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Conflict in the world polity – neo-institutional perspectives

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Abstract

This article assesses the potential contribution of neo-institutional world polity theory to the study of global conflict dynamics. Prevalent conflict theories explain the emergence and resolution of conflicts by resorting to actors' mutually incompatible preferences and differential access to economic, social or symbolic sources of power. World polity theory challenges fundamental assumptions of such theories by conceptualizing action as highly scripted and actors as culturally constituted. By focusing on the cultural rules of modern actorhood, world polity theory accounts for the emergence of new motives of conflict no less than for the diffusion of 'rational' methods of conflict resolution. It concludes by arguing that theoretical explication and empirical analysis of the hitherto neglected conflictive dimensions of the world polity approach is a fruitful agenda for conflict research and neo-institutional scholars alike.

Keywords

conflict, conflict resolution, institutionalism, world polity

Introduction

In this article we assess the potential contribution of world polity theory to the study of global conflict dynamics. World polity theory, as formulated by John W. Meyer and his collaborators

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(see Meyer et al., 1997), has steadily gained influence in debates on globalization and transnationalism over the past two decades. Its proponents claim that increasing social interaction at a global scale has given rise to a dense web of shared meanings; that world culture basically consists of highly universalistic and rationalistic schemata of action from which actors – individuals, organizations and nation-states – derive their basic identities and interests; and that these actors exhibit increasing levels of structural ‘isomorphism’. The radical neo-institutionalism inherent to world polity theory has been criticized on various accounts. It is said to ignore the inequalities in access to material resources that characterize the world economy, to pay insufficient attention to power relations within the modern state system and to disrespect historical path-dependence which may explain varying modes of adopting global scripts in local contexts. As a consequence of these shortcomings, world polity theory is seen as being unable to explain the various forms of conflict that permeate contemporary world society (see Buttel, 2000; Hirsch, 1997). And indeed, only few substantive contributions of world polity theorists to the empirical study of causes, processes and outcomes of conflict come to mind (but see Bonacker, 2006; Bonacker and Weller, 2007). In this article, we argue that, contrary to standard criticism and common practice, the world polity approach has important conflict-theoretical implications which should receive greater attention in future research on global conflict dynamics.

Prevailing conflict theories explain conflict dynamics by focusing on actors and their choices. It is useful, here, to distinguish two problems of explanation: one concerning the motives for conflict and the other pertaining to the choice of methods, notably force, for conflict resolution (see Fearon, 1995). Motives for conflict are typically derived from constellations of actors with given, mutually incompatible preferences and differential access to economic, social or symbolic power. Likewise, methods for conflict resolution are typically related to actors’ preferences which guide their (rational) cost–benefit calculus. In International Relations (IR), such actor-oriented lines of argumentation are used in ‘realist’ explanations of global conflict dynamics, as a brief glance at the existing literature on international power struggles and war (Krasner, 1985) or on ethnic insurgencies and civil war (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Gurr and Harff, 1994) attests. Even ‘liberal institutionalists’ who concede that international organizations may constrain states’ interest-maximizing behaviour focus on opportunity costs and information effects (e.g. through signalling) and less on changes of preferences (see Boehmer et al., 2004).

World polity theory, along with ‘constructivism’ in IR (Checkel, 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001), challenges these prevalent assumptions by conceptualizing actors as culturally constituted and action as highly scripted (see notably Meyer and Jepperson, 2000). We argue that by highlighting the cultural rules of modern actorhood through which actors become authorized agents for various interests in the first place, world polity theory captures global factors that account for new motives for conflict and for international frameworks that constrain methods of conflict resolution. While we concede that world polity theory is in fact largely silent on the proximate causes of manifest conflicts and the choices of resolution methods, notably force, we claim that it does provide new insights not only into the regulation of conflict but also into latent potential for conflict that conventional conflict theories often ignore.

We begin, in a first section, with a brief review of the neo-institutional world polity approach in which we disentangle its major theoretical arguments. In a second section, we engage with the critics of world-polity theory, discuss some existing attempts at conflict-theoretical amendments to the theory’s core, and present our own major argument concerning the theory’s unexplored explanatory potential for global conflict studies. More specifically, we argue, in a third section, that the emergence of the modern world polity gives rise to many new types of conflict, as illustrated

by the conflict-ridden institutionalization of the nation-state as virtually exclusive political form of modern society and, more recently, of its institutional transformation in the wake of global human rights discourse. In a fourth section, we turn to major modes of conflict resolution that have become institutionalized within the world polity. Here, we depict the diffusion of new mechanisms of post-war reconciliation between nation-states and discuss models of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) that articulate rules of how individual and corporate actors should resolve recurrent economic conflicts. We conclude by arguing that despite some of its obvious shortcomings, the world polity theory has unexplored potential for explaining important dimensions of contemporary conflict dynamics and thus merits greater attention in conflict theoretical debates.

