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Facing human interconnections

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Facing human interconnections: thinking International Relations into the future

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Abstract

Communities on the planet are faced with complex challenges: changing relations within and between human communities, changing relations with ecological and climatic conditions, and shifts in technology-human interconnections. The complex interconnections across issue areas – migration, environmental degradation and new technologies, for example – demand that scholars increasingly think across theories, paradigms, specialisms and disciplines. But how should we ‘hold things together’ as we try to make sense of complex realities in International Relations (IR)? This introductory article to the Special Issue ‘Facing human interconnections: thinking International Relations into the future’ discusses the open thematic of ‘human interconnections’ that is used to loosely structure the contributions. Analysis of human interconnections, as understood here, does not have a precise or fixed definition but is considered an open-ended notion with varied meanings and dimensions. Indeed, the authors engage it here in varied ways to explore their empirical, theoretical and political concerns. Yet, this notion also allows for interesting new questions to be posed on the potential and limits of IR as it faces the future, and debates around how we see interconnections between issue areas and ‘-isms’, how IR constructs ‘humans’ or ‘non-humans’ in interconnections, and what is at stake in bringing to our attention unacknowledged interconnections. Here we set out why human interconnection is an interesting notion to work with and why we need to keep its meaning open-ended. We also provide an account of six different orientations we observe amongst the authors tackling the dynamics of human interconnections in this Special Issue.

Keywords

futures, global challenges, human, interconnection, International Relations discipline, non-human

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Introduction

The year 2019 was an important occasion for scholars in the academic field of International Relations (IR) to reflect on the contested origins and evolution of the discipline, and this reflection continues in 2020 and will do for years to come. In this journal, the centenary was celebrated with a Special Issue reflecting on the first 100 years of IR.¹ That Special Issue analysed the key issues, processes and ideas that came to dominate international politics and its study in the first century of IR. The Special Issue included analyses of policies and practices of the international, centring on significant areas such as race, human rights, technological change, great power relations and international law, and examining patterns of continuity and change across these areas and for the broader field as a whole.

In the wider field, the centenary has also prompted much reflection and discussion on the shortcomings of IR scholarship, and the difficulty of understanding the dynamics of international change. The centenary, unsurprisingly, has also raised questions as to how we might understand IR into the future. Much IR scholarship is still expressed in the vocabulary of concepts like anarchy, sovereignty and power, reflecting the remarkable continuation of international political realities that are associated with difficulties of state interaction, the nature of warfare, persistent hierarchies of global life and the ongoing interplay between conflict and cooperation. Yet, various new conceptual, empirical and political perspectives have been brought to the table in recent years: global IR, multiplicity, post-humanism, assemblage theories, practice theories, postcolonial scholarship, relational theories and cross-scientific conversations on the quantum and cosmology.

In this Special Issue, we take up the challenge of thinking into the future of IR. However, our aim is *not to predict* the future of the international order or the issues that will define the nature and practices of international politics. *Rather, we ask how we might 'hold things together' conceptually and empirically as we face an emerging and complex array of national, international, global and planetary challenges.* We invited an array of scholars from different theoretical perspectives and with different empirical interests, to reflect on how they might think their scholarship and IR into the future, particularly through grappling with the challenges presented by thinking through complex *human interconnections*.

We put forward the notion of human interconnections as a concept around which both established and newer IR theoretical ventures, and the study of multiple different and novel empirical focal points, might productively cohere or be structured. Human interconnection, as we trace below, has been of interest to IR scholars for a long time. Yet, human interconnections have not only been studied in different ways and within different conceptual systems in IR but are also being thought through in qualitatively new ways in recent IR literatures around relationality, complexity theory and politics of the human and the non-human. As we explicate below, we do not then present this notion as one with a singular meaning or as a new theory or paradigm for explaining or predicting into the future. Human interconnection is instead put forward to as *open-ended and dynamic conceptual site where conversations and debates between IR scholars from different orientations, focused on different empirical challenges, political struggles and theoretical questions, can develop.*

As we will see, it is precisely because there is no agreed upon understanding of human interconnections constricting scholars here, that interesting lines of conversations around how we should think, act, notice and debate into the future of IR arise. To give the reader a sense of these, in this introduction we put forward a crude but hopefully helpful six-part typology of orientations to thinking through human/human and human/non-human interconnections. Through this structure we can see that within this Special Issue very different types and scales of interconnections – and very different theoretical and political questions around interconnections – emerge. These have, we believe, important consequences for how we understand issues such as migration, slavery, climate change, the Anthropocene and new digital technologies, as well as for how we discuss what the challenges are for IR scholarship thinking into the future.

This Special Issue seeks to illustrate how conversations that are not directly tied to IR's much-maligned '-isms' might unfold in the field and around it. Analyses of climate change, migration and technological change here speak directly to each other and they are further implicated in rethinking international order, universalism, racialisation, temporality, sovereignty and governance. None is clearly set out in terms of IR's schools of thought: rather they push forward to new ways of making and thinking interconnections, and point to the political challenges therein for scholars in the field and for practices of international politics. The open structure of the debate does not mean that the perspectives in this Special Issue do not clash or that there are no disagreements – far from it, as we will see – but it does mean that a more open discussion is possible, beyond the 'campfires' of IR. To facilitate the conversation, we asked our authors to think – in their own way – through human interconnections and thus to keep both conceptual and empirical horizons open to the differences in so doing.

In contextualising and orienting this collection of essays in this introduction we will, first, examine previous attempts to 'hold things together' in IR through ideas that suggest an interest in human interconnections. We then set out why it might be fruitful to more explicitly facilitate conversations on the future of the field through this notion, when it is utilised in an open and multi-dimensional way. In the final section, we reflect on what it does to our empirical and theoretical horizons to think in these new terms: what kinds of questions and challenges arise, for the future of IR in the twenty-first century.

The essays contained in this Special Issue extend an open-ended invitation for international relations scholars to think into the future. We encourage the readers to read multiple articles to see and engage the important tensions between them, and hope they will also thus be inspired to engage in further conversations on how we might 'hold things together' in this complex (inter)discipline, and what the limits of doing so in particular ways are.

