

P A R T II

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**IMAGINING THE
DISCIPLINE**
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CHAPTER 2

THE STATE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

DAVID A. LAKE

THE state is central to the study of international relations and will remain so into the foreseeable future. State policy is the most common object of analysis. States decide to go to war. They erect trade barriers. They choose whether and at what level to establish environmental standards. States enter international agreements, or not, and choose whether to abide by their provisions, or not. Even scholars who give prominence to domestic interests or non-state actors are typically concerned with understanding or changing state practice. International relations as a discipline is chiefly concerned with what states do on the world stage and, in turn, how their actions affect other states.

Correspondingly, states are a common unit of analysis in theories of international relations. Many analysts focus on states and their interactions to explain observed patterns of world politics. The state is fundamental to neorealism (Waltz 1979) and neoliberal institutionalism (Keohane 1984). It is also key in many constructivist and English School theories (Bull 1977; Reus-Smit 1999; Wendt 1999). Even critical, postmodern, or feminist theories, which have arisen in opposition to existing forms of social power and are discussed elsewhere in this volume, often focus on deconstructing states and state practice.

Both as the object and as a unit of analysis, international relations is largely about states. The state is, thus, an indispensable component of theories of world

politics. This chapter first reviews the rationales behind state-centric theories of international relations. The second section examines criticisms and probes the limits of state-centric theories. The third section identifies three promising areas of research within state-centric theory.

1 WHY STUDY THE STATE?

All theories are based on simplifying assumptions intended to render a complex reality explicable. Theories are typically grouped into families or paradigms by their shared assumptions.¹ In making simplifying assumptions, analysts place a methodological “bet” on the most useful way to capture the essence of the phenomenon they wish to explain. These are bets because the assumptions must be made before the implications of the theory are fully explicated and tested.² Scholars can work for years or possibly generations building from a set of assumptions before they know whether their bet will pay off by providing a powerful explanation of the desired phenomenon.

State-centric theories of international relations assume that states are the primary actors in world politics. Theorists working in this tradition do not deny the existence of other political units. As Kenneth Waltz (1979, 93–4) writes, “states are not and never have been the only international actors . . . The importance of nonstate actors and the extent of transnational activities are obvious.” Rather, the claim is that states, and especially great powers, are sufficiently important actors that any positive theory of international relations must place them at its core.

Scholars making this assumption are betting that a focus on states will yield parsimonious yet empirically powerful explanations of world politics. Central to this bet is a hunch that the parsimony or theoretical elegance derived from an emphasis on states will outweigh the loss in empirical richness that comes from including a broader range of actors. One’s evaluation of state-centric theory rests, in part, on how one assesses the inevitable tradeoff between theoretical elegance and empirical power. This is a subjective choice over which reasonable scholars can disagree.

In addition to parsimony, there are at least three additional reasons why some scholars expect state-centric theory to be a good bet. First, states may possess, or be plausibly understood to possess, a national interest. A national interest can be reasonably assumed to exist when society has relatively homogeneous policy

¹ On assumptions and paradigms, see Kuhn (1970). On paradigms in international relations, see Elman and Elman (2003).

² On methodological bets, see Lake and Powell (1999, 16–20).

preferences or has internalized certain norms as appropriate. Alternatively, despite variation in preferences and norms between individuals or groups, a national interest may still plausibly exist when states have domestic institutions that aggregate individual or group attributes into a coherent collective ordering.³ In both cases, analysts can safely abstract from the pushing and hauling of domestic politics and assume the state is a unitary entity with a collective preference interacting with other similarly unitary entities.