Radical neo-institutionalism and world polity theory

Institutional theories have gained prominence throughout the social sciences, ranging from new institutional economics and historical institutionalism in political science to neo-institutionalism in sociology that first emerged in organizational studies and has expanded to other fields since then (for reviews, see Brinton and Nee, 1998; Dobbin et al., 2007; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Schmidt, 2008; Schneiberg and Clemens, 2006; Scott, 1995). World polity theory builds on a very particular brand of these theories that may be called radical neo-institutionalism. In contrast to other new institutionalisms, notably in the rational choice literature where institutions are conceptualized as regulative or normative frameworks for purposive action, the institutionalism inherent to world polity theory emphasizes the cognitive-cultural rules in which actors and interactions are embedded (see Scott, 1995). When originally conceived, that school of thought partook in the critical reaction against utilitarian and functionalist theories in sociology. For instance in organizational studies, it was argued that the formal structure of organizations was less related to rational cost-benefit calculus or functional requirements, but rather to the legitimate scripts or models that organizations find in their institutional environment (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Focusing on the taken-for-granted rules that shape actors' basic identities and interests, the implicit micro-theory of neo-institutionalism views action neither as purely instrumental, nor exclusively norm-oriented, but rather as a dramaturgical display of adherence to institutionalized scripts – a perspective that resonates on the one hand with the phenomenological and symbolic-interactionist traditions in sociology and, on the other, with more recent developments in cognitive psychology where 'schemata', rather than 'motives', are regarded as major elements guiding human behaviour (see notably DiMaggio, 1997). Pursuing this perspective to its radical conclusion, the very actorhood of individual and collective 'actors' which conventional social theories assume as naturally given is problematized. In Meyer and Jepperson's words, the idea is explored 'that the modern "actor" is a historical and ongoing cultural construction and that the particulars of this construction should help to account for a number of specific features of actorhood' (2000: 101). Scrutinizing the cultural rules of modern actorhood that authorize 'agents' for various 'principals' – the self, other actors, other entities, or abstract principles – is the core of radical neo-institutionalism.

A radicalized institutionalism also underlies world polity theory. While the initial intuition that societal developments are subject to a global level of structuration is shared by other schools of thought, world polity theorists take a distinctive approach to global structuration. Contrary to Wallerstein's view that the world-system consists essentially of economically based centre-periphery relations (Wallerstein, 1989), they regard global structures mainly as a collectively shared set of cognitive-cultural models and scripts (Meyer, 1980: 117). This institutional structure provides definitions of authorized actors – nation-states, formal organizations and individuals –

and contains schemata for their rational action (cf. Meyer, 1980: 117). Most notably, world polity theorists highlight the cultural embeddedness of sovereign nation-states which the social sciences, falling victim to what is now called ‘methodological nationalism’ (Chernilo, 2007), long assumed to be quasi-naturally given. Not unlike ‘constructivists’ in IR who, against both ‘realists’ and ‘liberal institutionalists’, stress the analytical autonomy of culture, discourse and ideas in explaining states’ behaviour (Checkel, 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001; Philpott, 2001; Schmidt, 2008), world-polity theorists thus adopt a ‘macro-phenomenological’ perspective on nation-states (Meyer et al., 1997: 146–8).

Upon closer scrutiny, there are three rather distinctive arguments that have been developed by world polity theorists and that, for better clarity, we aim to disentangle here: institutional structuration, cultural content, and domestic or local impact of the world polity.¹ Although the historical order of their formulation has actually been the inverse, we present these arguments by their logical order, starting with *institutional structuration*. It is claimed that a world polity has successively crystallized since the nineteenth century, with the post-World War II period marking the strongest intensity of global institutionalization. To support this descriptive claim, qualitative as well as quantitative longitudinal analyses have been conducted of global institutions for environmental protection (Meyer et al., 1997), science and culture (Finnemore, 1993), women’s rights (Berkovitch, 1999), or human rights (Eliot, 2007; Koenig, 2008). These institutions are basically composed of three types of association. Among them are, above all, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), United Nations and UNESCO, the World Health Organizations (WHO), and so forth, which international relations scholars conventionally conceptualize as part of intergovernmental ‘regimes’ (Krasner, 1985). Going beyond regime theory, world polity theorists emphasize that these IGOs have authority to propagate prescriptive models of behaviour for nation-states and provide public stages on which the latter acquire legitimacy through these models’ ritualistic enactment (McNeely, 1995; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). Even more important is the second type of associations forming the world polity: international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). In quantitative terms, INGOs have grown almost exponentially in the second half of the twentieth century across various domains (Boli and Thomas, 1999; Drori et al., 2006). They play an important role in both the creation and diffusion of legitimate models of behaviour, especially when inter-linking local movements with transnational networks (Risse et al., 1999; Tarrow, 2005). Yet highest authority is, thirdly, assigned to putatively disinterested professions and sciences. As ‘epistemic communities’ with shared cognitive models (Haas, 1992), they are the major ‘significant others’ for modern actors – states, organizations and individuals – and are the driving forces behind the elaboration of world cultural models. The sciences enjoy particular ‘institutionalized cultural authority’ in the world polity. These epistemic communities contribute directly to the constitution of modern actors by disenchanting their natural (and social) environments and by formulating legitimate goals of action (Drori et al., 2003). A study on the structuring of the world environmental regime in the twentieth century, for instance, has found that scientific problem formulations and, later, INGO mobilization preceded the formal codification of environment protection in inter-state treaties (Meyer et al., 1997). In sum, IGOs, INGOs and the professions have forged an increasingly dense associational field whose pivotal structural characteristic is the absence of a global state – whence, presumably, the prevalence of cultural–cognitive or mimetic modes of diffusion within the world polity (Dobbin et al., 2007; Strang and Meyer, 1993).