Interconnections in IR

The notion of 'human interconnection', or indeed the aim of 'holding things together' through umbrella concepts such as this, is not new to the field of IR. Indeed, in many ways, the study of International Relations has always been about the creation of concepts through which complex global realities can be processed: from 'anarchy' to 'complex interdependence' or 'core-periphery relations'. To understand state policies, cooperation

dynamics, the nature of conflict or the history of diplomacy, IR scholars have had to make sense of complex historical processes and as such, have worked across disciplines and conceptual and empirical domains with the aim of thinking through the best ways of conceiving large-scale processes.

There have been many ways of 'holding together' as we try to understand the 'international' and the 'global'. Interestingly many of them are suggestive of the notion of interconnection in one form or another. For example, the realist understanding of the international as shaped by anarchy could be conceived as one distinct way of developing a holistic view of how things are 'interconnected'. The fragmented nature of the international is itself an outcome of the balance of power and security concerns of states that are inherently part of the same system.² It is then 'interconnection' in the condition of anarchy that creates the challenges of insecurity and power-seeking behaviour. No state in an anarchy is 'isolated', all are vulnerable to others, even as they do not necessarily know their intentions.³

Liberals in IR, on the other hand, have tried to think through dynamics of complex interdependence of a different kind, where some of the aforementioned patterns coexist with other dynamics generated by the interactions of state and non-state actors.⁴ Rather than mere fragmentation, the international is characterised by multiple socio-economic flows, forms of organisation, and formal and informal global arrangements, often captured by the term globalisation. This is an expanded and multi-scalar understanding of interconnection that takes many forms, among which the process of economic globalisation, and its specific practices like trade and financial liberalisation, is seen as one fundamentally shaping the international, and potentially alleviating and constraining the inclinations of states towards conflict.⁵

These processes of economic interconnection have also long interested the Marxists. For Marxism, capitalism is a global form of interconnection, even if individuals within it may not fully perceive the nature of the connections generated by the constant moving of capital. To analyse things in a systemic fashion is then fundamental for understanding interconnection precisely because tracing the actions of individual actors does not reveal the systemic forces. This understanding of interconnection has shaped subsequent theories of Marxist orientation, whether to argue that inequality and marginalisation is caused by the capital driven process of interconnection not having engulfed yet the periphery, or precisely because the global expansion of interconnection through processes like imperialism creates new forms of marginalisation.⁶

Constructivism has encouraged scholars to understand interconnections as mediated through language. It is through language that positions are defined, meaning stabilised and actions ascribed, and as such, for constructivists, the international has not been anomic or characterised by the absence of rules and rule,⁷ but rather has necessitated analysis of socially constructed modalities of interconnection.⁸ Constructivism leads us to perceive the international not as a domain where relations unfold between disconnected units, such as states, but rather as a global social space, a distinct language game, engulfing dynamic and ongoing encounters that define and limit actors.⁹

Many other IR scholars, such as the feminists have added their own flavour to analysis of interconnection. The classic works of Cynthia Enloe, for example, were about identifying global interconnections underpinned by often gendered power relations and

interdependences.¹⁰ Feminism too is about being curious about the interconnections we are often unable to perceive through ungendered lenses – or structurally uninterested to understand because of our positioning in gendered power structures.¹¹

Increasingly, the challenges of studying the complex dynamics of international politics have led to new perspectives that attempt to transcend the established theories or ‘-isms’ of IR,¹² in order to make sense of the complex flows of the planet. Central to these perspectives has been at least an implicit sense that we need deeper reflection on how interconnections work. In particular, if traditional IR theories, positivist and post-positivist, have had an interest in tracing multiple forms of human interconnections with other humans (trade, global governance, etc.), the contributors to debates on the Anthropocene, assemblage theory, quantum theory and post-humanism have had an interest in thinking through humans in interconnection with the non-human world. Contrary to old materialism and humanism, these perspectives seek to show how both the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’ are deeply co-entangled and co-constituted. Indeed, the human itself is a processual notion made in relation to the non-human, which is not necessarily, as traditionally assumed, inert and lacking in agency. Through these perspectives, the international has come to be seen as made by not just foreign policy makers, civil society actors and business leaders; it is also made by microbes, garbage, biometric master-cards, quantum entanglements, containers and electronic passports.¹³ As part of all these attempts, there have been an increasing number of scholars arguing that the way IR has ‘held things together’ reflects a very particular world-view: a Western-centric, humanist and Newtonian worldview.¹⁴ Such critiques have pointed towards new sources of thinking through interconnections.

The ‘Global IR’ project that has emerged in recent years also seeks new sources of inspiration for a more ‘pluralistic universalism’ and the development of generalisable concepts and theories derived from non-Western regions, and in order to integrate with, rather than supplement, existing Western IR.¹⁵ Key developments have been evident in this respect. For example, Asian IR is emerging (though still developed around national schools), increasingly challenging the applicability of Western IR to Asia and engaging in theory-building, including middle-range theorising and alternative IR theories drawn from Asian traditions and civilisations.¹⁶ African IR is also re-cast through an ‘assemblage approach’ that studies how the ‘international’ in Africa is assembled from the ground up, and derives from an assemblage of key elements of the social world that is both unique to Africa, but at the same time a generalisable expression of what constitutes the ‘international’.¹⁷