In realist theories, the national interest is assumed to be state power (Morgenthau 1978), and in neorealist theories it is assumed to be state survival, at a minimum, or power, at a maximum (Waltz 1979). Survival is understood as a primordial goal that is necessary for the pursuit of all other political ends. The drive for power stems from human nature (Morgenthau 1978, 36–8) or the state of nature that characterizes the international system (Mearsheimer 2001, 32–6), but in either case it is instrumental for achieving other ends within the political arena. Since survival or power occurs at the level of the nation or society, these assumptions about the goals of politics lead to the further assumption that states are the appropriate unit of analysis in theories of world politics. Similarly, constructivists see norms as widely shared by domestic publics or embodied in a set of domestic institutions that then define a state's social purpose (Reus-Smit 1999; Ruggie 1996; 1998; Katzenstein 2005). Although constructivists largely treat them descriptively, it is the fact that norms are broadly held that allows such beliefs to be considered as historically contingent but nonetheless national interests. Other theories posit more context-specific national interests. Nuclear deterrence theory, not implausibly, presumes that everyone wants to avoid annihilation. Likewise, we can posit that nearly everyone benefits from freedom of the seas or stopping terrorism.⁴ When it seems reasonable to assume that citizens possess relatively homogeneous interests or norms, it is then a convenient analytic short cut to treat states as unitary actors.

Secondly, even when they lack a plausibly construed national interest, states are authoritative actors whose duly enacted policies are binding on their citizens and thus regulate how individuals and the collective interact with other similarly bound societies. As sovereign entities, states possess ultimate or final authority over delimited territories and their inhabitants. Once a policy is enacted, the decision is binding on all citizens. If a state raises a tariff, all its citizens are affected by the higher price for imports, whether they support the tax or not. If a state declares war on another, all its citizens are belligerents, regardless of whether they personally

³ Domestic institutions do not guarantee the aggregation of individual preferences into a stable collective preference. When individual preferences are socially intransitive, no non-dictatorial institution can ensure a stable equilibrium (for an overview, see Schwartz 1987). Even if institutions induce an equilibrium (Shepsle 1979), these same institutions will be contested, with actors cycling through different institutions that privilege one or another outcome (Riker 1980). Despite these difficulties of collective choice, most states most of the time do not cycle through alternatives.

⁴ As these examples suggest, public goods affect individuals in broadly similar ways (depending on individual preferences) and will often have a “national interest” character.

support the war or not. Just as states pass laws that bind their citizens at home, they also act authoritatively in ways that bind their own citizens in relations with other states. This is the analytic foundation of the adage that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” Given their internal hierarchy, it is again reasonable to treat states as unitary actors when interacting with other similarly hierarchical states.

A key assumption of Westphalian sovereignty is that authority is indivisible and culminates in a single apex (Hinsley 1986, 26; Krasner 1999, 11). Whether sovereignty is vested in a hereditary monarch or the people, there is an ultimate or final authority within each state. This is not to assert that states possess the ability to regulate all the possible behaviors of all citizens (see below), only that there is a single point where, in President Harry Truman’s classic phrase, “the buck stops.” States may, of course, differ in how they aggregate the interests and norms of their citizens. In autocratic regimes, a small group of elites may set policy for all. In more democratic states, representative institutions incorporate the interests and norms of voters into policy. But, regardless of what type of regime exists, citizens are bound by the policies enacted by their governments.

It is this ability to bind their societies that make states virtually unique in international relations. However active a non-governmental organization may be, it can claim to speak only for its members and, perhaps, for universal principles of justice or human rights; it cannot bind others through its actions, including its own members who join only in voluntary association. Because of their unique status as authoritative actors, and their ability to act on behalf of their citizens, it follows that states are central, more important actors than others, and thus oftentimes appropriate units of analysis in international politics.

Finally, theories of systems-level processes naturally assume states as units of analysis, especially when such processes affect states as states. Theories that include international evolutionary processes that select on certain unit attributes or reward behaviors by units differentially, logically, and pragmatically assume those units are central actors (Kahler 1999). States that fail to balance against other states rising in power, Waltz (1979) hypothesizes, will be eliminated or “selected out” of the international system. Theories of systems-level processes are, at present, most highly developed by systemic constructivists, who posit that socialization or legitimation occurs at the level of the state within a society of states (Wendt 1994; 1999; Finnemore 1996; 2003). Going beyond states as relatively homogenous or authoritative actors, they theorize a systems-level process of diffusion and interaction that shapes the normative understanding of states about the nature of the society they comprise.⁵ In this view, as Wendt (1992) famously observes, anarchy is what states—not individuals, groups, or transnational advocacy networks—make of it. The existence of states is not theorized explicitly, and thus systemic constructivists

