

## A Global Public Sphere?

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### Abstract

International relations theory has been struggling to keep pace with the transforming realities of World Politics – the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of Global Terror, the growth of multimedia technology, the globalisation of trade, the swarm like anti-globalisation movements have all perforated the once reified notion of sovereignty. The ‘inter-paradigm’ debate<sup>1</sup> has characterised the discipline for much of the last 15 years, and much like the other ‘great debates’ it represents not so much a debate as a shouting match between opposing sides – one side claiming to hold the truth and the other that there is no such “truth” to be held. The purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility of a critical international relations theory as an adequate response to the transforming Global realities the World now faces. Using Habermas’ concept of the “public sphere” and of conceiving of the international (or perhaps the Global) as a sphere of communicative action. The paper is structure around two parts. It will begin with an exploration of the Public Sphere in Habermas work from its first appearance in his 1967 work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to its final formulation in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992). This exploration will be carried out in the context of Habermas’ attempt to reconcile the paradox of Critical theory – its recognition of the historicity of knowledge while claiming to be able to objectively criticise society. This aspect of Habermas’ work is important in preempting criticism from anti-foundationalist perspectives. The discussion of the Public Sphere will conclude with an examination of Nancy Fraser's critical reconstruction of the concept in order to in order to “critique actually existing democracy”<sup>2</sup>. The second part of the paper will deal in depth with the issues raised by the inter-paradigm debate for international relations theory and the contemporary shift towards Globalisation theory. The aim is to bring the critical potential of the Public Sphere (and its inherent transformative possibilities) to bear on the international/global. “Let us ask the victims of world politics to reinvent the future.....The world they would conceive would surely point to ‘justice as fairness’ more closely than the world traditionally described and explained by the academics of the powerful.”<sup>3</sup>

## The Public Sphere

Habermas' work is often seen as something of the culmination of the work of the Frankfurt School of Social theory. However as Held points out, this view of Habermas glosses over several important differences between Habermas and the other Frankfurt School theorists, and indeed between Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer themselves.<sup>4</sup> However, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere : an enquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society* (1967) clearly bears the hallmark of Adorno and Horkheimer. The method of the book is one of 'immanent critique'. As Horkheimer put it, immanent critique confronts "the existent, in its historical context with the claim of its conceptual principles, in order to criticise the relationship between the two and thus transcend them." Habermas' discussion of the Public Sphere proceeds very much in this vein. He outlines the founding of the public sphere in the salons and the free press of the eighteenth century as counter weight to Autocratic authority. It is the realm where 'public opinion' can be formed through the process of 'discursive will formation' which is the product of unconstrained and uncoerced communication. However as his historical reconstruction shows the social basis of the public sphere was limited to the bourgeoisie and, as many subsequent theorists were to point out, the male bourgeoisie at that. The restrictive social base, coupled with the commercialization of media and the increased influence of science and technology all contributed to what Habermas termed the "depoliticisation of the public sphere"<sup>5</sup> The problem then was what had constituted the Public Sphere now only constituted the technical manipulation of public opinion, through the organs of professional media and the dominance of technical elites and experts. The conclusion of *Structural Transformations* is therefore somewhat pessimistic, in that the critique of the Public Sphere appears successful, however the method of immanent critique fails to point to any possible solution.

The problem for Habermas was that the method of immanent critique while effective in highlighting the disparities between concept and reality, simultaneously undermined the standpoint of the critic. In the writings of the earlier Frankfurt school theorists – Adorno, Horkheimer and to a lesser extent Marcuse – this lead towards a pessimistic assessment of the potential for transformation in modern societies. Roderick associates this pessimism with the Frankfurt school thesis of "the disappearance of the proletariat."<sup>6</sup> Without the pivotal actors of Marxist theory, critical theory increasingly came to address either a handful of followers or humanity in general. Adorno's privileging of 'immanent critique' where the researcher looked for a