There is also a re-discovery of centuries of IR thinking from the ‘periphery’, such as dependency and non-alignment, initially driven by anti-colonialism and anti-racism, and re-surfacing as emerging non-Western powers and marginalised populations articulate their distinct visions of modernity, world order and world history.¹⁸ For some, however, the process of decolonising IR needs to go even further as they question Eurocentrism as the dominant mode of knowledge production while rejecting the binaries (such as West/non-West) around which IR knowledge is organised.¹⁹ Such a process may eventually need to come full circle into questioning the very idea of Western-centrism or Eurocentrism itself, and how that is not a universal and monolithic form of dominance, as often assumed, but entails ideological, residual and historical-contextual variants,²⁰ and

unacknowledged dynamics (for example, secular notions that have many religious and theological underpinnings).²¹ Another path to decolonisation of IR, taken by decolonial and postcolonial thought, has been to rediscover the already existing resources in order to think 'IR' in an alternative way. For example, Robbie Shilliam turns to Pacific islanders' conceptual tools for making sense of relations between multiple communities globally.²² Lily Ling turns to Buddhist concepts to make sense of enemy-friend relations globally. What is characteristic of these ways of 'holding things together' is a scepticism of certain types of universal perspectives of 'the whole', even though that does not mean that particular theoretical perspectives cannot speak to different contexts. For some, this has led to the emphasis on the pluriverse: there is an increasing recognition of the international as consisting of multiple, rather than a 'single', world(s).²³

Somewhat similar thematics also come through the work around new materialism, posthumanism and quantum theory.²⁴ There is an interest in these areas of scholarship in recognition of the contingency, entanglement and situatedness of all knowledge production in, and about international politics. If IR scholarship has had a tendency to theorise the international and global by seeking to 'capture' them as 'wholes', recent theoretical developments are critical of 'god's eye views' that try and capture the 'international' or indeed the 'globe' as wholes; rather we are asked to seek knowledges from where we are, and in collaboration with 'objects of study' (inasmuch we can even speak of objects and subjects).²⁵

Why then, given these many ongoing attempts, do we here turn to the concept of human interconnection? Is it not a rather out-dated and, in light of all the new relational and global perspectives, is it not a rather uncritically humanist and perhaps also Eurocentric notion to turn to?

We want to defend our decision on a few grounds. We argue that while many major theoretical strands in IR, as discussed above, have all examined the nature and scope of interconnection to some degree, albeit in a mostly implicit fashion, the term interconnection has so far been used interchangeably with other processes like globalisation and interdependence, and is therefore treated as an integral part of these (rather traditional) theorisations of the international. We wish to move beyond such established and often particularistic uses of interconnection. Indeed, we wish to suggest that the concept might allow us to simultaneously 'break apart' and not just consolidate how the international has been made in interconnections. As Amy Niang's analysis of racialised interconnections underpinning the international via the history of slavery and migration shows, or as Oliver Kessler and Marc Lenglet's critique of the hidden spatiality of our ways of trying to make sense of digital technologies demonstrates, the Special Issue pieces show that by being interested in human interconnections in an open and dynamic way, we can also break apart traditional IR notions and make new thoughts possible about how politics might unfold in the twenty-first century. The human interconnections of climate change, digital technologies and migration are not reducible to the interconnections of globalisation debates.

For the concept to gain greater analytical purchase, however, and not be subsumed under other established concepts, it is imperative to emphasise the open-endedness and fluidity of human interconnections as conceived here. To move towards such a more open-ended notion below, we first rehearse how certain other works in the field of IR

have used the concept of interconnection in a more explicit way. Thereafter we set out our more open-ended understanding and categorisation of what we may 'see' or 'ask' by being interested anew in thinking through human interconnections.

Interconnection and globalisation

Since the early 1990s, the notion of interconnection has figured prominently in accounts of globalisation, especially as an underlying process, even if the term is not used explicitly.²⁶ Despite the proliferation of related but different concepts, like interdependence, it is therefore possible to trace a series of works that deploy the notion of interconnection to understand the distinct dynamics of globalisation.²⁷ In one of the first attempts to bring the conditions of connectivity and interconnection towards the foreground, John Tomlinson builds upon earlier accounts of connectivity to highlight the concept of 'complex connectivity', which can be understood as 'the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences that characterise social life'.²⁸ Tomlinson's important contribution through this concept is the proposition that increased connectivity as a condition of globalisation is not in itself simply an observation, but a promising concept that can gain greater analytical relevance through further elaboration and interpretation.

In this respect, Tomlinson notes that complex connectivity provides an essential prism for critically assessing established notions of globalisation such as proximity and unicity. Complex connectivity accepts proximity as a key aspect of global modernity as interconnections make the world appear as more accessible and immediate, and transform human relations through time-space compression. However, connectivity, he points out, also denotes the persistence of the 'real' physical distance that still exists materially, along with the socio-political and cultural differences that persist within and between localities.²⁹ While connectivity accepts the notion of unicity as interconnections engulf different human societies into a global 'single space', this notion also cautions against treating globalisation as a one-dimensional process towards unity and uniformity, by revealing how political, economic, social and cultural differences actually become sharper exactly because humans' self-identification now takes places vis-a-vis the 'whole world' and through the increased exposure brought by interconnections.

In a similar vein to Tomlinson, Tarak Barkawi argues that interconnection is a central aspect of globalization that can be further developed as an analytical concept if it is understood as both transformative and constitutive of the international sphere.³⁰ In this respect, globalisation can be treated as a 'general term referring to relations of *interconnection* and *mutual constitution* in world politics', and can be 'potentially applicable to any era in history, not just the contemporary one'.³¹ Barkawi argues that warfare in particular is a domain that reveals the multi-dimensional and transregional character of interconnection, as well as its explanatory potential. Since warfare generates, but also works through interconnections, it can provide a deeper understanding of globalisation that is not mere re-labelling, but rather comprises a new research direction through which 'globalization draws our attention centrally and specifically to the domain of interconnection, to interactive processes and their consequences'.³² Interconnection therefore encompasses an array of relations that makes us understand 'the international' as a 'socially "thick" space' that

engulfs different human societies through major globalising processes like warfare and culture.³³ Through such processes, interconnection does not lead, as often assumed, to monolithic homogenisation but to a ‘consciousness of the world’ where human societies become aware of the progresses and failures of distant others, and imagine their own future prospects through the lenses generated by interconnection, whether through warfare, culture, the world economy or modern communications.³⁴

