creates an oversight committee (an IGO) to receive complaints from individuals (acting independently of and against their respective nation-states) who are often assisted by advocacy groups (such as INGOs) that are themselves linked (via transnational activist networks) to similar organizations around the world. In this fashion, the world polity and society have become highly interpenetrated over time.

In another example of interpenetration, the United Nations has formalized the participation of civil society organizations from its inception. Article 71 of the U.N. Charter provides that the Economic and Social Council “may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence.” As of September 2010, nearly 2,400 nongovernmental organizations enjoy consultative status in the United Nations. Through this mechanism, world society organizations participate actively in the world polity’s most prominent IGO.

Additional Considerations on Operationalization

How might analysts begin to operationalize the distinction between the world polity and society in empirical research? One solution is simply to treat IGO memberships and INGO linkages as measures of distinct concepts: a state’s degree of embeddedness, respectively, in the world polity and world society. Institutionalists often neglect to link these concepts to their respective operational measures—IGOs as measuring the impact of the world polity, and INGOs as tapping the influence of world society. More often than not, analysts indiscriminately use both measures together, or either measure in isolation, to tap membership in a coherent world polity/society. Even more problematically, they sometimes combine the two measures into a single index (e.g., Cole 2005; Schofer and Hironaka 2005; Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000). I suggest that these measures be kept distinct, and that they be interpreted as tapping different dimensions of the global institutional system.

Recent research shows, for example, that states’ participation in the world polity via IGO memberships reduces levels of political mobilization and violence among ethnic groups, whereas INGO linkages serve to exacerbate inter-ethnic conflict (Olzak 2006; Koenig and Dierkes 2011). Here, then, is a case where intergovernmental (i.e., statist) and nongovernmental (i.e., societal) organizations exert contradictory effects on a given outcome.

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7 As noted previously, Beckfield (2003) concluded that core countries and Western nations belong to significantly more INGOs than do their economically peripheral and non-Western counterparts. To capture the unique “world society” influence of INGO linkages, it may be necessary to residualize country-level INGO memberships by partiailling out the effects of economic development, world-systems status, and civilizational membership (see, e.g., Cole 2012b).
Likewise, measures such as international migration, telephone traffic, and tourist flows (Clark and Hall 2011; Tsutsui and Wotipka 2004) have already been used to operationalize important dimensions of world society linkages and networks, just as dependence networks, interstate linkages, and diplomatic exchanges (Goodliffe and Hawkins 2009; Slaughter 2004; Torfason and Ingram 2010) currently tap elements of world polity integration. All that remains is to make these dimensions conceptually and theoretically explicit.

In addition to these standard measures, the KOF Index of Globalization (Dreher 2006) offers another way to measure states’ embeddedness in the world polity and society. This index measures the economic, political, and social dimensions of globalization. The economic component pertains to the level of a country’s integration into the global capitalist system, which is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss. The political component is a reasonable measure of a state’s embeddedness in world polity: it indexes IGO memberships, participation in U.N. Security Council missions, ratification of international treaties, and the number of embassies in a country. Finally, the social component includes measures of interpersonal contact (e.g., telephone traffic, international tourism, foreign population) and cultural proximity (number of McDonald’s franchises, number of Ikea stores, and trade in books). This index overlaps substantially with global institutionalist understandings of world society.

Table 1 presents correlations among the KOF economic, social, and political globalization indices and several other measures: INGO linkages, IGO memberships, GDP per capita, and a dummy variable for Western countries. As with Beckfield’s (2003) analysis of IGO and INGO ties, aggregate economic wealth correlates more or less strongly with the various dimensions of globalization. Of the three globalization indices, the social dimension is highly correlated with GDP per capita ($r = .760$), followed by economic globalization ($r = .589$) and political globalization ($r = .486$). Similar, albeit less pronounced, associations characterize the relationship between Western status and social, economic, and political globalization ($r = .644$, .555, and .433, respectively). Western and wealthy countries are also more dominant in INGOs than in IGOs (Beckfield 2003). INGO linkages correlate with GDP per capita at $r = .689$, compared with $r = .497$ for IGO memberships. Similarly, Western status correlates with INGO linkages and IGO memberships at $r = .576$ and .391, respectively.

These correlations suggest that the social globalization index and INGO linkages tap a common underlying dimension—world society embeddedness—whereas the political globalization index and IGO memberships correspond to a different dimension—world polity integration. Indeed,

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8 The economic globalization index comprises a variety of measures on trade, foreign direct investment, taxes, import barriers, and the like. This index would allow researchers to address world-systems–like dynamics alongside global institutional processes transpiring in the world polity and society.

