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Introduction

Zealous devotees of the Buddhist doctrine of *ahimsa* (or non-harming) are reported to wear masks and strain drinking water lest they kill insects unintentionally (Amore 1996: 244). Jain monks are alleged to carry small brushes to clear the path ahead of them so they avoid killing unseen insects; they are said to refrain from lighting fires or lamps in case insects are drawn towards them and destroyed (Bowker 1975: 281–2). Even though they may seem excessively burdensome to those brought up in Western ways of life, and may also attract ridicule, such precautions merit respect as codes of conduct that display powerful commitments to avoiding unnecessary harm in daily life. Laudable though the devotion to avoiding unnecessary suffering may be as a personal ideal, the realist will stress that adherents enjoy the moral luxury that comes with freedom from the responsibilities that are linked with the public duty to ensure the security and survival of the state. In the international political domain, circumstances frequently arise where compromising far less exacting moral codes than that enshrined in the notion of *ahimsa* is inescapable. Those who believe that 'brute force has hitherto governed the world' (Wollstonecraft 1992 [1792]: 40), and will forever do so, may add that the ideal of avoiding harm is not just politically irresponsible but destined to permanent ruination at the hands of the unforgiving logic of international anarchy. From that standpoint, the duty to violate the harm principle when vital national interests are at stake will remain a critical tenet of foreign policy – as will the responsibility to outmanoeuvre and overwhelm adversaries by accumulating instruments of violence that can inflict levels of suffering that were unimaginable only a few decades ago.

The last point raises large questions about the course of human development. It is clear that the species has an unusual capacity for harmful action which is especially evident in the history of international relations, and particularly in successive military revolutions that have made the destruction of all human, and virtually all non-human, life possible. That power is no less evident in one outcome of the long journey to the human monopolization of the most destructive technologies, namely the extermination or domination of many threatening animal species. The ability to develop new technologies of harm is one reason why humans have triumphed in this way, converting themselves in the process

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from the hunted to the hunters, but increasing the dangers they pose to each other as they reduced the threats emanating from nature (Elias 2007a [1987]: 25; Goudsblom 1992: 20–3). Not only human development but also natural history and the fate of the environment have been shaped by the species' unrivalled inventiveness in designing effective instruments of harm. Creativity in that realm is as old as the species itself. Early hunting and gathering societies could not have survived without using force to defend possessions from human and non-human predators. Threats from other species declined with the introduction of technologies of harm including mastery of the monopolization of fire, an innovation that altered the nature of warfare and all subsequent human development (Goudsblom 1992). Decisive technological breakthroughs occurred as a result of warring relations between the first cities and states and then, particularly over the last five and a half millennia, in struggles between ever-larger territorial monopolies of power that increased the capacity to cause distant harm. That development has been one of the main overall trends in world history. But it does not end there. As a result of environmental degradation, societies have the ability to harm generations that have yet to be born. Whether or not the more pessimistic interpretations of the future prove to be correct, few doubt that the destruction of the biosphere on which all complex life depends is conceivable. That possibility is testimony to the species' unique power to cause harm, and evidence of how inventiveness in that domain has come to endanger its potential to direct its future development and, quite possibly, to ensure its own survival.

Advances in that sphere – most clearly in the ability to wage warfare in the heartland of enemy societies and to do so over larger territorial areas – have been amongst the most powerful features of social and political evolution. Humans have developed the ability to harm one another in remarkably diverse ways throughout their history – hence Karamazov's lament that 'no animal could ever be so cruel as a man, so artfully, so artistically cruel'. The ingenuity of humans has been to extend capabilities that formed part of their animal inheritance. The upshot has been that killing or maiming, deceiving, humiliating, or exploiting others, behaving recklessly or negligently, and responding with cold indifference to their plight have existed in all times and places, albeit in different quantities and degrees. Conservative modes of Western political theory have been assiduous in drawing attention to such features of human existence – rather more so than utopian theories of politics and, of course, those apocalyptic perspectives that hold that force or terror can have the long-term effect of purging violence from social and political affairs. That is not to argue that utopian visions should be placed to one side; it is only to suggest that no such exercise of the political imagination can ignore Freud's safe prediction that societies may never reach the point where they no longer need to guard against those who will seize any opportunity to exploit the vulnerable and to inflict harm in other ways (Freud 1939: 85).