Interest in interconnection, then, points towards an interest in multifaceted and dynamic sets of processes. Indeed, Garrett Wallace Brown notes that a better understanding of interconnectedness can help reveal ‘the dialectic character’ of globalisation as one that involves multiple points of connection between humans and human made organisations.³⁵ The plethora of interconnections that can be identified in globalisation (and across its historical development and, potentially, its future trajectory) effectively mean that perceptions of globalisation are dependent upon the position one occupies in such interconnections. Empirically, approaches to globalisation could move away from attempts to provide a definite approach to, and definition of globalisation in order, instead, to ‘capture specific elements involved with the various processes of global interconnectedness’.³⁶

Gurminder K. Bhambra’s critique of historical sociology and its use in IR reinforces this need to think through the ‘situatedness’ of knowledge about connections. Bhambra argues that much theorising in IR and historical sociology maintains a Eurocentric view of modernity that prioritises certain types of global connections and silences others, and then elevates the prioritised global connections to abstract ideal types that are seen to operate according to their own endogenous processes, while the silenced global connections are rendered as exogenous and potentially irrelevant.³⁷ The problem here is that *only certain types of connections are constituted as worthy of a systemic theorisation, which then leads to forging universal frameworks according to which all types of global connections can be studied.*

Nevertheless, Bhambra argues that it is possible to save the concept of interconnection from such bias by acknowledging that interconnection should not, and does not need to maintain any ‘world historical center’ from which connections are generated and diffused outwards, but rather adopt a ‘connected histories’ approach that maintains a decentred conception of global interconnection.³⁸ Bhambra therefore stresses that ‘connected histories and connected sociologies, together with a recognition of “international interconnectedness”, allow for the deconstruction of dominant narratives at the same time as being open to different perspectives and seek to reconcile them systemically both in terms of the reconstruction of theoretical categories and in the incorporation of new data and evidence’.³⁹

All of these perspectives bring the concept of interconnection to the centre of attempts at making sense of the international, and help us think how interconnection, and related concepts like connectivity and interconnectedness, might be used as important concepts in the vocabulary of IR. When we take into account the time of these writings, we can also see why the context surrounding the concept of interconnection in these accounts is strongly conditioned (albeit in varying degrees) by the pre-eminence of globalisation in shaping the debates on international realities.

We think the authors above are not misplaced in their interest in the analytical potential of thinking through interconnection, but at the same time we here disassociate

interconnection from analysis of globalisation in order to stress that interconnection needs not be assumed to be driven or defined by a particular political project or process. In our attempt below at highlighting the open-ended character of interconnection, we find it is helpful to see how interconnection can be related to, but not subsumed by, globalisation but also other political processes, such as the notion of global civilisational process.

This latter notion is important to consider in this context because possibly the most focused effort in thinking through human interconnections is in Andrew Linklater's work. Here an explicit interest in human interconnections is tied, via Norbert Elias's process sociology, to a discussion of civilizing processes. Linklater seeks to show that the notion of human interconnection itself is part of the evolution of social learning processes that are created by increasing patterns of 'human interconnectedness'.⁴⁰ While Linklater cautions against unreflective use of concepts like human interconnectedness as 'grand narratives', he argues that process sociology's focus on how human relations are shaped by global interconnectedness is an important starting point for developing 'synoptical conceptual frameworks' that seek to understand how material and social forces are intertwined with global interconnectedness.⁴¹ In so doing, Linklater notes:

'any account of human interconnectedness must analyse changes in the organization of coercive power and transformations of modes of production, noting how their respective causal influence has shifted over time (where indeed it makes sense to separate them). But the investigation of material structures and forces has to be coupled with an examination of the ideational movements and ideological changes that enabled humans from different communities to orientate themselves to the demands of growing interconnectedness, and to become more adept at interacting with strangers and outsiders'.⁴²

Linklater subsequently ties human interconnectedness to what is termed the 'global civilizing process', and in this respect human interconnectedness entails two important aspects. First, human interconnectedness is a process constantly intertwined with the global civilizing process throughout human history, and in complex ways that vary. Human interconnectedness can, therefore, be traced back to the early stages of history when, through the gradual formation of 'chains of interdependence', monopolies of power were created that were characterised by 'internal pacification', the formation of market mechanisms, and social norms and organisations.⁴³ Second, and following from the above, human interconnectedness is understood as creating ambiguities, in the sense that distant communities are becoming more attuned to the suffering of distant others through 'emotional identification' (something facilitated by the technological and communications advances of interconnectedness), but at the same time, and in the absence of a world authority monopolising power, patterns of violence occasionally resurface between the principal organising units of the system, that mainly include nation-states.⁴⁴ The tensions between processes of integration and disintegration are yet to be resolved as despite the ongoing outbreaks of violence, 'the possibility of more radical measures to overcome the negative effects of further advances in human interconnectedness is apparent in the slow process of collective learning in the ethical sphere'.⁴⁵

What is particularly interesting about Linklater's development of the concept of human interconnectedness is that it provides us with a narrative of how we might hold together all of human history, and also how this human history itself emerged.⁴⁶ In this respect, human interconnectedness opens the door to greater interdisciplinarity and gives us the aim of trying to hold together multiple processes and the ways in which they evolve. This perspective also invites IR scholars to take seriously the multiple experiences of different dynamics of interconnectedness in different parts of the globe. Linklater's perspective is not one of a singular linear story of Western civilisation, but rather one that demands serious engagement with the multiple experiences that comprise human interconnectedness, thus speaking closely to the attempt to build a more global and decolonial IR.⁴⁷

We find the existing above explorations of the concept of interconnection rich and useful, in particular in their ability to bring forward the potential significance of interconnection while creating an open, interdisciplinary horizon for 'holding things together' in accounts of the international. Yet, we seek to further open the analytical horizon we think is promised by human interconnection to the point that the concept does not retain any predefined and predetermined association with particular political processes like globalisation or civilisational narratives. Such a disassociation, discussed below, emphasises the dynamic, fluid and varied character of interconnection, and how that can further expose us to different understandings of the international, and novel attempts to grapple with interconnections. These new understandings may help scholars to grapple with limits of current IR frameworks and to develop new vocabularies needed to make sense of shifts in the meaning of politics, humanity and the international (as is seen in multiple articles in this Special Issue).