A second major argument concerns the *cultural content* that characterizes world polity models. The baseline account is one of increasing rationalization. In a strictly phenomenological reading of

Max Weber, rationality is seen as socially constructed, rational action as its ritual enactment, and rationalization as the institutionalization of a cultural system of social agency composed of authorized actors, legitimate ends and elaborate ends-means schemata (Meyer et al., 1987). This cultural system that is institutionalized through the above-mentioned associational field can historically be traced back to transformations of Christianity in the early modern period in Europe when highly generalized and universal notions of divine authority were re-installed in mundane actors including states, organizations and the individual. It should be noted that world polity theorists are prudent to highlight the variability of modern polity models (Jepperson, 2002) and their mutability over time (Meyer, 1999). For instance, strong sovereign national states were the first pivotal actors charged with this-worldly realization of salvation, progress and development (Thomas and Meyer, 1984), whereas in the late twentieth century greater emphasis has been laid on the individual as autonomous actor, as evinced by proliferating discourses on human rights (Elliot, 2007; Frank and Meyer, 2002). Whatever these semantic changes, world polity theorists assume an elective affinity between global associational activity and the rationalization of abstract categories.

The third argument concerns the *impact* of world culture on domestic or local structures. In critical assessment of modernization theories whose account of convergence and divergence in societal development typically refers to functional adaptation or other endogenous processes, world polity theorists have claimed that convergences are to be causally attributed to the cultural models of rationality institutionalized at global level (Meyer et al., 1975). Two testable hypotheses can be derived from this argument. Longitudinally, increasing global structuration can be expected to lead to increasing isomorphism at domestic or local level. And in cross-sectional perspective, one can expect that the more actors become integrated into global institutional structures, the more they will adapt their formal structures to rationalized and universalistic schemata. Empirical evidence for both hypotheses has been amassed over the past two decades. Period effects on structural isomorphism in affirmations of national independence (Strang, 1990), children's rights in national constitutions (Boli-Bennett and Meyer, 1978) or women's suffrage rights (Ramirez et al., 1997) have lent support to the hypothesis of an increasingly pervasive world culture. And cross-sectional analyses of welfare spending (Strang and Chang, 1993), environmental policies (Frank et al., 2000a) or human rights treaty ratification and implementation (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005) have amply demonstrated that nation-states' greater orientation towards rationalistic and universalistic models correlates with their differential integration in IGO or INGO networks (Meyer et al., 1992).

In sum, all three lines of argument and the empirical research that has been conducted by world polity scholars lend strong support to the neo-institutionalist core assumption that structural and substantive characteristics of modern 'actors', including nation-states, are highly scripted and culturally embedded.

Conflict – a blind spot in world polity theory?

The world polity perspective has provoked harsh criticism just like the cultural-cognitive version of neo-institutionalism in organizational studies more generally (Hirsch, 1997; Perrow, 1985). To many, the world polity approach is nothing other than a slightly modified version of classical modernization theory, sharing notably its affirmative stance towards global developments that bear the imprint of American hegemony. Thus, the fact that empirical work in the world polity school focuses on reform policies in citizenship, education or environment is sometimes attributed to a general optimism that ignores economic inequality, conflict and war. But this, in our view, is a shallow reading of a diagnosis of 'Westernization' that in fact shares Weber's normative

agnosticism towards the global spread of rationality. Meyer's implicit normative stance – if there is one at all – is scepticism of modern reformism and the belief in this-worldly perfection that it entails.²

Leaving aside such ideological polemics, there is a more serious theoretical criticism arguing that contemporary conflict dynamics, including notably inter-state war, the escalation of ethnic conflicts, struggles in 'failed states' or the spread of terrorist violence cannot be captured by the world polity perspective. For instance, world-systems theorists would argue that power relations and economic dependencies are far more crucial factors in the global patterning of armed conflict than the diffusion of a rationalized world culture (Bergesen and Lizardo, 2004; Wallerstein, 1990). Proponents of the world polity theory might defensively react to this criticism by emphasizing the limited scope of their own theory's applicability. They could argue that the empirical focus on phenomena of structural isomorphism by no means forecloses that other phenomena, such as political or economic conflict, might fruitfully be studied from a macro- (or micro-) realist perspective.³ In fact, the world polity approach was originally formulated as a complement, not an alternative, to Wallerstein's more macro-realist world-systems theory (Meyer, 1980; Meyer et al., 1975). However, this defensive argument may quickly be shattered, as critics could claim that if conflictive forms of interaction do exist, these may in turn affect crucial institutional mechanisms within the world polity itself. It is therefore necessary openly to confront the putative conflict-theoretical deficit of world polity theory in greater detail.