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Considerable effort has been devoted to establishing whether or not human aggression is anchored in genetic foundations, but on one level, whether there are such underpinnings is immaterial (Pinker 2003). Humans have, if not a genetic disposition to behave aggressively, then a biological capacity to initiate harmful action which has evolved as part of the armoury of survival (but they also have the ability to learn how to curb the power to harm). How those powers are exercised depends on social conditions and circumstances most of all. Unlike predatory animals, humans can undergo cultural development that enables them to organize their interaction with a view to checking aggressive impulses and controlling the capacity to harm. Other species, including primates, do not lack such mechanisms, but they are either fixed genetically or evolve far more slowly than human cultural development. The question is how far cultural forces that have replaced biological properties as the main pacemaker of human evolution can bring the genetically-based capacity to injure under greater control (Elias 2007a [1987]: 31ff.; Elias 2007b [1992]: 125). The historical evidence appears to confirm Freud's contention that the future does not belong to societies that will eradicate the disposition to harm, even though such a condition is desirable, and may be attainable in some distant era (Freud 1939: 85ff.). The injunction to 'do no harm', or to refrain from causing unnecessary harm, will remain a central ethical dictate as long as the problem of preventing humans from injuring each other unnecessarily – whether members of the same social group or, more ambitiously, those who belong to other communities – persists. No doubt, there are more uplifting social ideals than aiming for a condition in which human beings do not harm one another without justification – though much depends on whether the harm principle is understood to generate only negative duties of refraining from injury, or entails, as some have argued, positive duties of assistance that provide the basis for more far-reaching advances in transnational solidarity. The point is that those more limited ambitions must have a central place in any vision of how humans should live together. More radical political visions cannot escape the issue of what they propose in response to breakthroughs in harming others in ingenious ways (Elshtain 1999).

None of those comments is designed to lend support to the Hobbesian perspective that 'the will to hurt' has always had a greater impact on social evolution than have acts of charity and kindness, commitments to justice, or notions of respect for other persons (Hobbes 1949 [1651]: 25). Nor are they offered as a blanket endorsement of Adorno's contention that human history is no different from the world of nature where the dominant tendency is to devour and be devoured (Breuer 1993: 274). The disposition to cause harm exists alongside powerful efforts to check violent and non-violent action and to encourage sympathy and benevolence. It is relevant that evil acts that involve delight in causing and/or witnessing suffering constitute only a small percentage of criminal behaviour in modern societies (Baumeister 1997). But their social effects can outweigh the benefits of beneficence, if not objectively because of the actual

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incidence of violence, then subjectively by generating high levels of fear and insecurity that lead many to support extraordinary or 'emergency' measures. All human groups therefore have to protect themselves from sources of harm, but it is crucial not to deflect attention from acts of kindness and commitments to justice, or to devalue political projects that aim to extend solidarity between members of the same society and, more adventurously, between those who belong to different communities.