In what follows, we wish to point towards this more open-ended notion of interconnection as well as to open up for the reader the rich array of interests, focal points and questions that arise for the authors here from the way in which they engaged with the notion of human interconnections.

Thinking through the human in/of interconnection

The discussion above showed that thinking through human interconnection is not alien to IR. In fact, many attempts to hold things together through related notions have been present. We wish to here suggest that human interconnection does indeed comprise a good starting point for mapping out promising avenues of future research. This is, for us, for three main reasons.

First, this is a concept that can host different forms of theoretical and empirical investigation, but still retain a core line of enquiry related to understanding the world and the international/global, and the multitude of socio-political relations that exist within a world characterised by processes of human interconnection.

Second, it does not have to presume (at least as conceived here) a particular theory or preoccupation with the international or the global, but can provide a conceptual horizon to see how the international and the global are also made, in human interconnections. It does not then necessarily reproduce established ontological focal points of IR but at the same time allows us to open them up for discussion.

Third, it allows for not just a disciplinary horizon but a potentially interdisciplinary horizon for discussion of how the worlds of human interconnection are made. Knowledge of interconnection is also recognised to be situated, which is why what we look for here is not simply a singular ‘God’s eye view’ of interconnection, but rather multiple situated knowledges of interconnections.

Yet, while we think the notion of human interconnection is productive we explicitly do not do so by offering a fixed ‘definition’ of what we understand by human interconnection, recognising that the reader may expect a clear answer to the question of ‘what exactly *is* human interconnection?’ We offer instead an open typology of possible areas of interest for exploration of human interconnections (outlined below) for two key reasons.

- (1) For us, interconnection is best conceived not as a ‘fixed’ notion with pre-defined ontological content but as a multi-character, multi-level and multi-dimensional notion able to bring to our attention dynamics implicated in each other (often in ways we have not understood). That is, interconnections we might be interested in IR or the social sciences (or indeed beyond them) can run in multiple directions, dimensions and have multiple characters.⁴⁸ They cannot be ontologically pre-determined or characterised.
- (2) For us, as pointed to also by the approaches to interconnection discussed above, we need to remember that we should speak of interconnections multi-vocally, from situated perspectives. To provide a singular definition of interconnection would go against the multi-vocality required to think interconnections in multiple, dynamic, situated dimensions. As the new literatures on relationality for example attest, how and where we think ‘relations’ or ‘connections’ matters for how we conceive them.⁴⁹

It follows that how different forms of IR enquiry – or our authors in this Special Issue – ‘operationalise’ this concept is not for us to pre-determine: indeed, it is our aim here to open the floor for different scholars to think through human interconnections in their own way, however differently relevant processes might be defined and understood.

If the notion of *interconnection* remains open for us, it is also important to note that the same goes for the notion of *human* in interconnections. Indeed, for us (and many of our authors here) the human is not at all a fixed category but a historically and dynamically forged and constructed notion – both in abstraction and in concrete.

We consider it important to emphasise this precisely because even in much of the interconnection literature there is a tendency to assume that we know what the ‘human’ is in interconnections. We emphasise precisely the opposite: that we know the human in and of interconnections very differently depending on where and when we think, act and analyse interconnections. There is an important ‘politics’ to the human in interconnection that we need to open up to, rather than ‘define away’ as many of our authors in this Special Issue so powerfully emphasise.⁵⁰ In sum, for us human interconnection is an interesting concept in part precisely because *we do not know [a priori] how the human is constituted in interconnections*: to study interconnection is to study the construction of the human. As we set out below, we can conceive of the human in and of interconnections in multiple different ways; an important insight for the future of IR scholarship.

Human in IR

We are not alone in an interest in the human: recent years have seen a remarkable rise of a new interest in the human in IR. This is motivated by (at least) two (somewhat contradictory) concerns. On the one hand, it is generated by the concern that some approaches to IR may dehumanise or side-line the human. In its focus on states and sovereigns, techniques and governance, paradoxically the human – for whom the discipline is to be constructed – disappears. For example, as Caban, Grovogui, Niang and Zambrano put it:

‘Humans built societies, institutions, and instruments to these ends, including the production of knowledge leading to security and the good and ethical life. The discipline of international relations emerges in this context as an instrument toward this end. However, from its inception to date, it seems to have paid greater attention to the institutions and instruments of deliverance of the goods. . . The human disappears from disciplinary concerns. The human disappears because of the sovereign claim of dynasties and states after them on life, its purpose, the means of its reproduction, and the terms of death’.⁵¹

One reason to be interested in the human then is that we have discovered that perhaps the field is in fact less interested in the humans it seeks to ‘manage’ the world ‘for’ than many of us thought.

Yet paradoxically some other scholars in the field also argue that at the same time, IR is also excessively human-focused. Indeed, the planet politics agenda, posthumanists and some relationalists⁵² have argued that IR is overly concerned with solving problems by and for human communities. In seeking to resolve global social problems, it fails to consider how human survival problems are in fact also non-human survival problems too and that these are all tied together.⁵³

Crucial then about the human is that its role is paradoxical, contested and yet relatively little examined. The literatures around the Anthropocene in IR highlight this: they point out that in the era of the Anthropos the human matters but also that the Anthropocene necessarily calls on us to think more carefully on how the human is structured in relation to the non-human world. The human then is, while at the centre of attention, also ‘under fire’.⁵⁴

From assemblage theorists⁵⁵ to posthumanists and critical humanists,⁵⁶ to post- and decolonial scholars,⁵⁷ many IR scholars argue that we must pay closer attention to the constructions of the human, and also the non- and inhuman. The arguments they explore call attention to the way in which constructions of the international arise from, and construct particular assemblages of human and non-human actors, but also how different kinds and gradations of (non)humanhood are implicated in how the hierarchies of the international order have been put together. They seek to excavate ways of thinking on human and non-human worlds that exceed the boundaries of the particular western imaginations of rational bounded humans.⁵⁸ The politics of international politics is also the politics of the human.