⁵ Holistic constructivists agree that socialization occurs at the systemic level but do not assume that it occurs strictly at that level (Price and Reus-Smit 1998, 268–9).

fall prey to Richard Ashley's critique of neorealism (1986) as being statist before it is structuralist.⁶ But, in focusing on and emphasizing these systems-level processes, states are understood to be shaped and reshaped *as states* by their material and ideational environment. As with any theory of systems process, it follows that states are useful units of analysis.

More importantly, to the extent that systems-level processes are significant, states and their behaviors cannot be reduced to the sum of their domestic attributes. A "bottom-up" or reductionist approach to theory that starts with individual or group preferences or norms and aggregates these desires into some national interest will not capture appropriately or fully the affect of the system on states. No individual or group necessarily has a direct interest in the systemically desirable actions that states are called upon to perform. As a result, the state as a whole has "interests" that cannot be reduced to its internal parts. This was the key insight of Waltz's argument (1959) about anarchy in the third image, but it holds more broadly for any truly systemic structure or process, including selection or socialization. For neorealists, anarchy demands attention to issues of security in ways likely to be different from the interests of either particular domestic groups or the collective interest aggregated through some set of domestic institutions (see Krasner 1978). Similarly, for all constructivists, the norms of the society of states within which individual states are socialized—even when reflecting a social purpose grounded in domestic politics—can be separate and distinct from the norms that exist within specific states.⁷ Thus, not only does the assumption that states are central actors follow naturally from an emphasis on systems processes, but, to the extent that such processes are important constraints on behaviour, a focus on states and their interactions is absolutely essential to a full understanding of international politics. If the states system really is more than the sum of its parts, then adding up the internal or domestic attributes of states will always fall short, and a systems approach focusing on states as states will always be necessary—even if systems effects are rarely if ever deterministic.

All three rationales share a pragmatic approach to theory. State-centrism is not a statement about the empirical world. No one working in this tradition is so naive as to mistake the billiard balls of state-centric theory as a description of states in the real world. Everyone recognizes that states have rich and sometimes highly consequential internal or domestic political lives. Likewise, everyone accepts that transnational forces can affect international politics in important ways. To point out that domestic or transnational politics exists and is not captured in state-centric theory is not an especially useful criticism; most state-centric theorists

⁶ Wendt (1987) also makes this criticism, but then continues to treat states as primitives in his later writings.

⁷ This is the problem of normative entrapment, in which powerful countries seed norms at the international level, often reflecting their domestic norms of governance, but then find themselves bound by those norms. See Ruggie (1993), Price (1998), and Reus-Smit (2004).

would certainly agree. Rather, the question is how much empirical power is lost relative to the parsimony that is gained, and whether we can identify any guidelines for when state-centric theory is likely to be more or less useful and necessary.

2 THE LIMITS OF STATE-CENTRIC THEORY

State-centric theories have been widely assailed. At root, most critics are simply making alternative methodological bets; although they may believe that the rationales that underlie their wagers are more reasonable, all such claims remain unproven. In this section, I probe two valid criticisms of state-centric theories, assessing the limits they identify but also the limits of the criticisms themselves. Both point to the need for more contextualized theories of international relations.

2.1 Domestic Politics

The first and perhaps most frequent criticism of state-centric theory is that there is no such thing as the “national interest.” Over five decades ago, Arnold Wolfers (1952) famously recognized that its synonym, national security, was an ambiguous and possibly dangerous concept, more a rhetorical device used by those seeking support for particularistic policies than a real, concrete attribute of the nation as a whole. Rather than affecting everyone in similar ways, most policies are redistributive or have differential impacts on groups even in the same country. Even though global climate change, for instance, raises temperatures for everyone, and therefore might be thought of as the quintessential national interest, it will affect different groups in different countries in different ways. Likewise, policies aimed at mitigating global warming will hurt some interests but benefit others. Within each country there will be winners and losers from climate change and from every possible policy to slow or reverse it. In redistributive politics, the concept of a national interest shared equally by everyone evaporates.