discrepancy between the concept of a subject/object and its actuality led to a relativistic outlook and ultimately to a critique of the enlightenment and Marxism itself as a product of the enlightenment in his joint work with Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Ultimately this undermined the ability of critical theory to claim a legitimate objective standpoint from which to enact criticism. “How a criticism of reason itself could proceed except by means of reason left this negative form of total criticism in a position of extreme paradox.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately Adorno embraced this paradox, hence the pessimism of his later work. The challenge then for Habermas was to regain, if not create the Archimedean point from which to carry out critique. For Habermas the resolution of this paradox lay in his theory of communicative action and in a defence of the enlightenment project. In a sense he retained Adorno’s immanent critique here, as he attempted to defend the enlightenment while still criticising its achievements to date. In other words by defending the concept, laying bare its contradictory reality and attempting to realise its potential. Or as Adorno put it “theory....must transform the concepts which it brings, as it were, from the outside into those which the object has of itself, into that which the object would, left to itself, like to be, and confront it with what it is.”<sup>8</sup> Habermas’ later work then held this tension between critique and historicity, and in some senses this tension was never satisfactorily resolved.

In its original formulation, Habermas’ public sphere was a single homogenous zone of communication populated by the emergent bourgeoisie. Who came to together as a ‘public’ to discuss the problems/needs of the community as a whole in a disinterested and rational manner. This conception of the public sphere has been criticised both by historians and other social theorists for its simplicity and apparent naivety, before turning to these criticisms in detail I will first look at Habermas’ reformulation of the Public Sphere in his later work, culminating in *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (1992). This later work, reflects a more optimistic turn in Habermas’ writing and thought, indeed his intellectual trajectory in this period can be seen as something of mirror image of that of Adorno, Horkheimer and the other Frankfurt school theorists. Bucking the trend toward pessimism and even nihilism, Habermas appears to have traveled in the opposite direction – from a pessimistic view of a public sphere dominated by commercial media and professional opinion makers towards a more optimistic view where “under certain circumstances civil society can acquire influence in the public sphere.”<sup>9</sup> In this conception of the Public Sphere, Habermas has shifted it away from the notion of Bourgeois society towards a more inclusive definition – “its [the Public Sphere] institutional core comprises those nongovernmental and non-economic

connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in society component of the lifeworld.”<sup>10</sup> The Public Sphere then operates to carry messages/opinions from the periphery of society to the political centre via the medium of Civil Society and media. Habermas cites Feminism and Environmentalism as just such formally peripheral concerns that have gained a footing in the political centre through the actions of Civil Society in the Public Sphere. Habermas distinguishes here between the ‘universal public sphere’ and the internal differentiation of Public Spheres. This in some ways is an acknowledgement to his critics that there are in fact a multitude of publics and that Habermas’ Public Sphere, especially in its original formulation, ignored certain exclusionary practices. However, he does assert that no public can have a permanent mechanism for exclusion – “there is no exclusion mechanism without a proviso for its abolishment.”<sup>11</sup> In other words he is completely rejecting Foucauldian technologies of exclusion and instead arguing that all Public Sphere’s have the potential for self transformation. “The labour movement and feminism, were able to join these discourses in order to shatter the structures that had initially constituted them as ‘the other’ of a bourgeois public sphere.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most pertinent and indeed obvious, question is what exactly is the ‘critical’ element in Habermas’ work. *Between Facts and Norms* appears to be completely supportive of the prevailing order and as such has an anaesthetizing affect on the critical theorist. “We are in danger of forgetting why even the most democratic of the capitalist states could once have been seen as an example of ‘the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie’.”<sup>13</sup>

In light of this we turn to Nancy Fraser’s attempt to critically reconstruct the Public Sphere in her essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” Fraser, while recognising the usefulness of Habermas’ conception for the Public Sphere, highlights some of the major shortfalls of his approach, that is at the end of *Structural Transformations* we are left “without a conception of the public sphere that is sufficiently distinct from the bourgeois conception to serve the needs of critical theory today.”<sup>14</sup> In order to develop just such a conception she outlines four assumptions that underlie the Habermasian Public Sphere that are especially suspect, and suggests how these should be amended. These four assumptions are: 1) that it is possible for actors in the Public Sphere to bracket their differences in status, in other words that societal equality is not a necessary condition for free and uncoerced communication 2) that a proliferation of multiple publics is necessarily a step way from democracy rather than towards it 3) that discourse in the Public Sphere should necessarily be disinterested and that the appearance of private interests and issues is

always undesirable and 4) that a functioning democratic Public Sphere requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state.