Some of the seemingly more prosaic, but remarkable, features of social life are worth noting at this point. Not even the most violent societies can function without child-rearing practices that place constraints on the carers' ability to harm, while encouraging positive values of love and affection. But such necessities require limited applications of the higher virtues. The latter have rarely governed the conduct of relations with outsiders that include subordinate groups in the same society and, crucially as far as the present work is concerned, the members of other groups. But they have not been wholly absent either. Patterns of harmful behaviour must be understood alongside measures to prevent, alleviate or eradicate suffering that have existed in all societies, and which have influenced, though usually to a lesser extent, their relations with the wider world. The fact that most humans share basic mental and physical vulnerabilities, and depend on others to care for them at various points in the life-cycle, has great significance for how they might organize relations between societies. Such common vulnerabilities provide the foundation for trans-cultural support for the ideal of eradicating unnecessary harm from world politics – or the grounding for shared beliefs that have proved elusive when the preferred starting-point has been the quest for a potentially universalizable notion of the good life. The process that societies need to undergo is therefore clear. Separately, societies face basic moral questions that are not easy to answer, and which arouse heated controversies about how to distinguish between harms such as methods of punishment that are essential for the preservation of society, and harms such as cruelty, exploitation and so forth that exceed what is strictly necessary for their survival. Similar difficulties arise in the context of rising levels of global interconnectedness where the parallel task is deciding the forms of harm that are essential for world society to function and the forms that are inhumane, superfluous and eradicable. The political challenges are eased by focusing on obvious points of solidarity between strangers.

Since the Enlightenment, many social and political theorists have argued that the highest political goal is to end needless suffering in line with what has been called the 'affirmation of ordinary life' (Taylor 1989: 13–16, 209–302). Marx's thought is especially significant because his emancipatory project included support for universal cooperation to liberate all people from unnecessary harm, insecurity and suffering as part of a larger political quest to create the conditions that facilitate the expansion of individual and collective freedom. That remains one of the great visions of politics, notwithstanding the catastrophic failures of

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Marxism in practice. Certainly, the achievements that the medical sciences have made in conquering or easing pain that would have ended or crippled life in earlier epochs have demonstrated that, in some respects, the more prosaic elements of the Marxian ideal are more achievable than ever before (Marx made the same point with respect to famine and economic misery). It may be that the vision of a world in which harm is greatly reduced is taken more seriously now than in most previous epochs, not least because of the influence that liberalism and socialism, the two principal heirs of the Enlightenment, have had on the 'civilizing process' in modern societies. What is not in dispute is that the condition in which all people closely monitor their behaviour in order to avoid unnecessary harm would be 'a very advanced form of human civilisation' indeed (Elias 2007a [1987]: 141) – as would a global political order in which most people are linked by a common desire to progress together in that general direction, however uncertain they may be about how to realize that ethical ideal, or unsure about the precise implications of their joint commitment. No civilization has succeeded in raising itself to such levels of eradicating force, and it is possible that no future civilization will succeed where others have failed (Toynbee 1978). But for the reasons given earlier, the remoteness of a state of affairs in which all people are linked by the ambition to prevent or reduce unnecessary harm does not justify abandoning this, the most realistic and realizable of cosmopolitan ethical ideals.

The purpose of this work is to reflect on core theoretical issues that surround any effort to understand the problem of harm in world politics. As its title indicates, the commitment is to theorizing harm and not to developing a theory of harm. The objective is to lay the foundations and prepare the way for future work. A second volume will connect the following exercise in theorizing harm with reflections on different states-systems in the West. A third will broaden the perspective to consider the problem of harm in world history. A central aim of the overall project is to understand whether, or how far, the modern world has made progress in making harm a key moral and political question for humanity as a whole – and, more radically, whether Enlightenment ideals have made sufficient inroads into the 'barbarism' of world politics to justify the claim that the modern states-system has succeeded in forbidding actions that were permitted in earlier times. The main features of perspectives that warn against the dangers of inflated claims about the special character of modernity are well-known. Especially important is the contention that one of the great illusions of the epoch is the belief that humanitarian sentiments have come to enjoy unusual influence on human affairs. Belief in growing humanitarianism has been interpreted as an exercise in constructing flattering self-images that critical social theory must expose (Foucault 1979). The aim has been to undermine modernist conceits anchored in arbitrary and self-satisfying dichotomies between the progressive nature of contemporary social life and the grotesque violence and cruelty of earlier epochs. That critique has raised intriguing debates about the 'progressive' nature

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of modern societies, but the disputants have rarely tried to settle their disagreements by engaging in the comparative analysis of different historical epochs. The resulting challenge is especially acute in International Relations where there has been little historically-informed discussion of whether, and how far, the modern states-system remains trapped in the age-old quest for power and security, as neo-realists contend, or has undergone progressive development in morally significant respects as, for instance, many contemporary liberals believe.