This comes through very clearly in the interventions in this Special Issue. Indeed, on the basis of the authors’ accounts, we offer here an initial – a necessarily crude but hopefully nevertheless provocative – typology of how we might think through humans in interconnections, with at least six different foci/orientations.

Human interconnections – a rudimentary typology

In order to give a sense of the varied dynamics involved in thinking through human interconnections, we start not by defining interconnection or the human very firmly but rather by putting forward a mapping of different ways of thinking human interconnection.

This mapping is not meant to be exhaustive and does not mean to foreclose how human interconnection can be thought of. It is also not meant to move against the processual and dynamic character of human interconnections as understood here; indeed several articles could be seen as sitting across these categorisations. Yet, we hope that the categorisation below – which arose from our own interpretations of how the authors in this Special Issue approached human interconnection in different ways – gives the reader a sense of why thinking through the human in, and of interconnection in multiple open-ended ways is necessary and productive for further debate in IR, and as we debate how we can approach complex ‘global challenges’.

We initially distinguish here between two broad foci of analysis of human interconnection: *human/human* interconnection and *human/non-human* interconnection. Crucially, each broad focus of analysis can be approached in *very different ways*, with important political stakes involved in how authors approach the issues. In other words, there are different kinds of interconnections around the human that the authors here perceive and their perspectives on what matters in human interconnections lead them to very different analyses of both international political dynamics and of what is required for us to think through in analysing interconnection.

Human/human interconnection can, we think, be thought of in at least three ways.

First, we can think through human/human interconnections via a manner suggestive of a rather classical liberal notion of human-to-human interconnections. Here, humans are imagined as (broadly) autonomous, equal and rational beings in interconnection with other such beings. These humans politically structure their interactions through institutions, such as states and international organisations, and engage in processes of structuring, refining and creating new forms of governance, norms and communications channels to progressively improve the lives of humans on the planet. For example, Richard Beardsworth’s analysis in this issue could be seen as broadly underpinned by such an orientation to human/human interconnection. A key concern for him is, in light of climate change science, how we can organise human/human relations in such a way as to facilitate effective outcomes needed to slow down and mitigate the effects of climate change on humans and non-humans. For him, the human potential to address climate change is embodied institutionally in a responsible and progressive state, and the main line of enquiry is to investigate what types of concerts, alliances of states, or governance arrangements, are ideally suited for materialising such responsibility towards humanity.

Second, while remaining focused on human/human interconnections, we could on the other hand focus on analysis of the power asymmetries, hierarchies, inequalities and marginalisations apparent in human/human interconnections embodied in the international order. Such a perspective would stress the ongoing and inherent contradictions in global political structures of human interactions, where the futures, prosperity and modernity of certain segments of humanity (often centred around economically and militarily advanced states, classes and organisations) are secured at the expense, but with the

participation and exploitation nonetheless, of other humans that lack the resources to restructure or overthrow this unequal order. In this respect, global structures and global processes of human interaction could be seen as often characterised by an epiphenomenal (or even hypocritical) adherence to global humanitarian norms, which only mask the underlying asymmetries that operate to reproduce the unequal structures of human interaction. In this issue, Mustapha Kamal Pasha's argument could be seen at least partially suggestive of this set of interests. He is concerned with deep continuing inequalities in how the international is put together. The colonial legacies are so embedded that they also get rehearsed in attempts by scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty to place humans back in 'nature'. For Pasha, Chakrabarty's attempt to provincialise humans in nature itself ends up drawing on a cosmopolitan universalist frame where humans become equalised and the differentiated nature of their structuring becomes hidden.

Third, we could also see a conception of human interconnection where supposed human/human interconnections are essentially dehumanising for some humans who are excluded entirely from the category of the human. The difference with the perspective above is that some humans are seen as deprived of human qualities and rights through notions and practices of neglect, indifference, ahistoricism, racism, extremism and mass-scale violence like genocide or slavery, and are not conceived as participating in the process of human/human interaction. The dehumanisation becomes part of the hidden or invisible international, and creates patterns of systematic lack of recognition, representation and participation in it. Audra Mitchell and Aadita Chaudhury's article points to the problematic dehumanising consequences for Black/Indigenous/People Of Colour (BIPOC) populations of attempts to 'save humanity from extinction'. As a result, we also come to ignore the alternative futurisms that could be mobilised to imagine different ways of addressing human/human and human/non-human co-existence challenges. Amy Niang calls into question how the category of the human is deployed in international politics by identifying parallels between the slave and the migrant, and revealing their dehumanising role in the construction of the international. She shows how established IR approaches and new forms of posthumanism both fail to grapple with ways in which the human is racialised and constructed in the international. In a slightly different way, Vicki Squire exposes the underpinnings of assumptions about differentiations in understandings of inequalities and autonomy, and how dehumanising such understandings can be.

The second broad focus of analysis of human interconnection is the human/non-human, and can also be conceived in at least three ways. First, humans can be seen in interconnection with the non-human (such as nature or technology), where the latter is conceived as a material sphere to be managed towards human ends. Often such management is in an effort to protect and benefit humans, to create governance structures that allow for securing the future of humanity (and often a particular understanding of humanity). Such an account moves beyond the human/human spectrum of interaction described above to reveal that while humans engage in ongoing struggles for modernity, equality and emancipation, such struggles unfold against the background of a non-human world that needs to also be accounted for in order for humanity to materialise a particular order of human-human interaction. Madeline Carr and Feja Lesniewska, here, propose deepening notions of governance in the context of the Internet of Things. While taking seriously the distinct challenges posed by these technologies, they also see the potential for human

communities to better manage the non-human environment. Similar to Beardsworth's contribution, they see potential, perhaps even a responsibility, for humans to manage (in this case a non-human object) through processes of governance.