This critique is undoubtedly correct. Even though Krasner (1978) persuasively argued that states do appear to pursue long-term interests that do not reflect the desires of particular groups or classes, even in the highly redistributive area of raw materials policy, many scholars today focus on domestic political interests and institutions to identify and explain more realistically what states want from international politics (for a review, see Gourevitch 2002). Different issues create and mobilize different political cleavages within societies. Countries are riven by internal cleavages—both material and normative—that mobilize individuals differently in different contexts (Moravcsik 1997). Varying political institutions serve

to aggregate alternative sets of domestic interests with different degrees of bias (Rogowski 1999). To understand what states want, this new research holds, analysts must pay focused attention to how typically competing and disparate groups are mobilized into the political process and how institutions then transform interests into policy.

Yet, this critique is itself limited in three ways. First, as above, as long as states are authoritative, their decisions are binding on all citizens. Regardless of the divisiveness of the issue, the policy, once enacted, is equally authoritative for all individuals. To debunk the myth of national interests is not to undercut the importance of state authority in treating states as units of analysis.

Secondly, in many problems of international politics, domestic politics provides only an explanation of what states want, not what they do. That is, it might explain the preferences of a society on some international issue, but it cannot explain why that society adopts the policy or gets the outcome that it does. Most interesting puzzles of international politics arise from the strategic interaction not only of groups within countries but also from the interactions of states themselves (Morrow 1999). Domestic interests and institutions may produce in some countries an interest in reversing global warming, for instance, but for most states changing their own policies will have only a minimal effect on the global climate. Achieving consequential change requires the cooperation of other countries. Knowing this, each country has an incentive to free ride internationally on the efforts of others. The result is fewer efforts at mitigation and greater emissions of greenhouse gases than is collectively optimal or desired. The strategic interactions of states remains an important part of any explanation of world politics.

Increasingly, scholars of international relations accept a division of labor—what Jeffrey Legro (1996) calls the “cooperation two-step”—in which some focus on domestic politics with the ambition of explaining policy preferences and others, taking domestically generated interests as “given,” focus on developing theories of strategic interaction between states.⁸ In the latter, the state is assumed to be the unit of analysis, not because it is natural, as in the national interest rationale, but because theorists expect that they will gain some explanatory purchase on the problem they are studying. Perhaps because economic policies have more clearly redistributive effects, international political economists tend to emphasize domestic politics in the belief that more of the explanatory “action” will lay in understanding policy preferences, whereas international security scholars tend to devote more attention to the strategic interactions of states because issues of bargaining, information, and credible commitment appear more central to peace and war (Fearon 1995; Powell 1999). But, like all theories, these are just methodological bets about where we are most likely to find interesting and potentially important insights when we shine our spotlights on an otherwise dark landscape. Thus, even if we accept the validity of the

⁸ For an effort to integrate this division of labor, see Milner (1997).

criticism that national interests seldom exist, state-centric theory may still be useful, especially when the strategic interaction of states is important to understanding how national preferences are translated into international political outcomes.