We start with institutional structuration and cultural elaboration. Even if one accepts world polity theory's descriptive account of an intensifying global field of association that carries an increasingly rationalized cultural system, the question remains which factors actually explain its associative form and cultural content. In this vein, Beckfield (2003, 2008) has proposed a 'conflict-centred model of the world polity' that regards the world polity as inherently shaped by differential access to material and symbolic power. As stark inequalities in INGO participation over the past decades showed, rich societies in the core of the world economy and with a Western cultural background were maintaining a powerful position in the world polity, even though IGOs had become more open to dependent states in the periphery. Yet if the emergence of global institutions as well as their cultural content was driven by material and symbolic conflict, actors and their interests would have, or so it seems, to be reintroduced into the analytical framework. A similar point is stressed by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 895–8), who argue that different logics of action should be disentangled in the process of institutionalization. It was only at rather late stages of institutionalization that the dramaturgical logic of action, emphasized in radical institutionalism, became salient. During the early phases of norm emergence, by contrast, more instrumental or communicative logics of action prevailed, as institutional entrepreneurs pursued their material or symbolic interests and, through strategic interaction, arrived at institutional equilibrium.⁴ Both arguments seem to suggest that without closer analyses of actor-driven conflicts any explanation of the emergence of specific global institutional frameworks and their cultural models will remain unsatisfactory (see also Buttel, 2000).

Turning to the domestic and local impact of world polity precepts, similar proposals to modify the world polity approach have been articulated. To start with, neo-institutionalists have paid only scant attention to the precise social mechanisms that transmit global precepts to nation-states, organizations and individuals (see Campbell, 2004: 78; Dobbin et al., 2007). Beyond DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) classical ideal-types of isomorphic pressure – coercion, normative influence and mimesis – little work has been done on the actual processes of transmission. It has been proposed, therefore, that analysing major avenues of diffusion requires attention to agency and network structures (Finnemore, 1996; Torfason and Ingram, 2010) – a move which will immediately highlight

the potential for local resistance against, and conflict over, global prescriptions. Furthermore, if, as Beckfield argues, the world polity's social structure reflects material and symbolic conflicts, then its domestic impact should be expected to vary as a function of nation-states' world-economic position and civilizational background (Beckfield, 2003: 419). To be sure, Meyer does acknowledge that world polity precepts may be enacted only ritually at domestic and local levels, thus giving rise to a marked decoupling of formal and activity structure that in fact characterizes nation-states (Meyer et al., 1997), organizations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and individuals (Frank et al., 1995). But an explanation of differential degrees of de-coupling is still largely missing. Once more, constellations of local actors, their interests, their power differentials and the resulting conflict dynamics need to be considered since precisely these may explain the selective reception, partial implementation or context-specific interpretation of global precepts (Acharya, 2004: esp. p. 244; Chabot and Duyvendak, 2002). Empirical research on female genital mutilation policies (Boyle, 2002), discourses of indigenous rights (Larson and Aminzade, 2007) or on the implementation of human rights standards more generally (Cardenas, 2007; Risse et al., 1999; Shor, 2008) have revealed that actual practice cannot exclusively be explained by international normative pressures but requires attention to states' interests and domestic struggles that provide the structural context within which global precepts are applied.

What all these strands of criticism share is the assumption that the notorious absence of conflict in the world polity literature is due to inherent limitations of radical neo-institutionalism in capturing the micro-dynamics of strategic interaction under conditions of differential access to various resources of power. And indeed, in our view, critics are right in stressing that modelling the motives for conflict and the precise methods of conflict resolution requires a modification of some core hypotheses of the world polity perspective by incorporating concepts of actors, interests and resources as well as of social network structures (Hafner-Burton and Montgomery, 2006). However, it would be wrong to conclude that world polity theory had no conflict-analytical potential whatsoever. In fact, or so we argue, world polity theory allows capturing more fundamental causes for latent conflict in contemporary global society that other, actor-oriented conflict theories tend to neglect. Seen from the perspective of radical neo-institutionalism, even the actors purposively creating, transmitting or adapting institutions at a time t_1 must already have been constituted 'from above', as it were, at time t_0 . Furthermore, world polity theory highlights the institutional frameworks and cultural scripts that actors enact in resolving conflict, even where their decisions about the use of force in manifest conflict are guided by cost-benefit calculations and bargaining games. It is, in other words, the macro-phenomenological focus on actor constitution from which a number of original and innovative hypotheses on contemporary global conflict dynamics may be derived. In the subsequent sections, we elaborate some of these hypotheses by focusing on patterns of conflict emergence and conflict regulation, respectively.

Emergence of new conflict dynamics in the modern world polity

We start with conflict emergence in the world polity. Our main intention here is to push the conventional empirical research agenda of neo-institutional world polity theory beyond its typical scope of application and to shift attention to the motives for conflict created by global institutional processes. The obvious starting point is to spell out in greater detail the conflict-theoretical implications of the idea of actor constitution. We do so by focusing on theoretical accounts of conflict parties and conflict objects, illustrating their explanatory potential by citing preliminary evidence from the existing empirical literature.