Second, reversing the previous approach, some see humans as driven by non-humans. Humanity and its semblance of autonomy have been overtaken or superseded by non-human structures, processes and phenomena such as nature, technology or space. The non-human realm here possesses and exerts meaningful agency and shapes human interaction in ways that force humans to rethink and develop their global political structures and processes. The forces of the non-human cannot be grasped, at least not completely, by human knowledge and invention and, as has often become apparent, such forces have the capacity to expose the inadequacies of human organisation and even threaten the existence of humanity altogether. The degree and effects of non-human agency can vary substantially, especially when considering that such agency might be enhanced in the foreseeable future. This can be a matter of substantial debate in IR. However, the important point for this category of human interaction is that the non-human possesses meaningful agency that unfolds in an autonomous manner from human control. Oliver Kessler and Marc Lenglet note in their article how the temporality of globalised financial markets has reached a scale that current governance or political concepts – based misleadingly on spatial notions of authority and hierarchy – cannot understand or grapple with.

Third, and finally, another conception of human/non-human interconnection is one that moves away from the very distinction itself between human and non-human nature and culture. Here, 'humans' are themselves 'more' and 'less' than human, and are smeared and blurred into the ecology. Such blurring of the human/non-human dichotomy works to reveal the lack of boundaries, in terms of time and space, which are reflected in the 'development' of the non-human realm and the minimal, or even complete lack of human agency in altering or affecting the past and future trajectory of the non-human world. In a mirror image of the human/human interconnections discussed above and their embedded human-centrism, this final conceptualisation of human interconnection reaches and eventually overcomes the limitations of the human interconnection concept itself, and opens up the problematique that we might need to talk of non-human interconnection as a stand-alone concept for identifying global challenges that transcend the human 'international'. At such scale, non-human forms of interconnection precede the human and define the human. Jairus Grove's paper could be seen as suggestive of this: a kind of taking over of human by its technological transformation.

The above set of foci/perspectives, while indicative only of possibilities harboured in thinking through the complex conceptual and political dynamics of seeing human interconnections, shows that there are multiple interesting and potentially promising paths to conceptualising and critically assessing the emerging issues and challenges associated with human interconnections. Indeed, the articles in this Special Issue, illustrate the multiplicity of potential human/human, human/non-human interconnections and several of the articles could be positioned across different categories of this rudimentary typology, illustrating our argument for the need for an open-ended approach to understandings of human interconnections. Yet, the reason the above typology is, we think, helpful, even as a very crude starting point, is that it emphasises the importance in IR of having a novel conversation around *multiple* politics of the human in interconnection.

Implications for IR

There have been a number of attempts not only to take stock, but also re-direct IR in recent years. The 'End of IR' EJIR Special Issue and the blog debates around it, for example, explored the limits and challenges in presenting a coherent vision of the field at a time of considerable theoretical and empirical fragmentation of scholarship. The editors called for a new era of integrated pluralism where IR scholarship would seek to more actively work across paradigms and '-isms'.⁵⁹ But the editors of that Special Issue were not the only ones to call for a new 'idea of IR' that is dialogical and political, and displays greater pluralism, openness and humility. For example, the 'What's the point of IR' project called for such an approach too.⁶⁰ Another similar 'broadening IR' project calls for identifying the pluralism already evident, elaborating on how exactly the dialogue between theoretical and spatial divides can be realised, and promoting greater diversity not only in IR theory but also in epistemology and methodology.⁶¹ If IR diversifies its methodological tools it can strengthen its explanatory value as a social science that prioritises the 'social sources of human agency', and compete with sciences like biology and psychology.⁶² IR can also rediscover its mission in order to say something special about the 'international', which is the unique area of the discipline, such as the idea of 'multiplicity' that 'provides the deepest code of the international as a feature of human existence'.⁶³ As interesting as these attempts to re-imagining IR are, many exercises of 'stocktaking' of the discipline seem to narrate how the contemporary discipline is fragmented compared to the 'golden days' of past uniformity, therefore paving the way for what each IR theorist has to prescribe as the new way forward.⁶⁴ Moving beyond such exercises however may also be possible.

How does our perspective on interconnection fit into, contribute to, or go beyond existing calls for a more pluralistic and dialogical field? One way of moving forwards in the field might be developing 'less/more than disciplinary' approaches through umbrella concepts. Indeed, this is what we attempt to do here. We gave the authors a new canvas but asked them to reflect on 'objects' of concern for them and how they would refract them as they sought to hold together complex realities/systems. At the same time, and in part drawing on the authors' varied contributions, we put forward an open-ended notion of human interconnection and asked them to use that as a background for reflection as they set out their view on how we should hold things together.

Thus, we have asked our contributors to think along two directions: (1) 'global challenges' of concern to twenty-first century IR and their interconnections with other issues, and (2) how they relate to it through reflection on the open horizon of human interconnection. Each has chosen to focus on different questions around what we should focus on and how we should think through interconnections. As a result, they develop very different responses as to what is required from IR and in terms of politics and governance.

Vicki Squire speaks to questions around migration and specifically the limits of IR's capacity to engage the kind of knowledge needed to understand migration. Critical of the explicit and implicit non-situatedness of IR's calls to address 'global challenges' like migration, she argues that engagement with the realities of migrants from their perspectives holds the key to understanding and addressing migration. More interdisciplinary

openings and more focused attention to the multiple politics of the human are needed to think through interconnections with the subtlety and nuance required for twenty-first century IR.

Audra Mitchell and Aadita Chaudhury's focus is an analysis of the 'white apocalyptic discourses' that underpin many IR and popular narratives on 'existential challenges' such as climate change. Such attempts to 'hold things together' to motivate change in fact seek to manage and marginalise BIPOC populations and also silence Black and Indigenous futurisms as better alternative ways of rethinking politics and IR. Uncritical attempts to hold things together in universal and existential frames have effects of dehumanising, silencing and racialisation. We always speak from somewhere and for someone, even as we claim to speak for the whole of 'humanity'.

Amy Niang also speaks to the construction of the international and the human. She does so through focusing on the role of the figures of the migrant and the slave. These figures are, she argues, deeply implicated in the construction of the topographies of the international. She points out that underlying analyses of interconnections, interdependencies and relations in IR are comprising racialised and dehumanising interconnections, which neither the humanist IR nor the new posthumanist IR have adequately grappled with. Thus, she calls for a better, deeper understanding and engagement with humanism and the human in IR.