Thirdly, some state-centric theorists, in turn, question whether this “two-step” division of labor is likely to prove adequate. As explained above, reductionist and systemic theories are not just two different starting points that take the same set of attributes and arrive at the same sum, but rather identify two separate and incommensurate sets of processes that add up in very different ways. Systemic processes, to the extent that they are important, cannot be derived from within the two-step. More generally, theories that reverse the “second image” imply that the two-step will, for at least some portion of the time, yield inaccurate predictions (Gourevitch 1978). The discussion of systemic theory above focused on processes that affected states as states. But it is also clear that international factors also affect how individuals or groups define their interests, which they then seek to pursue in the domestic political arena. In an “open economy politics” approach, what groups want is determined, not by their position relative to other domestic groups, but, rather, by their relative abundance or competitive position within the international economy (Gourevitch 1977; Frieden 1988; Rogowski 1989). In turn, group strategy, including the coalitions the groups enter, may be conditioned not only by their position but also by the policy choices of other states (James and Lake 1989). Holistic constructivist theories identify similar limits. Not only do norms entrepreneurs, necessarily located within some territorial jurisdiction, organize and act transnationally in ways that change the normative environment in which states interact, but international norms themselves structure the political agenda, condition what these entrepreneurs can and cannot do, shape their political strategies, and determine when normative change succeeds and fails. Both the decolonization and anti-Apartheid campaigns, for instance, were fundamentally affected by the prior international norm of national self-determination and succeeded, in part, because the causes could be connected to this existing normative belief (Klotz 1995; Crawford 2002). Whenever the interests and capabilities of domestic actors are themselves affected by international structures, processes, and norms, the two-step that begins with domestically generated policy preferences and then adds in interstate interactions will be insufficient to capture the reality of world politics.

2.2 Transnational Relations

The second, more substantive critique of state-centric theory is that states have lost control over private (non-state) actors who can organize and move across national borders, be these cosmopolitan individuals, multinational corporations, or transnational advocacy networks (TANs).⁹ Even if state-centric theory might

⁹ For a review of this literature, see Barnett and Sikkink, this volume.

once upon a time have been a reasonable bet to explain international politics, the erosion of sovereignty and growth of transnational forces have now made this a less attractive wager (Keohane and Nye 1972; 1977).

Transnational actors entered the study of international relations in the early 1970s. Although some transnational actors, like the Catholic Church, have been present since the birth of the modern states system, the rise of multinational corporations that threatened to put “sovereignty at bay” (Vernon 1971) and the parallel rise of transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Smith and Wiest 2005) led many to question the continued utility of state-centric theory. The international political landscape is certainly more crowded with a greater variety of actors than ever before.

In the face of this criticism, some scholars simply reaffirmed their bet that state-centric theory will retain its explanatory power (Waltz 1979, 93–7). Others argued that states remain sovereign and, rather than being challenged by non-state actors, actually permit such actors to exist and exert influence on world politics. For these analysts, the question is why states acquiesce in and perhaps even encourage the growth of transnational actors (Gilpin 1972; 1975; Krasner 1995). Neither the explanatory power of state-centric theories nor the ability of states to control transnational actors, however, is likely to be constant. Rather, sovereignty and effective control have to be theorized and, in turn, explained. Doing so helps us understand when state-centric theories are likely to remain useful and relevant, and when they must be augmented or perhaps radically transformed.

Sovereignty is variable. In international relations, scholars tend to focus on the external face of sovereignty or the status of being recognized as a state by the international community.¹⁰ Recent research shows that the meaning of sovereignty and its practice has varied over time.¹¹ There is a second, “internal” face of sovereignty, however, that is more relevant to this discussion of transnational actors. Even within an external face, presumably similar for all states, the authority of states over their own citizens varies dramatically. “Liberal states” by law or custom have highly constrained ranges of authority. They have the right to regulate only certain practices by their constituents, mostly those that contribute to market failures. At the same time, they are restricted from regulating other practices—such as speech, assembly, or the press—except in extraordinary circumstances. The authority of such states is continually contested, at least at the margin, as suggested by the current debate over the rights of the government to monitor phone calls or financial transfers in conjunction with the global war on terror. “Strong states” may be no more or less autonomous than their liberal counterparts, but they possess greater authority over a greater range of behaviors, typically including some direct controls over

¹⁰ This is “juridical” or “Westphalian” sovereignty. See Jackson (1990) and Krasner (1999).

