Symbols and world politics
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Towards a Long-Term Perspective on Historical Trends

and Contemporary Challenges[1]

'A flag is only a bit of cloth; nevertheless, a soldier will die to save it' (Emile Durkheim)

Durkheim's striking comment about the emotional power of the flag remains highly relevant in the contemporary era. The observation provides a reminder of the relative weakness of global symbols that command equivalent loyalty or inspire comparable acts of personal sacrifice. Whether the balance of power between national and global symbols will change in future decades and centuries – whether large sections of humanity will come to identify strongly with symbols that represent their common humanity - is an important question for reflections of the prospects for higher levels of international cooperation. For, as Durkheim maintained, 'social life in all its aspects and in every period of its history [has been] made possible only by a vast symbolism' (Durkheim 1947 [1915]: 231).

The example of flag symbolism illustrated his thesis that the 'social sentiments' that underpin human groups are 'precarious' unless they are underpinned by shared symbols (Durkheim 1947 [1915]: 231). Developing the point, Durkheim observed that support for 'collective ideals' and attachments to specific communities have depended on how far shared values and principles have been 'concretely realised in objects that can be seen by all,

understood by all and represented to all minds' – in objects such as 'animate or inanimate objects', 'formulae, whether written or spoken', sacred places, commemorations of significant historical events, and revered figureheads including prophets, priests and political leaders (Durkheim 1965: 94; Lukes 1973: 424). The inventory of influential symbols demonstrated that social groups have ascribed symbolic significance to an almost limitless range of phenomena (Durkheim 1965: 87). In so doing, they have engaged in the process of symbolisation which invests particular phenomena with no intrinsic meaning with societal significance. (Here it is worth noting that the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of a symbol includes material objects that represent 'something immaterial or abstract' such as a 'being, idea, quality, or condition' that has 'sacred' importance). Durkheim (1965: 94) stated that social groups often have no memory of how the particular was converted into the abstract. They often presume that there is a 'natural affinity' between collective social ideas and important symbols although, in reality, various 'contingent characteristics' have shaped the selection of 'chosen' symbols (Durkheim, ibid). A resulting challenge for the sociology of symbols was to understand how specific phenomena with no obvious social meaning acquired symbolic value for human groups.

Leading critics have argued that Durkheim and several followers largely neglected the ways in which ruling groups have used collective symbols to defuse internal tensions and to secure political hegemony (Lukes 1977: ch. 3). The contention is that power relations and social conflicts have shaped symbol formation across human history. It is indeed the case that, over the millennia, governing elites have employed controls over the symbolism of public ceremonies and rituals, monumental architecture and historical myths and narratives to legitimate their rule. But traditional symbols have often been fiercely contested as part of political contests between dominant and subordinate strata, and they have often been replaced by a new symbolism that reflected changing distributions of power and social sensibilities.

Recent protests in the United States against police brutality by sitting or kneeling before the flag in football stadiums (and President Trump's condemnation of the athletes involved) illustrate such struggles (https://www.theguardian.com › US News › Donald Trump). Disputes over statue symbolism, particularly with respect to monuments honouring the Confederate military commander, Colonel Robert Lee, belong to the same social trend (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-rally-protest-statue.html). A notable parallel in the United Kingdom was the debate that surrounded the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign to remove the memorial to Cecil Rhodes at the entrance to Oriel College, Oxford. Such contests over the symbolism of statues are not confined to the West as the 'Gandhi must fall' campaign at the University of Ghana in Accra has demonstrated (https://www.washingtonpost.com/.../in-ghana-calls-to-tear-down-a-statue-of-racist-gandh).

Those disputes in the United States and United Kingdom have been central to protests by traditional outsiders against public symbols which are inextricably linked with the history of racism and imperialism and with the continuing domination of the most powerful social strata. The controversies reveal how 'prestige symbols' for established strata are, or can become, 'stigma symbols' from the standpoint of outsider groups (Goffman 1990). Recent tensions over core symbols raise fascinating normative questions about what contemporary societies should commemorate, dethrone, or remove from public view in the light of shifting power balances and heightened sensitivities to the political role of traditional symbols. They invite detailed sociological inquiries into the relationship between the rise and fall of core symbols and the politics of national identity. Important questions arise about the prospects for higher levels of international cooperation not least given the contemporary national-populist revolt and the continuing potency of traditional national symbols. Durkheim's observation that social cooperation always depends upon a 'vast symbolism' strongly suggests that more extensive forms of international collaboration will not develop without radical innovations in

the symbolic sphere that have emotional significance for large sections of the world's population (Theiler 1995). His emphasis on the emotional power of flag symbolism for many groups is a reminder of the immense difficulties in constructing symbols that change human loyalties in the light of normative images of a future world community.

Symbols may have been central to the history of human groups, but for too long they have been marginal to mainstream social-scientific explanation (Olesen 2015). (There is no space here to consider the contributions of Cassirer, Eliade and Ricoeur). The dominant materialist modes of investigation in International Relations and Political Science have been criticised in recent writings for neglecting the symbolic sphere (Bartelson 2014). Scholarly initiatives in critical security studies have argued that the state's capacity to use the instruments of coercion (material power) is heavily dependent on 'symbolic power' - on the ability to mobilise public support through the emotive employment of core political symbols (Williams 2007; Bourdieu 1989, 1991; also Adler-Nissen 2013). Critiques of materialist accounts of state behaviour underpin studies of symbolism in the European Union as well as contributions to international political economy (Hedetoft 1998; Theiler 1995; Manners 2011; Eagleton-Pierce 2012: 7ff, chs. 2-3). Growing interest in symbolic domains is evident in the analysis of the vital role of 'symbols of defeat' in nationalist myths and narratives (Mock 2012). Turning to contemporary political science, scholarly investigations of symbols which were pioneered by Edelman (1964) have increased in recent years. Studies of Soviet and post-Soviet symbolic orders have analysed the vulnerability of regimes that proved incapable of incorporating powerful symbols in compelling 'meta-narratives' (Gill 2011, 2012). Other investigations have examined the symbolic dimensions of 'ethnic conflicts' (Kaufman 2001) and the role of 'disciplinary-symbolic power' in Syrian politics (Wedeen 2015: 145ff). Developments in Political Science with particular relevance for students of international relations include a pioneering investigation of 'global injustice symbols' which demonstrates

how contemporary social movements have encroached on the state's traditional powers in the symbolic domain (Olesen 2015). Of special interest for the investigation of global symbols are explorations of the relationship between the symbolism of the Holocaust and the rise of cosmopolitan conceptions of moral and political responsibility that draw extensively on Durkheim's writings (see p. 22 below).