The first assumption focuses on the accessibility of the public sphere, Habermas' account of the Public Sphere stresses that it was open and accessible to all, and that private interests related to status and wealth were bracketed within the sphere and hence the debate was disinterested and representative. However Nancy Fraser suggests that a revised historiography of the Public Sphere suggests that interaction within was "governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality."<sup>15</sup> In other words the bourgeois Public Sphere contained just those Foucauldian technologies of exclusion that Habermas denied could exist. Fraser's criticism is that by claiming that identities were bracketed, these exclusions were effectively sublimated, therefore by recognising and allowing for the role of identity in the Public Sphere critical theory can explore the ways in which societal inequality affects existing Public Spheres. Although Habermas, in his later reformulation appears to have somewhat answered this criticism by recognising that barriers can exist within Public Spheres but that they cannot however be construed as permanent given their discursive nature.

Fraser's second criticism of the Public Sphere as conceived by Habermas is that it constructs a narrative of a single overarching Public Sphere as being the ideal, and thereby that the subsequent fragmentation of the Public Sphere from its Bourgeois origins represents a decline. In some ways, this criticism is a logical step from the first in that, given that societal inequalities affect access and effectiveness within the Public Sphere, then it is logical that alternative spheres of communication should arise within which those who are marginalized/subordinated can put forward counterdiscourses to the prevailing consensus. These 'subaltern counterpublics'<sup>16</sup> allow marginalized communities to recast their own identities and thereby increased their effectiveness in official Public Spheres. In this sense Fraser argues that a proliferation of such 'counterpublics' represents very much a shift toward true democratic freedom rather than away from it. Linked to this account of 'subaltern counterpublics' is the third criticism that the rise of private interests in the Public Sphere is necessarily a bad thing. The problem here is how do we judge what constitutes a public issue and vice versa, a private one. Again Feminism is a good example here, issues such as domestic violence and sexual assault were largely ignored by the state because they were deemed part of the private sphere of the home and family. However through the operation of the Feminist counterpublic this previously private sphere was opened up and ending domestic violence became part of the common good of the Public Sphere (at least that is, in most Western Societies). The problem highlighted is that

ultimately what is public and what is private is decided through discursive will formation within the Public Sphere and therefore any a-priori delimitations may inhibit the participation of marginalized groups. Furthermore, such a redefinition of public and private is subject to an intervention in the Public Sphere by an 'interested' party such as Feminists in the example above.

The final criticism, Fraser raises of Habermas' conception of a Public Sphere is that his stressing of a complete separation of the state and civil society leads to what she terms 'weak publics.'<sup>17</sup> She highlights the growth of parliamentary democracy as an example of a 'strong public'. In other words, parliaments represent a 'strong public' in that they combine discursive will formation, through the medium of debate (at least in principle) with the executive power to "translate such 'opinion' into authoritative decisions."<sup>18</sup> At question here is the relationship between the 'weak public' of civil society and the 'strong public' that is supposed to enact their opinions. In other words, how do we judge whether representative democracy is operating in the interests of the discursively formed will of the 'public' or in the narrow interests of some sub-sphere or its own parliamentary 'super-sphere'? The problem with Habermas' formulation is that it precludes the possibility of direct democracy while also neutralising our ability to critique representative democracy. The lesson from this for the international is obvious, "given the inescapable global interdependence manifest in the international division of labour within a single shared planetary biosphere, does it make sense to understand the nation-state as the appropriate unit of sovereignty."<sup>19</sup>