¹¹ On the changing substantive content of sovereignty, see Biersteker and Weber (1996), Krasner (1999, 2001), Reus-Smit (1999), and Osiander (2001).

the commanding heights of the economy.¹² Even though states may be sovereign relative to one another, they possess clearly different authorities over their own societies.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that transnational relations appear most fully developed and most consequential in liberal states (Keohane and Nye 1977; Risse-Kappen 1995). This is partly a function of interdependence, which creates additional “outside options” for actors, but it is equally a product of the larger private spheres of action in liberal democracies. In these countries, it may be less useful to think of private actors as escaping the authority of their states than it is to see them as enjoying a constitutionally protected sphere of autonomous action. Yet, this understanding severely qualifies the claim that states could if they wanted reassert control over private actors. Sovereignty abroad, which implies the authority to regulate transborder flows, is different from sovereignty at home, which as the dividing line between public authority and private freedoms is negotiated between the state and society. To claim new authority over, say, corporations requires renegotiating the constitutional compact that makes liberal states liberal. In determining the autonomy of transnational actors, external sovereignty is less important than the state’s internal sovereignty.

Technology is also a variable with consequences for the scope of transnational relations. It is generally assumed that new communication and transportation technologies favor transnational groups and permit them to escape state control. Even though states might have the right to regulate their behavior, this suggests that transnational actors can exploit technology to gain even greater autonomy. Thus, new technologies permit multinational corporations to develop global networks that undermine the ability of states to regulate or tax production. Likewise, transnational advocacy networks use communications technologies to bring information to light on human rights, environmental, and other practices that governments prefer to keep secret.

Yet, states are not without counter-strategies in the face of technological change. Given the design of the Internet, which requires traffic to move through particular “choke points,” and the willingness of firms to cooperate with governments in order to preserve their market access (e.g., Google in China), states have been able to impose restrictions on the content available to their citizens (Deibert and Rohozinski forthcoming). Similarly, the US government has greatly extended its authority and ability after 11 September to monitor phone calls, Internet traffic, and financial flows anywhere around the globe. Generating an ability to sift through the large number of communications they intercept each day, governments have been exploiting technology to reimpose control over transnational groups and activists. More generally, states exert extensive influence over which technologies

¹² This is a reformulation of earlier arguments about state strength; see Katzenstein (1978) and Lake (1999*b*, 42–8).

get developed, how they are used, and how they are regulated for what purpose. Technology cuts both ways. On balance, new technologies have most likely favored transnational actors, but the balance will ebb and flow over time.

The greater the autonomy of transnational actors, the more consequential they will be for international politics, and the less useful state-centric theories will be. This does not imply that state-centric theories are obsolete. Rather, theorists must now be more attuned to when non-state actors are likely to be important for the outcomes they wish to explain and when it is reasonable to focus only on the actions and interactions of states. The answer is likely to vary by issue, time, and country. The old methodological bets of state-centric theory may not produce the same returns, but they are not yet without merit.

3 FRONTIERS OF STATE-CENTRIC THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

States are important actors in world politics. State-centric theory remains useful both as a pragmatic tool and because it captures systemic effects that would escape strictly domestic or second image theories. If states and state-centric theory remain essential, what then are the most promising areas for further development? Where are the research frontiers? Since states are so important, such a survey might be synonymous with the field of international relations itself. In this final section, I highlight three research areas in which states are both the object and unit of analysis.

3.1 State Structure

As noted above, state structure conditions the possibilities and politics of transnational relations. Liberal states are more easily penetrated by the forces of global civil society, strong states are less hospitable. Globalization may be transforming state capabilities and how states and societies are integrated. State structure was a topic of vigorous analysis two decades ago. It is due for a revival.

State structure varies by how authority is distributed across political institutions (decentralized to centralized) and the degree of differentiation between state and society (low to high). Peter Katzenstein (1978; 1985) used this conception to identify “weak” and “strong” states in foreign economic policy, and then later liberal and social corporatist regimes. It was extended to non-democratic regimes in Eastern Europe (Comisso and Tyson 1986) and less developed countries (Migdal 1988). This approach was superseded by a more narrow institutionalist research program that

uses insights from American and comparative politics to study how the number of veto players, presidential versus parliamentary systems, single versus coalitional governments, unitary versus divided government, and other variations influence policy choice (Rogowski 1999). By specifying more precisely the ways in which political authority is distributed, this institutionalist literature is a significant advance, but it largely ignores the second dimension on how states and societies are differentiated. The more complete vision of state structure lives on in the varieties of capitalism literature (Hall and Soskice 2001), but the studies in this vein are mostly limited to developed countries.