The following discussion endeavours to extend those inquiries by offering preliminary comments on the analysis of political symbols in long-term perspective. The aim is to lay the foundations for more synoptic investigations that take the long historical view on symbols and world politics. The approach supports earlier attempts to transcend what has been described as 'presentism' in International Relations (Buzan and Little 2000: 18-19) or lamented as the 'retreat into the present' in Sociology (Elias 2009). In Eliasian or process sociology, which shapes much of the argument of this paper, understanding the formation and development of human societies from the earliest period is one of the main objectives of social-scientific inquiry. From that standpoint, every historical era has equal importance for understanding the main directions of social and political change and recurring challenges in the 'human level of the universe' (Elias in de Swaan and van den Bos 1975). Those comments pave the way for theoretically-informed, long-range empirical analyses of core symbols that have contributed to the functioning of state-organised societies and, in addition, of powerful symbols that have been used to promote more universal solidarities and attachments. The development of key themes and concepts is necessary in order to give shape and direction to future large-scale empirical investigations of symbols and world politics.

Three typologies are central to delineating a long-term perspective on symbols and world politics. The initial classificatory scheme highlights, first, the overall trend in human history towards *larger territorial concentrations of power* with the capacity to unleash more devastating forms of harm over greater areas; second, elite efforts to promote *patterns of*

emotional identification or the sense of 'we-feeling' and *interlinked restraints on force* amongst, at the very least, members of the governing strata; and, third, diverse moral perspectives on whether, or how far, *valued intra-restraints on violence can be observed or must be relaxed in inter-societal conflicts*.

The second typology consists of a tri-partite classification of the primary function of political symbols that contributes to understanding the development of human groups. First, *binding symbols* have been essential to integrating ruling elites, if not whole populations, in a succession of scaled-up, increasingly-destructive forms of social and political organisation. Public ceremonies and commemorations, monumental architecture and revered leaders illustrate the importance of symbols for promoting feelings of solidarity in larger-scale political units. Second, analytically distinguishable are '*releaser symbols*' which have been important in defending departures from intra-societal taboos against killing in clashes with external adversaries (Elias 2013: 172). Representations of 'savagery' in the age of Western colonisation are an example of a recurring social need to legitimate violations of intra-group restraints on violence in such conflicts. Third, different again are *restraining symbols* which have underpinned not only controls on force within groups but also constraints on violence in the relations between peoples. Familiar illustrations include European conceptions of civilization which were employed to defend the humanitarian laws of war from around the middle of the nineteenth century (Linklater 2016: chs. 5 and 9). It is evident that, throughout human history, such restraining symbols have invariably lagged behind binding and releasing symbols within scaled-up political associations with destructive capabilities that surpassed those of their predecessors. It is an open question whether that will change substantially in the foreseeable future.

Symbols have rarely been merely societal, confined to relations between members of the same social group. 'Axial Age' religions revolved around a rich symbolism that was

designed to bind the members of different communities and collectivities together in new faith communities. In revolutionary France and Russia, radical political movements harnessed international as well as national symbols in the attempt to overthrow the traditional domestic and international order. Moreover, in the contemporary society of states, cosmopolitan symbols such as the Red Cross or Red Crescent co-exist with admittedly more powerful national symbolisms. The final taxonomy identifies three social-scientific objectives in the light of the symbolic dimensions of recurrent images of wider human solidarities. The first is the analysis of the *social conditions* under which breakthroughs to universal symbols occurred in earlier eras; the second is the investigation of the *agency of oppositional movements* in using symbols to promote new visions of community; the third is the inquiry into how specific *counter-hegemonic symbols* acquired strong emotional resonance for interstitial groups that were committed to transforming existing social and political relations.

The remainder of the discussion employs those taxonomies to prepare the groundwork for a long-term perspective on symbols in world politics. The first section discusses the Eliasian concept of 'symbol emancipation', the *sine qua non* for the rise of distinctively human societies with uniquely-destructive potentials. Section two considers one of the fundamental forces in human history that symbol emancipation and successive waves of symbol innovation made possible, namely the formation of political units of 'greater magnitude'. Part three highlights the symbolic dimensions of standards of restraint in international societies and stresses the role of cosmopolitan symbols which have been linked with efforts to control violence in the modern society of states. The paper concludes by discussing specific research directions for future historical-sociological investigations into the rise of universal symbols in different regions and eras.

Symbol Emancipation

Reflecting on the analysis of very long-term patterns of change in the history of human societies, Elias (2007: 20) stressed that there are no 'absolute beginnings' that represent a major break with the past or that announce the dawn of wholly new trajectories of development. His analysis of the emergence of distinctively human forms of social organisation highlighted the central importance of the process of symbol emancipation for the major transformations in the balance of power between different human and non-human and also between human groups that have shaped life on the planet (Elias 2011; also Elias 2007, 2007a). Crucial was the process in which language or linguistic symbols took over from 'gesture symbols' as the chief means by which early humans orientated themselves to the world and communicated with each other about, for example, species that were hunted in the competition for survival (Elias 2007: 119). The relationship between symbol emancipation, shared language and unprecedented potentials for organisational complexity prepared the way for human 'supremacy' over other life forms (Elias 2007: 25).

The importance of symbolism in the development of human societies was linked with the specific process in which genetic restraints on aggressive and violent animal behaviour were steadily weakened – gradually 'disabled' if not entirely 'switched off' (Elias 2011: ch. 1; Gräslund 2005: 161). With the decline of genetic constraints in emergent human groups, cultural constraints assumed increasing significance for regulating behaviour. The attendant 'flexibility' of behaviour introduced unparalleled problems as humans acquired the power to harm each other in diverse and ingenious ways (Gellner 1991: ch. 1; Linklater 2011: ch. 1). The resulting challenge was how to construct social rules which restrained what nature could no longer prevent – to invent what have been described as harm conventions which define what is permitted and forbidden within social groups and in relations with other peoples (Linklater 2011: ch. 1). The declining influence of genetic restraints on behaviour was linked with the emergence of harm conventions and associated collective symbols that had the

binding, restraining and releasing functions noted earlier. Symbolic innovations were integral to the process in which 'cultural development' overtook 'biological evolution' as the primary determinant of human societies – put differently, in which early groups underwent radical cultural transformations without major changes in the biological constitution of the species (Elias 2011: ch. 1).