Before turning to a discussion of IR theory and the role a critically reconstructed theory of the Public Sphere could play in it, let us recap on the Habermasian Public sphere and why it represents a potentially fruitful critical tool for the budding theorist of IR. First and foremost, the Public Sphere was initially conceived as an ideal type, the actualisation of the concept of the public in Bourgeois Ideology. It was constructed in order to critique the way in which apparently liberal and open institutions actually conceal relationships of power and domination. The concept was rehabilitated in Habermas' later work which seemed more optimistic in its evaluation of the Public Sphere, which by now had moved away from its exclusive bourgeois (and masculinist) origins towards the open and free formed Civil Society of late capitalism. However this later argument led Habermas toward a conservative complicity with the status quo, as Hill and Montag note "Habermas was compelled by the force of his own argument to support the massive prolonged war against Iraq by what were once called 'Imperialist' States."<sup>20</sup> However the critical scope for the Public Sphere is not wholly diminished, rather by acknowledging and incorporating the critical reconstruction of the Public Sphere by Nancy Fraser,

we can use the concept to critique actually existing democracy and by extension, we can critique the actually existing 'international'. And to this question we now turn.

### **The Global**

The problem with attempting to grapple with some of the perceived problems with International Relations theory is that there is no real firm foundation with which to grapple. Therefore most, if not all, general discussions of theory are required in some sense to reinvent the wheel, to draw out the history of IR theory and to situate themselves in the contexts of the 'Great debates' and to choose to nail ones colours to the mast of one the three traditions as outlined by Martin Wight, and of course, if time and space permit, some mention should be made of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. As though the problems of the international realm in the twentieth and twenty first centuries can be traced back to the machinations of European autocrats that brought to an end the Thirty Years war. It should suffice to say that this particular discussion situates itself in the aftermath of the 'Third debate', characterised by Banks as the inter-paradigm debate.<sup>21</sup> In essence to attempt to meet the challenge laid down by Booth – "the problem of international political theory is to try to change the world through understanding it, and to try to explain the world through changing it."<sup>22</sup>

The first problem one must overcome to apply the concept of the Public Sphere to the analysis of the international is where exactly to situate the Public in the Global. In other words are we talking simply about communication between states or is there room for other actors? The problems for the state based approach is that it would mean largely accepting the view of the Realist school of IR theory. Namely that "whereas men within each state are subject to a common government, sovereign states in their mutual relations are not. This anarchy it is possible to regard to regard as the central fact of international life an the starting-point of theorising about it."<sup>23</sup> Clearly such a view would restrict the possibilities for IR theory, the notion of 'sovereign states' would restrict discussion of the international by and large to the established Western states. It would be fruitless to attempt to shoehorn the fragmented sovereignties of the Balkans or Sub-Saharan Africa into this world-view. Furthermore even in the case of relatively stable and established states the notion that they are somehow sovereign, unitary and independent actors is questionable. The growth both of international intergovernmental organisations and of non-governmental organizations from Amnesty to Al-Qaeda has seriously undermined the prime position accorded to states in the

discussion of the international. This growth of “supra-territorial” space in the realm of what has until now been known as the international has come to be known as the process of Globalisation. Scholte, for example, characterises the process of Globalisation as the “transcendence (rather than the mere crossing or opening) of borders.”<sup>24</sup> This growth of Transnational space has eroded the dichotomy of the political and the international that marked the approach of traditional IR theory. Globalisation therefore calls for a more open ended and flexible definition of actors in the ‘Global’ than the traditional conception of sovereign states in ‘a state of nature’. The contention here is that the concept of the Public Sphere may point toward a suitable definition. However, before turning to the specifics of a potential Global Public Sphere, we must first consider the relationship between communicative action and the international.