Authorized actors as new conflict parties

One of the central tenets of neo-institutional world polity theory is that global associational processes have given rise to a highly rationalized and universalistic cultural system that assigns rational actorhood to nation-states, organizations and individuals. Increasing global institutionalization of rationalism and universalism may be hypothesized to be conducive to conflict in two ways. First, in the absence of a central authority, there is a multiplication of actors who are constituted and legitimated by the world polity and whose interests may potentially clash. As Meyer et al. (1997: 170) remark, '[t]he greater the number of entities, whether individuals, organizations, or nation-states, that pursue similar interests requiring similar resources, the more the entities will come into conflict with each other [...]'. Second, the world polity constitutes latent conflict parties to the extent that actors derive their isomorphic interests from universalistic scripts. Referring to Simmel's conception of conflict as a form of interaction, Boli and Thomas thus argue that:

[U]niversal cultural principles may themselves generate conflict. For example, uniform conceptions of human purposes imply that actors have identical goals and therefore are likely to compete for the same resources. [...] Dialectical processes of world-polity development thus generate struggles that would not arise in a less integrated world. (1999: 174)

The most obvious empirical field of conflict studies upon which such a radical institutional perspective may be brought to bear is the diffusion of the nation-state model during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From a well-established literature in historical sociology we know that the rise of the nation-state model was a story of violence and war (Tilly, 1990; Wimmer, 2002). The war-driven expansion of the modern state-system was legitimated by ideologies of nationhood that justified ethnic exclusion as well as individuals' sacrifice for the political collectivity. World polity theorists along with constructivists in international relations adopt a yet more radically institutionalist perspective. In their view the nation-state's rise to complete dominance as a form of political organization can be understood as a global diffusion process shaped by the institutionalization of highly rationalized models of sovereign statehood (Philpott, 2001; Strang, 1990).⁵ Arguably, then, increasing global institutionalization of the nation-state model, for instance through international law principles of sovereignty or national self-determination, should produce or at least perpetuate the modern pattern of inter-state and within-state conflict. Wimmer and Min (2006) demonstrate that occurrences of inter-state and civil war are related to the adoption of the nation-state model which necessarily clashed with older, imperial forms of political organization. And focusing on the intra-state violence that has accompanied state-formation, Hironaka (2005) has shown that the global diffusion, and international sanctioning, of new nation-states in the wake of decolonization has strongly contributed to the perpetuation of civil war within weak states.

Nation-states, however, are not the only actors who are attributed authorized agency in the modern world. The same cultural system of rational actorhood that led to the diffusion of nation-states also gave rise to social movements that potentially challenge the ideas of sovereignty and national homogeneity. Consider the emergence of a global human rights regime in the second half of the twentieth century in which state sovereignty was limited and the authority of individual actors strengthened (see Elliot, 2007; Risse et al., 1999). Characteristically, this human rights regime, with its inherent focus on non-discrimination and equality, has legitimized sub-national collective categories, such as ethnic, religious or linguistic groups or indigenous minorities whose rights have been prominently codified in recent international human rights law (see Boli and Elliot, 2008; Koenig,

2008; Kymlicka, 2007). These globally legitimized collective categories may be hypothesized to strengthen latent differences and facilitate their transformation into conflict parties.⁶ To provide some preliminary plausibility to this counter-intuitive hypothesis on the conflict-generative potential of global human rights, we cite recent research on the increase of ethnic (sometimes armed) conflict since 1945.

As secondary analyses of the *Minorities at Risk* dataset (Gurr, 1993; see also Gurr and Harff, 1994) have shown, this growth of ethnic conflicts cannot be explained entirely by endogenous factors like the cultural distance of ethnic groups to majority society, economic disadvantages or a general lack of development. They seem to some extent related to social embedding in world polity structures (Olzak, 2006; Tsutsui, 2004).⁷ While it is true that states' membership in IGOs has a negative impact on the political mobilization of ethnic groups and the development of violent conflict, involvement in INGO networks does have a positive impact, especially since the end of the Cold War (Olzak, 2006: 217). The world polity perspective offers a plausible explanation for this counter-intuitive observation. While IGO participation and the ritual enactment of their expectations strengthen state authority and thus prevent protest, involvement in INGO networks not only makes opportunity structures and new resources available for mobilization (see McAdam et al., 2001), but also circulates cultural repertoires of self-determination and ethnic rights that configure identities, interest and preferences of collective actors. The impact of this embedding of particularistic groups into the world polity has been confirmed by qualitative case studies as well. For instance, the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by Japan (1979) has encouraged the mobilization of the Korean minority as well as of the indigenous Ainu, whereas Burakumin thanks to a longer history of organized protests were less dependent on global legitimacy (see e.g. Tsutsui and Shin, 2008). Similarly, conflicts over recognition of religious migrants and linguistic minorities in Western and Eastern Europe may at least partly be seen in light of the new celebration of cultural difference and the concomitant decline in legitimacy of assimilationist policies (Koenig, 2005; Soysal, 1997). Paradoxically, then, the institutionalization of highly abstract, universalistic precepts may beget particularistic identities, conflict constellations and political struggles that undermine the authority of the nation-state.

Determining the causal weight of global as compared to local forces in explaining instances and degrees of inter-state or within-state conflict is of course a task beyond the confines of this article.⁸ What should be clear, though, is that the hypothesis according to which the world polity directly creates new conflict dynamics through the constitution of multiple authorized agents merits further empirical analysis.

Universalistic principles as new conflict objects

Another, more indirect mechanism through which the world polity creates new conflict is linked to the universalism that characterizes its cultural content. First, by providing universalistic scripts and models of action, the world polity invites highly ideological re-interpretations of local conflict, thereby potentially exacerbating them. Second, and more importantly, since universalistic principles are formulated in a highly pluralistic associational field without central authority, their elaboration and specification have a high propensity to result in institutional contradictions which, in turn, create latent conflicts by legitimating incompatible courses of action (on institutional contradictions more generally; see Boli, 2005: 396). To illustrate this mechanism in greater depth, we return to the global human rights regime and its conflict-conducive characteristics.