Reference has been made to the problem of harm in human affairs, and some further comments about that expression are needed before proceeding further. The term is designed to stress that the need to control the power to harm is a universal feature of social existence. All societies have had to deal with the harm that members can do to each other, not only through direct physical violence but also through damage to institutions and the natural world (not to mention the separate category of harm to the self). Some caution is necessary here because this tripartite division is a modern invention, possibly first suggested by Freud (1939: 28). The taxonomy may be perfectly intelligible to all societies, but most groups over the millennia almost certainly did not classify harm in that way but emphasized, for example, the greater danger of offending, or in other ways harming, supernatural or spiritual forces that were assumed to govern, or stand in judgment of, human affairs. It is clear that many societies have believed that harm to supernatural beings is the most serious injury of all, and that harm to other people or to the self has to be viewed as part of a larger struggle to resist evil or defeat satanic forces. No sociology of harm conventions can ignore the extraordinarily diverse ways in which societies have understood harm and the various justifications that have been advanced for inflicting harm, just as no sociology can neglect the ingenuity of the species in creating new ways of making others suffer. Yet the stress on cultural diversity can be pressed too far, as occurred in much post-Second World War anthropology where the well-intended ambition of escaping ethnocentrism led to an emphasis on social differences that deflected attention from properties and problems that all societies have in common (Brown 1991). Harm conventions have precisely that quality since they address challenges that are part of the universal grammar of social life.

The universality of harm conventions exists on several levels. Every functioning society must possess some concept of harm in an inventory of moral concepts that addresses the problem of how to regulate human behaviour; all societies must distinguish between serious and trivial harms, and between permissible and prohibited harm. Systems of punishment often provide insights into how core distinctions are drawn: they express the dominant beliefs about what is harmful to people and society, and about what is justifiable as opposed to cruel punitive action. The place of such beliefs in the moral grammar of societies cannot be understood in isolation from the power hierarchies that explain unequal vulnerabilities to harm and the uneven distribution of security, and

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which invariably lead to perceptions of injustice, and can cause civil unrest or violent conflict in the most extreme cases. The problem of harm is compounded by the politics of decision-making structures – and specifically by often socially divisive questions about where the ultimate authority for creating harm conventions lies (and about the protocols and procedures that should restrain the governing social strata). All of those features of social structures are mirrored in everyday life. Through routine socialization processes, every society must make infants aware of their capacity to cause harm (and therefore inculcate socially relevant concepts of agency, responsibility, shame, and so forth), and they must gradually lead them to the realization that other people are independent centres of experience with the ability to feel pain and to suffer (Aronfreed 1968: 68ff.; Hoffman 2000). The routines that promote the internalization of the social standards that govern the dominant conceptions of responsibility to others will reflect broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion in society, not least by reflecting and reproducing more general beliefs about the groups that have the greatest entitlement to be protected from significant harm and the strata whose interests count for less, or are simply ignored.