“To regard the world of ‘international relations’ as a text, therefore, is to enquire into the style of its scripting, to reveal the way it has been mediated by historically specific scripts governing the interpretations through which it has emerged.”<sup>25</sup> If we identify the realm of International Relations as a text, as Shapiro suggests we should, we can then turn a critical eye towards the privileged forms of representation within that realm. Seen as a text, action within the international is inherently communicative, aimed at legitimating and reproducing itself. Therefore, rather than attempting to analyse the ‘facts’ of the international as some sort of objective data set, as the behaviouralists of the second debate would have us do, the critical theorist can recognise both their historicity and their contingency. However, this problematising of the international throws up the same paradox the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer faced – if the historicity of knowledge is recognised then how can the critic claim to step outside his own historical being in order to analyse the actions of others. While accepting our own historicity, the multiplicity of Public Spheres in Fraser’s critical reconstruction allows to forge some way forward. In other words, in critical theory by recognising the historicity of her own knowledge the researcher proceeds reflexively questioning both the object of inquiry and her own prejudices and understanding. In the global Public Sphere we can proceed then by critically comparing the dominant Public Sphere i.e. that one dominated by the discourse of major powers with the counter-Public spheres of the disenfranchised, such as NGO’s representing various issues, organisations such as the group of 77 developing countries, and even the murky spheres of International Terrorism such as Al Qaeda.

A major problem for the characterization of the Global as a set of Public Spheres is that Habermas himself, regarded constitutional democracy as a something of a necessary prerequisite of an active and effective Public Sphere. As he puts it himself in a discussion paper on the need for a European

constitution; “Democratic legitimation in complex societies derives from the interplay of institutional consultation and decision-making operations with informal, media-transmitted, opinion formation processes within a public sphere of communication.”<sup>26</sup> It is the institutional and decision-making strands of this sentence which are problematic when transposed to the global where no such institutions exist. The closest approximation would be the UN. However, the UN is especially susceptible to the criticism of being a formally open and equitable institution that is de facto dominated by a small but powerful majority through the institutional arm of the Security Council. Brunkhorst suggests that the Global Public falls under the category of a weak public in that it is a “public sphere enabled by the existence of basic rights [such as the UN charter] as soft or hard law.....a public can only be weak, having some moral influence loosely coupled with administrative power.”<sup>27</sup> This characterization would seem to adequately reflect the current state of play within the UN where the modus operandi is one of representative democracy, albeit though the representation is unequally distributed and in the case of the 5 permanent members, non democratic. Thus given the institutional constraints, it would appear that the Global Public Sphere is interminably weak. Der Derian relates the weakness of the Public in Global affairs to the perpetuation of ‘expert analyses’ and hence the dominant text of the International. “That will not change, the cycle [of terror and counter terror] will not be broken, until a public rather than expert assessment is made of what distinguishes new from old dangers, real from virtual effects, terror from counter-terror – and whether we are then ready to live with new levels of uncertainty about those very distinctions.”<sup>28</sup> Although the global public is very much a weak one in the Habermasian sense, conceptualising in the Global in terms of Public Sphere does allow us to problematise the International in an innovative and effective manner.

Furthermore, the definition of actors in the public sphere as autonomous and overlapping publics could prove a more fruitful definition of actors in the Global Sphere than more traditional concepts of sovereignty and nationality. The question of identity has dogged IR theory for several decades now, the problem being, as characterised by Eric Hobsbawm that “that men and women do not choose identities as they would a pair of shoes – knowing they can only wear one at a time.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore much of IR theory has remained at the level of examining the interaction between states, a position most doggedly adhered to by the neo-realists. A position well summed up by Waltz – “Each state pursues its own interests, however defined, in ways it judges best. Force is a means of achieving the external ends of states because there exists no consistent, reliable process of reconciling the conflicts of

interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy.”<sup>30</sup> This characterisation of the international in terms of a state of nature between homogenous and sovereign states clearly does not allow for the fact that in many cases in the current climate it is often governments operating in tandem against the actions of their own citizens that characterises the Global realm as in the case of anti-globalisation protests and even more so in the case of the war on terror. In this case the concept of interacting, overlapping and autonomous publics proves invaluable in understanding how misrule and oppression in Saudi Arabia leads to close to 3000 deaths in Manhattan to 1 million in London’s Hyde Park protesting against their own governments policy to the overthrow of a minor dictator in the Middle East.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to outline the Habermasian concept of the Public Sphere, its critical reconstruction by Nancy Fraser and the relevance of this reconstruction to theoretical approaches to understanding the Global in the twenty first century. The underlying purpose has been to highlight the need for a re-engagement with the critical imperative of theory. In other words that the job of the academic and expert is more than producing technically applicable knowledge or objective descriptions of the Social. As students of humanity and society we need to recognise our roles as actors in the very areas we seek to understand, and we need to reflexively evaluate our contributions and our objectives. In terms of understanding the Global, the concept of a multiplicity of Public Spheres constituted by autonomous and overlapping publics could prove invaluable. The challenge then is to apply this theoretical frame to real world cases of conflict. The other option is to bury our heads in the sand and to treat the international as an unchanging realm of sovereign states bouncing off each other as billiard balls. Perhaps the most worrying thing is that some of our ‘experts’ are doing just that. “Terrorist attacks do not change the two main bases of international politics or alter the condition of recurring crises”<sup>31</sup> Or to put it more succinctly, at the end of the bloodiest century in human history all we can say is “Here we go again....”

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> M. Banks “The inter-paradigm debate” in *International Relation: A handbook of current theory* ed. M. Light & A.J.R Groom (London, Frances Pinter 1985), 7-26

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Fraser “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Massachusetts, MIT Press 1992) ,

<sup>3</sup> Ken Booth “International Relations Theory vs. the Future” in *International Relations Theory Today*, ed. Ken Booth & Steve Smith (Cambridge, Polity Press 1995), 348

<sup>4</sup> David Held *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (London Hutchinson, 1980) 13 - 28

<sup>5</sup> as quoted in Rick Roderick *Habermas and the Foundations of Critical Theory* (London, Macmillan 1986) , 43

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 150

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 147

<sup>8</sup> Held , 382

<sup>9</sup> Jurgen Habermas *Between Facts and Norms* (Massachusetts, MIT Press 1992) , 373

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 366

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 374

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 374

<sup>13</sup> Mike Hill & Warren Montag “Introduction: What was, What is The Public Sphere?” in *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere* , ed. Mike Hill & Warren Montag (London, Verso 2000) 8

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Fraser “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Massachusetts, MIT Press 1992) , P112

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 119

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 123

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 134

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 135

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 136

<sup>20</sup> Hill & Montag , 7

<sup>21</sup> Mark Hoffman “Critical Theory and the Inter-Paradigm Debate” , *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* 16 No.2 (1987) , 231

<sup>22</sup> Booth , 347

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<sup>23</sup> Hedley Bull “Society and Anarchy in International Relations” in *International Theory: Critical Investigations* ed. Der Derian (Basingstoke, Macmillan 1995) 75

<sup>24</sup> Jan Aart Scholte “Global Capitalism and the state” , *International Affairs* 73 No.3 (1997) , 427

<sup>25</sup> Michael J. Shapiro “Textualising Global Politics” in *International/Intertextual :Postmodern Readings of World Politics* ed. James Der Derian & Michael J. Shapiro (New York, Lexington 1989) 12

<sup>26</sup> Jurgen Habermas *So why does Europe need a constitution?* 2001 <<http://www.iue.it/RSC/EU/Reform02.pdf>>

<sup>27</sup> Hauke Brunkhorst “Globalising Democracy without a state: Weak Public, Strong Public, Global Constitutionalism” , *Millenium Journal of International Studies* 31 No. 3 (2002) , 679-80

<sup>28</sup> Der Derian in Booth & Dunne 2002 P115 need full reference

<sup>29</sup> Hobsbawm 1989 need full reference

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York, Columbia University Press1959) , 238

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz “The Continuity of International Relations” in *Worlds In Collision :Terror and the Future of Global Order* ed. Ken Booth & Tim Dunne (Basingstoke Palgrave 2002) 353

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