9 Admittedly, the cultural proximity dimension corresponds more closely with world society’s expressive as opposed to constitutive dimensions (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987; Jepperson and Swidler 1994; Meyer 1999; Boli and Lechner 2001). Culture, in the global institutionalist sense, is fundamentally constitutive: it “is less a set of values and norms, and more a set of cognitive models defining the nature, purpose, resources, technologies, controls, and sovereignty of the proper nation-state” (Meyer 1999:123). Sewell (1992) invokes the example of language to elucidate the distinction. Rules of grammar and syntax form the constitutive elements of language (langue), whereas the poetry, prose, and spontaneous speech created under the rubric of those rules (parole) is quintessentially expressive. People routinely speak without contemplating or even comprehending formal grammatical or syntactical rules, which illustrates the often tacit and taken-for-granted nature of constitutive culture.
the correlations of social globalization with INGOs and political globalization with IGOs are quite strong (r = .701 for the former and .785 for the latter). Future work in the world polity/society domain would do well to link their operational measures more explicitly to different conceptual dimensions of the global institutional system.

Conclusion

Since its initial formulation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the world polity/society approach has grown into a full-scale research program. Several generations of scholars have analyzed the dramatic expansion of the global institutional system, particularly since World War II, as well as its effects on national societies. The approach is theoretically sophisticated and empirically rigorous. Nevertheless, I have argued that it would benefit from a clearer and more forceful distinction between its statist and non-statist dimensions.

Such a distinction between “world polity” and “world society,” already implicit in much of the literature, would serve a number of important purposes. First and foremost, it would facilitate the identification of different causal mechanisms at work in the global institutional system. Research demonstrates that countries have become increasingly isomorphic over time with respect to formal policies and structures. Analysts are also beginning to show that world-cultural influences penetrate deep into countries to affect their practices. Often left ambiguous, however, is whether these influences are carried through interstate, organizational (whether intergovernmental or nongovernmental), and/or interpersonal networks. Distinguishing between world polity and world society mechanisms of diffusion and influence can sharpen our understanding of global institutional processes.

Distinguishing polity from society can also help elucidate tensions within the global institutional system. Under what conditions do the statist and non-statist dimensions of this system reinforce one another? When—and why—do they work at cross-purposes? The complex relationship between state sovereignty and human rights is one prominent example of the tension between polity and society. Sovereignty is, of course, a property of national states and a Grundnorm of the world polity. Human rights principles, in contrast, are designed to protect individuals and vulnerable groups from the arbitrary exercise of state sovereignty. Civil society “agents”—transnational advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations, and even aggrieved individuals themselves—have deftly marshaled these principles to criticize and delegitimate abuses perpetrated by states. At the same time, in the absence of a single, overarching, integrated world state, human rights continue to depend on national states for their protection and implementation. Highlighting conceptual and substantive differences between the world polity and world society can enable researchers to gain traction in explaining these kinds of dialectical dynamics.

Just as important, the world polity/society distinction can nurture a more historically attuned rendition of global institutionalism. With very few exceptions, work in this tradition has focused overwhelmingly on the post-World War II period, when world-cultural processes in both the world polity and world society intensified dramatically and became increasingly interpenetrated. But a world polity—as well as a nascent world society—clearly antedated the mid-twentieth century.

10 The strong correlation between political globalization and IGO memberships makes sense, given that IGO memberships contribute approximately one-fourth of the variation in the KOF political index (Dreher 2006).
century. It is also true, however, that the global institutional system has become less resolutely
statist during the postwar era: global civil society has thickened and strengthened tremendously
over the past five or six decades (Boli and Thomas 1999; Schofer 2003). Delineating between the
more statist and societal dimensions of the world system can give us a better foundation for
understanding how it emerged and has transformed over time.

Here, then, is a case in which greater conceptual specificity has the potential to yield new
theoretical insights without imposing onerous methodological burdens. Indeed, existing
measures can be easily redeployed or freshly interpreted in ways that give force to the world
polity/world society distinction, thereby improving the ability of researchers to explicate the
diverse processes, mechanisms, and influences that operate within the global institutional system.
References


Figure 1.
Trends in the use of “world polity” and “world society” in scholarly work, 1980-2010
Table 1. Correlations among different dimensions of globalization

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