Elias argued that early human societies dealt with the unprecedented problems associated with increasing behavioural possibilities 'as if they could never rely on regulations and compulsions they themselves impose[d] on one another, and always need[ed] a non-human power to alleviate the threats to their fragile existence' even though the powers imputed to 'extra-human authorities' were in effect nothing other than 'human regulations and compulsions in disguise' (Elias 2009a: 61). In those groups, social taboos were usually enforced by the collective fear of spiritual forces. Associated symbols were central to the web of social constraints. That approach resonates with anthropological studies of how early societies responded to the challenge of controlling the greater flexibility of behaviour by converting 'arbitrary' practices (mere custom) into social rules and prohibitions that seemed 'natural' and 'necessary' to those involved (Rappaport 1971: 32ff; Durkheim 1947 [1915]: 206ff). Core distinctions between the sacred and the profane, and the invention of notions of sacrilege to condemn transgressive actions, were harnessed to enforce or ensure 'obligatory conformity' (Lévy-Bruhl 1928: 69) with central 'regulatory mechanisms' (Durkheim (1947 [1915]: 206ff). Core symbols with the three social functions noted earlier became hard to contest, and social arrangements became difficult to change or challenge as a result of the alienation of human powers to spiritual or sacred forces (Wouters 2017). According to anthropological studies which have been heavily indebted to Durkheim's writings, common symbols became central elements of 'societal control' precisely because they helped to convert 'external moral restraints' into internal constraints and accompanying 'feelings'

which ensured that individuals largely internalised the 'moral imperatives' of their community (Munn 1973: 583-4).

Greater flexibility of conduct within groups was accompanied by the extraordinary diversification of behaviour codes and the increased differentiation of human societies. In tandem with changes in the balance of power between genetic and cultural influences, 'group-specific' restraints on human conduct steadily replaced the 'species-specific' constraints that dominated non-human behaviour (Elias 2011: ch. 1). Shared moral beliefs were frequently based on the conviction that those who violated group norms were incontrovertibly 'less than human' (Rappaport 1971: 34ff). Such standpoints were often intertwined with deeply-held beliefs that other peoples with radically different social practices and moral codes constituted inferior forms of life. Symbol emancipation was accompanied by forms of cultural differentiation, frequent patterns of social stigmatisation and levels of mutual incomprehension (as symbolised by the idea of the Tower of Babel) that have frustrated inter-societal cooperation to control violent capabilities ever since.

The problem of controlling the power to harm in the relations between peoples was compounded by a unique product of the capacity for symbolisation, namely the storage and augmentation of cultural information that could be transmitted across the generations (Geertz 1975: ch. 5). Through their immersion in a specific 'symbol-world', the individual members of each new generation did not only learn how to orientate themselves to the social world; they also learned how to increase collective social power by building on the accumulated 'experiences and reflections of a long line of ancestors' (Elias 2009b: 139). The development of complex forms of time-measurement in early societies is one example of how human groups acquired the capacity to coordinate behaviour over larger areas and longer time-spans with clear advantages in struggles for security and survival (Elias 2007a; McNeill 1995). As previously noted, such outcomes of symbolic emancipation were critical in changing the

balance of power between species. They also gave some societies decisive advantages in inter-group conflicts.

Clear gains accrued to societies in which an ensemble of shared symbols underpinned the level of emotional identification between members as well as high levels of voluntary compliance with moral imperatives and the willingness to risk life for the community. Groups that lacked the level of social integration that such symbols promoted had lower prospects of surviving conflicts with adversaries. They were at the mercy of societies with higher levels of solidarity that could absorb defeated armies and conquered peoples in scaled-up forms of social and political organisation. New challenges always arose for societies that incorporated subject groups by force in imperial arrangements. A recurring question was whether, or how far, rule over diverse groups scattered across vast areas could be secured not just by the threat or use of force but by astute symbolic innovations that helped to unite the victors and the vanquished in wider solidarities. In the ancient world, the Roman imperial project was especially successful in creating a complex symbolic landscape that integrated newly-conquered groups in imperial political structures and checked centrifugal tendencies that are built into all empires and contribute to their eventual destruction or decline (Mann 1986: chs. 8-9; Linklater 2016: ch 2). The Roman imperial experiment is one indicator of the central importance of symbol inventiveness in the overall historical trend towards larger-scale political units with greater destructive capabilities.

The long-term trend towards states of greater magnitude

As a result of symbol emancipation early human groups acquired the unique capacity to forge more expansive and more populous social arrangements. The key contrast is with non-human species which are genetically constrained to live in groups with an unchangeable upper limit. The plasticity of symbols facilitated revolutionary transitions from hunting-gathering groups

which were the dominant form of social organisation for hundreds of thousands of years to the first Mesopotamian urban settlements and, within about two millennia, to the first Ancient Near Eastern empires. Reflecting on such transformations, one analysis of state-formation has observed that 'a *decrease* in the number of autonomous political units and an *increase* in their size' has been the dominant 'principle of cultural development' since the rise of the Neolithic era (Carneiro 1978: 206, italics in original). One consequence of the overall trend towards the increased 'magnitude of human survival units' is the virtual elimination or marginalisation of hunting and gathering societies by powerful state-organised societies. In the broad direction of historical change, societies of organisational complexity and scale emerged with the ability to inflict harm over larger areas without proportionate increases in effective inter-societal constraints on violent capabilities. Powerful binding, restraining and releasing social symbols contributed to the survival of such units but invariably blocked the emergence of powerful constraining international symbols.

Elias's perspective on symbol emancipation laid the foundations for explorations of symbol innovation and diversification in the development of relations within and between larger territorial concentrations of power. He observed that the 'growth in magnitude' of human societies 'conferred long-term advantages in…elimination struggles' to those groups that were 'more or less pacified internally' (Elias 2008: 4). He recognised that symbol inventiveness was a critical feature of that process, but it has fallen to others to develop the theme that an 'immense effort at symbolisation' that was often centred on reworking familiar kinship metaphors was critical in top-down initiatives to unite the members of increasingly-stratified, large-scale, state-organised societies (de Swaan 1995: 31). Bourdieu, for example argued, that all the 'great state bureaucracies' used the symbolics of power in the attempt to construct enduring social orders (Bourdieu 1990: 80). Inspired by his writings, other scholars who have who elaborated the idea of the state as a 'symbolic accomplishment' have shown

how elite controls of 'symbolic capital' could determine the 'constitution of the given' so that compliance with ruling practices became 'second nature' (Loveman 2005; Bourdieu 1990: 63; Bourdieu 1989: 21). Conformity with social norms was achieved not only by dramatic state demonstrations of brute force but also by the subtle 'power of suggestion' with the result that many 'apparently insignificant' symbolic features of 'everyday life' also promoted 'social integration' (Bourdieu 1991: 51-2, 75, 166; Bourdieu 1990: 18, 55; see Smith 2009 and Billig 2013: ch. 3 on how many political symbols are most effective when barely noticed, as in the case of silent, subliminal operation of symbols such as national flags). As a result of the state's effective symbolic power, subjects or citizens might resent particular exercises of state power but stop sort of questioning its ultimate legitimacy (Bourdieu 1992: ch. 8).