Mustapha Kamal Pasha focuses on the analysis of the Anthropocene and inequality through a conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of 'new universalism'. Pasha points to the curious sidelining of postcolonial concerns of difference in Chakrabarty's turn to planetary concerns. Pasha argues that there is a curious blindness within new universalism to the notion of differentiation. New and more nuanced intellectual resources are needed to think through the postcolonial politics of the Anthropocene.

Richard Beardsworth argues that the spectre of climate change means that we must return to thinking through the state. Instead of reorienting IR scholarship as well as political imaginations away from the state, we must instead put the role of the state at the heart of such engagement with global challenges. This means thinking through new responsibilities for states and also entails that critical theorists must avoid thinking 'past' the state as straightforwardly as they have.

Madeline Carr and Feja Lesniewska share a concern with the need to develop new governance models, but also look to bring other actors to the fore to supplement the state in managing interconnected challenges. Therefore, they seek to develop new ways of approaching the governance of the Internet of Things and do so by drawing on experiences of polycentric governance in climate governance. This approach suggests new ways of holding things together through which the managing of Internet of Things governance may thus be enabled.

Oliver Kessler and Marc Lenglet are concerned with governance of finance and new technologies, and argue that the challenge is deeper still. They argue that to address the challenges of speed and governance in global financial interconnections, deep theoretical and conceptual weaknesses of IR need to be taken on. Even relational IR has been overly 'spatial' in its conceptual capacities. How do we think through the temporality of authority and governance in twenty-first century IR?

Finally, Jairus Grove's contribution to the Special Issue challenges us to think about alternative futures and the implications of technological changes in how we produce, conduct war and communicate. He puts forward a challenging and provocative sense of the lack of necessity or centrality of the human in its varied technological interconnections. In a disturbing sense, it is not just the colonial denials of some humans and non-humans that is the issue but the very shifting of the capacities we once thought as 'human' by a technological 'machine' over and beyond us.

This conversation suggests that there is no agreement in the Special Issue on how we should theorise human interconnections, address global challenges or direct the future of the field, and the conversations on politics of the human and the politics of interconnection are rich and multifaceted. Some call for escape from the state, others a return to it, while others show how it must be rethought. Many call for serious engagement with the non-human and the human, and the politics thereof, but how they do so differs, as do the political stakes. Many are sceptical of IR's capacity to deal with the multifaceted issues and yet they also critically and also in many cases constructively seek to rewrite, reorient and reconfigure the vocabulary of key IR concepts. And without giving 'an answer' on the future of IR or the international order, they do give the reader, we think, a sense of important debates, openings and questions we must explore in the second century of the field of IR, around climate and environment, race, marginalisation, situated knowledge, inequality and silenced voices.

Overall, there may be five implications in this kind of approach to studying the future of IR. First, the collection of essays shows that we are called to, and can think across theoretical '-isms'. We can try and hold complex realities together, conceptually and empirically. We acknowledge that there has been substantial debate towards this direction already in the field, but in the face of existing global challenges (some of which are discussed in this Special Issue) we consider that the task of 'holding things together' remains a major intellectual challenge for the discipline, and continues to invite new conceptual innovations, among which the concept of human interconnection can provide a new angle of re-thinking the international and the global.

Second, thinking through human interconnection does not result in attempts to assume the 'global' whole or a 'universal' experience. Instead these articles specifically look at how the constructions of the 'wholes' or 'universal categories' such as 'humanity' are implicated in this very process of how we hold things together. Thus, the way in which Amy Niang holds together the slave and the migrant in the construction of the international is very different from the way in which state responsibility emerges for Richard Beardsworth. Yet both are interested in discussing how different forms of human interconnections can be identified across past, present and future developments in distinct issue areas like migration and climate change, and, in this way, enter into a conversation with each other.

This approach is, third, also important in that it calls for new voices, but more than that, also new kinds of general perspectives: more global or pluriversal IR. Instead of lacking in ambition to speak generally the approaches here do call for ambition to speak to interconnection, to international, to alternative futures, but without lapsing into abstract universalisms written 'from nowhere'. Even the new cosmopolitans are 'of somewhere'. Our prisms for thinking human interconnections allow for this situatedness of all attempts at general constructions to come through.

Fourth, this ultimately matters because new kinds of futures can be imagined in this view: futures from elsewhere and for others; futures for specific communities in relations with others, not just ‘global universal’ wholes, yet imagined together, *in* interconnection. As has been discussed throughout this article, the dynamic character of interconnection continues to generate multiple connections that run across various directions, and which bring humans and non-humans to face inter-related challenges if not ‘common’ problems and ‘common’ futures.

This, fifth, also feeds into how we think of central IR problems, such as how we imagine politics of governance. Much is amiss and missing in how we come to think on political imagination and governance. This is pointed to in the articles of Kessler, Beardsworth, Carr and Lesniewska, but also in Squire and Mitchell and Chaudhury. These questions are also tied up with difficult ‘theoretical’ and ‘political’ questions around politics of the human, politics of speed and politics of race.

Conclusion

This Special Issue seeks to develop a cluster of conversations about how we should hold things together in and around the field of IR and in the context of the complex global and planetary challenges facing humans and non-humans alike. From climate change to technological change, and from coronavirus to migration management, complex, interconnected issues pose important challenges for IR scholars. We have to be willing to think beyond narrow specialisms and seek and see the connections.

Yet, this is not enough: we need to also be willing to undo and think through some of our commitments conceptually, to be able to think through how the international, global and planetary challenges have come about. Important political stakes are involved in how we open up the issues and their interconnections – as indeed, we believe, the Special Issue contributions demonstrate. Politics of the human and the non-human, politics of race, politics of temporality, politics of technology, are all at stake.

Without putting forward a set of answers or even a theoretical paradigm, we put forward here an open interdisciplinary conversation around how some scholars in our field think we should hold things together as we think through how we face the complex human interconnections in the twenty-first century. We hope the reader will find it a provocative, inspiring conversation and one to which you may wish to add.

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Notes

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