Human rights, defining constitutive rules of both state and individual actorhood, pose a prime example for the abstract and context-independent universalism that generally permeates world culture. The elaboration and specification of human rights since the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) has resulted in numerous conflicts over their proper interpretation. The controversy between the Western and the Soviet bloc over the relative legal importance assigned to civil and political liberties on the one hand and socio-economic rights on the other, is only the most obvious of such conflicts which eventually resulted in the adoption of competing conventions in 1966. More recently, a similar line of conflict has emerged between the North and the global South over the human right to development; after the adoption, in 1986, of a UN declaration on the right to development against the will of the United States, the conflict has been stalemated with any legally binding codification being resisted by the developed countries. Another example is provided by struggles over the interpretation of religious rights. Whereas the right to religious freedom became firmly entrenched in international human rights law in the post-war period, its interpretation as individual vs. collective rights has been shown to be highly contested among IGOs, INGOs and states (Koenig, 2008; Thomas, 2004).

To be sure, these conflicts over the interpretation of human rights are also related to conflicting interests of (globally authorized!) actors. Yet, the universalism of the human rights language lends itself to making claims potentially incompatible thus shaping new conflict lines. Clashes between claims to religious freedom or cultural identity and those to women's rights clearly demonstrate the conflictive potential of human rights language (Foblets and Renteln, 2009; Shachar, 2001). Yet, the most important conflict shaped by universalistic principles arises from contradictions between individual human rights and state sovereignty, which are both derived from an abstract principle of autonomy. As Boyle (2002) has aptly shown, Western feminists, in their struggle to promote reformist policies, were able to exploit the space created by these contradictions, as both concepts had simultaneously informed the international community's stance towards locally legitimate practices of female genital cutting.

To conclude, then, the world polity approach with its macro-phenomenological focus on actor constitution allows formulating hypotheses on the emergence of new collective parties to conflicts that may even turn into violent clashes. Furthermore, the inherent universalism of world culture as well as its internal contradictions seems to produce new objects of conflict, both between and within nation-states.

Taming conflict in the world polity

That the modern world polity, by virtue of the multiplicity of authorized rational actors it constitutes, generates new latent motives for conflict may appear as a paradoxical feature. In fact, the world polity's core cultural tenets, rooted, as they are, in a secularized version of Christian eschatology, are oriented towards progress, peace and the advent of a universal community of humankind. It may therefore be hypothesized that increasing institutional structuration of the modern world polity is accompanied not only by all sorts of conflict but also by intensifying attempts to regulate and even prevent them.

Reconsider the rise of the nation-state as dominant form of political organization which, as we already mentioned, was inherently related to dynamics of inter-state as well as civil war. Even the Westphalian international order with its principles of equal sovereignty of states contained rules that regulated military conduct in situations of war. In the nineteenth century, the nascent associational field of the world polity engaged in restraining state violence, as the well-documented initiatives by

the Red Cross and other INGOs demonstrate (see Finnemore, 1999). IGO activities, starting with the League of Nations in the inter-war period, have likewise aimed at regulating and taming inter-state conflict, resulting in the ban of military aggression in the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928) which was even more firmly institutionalized in the UN Charta (1945). The embeddedness of states within the world polity while producing various motives for conflict (see above) should also constrain the use of force as a method for conflict resolution. In the IR literature, this assumption is shared by liberal institutionalists who, following the Kantian vision of a cosmopolitan order, argue that IGO membership, along with democracy and international trade, should reduce states' propensity to engage in military conflict. Recent quantitative studies have shown that IGOs, to the extent that they systematically reduce informational uncertainty, do indeed discourage states from using force (Boehmer et al., 2004; see also Hafner-Burton and Montgomery, 2006).

Going beyond this debate on the use of force in dyadic conflict resolution, we argue in the following that world polity theory captures the global rise of alternative methods of conflict resolution. Given the world polity's associational structure, we hypothesize that global scripts for conflict resolution will take the form of triadic, judicial or quasi-judicial interaction in which two rational actors submit to a third, impartial agent to have their conflict adjudicated (see Shapiro and Sweet, 2002). Such triadic conflict interaction builds on and supports the authority of IGOs, INGOs and, above all, scientific professions who posture as disinterested carriers of global culture. To give some empirical illustration for this theoretical argument, we cite recent studies on policies of post-conflict reconciliation between nation-states and discuss the world-wide spread of alternative dispute resolution in individual and organizational conflicts. We particularly highlight the role of professional networks in diffusing methods of taming conflict.