Analyses of social 'struggles over the power to produce and to impose the legitimate vision of the world' (Bourdieu 1989: 20) are nuanced in the Eliasian or process-sociological examination of endeavours to monopolise or otherwise control the 'means of orientation' in society – that is, the shared understandings about conduct which are routinely internalised and freely observed by the population at large. A central claim is that 'groups of people who are able to monopolise the guardianship, transmission, and development of a society's means of orientation hold in their hands very considerable power chances, especially if the monopoly is centrally organised' (Elias 2009b: 135). Especially through actual or virtual monopoly powers in the symbolic sphere, religious and/or political establishments have ensured that the lower strata depended on them for attaining fundamental goals, material and spiritual (Elias 2009b: 138). The thesis is well illustrated by the symbolics of power in the dominant mode of government for around five millennia, namely sacred kingship where rulers portrayed themselves as the indispensable intermediaries between society and the gods and as the sole bastions against chaos or catastrophe. Elite investments in constructing sacred narratives reveal that struggles to control the symbolic realm have often been as important as

initiatives to monopolise control of the instruments of violence and the methods of taxation for the whole process of state-formation (Loveman 2005).

Sceptics may wonder whether monopolistic processes with respect to symbolism are as central to state-formation as parallel developments regarding controls over the instruments of violence and the power of taxation. Doubts should be dispelled by the evidence that the state's ability to use force depends on the extent of its symbolic power and inventiveness (Williams 2007). But further investigations are needed to explore the interdependencies between those monopolies in different social arrangements and to examine how far decline in one domain leads ineluctably to the erosion of powers in the other two spheres. What is indisputable is that across the millennia, states have engaged in 'symbolic cultivation' in order to acquire and preserve monopolies in the other realms (Smith 2009: 48-9). Many court societies in different eras and regions regarded the 'symbols of power' as 'prestige-fetishes' that outweighed 'financial considerations' (Elias 2006: 145). They understood all too well how controls over 'prestige symbols' could help to legitimate their rule in complex, stratified societies while inspiring feelings of admiration amongst neighbouring societies.

From the first chiefdoms and early states through to the more recent later phases of state-formation, rulers employed public symbols in support of the claim to be 'beings of more or less superhuman stature'; such symbols were designed as 'focal points for the emotional bonding of persons' in scaled-up associations (Elias 2013: 159-60). Recurring narratives of sacred or divine kingship emphasised the ruler's indispensable role in, and ultimate responsibility for, harmonising 'earthly existence' with the mysterious 'cosmic order' that was inaccessible to mere subjects (Earle 1997: 149ff). Studies of Polynesian chiefdoms which have emphasised the centrality of symbolism in such associations that did not – with the apparent exception of Hawai'i – cross the threshold to full statehood are worth noting in this context (Kirch 2000: ch. 8). Those systems of government have been described as

'heterarchical' because ruling elites were unable to integrate political, economic and symbolic powers in state power monopolies (Earle 1997: 210-11). Scholars have stressed that most were incapable of monopolising control of the instruments of force and were in danger of disintegration or collapse whenever warrior castes decided to turn their weapons against them. But competence and ingenuity in the symbolic domain often underpinned later elite advances in centralising power capabilities that had been distributed between diverse groups in state-less societies.

A distinguishing feature of complex state-organised societies is the fusion of controls that were disaggregated in heterarchical chiefdoms. The observation is central to studies of the role of imperial conquest in the emergence of scaled-up social and political associations in the Ancient Near East. Illustrative of broader trends, Sargon of Akkad who conquered the Sumerian city-states circa 3500BC did not rely simply on violence but also on the symbolics of power to secure dominance (Mann 1986: ch. 5). Imperial rule was preserved by astutely incorporating the gods of the defeated cities in a new religious pantheon underpinned by the 'potent myth that turned [them] into subordinate members of a supernatural universe parallel to and controlling its territorial reflection, the empire' (Armstrong 1982: 132). The utility of such symbolic innovations was not lost on governing elites in later eras. Medieval and early modern European rulers with 'universal pretensions' skilfully turned to imperial insignias' that were derived from 'Babylonian cosmic symbols' to promote their ends (Armstrong 1982: 132). In many periods and regions, the attribution of sacred qualities to the emperor who was portrayed as the 'terrestrial reflection' of the divine order was critical for advances in fusing state powers (Armstrong 1982: 165). Success in organising scaled-up social and political associations therefore depended on the actual or virtual monopolisation of coercive power, on controls over the means of extracting wealth from subordinate strata, and on the command of political symbols that were fundamental to the 'high culture' of the leading social strata - to

levels of emotional identification at the elite level that were invariably interwoven with confidence in their innate superiority over groups (Crone 1989: 64ff). Lower strata were highly susceptible to 'manipulation' by governing elites that guarded 'myths and symbols common to the society as a whole' (Armstrong 1982: 6). Competitors had limited 'power chances' if they could not mobilise similar cultural resources in counter-hegemonic challenges to the dominant groups. Circumstances rarely changed unless the distribution of power became less uneven (Elias 2010).

Detailed studies of the collapse of complex societies have shown that the pathway to political units of greater magnitude has rarely been smooth (Tainter 1998). Centrifugal forces were hard to contain whenever ruling elites relied on local strongmen or landed nobilities to maintain power and where they lived with the permanent danger that powerful internal challengers would arise, sooner or later. Such power dependencies often blocked top-down initiatives to construct a unifying ensemble of core political symbols (which is not to imply, as noted earlier, that the monopolisation of the instruments of force was essential before similar developments in the symbolic sphere could occur). Even so, the overall trend towards territorial monopolies of power of 'greater magnitude' with significant controls over the symbolic sphere has been the dominant tendency in the history of human societies for over five millennia. At its heart, as previously discussed, was sacred kingship which prevailed in the ancient Near East and Egypt, in China with the rise of the Shang Dynasty, in Meso-America and in South America, in the Islamic world, in sub-Saharan Africa, and in early modern Europe (Oakley 2006: prologue, ch. 2). Ever present were political symbols such as the royal crown and associated regalia that portrayed the ruler as the 'sun god' or 'bearer of light' with sole responsibility for ensuring that the social order was aligned with cosmic forces (Oakley 2006: 13-14, ch. 2). Symbolic repertoires that encouraged the reverence of subordinate groups and astonished visiting dignitaries were critical for the formation and

survival of state power monopolies in large-scale political units. The desire to impress foreign dignitaries through controls over 'prestige symbols' – and inter-elite competition in this sphere – is evidence of how complex societies have been embedded in longer webs of interdependence with their own symbolic features to which the discussion now turns.