Enough may have been said to support earlier claims about the universality of the problem of harm. All that is assumed is that every society has to find ways of protecting vulnerable humans from harms that may shorten or disfigure their lives. For that reason, the dominant harm conventions can be the subject of comparative inquiry. It is possible to analyse the development of any society to ascertain how far, if at all, harm conventions changed over time. It is feasible to compare different societies at a precise moment in their life-cycle, or over long-term intervals, in order to cast light on the enormous range of harm conventions and to identify similarities. The same holds for relations between societies. It is possible to ask how far different conceptions of the problem of harm, different strategies for curtailing harm, and different levels of success existed in different stages in the evolution of any states-system (or how far continuities existed across all periods). The same questions can be asked of all known international systems. It is possible to compare specific phases in their life-cycle, and to compare long-term patterns of development, with the aim of understanding the dominant views about permissible and forbidden behaviour, and in order to identify any common trends. Whether there were similar trajectories, whether moral concerns about unnecessary pain and suffering shaped their evolution, and whether the constituent parts cooperated to reduce or eliminate forms of harm that were widely held to be unjustifiable or reprehensible – those are central questions for this mode of sociological investigation.

The last few comments about a comparative analysis of harm conventions may give the impression that domestic and international politics can be regarded as autonomous spheres of action. But that is not the intention. Separating those spheres has been an obstacle to understanding one of the central processes in human history – how all societies have become more closely interconnected

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over the millennia, but never more so than in the last few centuries, and at an ever-accelerating rate in recent decades. One might hope through studying the problem of harm in world politics to shed some light on the social and political evolution of humanity as a whole, and to place current global developments in an appropriately broad historical context. It might be surmised that certain patterns recur. In general, lengthening webs of human interconnectedness have almost always been superimposed on parochial moral codes that privileged the interests of insiders, or the needs of the most powerful or high-status groups. Sectional interests have shaped the patterns of global interconnectedness or they have tried to bend them to their cause in ways that have often generated resistance. The perennial question has been whether the dominant strata had the desire (or were forced or persuaded by vulnerable groups and those who claimed to represent them) to establish cosmopolitan harm conventions that had the purpose of protecting all people from unnecessary harm, irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity, citizenship, class, race, gender, sexual orientation and so forth.

That has usually been a normative ideal rather than a determining influence on political practice. More often than not, societies have struggled to develop broader frameworks of thought and action that keep pace with extended webs of interdependence that make it easier for some groups to cause harm over greater distances (Sherratt 1995). Responses to such dangers that build solidarities based on the widespread aversion to pain and suffering have not been the historical norm. Certainly, the world religions often took the initiative in promoting more inclusive solidarities, but invariably limited their scope by creating distinctions between believers and non-believers – between the faithful and heretics or apostates. That recurrent problem exemplifies the more general failure to create principles of co-existence that seem just from the perspectives of all those who have been forced to live together. The history of empires reveals that colonizers rarely strained to ascertain whether their social standards were appropriate for organizing relations with cultures that they might stumble across. As a general rule, they arrived in distant places with an uncontested faith in the superiority of their values and way of life, and treated vulnerable outsiders accordingly. In the same way, following first contact with each other, egocentric civilizations relied on their parochial worldviews to decide how to conduct a new web of relations. The interesting question has been whether they could devise, or felt obliged to work towards, more detached worldviews that could enable them to co-exist as equals (Bull and Watson 1984). Rising levels of global interconnectedness have always raised the issue of whether societies can find common moral and political ground when forced to live together in such haphazard or coercive ways. The earlier query about whether the modern states-system is distinctive leads to the question of how far its constituent political units have made advances in establishing 'transcultural principles' that eluded earlier world orders (Watson 1987: 152).

That question can be rephrased to ask how far cosmopolitan harm conventions have influenced the evolution of international systems, and whether such

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conventions helped bridge the gulf between parochial moral codes and lengthening social connections. International societies have been the highest 'steering mechanisms' that have developed thus far for organizing relations between largely autonomous communities; they have been the arenas in which possibilities for agreeing on global harm conventions can be explored. But as with relations within societies, so it has been with relations between them. All such orders have faced the problem of violent harm. They have had to distinguish, insofar as they could, between harmful actions that are widely thought to be acceptable (the use of force in self-defence, for example) and reprehensible harmful behaviour that should be removed from external relations, wherever possible. They have done so in a hostile or uncertain environment where preparations for injuring, weakening and disadvantaging other societies have been widely regarded as the inevitable consequence of the seemingly endless competition for security and survival.