Globalization is prompting new attention to questions of state structure, and especially how state and society are differentiated. One school sees globalization as forcing a convergence in state structures either in a race to the bottom or towards an Anglo-Saxon liberal state. In this view, global competition produces strong tendencies toward economic and political homogenization.¹³ A second school, emerging from the varieties of capitalism literature, argues that dissimilar state structures are not necessarily better or worse, but that they simply work differently and co-evolve with particular forms of economic and social organization. Here, the dominant trait of globalization is not competition but specialization, which is compatible with and may even enhance differentiation (Gourevitch 2003; Gourevitch and Shinn 2005; Rogowski 2003). In both perspectives, however, state structure is, as above, a force for globalization and transnationalism and simultaneously a product of this same long-term historical process.

Globalization may be the most profound transformative process of the modern world, but we understand its processes, effects, and future only poorly. Although created by states that have intentionally liberalized their economies over the last half century, globalization works its effects primarily through individuals, firms, sectors, and other non-state groups, including transnational advocacy networks that thrive on the new technologies and open borders that underlie market openness. These social forces, in turn, affect governments and policy differently depending on how they are mediated by state structure (Kahler and Lake 2003, 24–8). To unravel globalization's causes and effects it will be essential, in my view, to understand better variations in state structure.

Yet, we lack a full typology of state structures, and especially one that integrates the insights of the new institutionalism. In turn, analyses focus almost exclusively on developed democratic states, truncating the range of variation in state structure and attenuating or making more uncertain estimates of its effects (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 128–38). Fully to understand the forces of transformation that are driving contemporary politics, and how states are likely to respond, analysts need to expand their horizons to include the full continuum of state structures. On

¹³ This view predominates in the semi-popular writings on globalization. See Friedman (2000, 2005).

one end are “failed” or fragile states that retain their external sovereignty but lack authority within their own borders through the absence of a central government (for example, Somalia) or a government whose writ does not extend to all regions of its territory (for example, tribal areas of Pakistan). In terms of state structure, such states possess highly decentralized forms of political authority and near complete disintegration between state and society. One step along the continuum might be autocratic states that are relatively centralized but nonetheless have little ability to penetrate their societies, sharing the disintegration between state and society of their fragile cousins (Herbst 2000; Boone 2003). On the other end of the continuum are totalitarian states that aim to regulate all forms of social behavior, although this extreme is seldom realized in practice. In totalitarian states, authority is highly centralized and state and society are fused. Liberal and strong states, discussed above, take intermediate forms along this continuum. The effects of globalization may be most profound, and most easily observed, at the extremes of state structure, rather than in the middle, where scholars have so far concentrated their attention.

3.2 Unit Heterogeneity

Many state-centric theories assume that all units are sovereign territorial states, a unique form of political organization that survived a Darwinian struggle against city states, leagues, empires, and other “pre-modern” polities to dominate the world after Westphalia (Tilly 1990; Spruyt 1994).¹⁴ Implicit in these theories are the further assumptions that sovereign territorial states are, first, composed of contiguous territories and, second, especially in more contemporary periods, formed as nation states in which all citizens possess relatively similar political rights and responsibilities and one titular group does not rule over other identity groups.

Yet, the assumption that all states are contiguous nation states is sustained only by an act of collective blindness by scholars of international relations. The modern states of Europe that form the basis for the model of sovereign territorial states were also empires, holding vast overseas territories for centuries. Imperialism is often cited as one of the possible causes of the great power rivalry that dominated late-nineteenth-century Europe and led to the First World War, one of the critical events of the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁵ In turn, the most striking event of the second half of the twentieth century may not be the cold war, which appears to have come and gone without any fundamental change in the nature of international relations, but the breakup of the European empires, a rupture with history that nonetheless seldom warrants more than passing notice in international relations textbooks.