The Symbolic Dimensions of International Societies

Any long-term perspective on symbols must emphasise their role not only in the formation of societies of greater magnitude but also in the development of higher levels of social and political integration including international societies of states. Ruling elites have engaged in symbolic labour at that level in order to deal with what has been described as 'the problem of harm in world politics' (Linklater 2011). For self-interested if not for altruistic reasons, state structures across great expanses of time have constructed diplomatic codes of behaviour in the quest to place restraints on destructive capabilities and to enjoy, *inter alia*, the benefits of trade. As studies of the diplomatic protocols that governed relations between the Ancient Near Eastern monarchs have shown, kinship symbolism which included the idea of the 'brotherhood' of kings had important binding and restraining functions (Lamont 2001). Such symbols were integral to the diplomatic cultures of aristocratic court societies well into the nineteenth century, one example being the assertion by the victorious powers in the wars with revolutionary France that the Holy Alliance symbolized 'the bonds of true and unbreakable fraternity' between rulers who governed their peoples with the devotion that was typical of the benevolent 'fathers of families' (Wortman 2006: 229-30).

English School explorations of societies of states are an important point of departure for inquiries into such instances of the symbolic dimensions of world politics. For example, studies of the Hellenic city-states system undertaken from the 'international society perspective' have shown how the symbolism of civilization and barbarism helped to bind

hoplite forces together in the aristocratic male warrior codes. Sharp distinctions were drawn between restrained hoplites who did not mutilate the bodies of enemies in warfare and unrestrained barbarians who purportedly resorted to such forbidden practices (Linklater 2016: ch. 2). As in the period of European colonial domination, the stigmatised 'barbarian' had releaser as well as binding and restraining functions. Symbols of savagery were deployed to legitimate lifting controls on force that supposedly distinguished 'civilized' peoples and the wider international society to which they belonged from the brutal and licentious world of 'social inferiors' (Wight 1977: 34-5, 83-8).

Symbolic expressions of dichotomies between 'civilized' and 'barbaric' practices were a major thread running through the diplomatic rituals of the European-dominated society of states. With the pre-eminence of Louis XIV's court, French replaced Latin as the language of diplomacy. It became a 'prestige symbol' for European ruling elites and a mark of distinction from the 'semi-barbarous' or 'barbarian' peoples who were regarded as objects of colonial subjugation (Burke 2004: 85ff). Proficiency in French was a symbol of the cultural sophistication that peripheral 'backward' courts such as the Russian court under Peter the Great were keen to acquire. The Western European ruling strata expected governing elites in Eastern Europe and beyond to adopt the 'civilized' rules and manners that were symbols of 'advanced' diplomatic practice. They did so at a time when Europeans confidently asserted monopoly control of the normative criteria for distinguishing between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' peoples. As part of an 'immense symbolic effort' in the late nineteenth century, the governing elites of, *inter alia*, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, China, Japan and Siam launched 'civilizing' offensives to bring traditional modes of orientation to society and politics into line with European standards of civilization. They undertook top-down initiatives to gain recognition as 'civilized' powers that had made the necessary reforms to state structures and diplomatic practice to deserve to be admitted into the society of states as the

sovereign equals of the original members. Political elites in Tsarist Russia, Meiji Japan and the Ottoman Empire also regarded mimetic colonial expansion as a pivotal element of the same symbolic revolution. They followed the European conviction that the scaling-up of political units through imperial domination and the 'improvement' of 'savage' populations were primary symbols of progress and civilization (Linklater, in preparation, provides a more extensive discussion).

The symbolism of civilization and savagery that underpinned European colonialism was rejected as part of 'the revolt against the West' although there is no space to consider that development here (see pp. 31-2 however). Of greater importance for this part of the investigation is the rise of cosmopolitan symbolism from around the middle of the nineteenth century. The pre-eminent symbols of the classical 'pluralist' European society of states – as expressed in the rituals governing the accreditation of ambassadors - reflected shared understandings that maintaining order between the great powers was the dominant political objective. More recent symbols such as 'Munich' – a recurrent theme in the denunciation of strategies of 'appeasement' – also belong to the 'pluralist' tradition of international thought. Such symbols of the value of order now co-exist with cosmopolitan symbols such as the Red Cross which nineteenth-century peace movements designed to advance the 'solidarist' goal of protecting individuals in their own right from avoidable suffering in inter-state conflicts (Linklater 2016: 320). In common with the diplomatic codes noted above, the mid- to late-nineteenth century humanitarian laws of war were portrayed as key symbols of civilized co-existence in a period in which the invention of ever more devastating military technologies exposed populations to the greater risk of 'total war' (Linklater 2016: ch. 10). They were core elements of liberal-cosmopolitan responses to the pernicious effects of the unusual fusion of political, economic and symbolic power in state-organised national societies. They were constructed in the attempt to alter the balance of power between binding national loyalties

with associated 'releaser symbols' on the use of force and new global symbols of restraint which were designed to widen the scope of emotional identification between peoples – to bind different societies together in support for the humanitarian laws of war.

A crucial question – recalling Durkheim's claim that all effective social arrangements depend on a 'vast symbolism' that underpins collective sentiments and his observation about the powerful symbolic role of flag – is whether popular support for cosmopolitan symbols in world politics is likely to increase in the coming decades, to stall at current levels, or undergo marked decline. The issue is whether societies with diverse symbolic worlds can agree on a global ensemble of core political symbols that embody shared beliefs about, for example, the moral imperative of collective action to extend the humanitarian domain in international society. Barriers to greater internationalism are considerable but not insurmountable. As a recent study has argued, 'claims to sovereign authority have long been encoded in weaponry and coinage, and symbols of sovereign authority have been embodied in sceptres and crowns, until the erection and restoration of historic monuments became an important way of evoking imaginaries of national identity and belonging during the nineteenth century. *Although those ways of encoding sovereignty have lost much of their ability to inspire awe and allegiance today*, the formation of modern states would hardly have been possible without those symbolisations of sovereignty and their successful dissemination in society' (Bartelson 2014: 17, italics added). That important observation that state controls over national symbol-formation have weakened resonates with the thesis that sovereign institutions have lost some of their traditional power and authority to determine the principles of global legitimacy to non-governmental organisations which have become influential symbol innovators in their own right (Clark 2007).

Recent events have shown that there is no warranty that states will continue to lose the ability to shape the means of orientation through powers in the symbolic domain and no

guarantee that transnational movements and organisations with cosmopolitan aspirations will flourish (and not least because of such phenomena as the recent scandal of sexual abuse surrounding some humanitarian organisations). Moreover, the largely-unanticipated resurgence of national-populist movements and ideologies has dented confidence in the more optimistic assessments of the possible global consequences of the state's diminished capacity to manufacture, manipulate and control political symbols. In several Western societies, mass support for traditional national symbols has increased as part of power struggles in which outsider groups blame established strata for the systematic neglect of their moral-cultural preferences and material interests. Nationalist political parties and movements have protested against the alleged unpatriotic devaluation of core symbols which remain powerful objects of emotional identification for many groups.