Reconciling political conflict – the policies of commemoration

While wars have not disappeared in the modern world polity, new methods of political conflict resolution and prevention have emerged in the past decades that go beyond the above-mentioned attempts to regulate dyadic state conduct in wars. In parallel with the ban on military aggression and the rise of a human rights regime after 1945, new frames of responsibility and victim consciousness have been formulated through which authorized actors are held accountable for atrocities and violence (see Levy and Sznajder, 2010). It is well known that IGOs have to some extent engaged in post-conflict legal sanctioning, as evinced by the Nuremberg tribunals and, more recently, by the UN ad hoc tribunals in Den Haag and Arusha set up to investigate war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda, respectively. Since the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2002, an independent supranational body investigates and potentially punishes state-sponsored and individual war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

Less known is the crucial role played by professional networks in formulating and diffusing policies of taming violent conflict. One example is recent scripts of commemoration and reconciliation which have been formulated in order to reduce the conflict-propensity of former opponents in inter-state or civil wars under conditions of drastic regime changes. The global spread of such scripts is shown by recurrent debates over claims for reparation by indigenous populations in the United States, Canada or Australia as well as discussions over truth and reconciliation commissions in Chile or South Africa (Wilson, 2001). It has been argued that these new forms of commemorating conflict and reconciling former opponents are crucially shaped by the experience of the Holocaust and the (West) German post-war trauma (Levy and Sznajder, 2005; Torpey, 2006). And, indeed, the (hesitant) acceptance of collective moral responsibility, including obligations to

material compensation by the (West) German state has come to serve as a model for new modes of conflict resolution and prevention world-wide.

The process through which German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has become a model can be assessed by analysing history education in public school curricula (Cole, 2007; Dierkes, 2010; Schissler and Soysal, 2005). Ironically, attempts in (West) Germany to account for German atrocities committed during the 1930s and 1940s were initially not aimed at reconciliation at all. Instead, they were part and parcel of a paradigmatic change from grand national narratives to more social-scientific modes of depicting history in the early 1960s – in line with global trends toward more rationalized historiographies (Dierkes, 2005a; Frank et al., 2000b). As qualitative longitudinal analyses of (West) German history textbooks show, the shift in portrayals of National Socialism were informed by the de-emphasis of particular national histories that had already been initiated by professional groups at the global level before and were strengthened by developments associated with the student movement of 1968 (Dierkes, 2001). That they became domestically institutionalized is notably due to the dominant position of teachers within a highly decentralized, federalist regime of educational policy-making. In this policy-making regime, teachers as professionals legitimated their decisions on history education by reference to their authority as disinterested experts.

Outside of Germany, German history curricula were seen as a purposive – and successful – attempt at reconciliation that could serve as a general model for post-conflict situations (Dierkes, 2010). Of course, the spread of these new forms of reconciliation occasionally met local resistance, as in the Japanese case where global models of history education were largely blocked. Japanese resistance to global precepts is largely due to the dominant role of the Ministry of Culture in the institutional field of education policy which hindered profession-driven diffusion of global models. Portraying itself as a neutral administrator vis-à-vis the United States occupation, the Ministry has promoted an empiricist historiography under which curricula and textbooks were to be focused on the ‘facts’ of history, dates, people, places, thus adopting neither the grand national narratives of conservative politicians nor the global model of reconciliation (Dierkes, 2005b). While the largest teachers’ union established itself precisely as a counterforce to the Ministry, its opposition did not extend to advocacy for a paradigmatic re-orientation of history education (Seraphim, 2006: chapter 3).

Such single cases of resistance towards global models notwithstanding, history education has come to be seen as a rational tool in efforts at reconciliation between parties to a previous conflict modelled upon the putative German ‘policy’ of commemoration (Cole, 2007). It is indicative that the post-war Iraqi government was charged with providing an account of the Bath dictatorship in museums as well as with new editions of textbooks to provide new historical interpretations. The prominent role of history education as a post-conflict reconciliation measure demonstrates the power of collective constructions carried by global professional networks rather than by hegemonic states as ‘realistic’ explanations would assume. In sum, states’ approaches to war, genocide and persecution are increasingly shaped by global institutional models thus following highly ritualized forms of taming conflict.

Harmonizing economic interests – the diffusion of alternative dispute resolution

Political conflict between and within states is not the only form of conflict that is being regulated by the world polity. Conflicts of economic interests between states and between private corporations – which, as organizations, are also invested with robust actorhood – have become another

main area of institutional regulation. One example of the global taming of economic conflict between rational actors is the diffusion of formal mechanisms of 'alternative dispute resolution' (ADR). Initially, the diffusion of ADR was prompted by the introduction of inter-state dispute resolution mechanisms under the World Trade Organization (WTO), where it supplanted previous mechanisms that were non-binding and thus lacked credibility (Potter, 2003). Adding mechanisms of credibility has effectively altered economic conflict dynamics. While in the late 1980s some saw trade competition of Japan with North America and Europe as a minor clash of civilizations, few would characterize current trade imbalances with China in such a fashion which, among others, may be due to the new WTO mechanisms of taming trade disputes.

Beyond the WTO context, ADR mechanisms have also found widespread acceptance as a method to ostensibly reduce costs of private litigation by organizations or individuals in capitalist societies. The global institutional embedding of ADR diffusion has been analysed in case studies on Japanese reforms in legal training curricula (Saegusa, 2006; Saegusa and Dierkes, 2005). In the past, relatively low rates of litigation were seen as one of the particular strengths of the Japanese economy, being rooted in a tradition of informal, non-court-based forms of dispute resolution. When the Japanese economy became more integrated into the world economy during the stagnation of the 1990s, Japanese businesses faced conflicts that were not easily resolved through such informal network ties. When Japanese managers bemoaned lacking legal support, when Japanese lawyers began to see their quasi-monopoly threatened by Anglo-American 'mega-firms' and when politicians adopted global rights vocabulary thus limiting collective duties, legal reform became a viable option. The reform of legal education followed global expert knowledge as shown by the reorganization of undergraduate law departments into graduate law schools (Saegusa, 2009). That Japanese policy-makers adopted North American law schools in the first place, despite the century-long reliance on continental European civil law traditions, is in itself a strong indication of the global spread of conflict resolution models. While the informal mediation techniques practised in the Japanese corporate sector for years were not included in the curriculum, imported techniques from North America, such as 'conciliation', 'arbitration' and 'mediation', were quickly incorporated. The fact that such courses are largely taught by internationally well-networked faculties at the most prestigious universities (Saegusa and Dierkes, 2005) confirms to world polity theory's argument that isomorphism is typically induced through the adoption of global cultural-cognitive frames within professional networks.