The scale of the problem of harm in world politics has been documented at length by mainstream analyses of international politics. Those approaches have stressed that societies often disagree fundamentally about what counts as permissible or prohibited harm. Disputes have reflected moral and cultural differences and asymmetries of wealth and power. Unequal levels of security, and different levels of vulnerability, have compounded the problem of achieving consensus. Such factors shape the scope of any agreement about conventions that are designed to maintain order between independent communities. The difficulties are still greater when the issue is whether those associations can introduce cosmopolitan conventions that protect certain rights or entitlements that many now regard as the 'natural' possession of all persons.

To use that discourse immediately drives a wedge between the individual and the state, the implication being that the international community, or whoever claims to represent it, can stand in judgment of national governments and assert the right to be the true custodian of their citizens' interests. In the modern world, progress in that sphere has been difficult because of an unwillingness to relinquish sovereign prerogatives, but also because of disagreements about fundamental human entitlements, and understandable fears that cosmopolitan discourses will provide the pretext for occasional great power intervention in the internal affairs of smaller states, and possibly for the re-imposition of imperial authority. However, the problem of harm in contemporary world politics has acquired a quite distinctive configuration. The question of whether 'pluralist' agreements that are geared towards the maintenance of order can accommodate 'solidarist' principles that express commitments to a universal community of humankind has arisen in this states-system, and probably in no other to anything like the same extent (Linklater and Suganami 2006: part two).

Connections can be made with the 'comparative sociology of states-systems' which considers, amongst other things, ways of organizing the diplomatic

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dialogue and the means of controlling force (Wight 1977: ch. 1). Comparisons of levels of institutionalization in different states-systems indicate that contemporary international society has developed an unusual battery of practices for managing increasing levels of interdependence – diplomacy and diplomatic immunity, the contrived balance of power, the doctrine that the great powers have special responsibilities for preserving international order, as well as global institutions and public international law (Little 2000: 410; Wight 1977: ch. 1). As earlier comments about the human rights culture and humanitarian intervention reveal, the inquiry can be broadened to ask whether the sovereign members of the modern society of states have surpassed their predecessors in cooperating not only to prevent unnecessary harm to each other but also to offer protection to individuals in their own right.

The distinction between international and cosmopolitan harm conventions can clarify the point. The purpose of international conventions includes upholding rights to territorial integrity and controlling violence. In various periods, such conventions were created by autocrats for autocrats who were not influenced by the universalistic and egalitarian conviction that each person's interests merit equal consideration. Individual people may have profited from general compliance with such harm conventions, but that was not the reason for creating them. The rise of the human rights culture is instructive in this regard. Throughout its history, the modern society of states has usually combined indifference to human rights with firm opposition to humanitarian intervention. The democratization of Western societies led to pressures for the parallel transformation of global harm conventions, although, as recent debates about intervention have shown, complex practical questions remain about the relationship between national sovereignty, individual rights and 'humanitarian war'. The fact those debates exist at all is evidence of the distinctive nature of modern international society. They indicate that unprecedented levels of global interconnectedness have encouraged discussions about how far the society of states can go in institutionalizing cosmopolitan principles that uphold the equal rights of people everywhere.

The comparative sociology of states-systems has the task of understanding the relationship between international and cosmopolitan harm conventions in different historical eras. A central question is how different systems coped with the discrepancies between the then current level of global integration, the prevailing harm conventions within the constituent political communities, and the understandings that existed between them. Those conventions usually revolved around insider–outsider distinctions that made it impossible to organize human interconnectedness around the principle that the interests of all people deserve equal moral consideration. They usually failed to overcome the ambiguities of global interconnectedness – the condition in which the ability to cause harm in remote places forged ahead of any willingness to develop cosmopolitan commitments to assist distant strangers. Such ambiguities arise in particularly dramatic

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