The reaffirmation of binding national symbols and of boundaries between 'self' and 'other' in order to reassert the traditional powers and privileges of sovereign state will not surprise many students of nationalism. Several years before the current national-populist revolt, analysts of nationalism argued that modern states are not poised to relinquish symbolic power to other political associations as a result of unstoppable global interconnections. The observation that 'there are no "world memories" that can be used to *unite* humanity' stressed that the dominant orientations to society and politics are still firmly anchored in nationalist symbolism despite increasing international interdependencies (Smith 1990: 179-80, italics in original). A related conviction that what there is in the way of 'a global collective memory' amounts to a limited 'set of common denominators' in a world of resilient national cultures similarly emphasises the relative poverty of binding and restraining global symbols (Aksu 2009: 331). Universal symbols, it has been argued, that supposedly belong to everyone effectively belong to no-one, and lack the emotional potency of national symbolic codes that bind people together in particular historical communities (Assmann 2011: ch. 6). Moreover,

scepticism about the prospects for widening the scope of emotional identification through cosmopolitan symbolisation was deepened by evidence of how quickly the 'hardening of symbolic borders' between peoples can occur in the face of perceived major security threats (Smith 2009: 46-7). The fate of the 'anti-torture norm' following '9/11' demonstrated how public support for the principle that the prohibition of torture is a symbol of civilized restraint lost ground to an official discourse that linked emotionally-recharged binding symbols of patriotism or national unity with the releaser symbol of 'savagery' to justify lifting taboos against violence in the 'war on terror'. But support for the belief that the anti-torture norm is a 'solidarist' symbol of civilization and humanity did not disappear in that period.

It is important in this context to provide a brief overview of core themes in recent discussions of examples of cosmopolitan symbolisation in the contemporary society of states. They include the analysis of how the idea of the Holocaust moved unexpectedly from the margins of public discourse to its current role as a prominent symbol of evil and as a core idea in calls for an 'unprecedented universalization of political and moral responsibility' for the victims of state-organised mass killing (Alexander 2002: 32; Levy and Sznaider 2002). Also noteworthy is the investigation of 'global injustice symbols' including figureheads such as Gandhi and Mandela as well as critical moments for the global community including the Rwandan genocide (Olesen 2015). The latter inquiry highlights a major weakness in many symbols of solidarism in the society of states, namely that they have been appropriated from the 'global South' to advance essentially Western-centred political projects (Alexander 2002; Olesen 2015; Goetze and Bliesemann de Guevara 2014).

Parallels to the suggestion that purportedly cosmopolitan symbols will remain highly susceptible to vigorous contestation while they are so obviously linked to Western liberal-democratic value-preferences are evident in reflections on the idea of the Anthropocene (a term coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer almost twenty years ago and only recently

the object of critical inquiry in the social sciences - see Delanty 2017). Its sudden rise to prominence illustrates the thesis which was advanced more than eight decades ago, namely that, throughout human history, 'changes of social structure' promoted the widespread conviction that traditional symbols were outmoded and that nothing less than a complete 'revolution in symbolism' was necessary as people orientated themselves to transformed circumstances (Whitehead 1927: 61). The concept of the Anthropocene which embodies scientific assessments that the unforeseen human impact on the environment has resulted in a wholly new geological era is at the heart of organised endeavours to transform the symbolic world. The idea has acquired a key role in arguments for fundamental changes to human self-images and, more specifically, for the break with archaic, releaser symbols not with respect to violence in this case but with regard to modern Western suppositions that increasing domination of the natural world is a major monument to progress and civilization.

It is not impossible that, at some future point, the Anthropocene will become a symbol of a major turning-point in human history – of the transformative moment in which human societies broke with the binding, restraining and releasing symbols that have been at the heart of the overall trend towards associations of 'greater magnitude' and became united in observing higher standards self-restraint in order to deal with their unanticipated ecological consequences. It may become a symbol of the long overdue movement towards exercising the higher levels of control over unplanned processes that were unachievable when human loyalties were confined, and levels of cooperation were constrained, by high levels of emotional identification with national symbols. But fundamental revisions will be necessary if the Anthropocene is to become a major symbol of the 'unprecedented universalization of political and moral responsibility' with respect to the natural environment. Critics have argued that the allegedly neutral or technical nature of the idea has concealed basic truths about climate change – most obviously, that it is plainly not the case that humanity is

responsible for environmental degradation and equally evident that an elementary sense of fairness dictates that the most affluent societies should shoulder the primary responsibility for reversing climate change (Harrington 2016). In short, its potential as a unifying global symbol of the ethical imperative to transform traditional orientations towards nature is weakened by the neglect of unequal power relations in the international society of states. Considered in conjunction with the recent analysis of the biases of global injustice symbols, the criticism provides a further reminder of the scale of the challenge in constructing symbols that can be objects of emotional identification for large sections of humanity. Those points invite new lines of inquiry into the social conditions under which earlier societies succeeded in designing potent symbols that contributed to promoting solidarity between diverse groups.

Future Research Directions

Durkheim's observation that ethical codes tend to become more 'abstract' or 'impersonal' as human interconnections stretch across greater expanses of space identified a core issue for analysts of the prospects for universal or cosmopolitan symbols in different eras (Durkheim 1993: 100-1). Principles that are designed to unite strangers in longer social webs may lack the emotional appeal of symbol complexes in bounded communities with shared traditions as well as collective myths, narratives and memories. They may exist without shared symbols that are major 'focal points for the emotional bonding of persons' (see p. 14 above). In any period, symbols that bridge long-standing cultural divisions must possess a high level of accessibility or intelligibility to those who have been drawn into longer webs of interconnectedness. But the modern era may well face unique challenges. Widespread expectations that global symbols should comply with universal and egalitarian principles (or at least avoid clashing with modern sensitivities about unjust social and political exclusion) would appear to be a distinguishing feature of the modern era and the reason for heightened

sensitivity to the role of public symbols in reinforcing social and political hierarchies. Contemporary efforts to construct universal symbols must survive levels of political scrutiny that have been rare in the history of state-organised societies given that ruling elites could exercise controls over the symbolic dimensions of the means of orientation that are largely unattainable today. Those are conjectures to test in future investigations. Suffice to add that, whether national or global, symbols are open to competing interpretations which have been intensified as a result of changing power balances and political rivalries between social groups as the discussion has shown (see pp. 2-3 above).