The adoption of ADR in Japan illustrates the global institutionalization of normative and cognitive expectations regarding the resolution of economic conflicts. Disputes – according to such conflict resolution precepts – are not to be resolved through individual litigation, nor through informal practices which may be suspected to favour nepotism and corruption, but instead through alternative dispute resolution techniques that embody rationalistic principles of efficiency and transparency.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that, contrary to prevalent perceptions and predominant practice, world polity theory has the potential to make an important contribution to the analysis of global conflict dynamics. Being premised on a radical neo-institutionalism, it challenges fundamental assumptions of actor-oriented conflict-theoretical approaches by conceptualizing action as highly scripted and actors as culturally constituted. While several shortcomings of world polity theory have to be conceded, we have maintained that bringing to light the cultural rules of modern

actorhood through which actors – nation-states, organizations, individuals – become authorized agents, this theory may explain latent motives for conflict as illustrated by the conflict-generative potential of globally institutionalized principles of state sovereignty and human rights. We have furthermore argued that the world polity's associational structure and cultural content also account for the emergence of new methods of conflict resolution, as exemplified not only by the role of IGOs in reducing states' propensity to use force in dyadic conflict resolution but also by the global spread of triadic forms of conflict resolution such as reconciliation policies, alternative dispute resolution and the like.

Of course, we acknowledge the limitations of our argument. First, given our concentration on theory development we have not provided conclusive, but merely suggestive, evidence of the various conflict-theoretical hypotheses we have derived from the world polity approach. Nor have we tested these hypotheses against existing conflict theories in sociology and IR. Second, we are fully aware that beyond those latent conflicts highlighted by world polity theory there may be other important latent constellations that result from structural inequalities or regional fragmentation of the world polity, as suggested by research on fundamentalism, terrorism and other protest movements against a West-centred world culture (see Beckfield, 2008; Lechner and Boli, 2005: 191–214). Third, the most serious limitation of our argument is that the macro-phenomenological emphasis on long-term processes of actor constitution which account for new motives of conflict and methods for conflict resolution needs to be better articulated with micro-realist modes of analysis that focus on the precise unfolding of manifest conflicts. In fact, neo-institutionalist explanations for latent conflict do not preclude *per se* that manifest conflict and its resolution could fruitfully be explained in terms of rational choice or game theory (see Fearon, 1995). Clarifying the scope conditions of both explanations of conflict would be an important step in integrating theoretical paradigms that model causal processes at different levels of analysis (see Collins and Rössel, 2002; Meyer and Jepperson, forthcoming).

Despite these limitations, we hope to have shown that neo-institutional approaches may generate a number of fruitful conflict-theoretical hypotheses that have hitherto been left largely unexplored by proponents of that school of thought. As the conventional research agenda of the world polity approach shows some signs of exhaustion, scholars working in this tradition should explicate the conflictive dimensions of global institutional process in greater detail and conduct empirical research on selected types of conflict including war, ethnic strife, genocide or terrorist attacks as well as on the effects of global scripts of conflict prevention. Such a research agenda might have the advantage of bringing world polity theory into fruitful dialogue – and competition – with more established modes of analysis in peace and conflict studies.

Notes

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1. For methodological implications, see notably Evan Schofer's and Elizabeth H. McEaney's overview in Drori et al. (2003: 43–74).

2. Meyer (2003) traces this ambivalence towards rationalized culture to his Mennonite background. At various points, he also acknowledges resonance with the work of Jacques Ellul, Michel Foucault and Niklas Luhmann (see Meyer and Jepperson, 2000: 102).
3. Or, indeed, from micro-phenomenological perspectives (see Knorr Cetina, 2005).
4. A parallel argument has been advanced by DiMaggio within the field of organizational sociology, where he called for more agentic accounts of the structuration of organizational fields (in Powell and DiMaggio, 1991: 267–92).
5. In recent work, Wimmer and Feinstein (2010) find no clear evidence of global, but only of imperial and regional, diffusion effects in the world-wide spread of the nation-state. However, their analysis, like Strang's (1990), is limited by lacking historical data for territories' embeddedness in the world polity.
6. Institutional conditions, including cultural–cognitive frames, are currently seen as important factors for turning differences into stable ethnic groups (see Brubaker et al., 2004; Wimmer, 2008). We follow these insights highlighting the globally institutionalized frames.
7. For a similar account on the mobilization of indigenous peoples, see Niezen (2003).
8. For instance, Wimmer et al. (2009) have demonstrated that ethnic exclusion, elite segmentation and incohesion in nation-states go a long way in explaining rebellions, infighting and secessionist movements.

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Author Biographies

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