Difficulties in creating global symbols that can command the consent of large sections of the world's population and underpin closer forms of international collaboration have increased accordingly. Moreover, national governments continue to strive to maintain control over the modes of orientation to society, and to prevent significant shifts in the balance of power, by determining the meaning of public symbols. Struggles over the meaning of the first photographic images of the earth which were taken by the Apollo 8 and 17 lunar missions illustrate the point. Conceptions of a shared homeland were advanced by the astronauts and adopted by Friends of the Earth but the imagery was neither unambiguous nor resistant to incorporation within nationalist or patriotic narratives. Successive US Administrations laid claim to the images as symbols of America's global power and technological prowess in an age of super-power rivalry (Cosgrove 1994: 281ff). Those who support the development of stronger global symbols face the immense difficulty of constructing an emotionally-powerful collective symbolism that does not become mired in such competitions for power and is not immediately open to the criticism that it preserves unjust social arrangements.

Analysing how universal symbols acquired such emotive power in earlier periods can shed new light on the prospects for cosmopolitan symbolisation in the contemporary society of states. Central themes in a study of political symbols that was published over five decades

remain valuable for delineating such an inquiry. According to that investigation, it is essential to understand how the 'slow erosion of the old symbols' and the 'wasting away of the feelings they once evoked' took place (Walzer 1967: 198). It is then important to consider how groups that 'cannot orient themselves in the political world' without symbols undertook the quest for 'meaningful' alternatives (Walzer 1967: 198). The investigation is completed by analysing how particular social strata had 'artistic and intellectual success' in converting symbols with limited support into 'new reference-worlds' with general appeal (Walzer 1967: 198).

Those insightful comments can be taken further by engaging with sociological studies of religion which have explored the rise of universal frames of reference in the 'Axial Age'. They have explored three dimensions of symbol transformation that have particular salience for inquiries into universal symbols in other periods. The enabling social conditions under which major symbolic revolutions occurred in the middle of the first millennium BC are fundamental to that analysis. By way of illustration, a core theme in sociological investigations of Axial Age religions is that rapid social change in societies of unprecedented magnitude produced widespread feelings of alienation that were directly addressed by the proponents of new religious world-views. Counter-hegemonic social symbols that provided solace and hope to outsiders who feared that the traditional gods had abandoned them constitute the second object of inquiry. As Weber (1948: 280) argued, salvation religions held out the promise of 'liberation from distress, hunger, drought, sickness, and ultimately from suffering and death' as well as protection from disaster that the established strata could not provide (Runciman 2004). As a more recent study has observed, the four main world religions - Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Confucianism - promoted a 'trans-local sense of personal and social identity' or 'a more extensive and universal membership' than 'any prior social power organization' (Mann 1986: 363). In the case of early Christianity, religious

groups gathered support by revamping kinship symbols in order to disseminate a revolutionary vision of society in which the relations between people would be governed by a radically new ethic of care and compassion (Brown 1981: chs. 1-2; Runciman 2004). They used innovative, emotionally-satisfying symbols to promote counter-hegemonic modes of orientation in a period of disconcerting social change.

The rise of transformative social agency is the third object of inquiry. Especially interesting for investigating current potentials for cosmopolitan symbolisation is the evidence that Axial Age religious movements launched universalizing symbolic initiatives within the 'interstices' of early empires where they were relatively free from the standard controls of the ruling establishment (Mann 1986: 363-4). They promoted 'transcendental breakthroughs' by 'standing back' from the dominant interpretations of reality, by pioneering the 'critical, reflective questioning' of prevalent beliefs and practices, and by articulating 'a new vision of what [lay] beyond' exhausted arrangements (Schwartz 1975: 3-4). At the heart of 'transcendent' ideologies including Christianity was the belief that ruling elites that had long exercised monopoly control over the relationship between society and the gods had to submit to divine restraints on political power (Weber 1948a: 333ff). Christian interstitial movements pitched 'transcendent' images of solidarity against the long dominant 'immanent' ideologies that reinforced social hierarchies and conventions which were, from the counter-hegemonic standpoint of outsiders, devoid of value (Mann 1986: 22ff).

Analyses of 'Axial Age' religions which examined the social conditions under which important symbolic transformations occurred as a result of the powerful agency of interstitial movements provide a model for future inquiries into the prospects for post-national 'symbolic cultivation' in the modern society of states. Important is how religious movements accumulated symbolic power in the absence of significant material resources. Precisely how 'Axial Age' groups triumphed by creating particular symbolic frameworks that bridged major

differences between social groups requires detailed investigation. Developments in those spheres may illuminate the challenges that are faced by contemporary social movements which have also been described as interstitial - as 'collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside…institutional or organizational channels', and invariably 'challenging' existing social and political structures (Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2007: 11). Clearly, unlike interstitial 'Axial Age' religious forces which developed within imperial structures, present-day counterparts operate within an international system of states. The former reached various accommodations with the ruling strata which cannot be discussed here but, through such processes, they acquired 'near monopoly powers' over the modes of orientation in 'core' social spheres such as 'the family and the life cycle' (Mann 1986: 367-8; Elias 2009b: 135-6). Those capabilities became interwoven with stark contrasts between the faithful and heretics or apostates and with the emergence of releaser symbols that were employed to justify acts of violence against outsiders that were proscribed in relations within 'communities of the faithful'. Universal claims anchored in a rich symbolism became wedded to new patterns of social exclusion and new forms of violence. The resulting question for present-day investigations of potentials for global symbols is how far they can be driven by higher levels of reflexivity about the danger of similar entanglements in power relations that distort the cosmopolitan aspirations that many invest in them.

Contemporary interstitial movements operating outside the dominant power structures face different challenges from Axial Age counterparts. As noted, earlier, they exist within a world of sovereign states, many enjoying significant political advantages by virtue of their capacity to harness popular support for entrenched national symbols. Modern states have ceded some of their symbolic authority to non-governmental organisations that have endeavoured to hold them accountable to new global standards of restraint with respect to the humanitarian laws of war, the universal human rights culture and global environmental

conventions. Those states face unprecedented pressures to answer to universal and egalitarian principles which are testimony to the role that interstitial revolutionary movements have played since the end of the eighteenth century in transforming the classical pluralist conception of international society (Armstrong 1993). More research on the impact of modern revolutionary movements on the symbolic landscape of world politics is needed. There is only space here to make some brief comments on how the French Revolution gave rise to core tensions within liberal-democracies over the relative value of national and international symbols – and of collective rights and wider moral and political responsibilities – which are unresolved to this day.

Historical investigations of the erosion and reconstitution of core intra- and inter-societal symbols in late-eighteenth century France have explained the social conditions and innovative political agency that led to organized resistance to elite controls of the symbolic domain and to the parallel invention of counter-hegemonic symbols with particular emotional resonance for the members of traditional outsider groups. Major studies have discussed the downfall of the classical allegories that shaped the dominant outlooks in the absolutist court society in the context of changing power balances between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie (Blanning 2012: ch. 1). The latter used their political agency to challenge what they regarded as the outmoded symbolism that suffused traditional social practices including 'civilized' diplomatic protocols and rituals (Frey and Frey 1993). The lack of emotional identification with 'social inferiors' and the failure to address mounting social and political problems resulted in what has been described in a different context as the process in which ruling groups prove incapable of revising the dominant symbolic 'metanarrative' in response to political demands for substantial reform from the lower strata (Gill 2011, 2012; Wortman 2006). In the resulting vacuum, new political opportunities arose for interstitial revolutionary groups with convincing alternative symbolic orders which included appeals to kinship

symbolism or fraternity in late eighteenth century France (and in Tsarist Russia just over a century later). Regarding the rise to prominence of new symbolic orders in revolutionary France, the break with 'aristocratic internationalism' was dramatically expressed in the public symbolism of conferring heroic status on ordinary citizens who sacrificed their lives for the Revolution (Bell 2001). The egalitarian symbolism of national monuments that commemorated the dead - the 'sacred spaces' of the 'new civic religion' (Mosse 1990: ch. 2) – marked the emergence of the 'nationalisation of suffering' which has been central to state symbolism ever since (Linklater 2016: 325ff).

The proliferation of national memorials to fallen warriors is one manifestation of the rapid transition from 'aristocratic internationalism' to bourgeois nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe. But that was part of what has been described as the 'duality of nation-state normative codes' in which 'national-Machiavellian' orientations to foreign policy existed alongside commitments to the universal and egalitarian moral principles that were important weapons in struggles between ascendant bourgeois groups and the traditional aristocracy (Elias 2013: 135ff; see Armstrong 1993: 204ff on French revolutionary conceptions of the immanent cosmopolitan or 'transnational' community). The result was that complex relations and tensions between national and universal symbolic frameworks became defining features of political life in the modern era. As realists have argued, the two dimensions of modern normative codes often come into conflict but rare is the national government which pursues its political objectives, however nationalist and Machiavellian, without paying at least lip service to 'solidarist' principles and to an associated symbolism which became linked from the nineteenth century with the ideals of 'humanity' and 'civilization'. That requirement is a product of the liberal-bourgeois revolution in which interstitial movements including the International Red Cross endeavoured to change the balance of power between national and universal symbols in response to the increasingly-destructive forms of modern warfare.

Suspicion towards global symbols has increased in recent years because many moral and political universals which are wrapped in the discourse of humanity and civilization are associated with European colonialism. To return to the introduction to this paper, recent disputes over flag and statue symbolism are powerful examples of opposition to the symbols of empire, slavery and racism that helped to bind together the global imperial establishment and legitimated the relaxation of 'civilized' restraints in the colonial suppression of 'savages'. Many everyday symbols of racial supremacy in the media and advertising as well as in children's fiction and toys that established groups took for granted only a few decades ago have disappeared as a result of resistance to the traditional symbols of European colonial dominance. As part of that development, Western societies have had to rethink their pride in 'prestige symbols' that were seized from colonised peoples and displayed in ethnographic collections as signifiers of the enormous gulf between 'civilized' peoples and 'barbarians' (Fyfe 2016). 'Sacred remains' which have been returned to indigenous groups in recent times have become shameful symbols of the period in which colonisers believed they could treat 'social inferiors' as they pleased. To prevent misunderstanding, it must be stressed that many point to the considerable unfinished business regarding the decolonisation of Western public symbolic spheres. Even so, the erosion of many 'prestige symbols' of race and empire reflects important shifts in the balance of power between established and interstitial outsider groups in Western states and in international society. Heightened sensitivity to, and the robust contestation of, the symbols of colonial domination raise large questions about the prospects for global symbols in the post-colonial era (Olesen 2017). Intriguing issues arise about how far future political endeavours to create global symbols will anticipate concerns about their relationship with existing power asymmetries and fears about the danger of creating new power structures. Engagement with those challenges will be essential if international cooperation to deal with the global problems which are the result of very long-term social

processes including the rise of political units of greater magnitude is to be anchored in the 'vast symbolism' which Durkheim regarded as pivotal to social existence in all eras.

Conclusion

Symbols are fundamental to human interaction but they have long occupied a marginal place in studies of international politics. Long-term standpoints on collective symbols that analyse the relationship between broad historical trends and contemporary challenges are missing from the field. For those reasons, this article has maintained that new perspectives are required to promote theoretically-informed empirical examinations of symbols and world politics. The argument has been that 'symbol emancipation' provides the starting-point for explorations of central features of human history such as the formation of political units of greater magnitude and the emergence of higher levels of social and political integration which include societies of states with distinctive symbolic landscapes. Particular emphasis has been placed on the binding role of collective symbols, on their contribution to restraining the use of force within social groups, and on their releasing function or role in legitimating the relaxation of intra-societal controls on force in the sphere of external relations. The discussion has stressed the investments that governing elites have made in the symbolic realm over the millennia in the attempt to legitimate the monopolisation of political power. State initiatives to maximise control of the instruments of violence, of the means of extracting wealth from society and of modes of orientation to the social world have been highlighted in this context. Central to long-term developments has been the state's role in 'symbolic cultivation' in the quest to promote the social integration of diverse groups in scaled-up associations. But the need for controls on destructive state powers has often led to the creation of diplomatic cultures with their own symbolic dimensions. Moreover, in different historical eras, interstitial movements which now include modern international non-governmental organisations have employed counter-hegemonic symbol cultivation to

promote wider solidarities. But many doubt that the balance of power between the national and international forces of symbolisation will change significantly in the foreseeable future.

Durkheim's key insight that social bonds are precarious unless they are underpinned by a vast symbolism and specific comment on flag symbolism remain highly relevant in the modern era. The clear implication is that enduring post-national arrangements that restrain state power and facilitate higher levels of international cooperation will not emerge without a firm foundation of emotionally-satisfying symbols that bridge major divisions between peoples. Analyses of the social conditions in which interstitial movements in different historical periods achieved major breakthroughs in creating symbols that contributed to widening the scope of emotional identification between peoples can illuminate contemporary possibilities and challenges. It is important to avoid the 'retreat into the present' on the understanding that efforts to construct wider solidarities through symbolic innovations are part of the long process of social change that symbol emancipation set in motion. They are features of the 'human level of the universe' which is the focal point of the synoptic modes of inquiry which have been considered in this exploratory discussion. Fundamental to such investigations are the unique capacity for symbolisation that developed over millions of years, the ability to develop symbolic codes that bound people together in particular societies, and the capacity to invent universal symbols that facilitated cooperation between social groups that had often been in conflict with each other. It is improbable that global problems will be addressed effectively without considerable symbolic inventiveness in that last domain. That is why long-term perspectives on the relationship between symbols that have reinforced bounded communities and symbols that have supported wider solidarities between peoples can bring fresh insights to endeavours to understand the prospects for closer international cooperation in the current era.

Endnotes

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