¹⁴ On the problem of unit heterogeneity more broadly, see Kahler (2002, 66–74).

¹⁵ The classic case is made in Hobson (1965). Two contemporary discussions include Doyle (1986) and Snyder (1991).

More recently, the post-cold war era has been shattered by the breakup of what are sometimes called multinational states in which one identity group dominates others—including the collapse of the Soviet Union, now recognized more appropriately in retrospect as a Russian (continental) empire and certainly never as a nation state in the full sense of that term (Dawisha and Parrott 1997; Esherick, Kayali, and van Young 2006). The problems of failed states and internal insurrections now facing the global community are similarly rooted in ethnic and religious competition between groups locked within sometimes arbitrarily drawn national borders, and often exacerbated by nations or identity groups that span those borders. The USA, as of this writing, is sinking in the quicksands of a sectarian struggle spurred by generations of Sunni domination of Shi'ites and Kurds in Iraq.

The STS is, in many ways, a myth, or at best another convenient analytic fiction. Nonetheless, it has remarkable staying power within theories of international relations. The great trends of the twentieth century continue to involve the shaping and reshaping of political units. Yet, if states are not all alike, and do not conform to the model of a sovereign territorial state, we still lack a common set of dimensions along which to array different types of polities. Similarly, we lack theories that explain variation or, more importantly, that link heterogeneity in units to outcomes in clear, testable, and falsifiable ways. Taking seriously the history of world politics creates a lurking suspicion that different types of units have deep consequences for international relations—for instance, that the nineteenth-century world of imperial states was somehow different from the late-twentieth-century world of multinational states—but we lack the tools to examine and probe this intuition more deeply. This is an area that virtually demands greater attention if we are to explain the shifting forms of political organization that we confront in the world today.

3.3 International Hierarchy

State-centric theory also assumes that all states, as sovereign entities, are formally equal within the society of states. Waltz (1959) famously argued that international relationists made a fallacy of composition in reasoning about the whole (the system) from its parts (states), and thus put the concept of anarchy at the center of the field. But, in accepting this critique, scholars now make the opposite fallacy of division in reasoning about the parts from the whole. That the system is anarchic does not imply that all relationships between states in that system are likewise anarchic. Rather, as the existence of empires should have made clear, a variety of hierarchical relationships exists between states and other polities—including other apparently sovereign states.¹⁶

¹⁶ For a key work that recognizes hierarchy within the system, see Bull and Watson (1984). Similarly, dependency theory was premised on a structural inequality of states. See Galtung (1971) and Cardoso and Faletto (1979), among others.

The great powers have always held a special place in world politics not just by their material capabilities but by the prestige they were accorded by other states (Gilpin 1981, 30–1), a status institutionalized in the Concert of Europe, the League of Nations, and especially the Security Council of the United Nations (Simpson 2004; Hurd 2007). Following in the footsteps of the cantons of Switzerland, the thirteen colonies that formed the original USA, the largely independent states that became Australia, and other federations, the European Union today is forming a new federal polity in which otherwise sovereign states cede authority over limited issue areas to a new, hierarchical center (Rector forthcoming). Less unique than sometimes supposed, the European Union is nonetheless a challenge to those who assume that states value their survival as states above all else (Grieco 1997, 184–6). At the level of the international community, moreover, new issues of international trusteeship are forcing themselves onto the international agenda (Bain 2003; Fearon and Laitin 2004; Krasner 2004; Lake 2007*c*).

Similarly, states exert authority over other states. In addition to formal empires, throughout modern history there has been a range of protectorates, dependencies, spheres-of-influence, economic zones, and informal empires in which one country has governed a greater or lesser range of actions of a second but stopped short of overthrowing the latter's formal sovereignty. The USA has ruled an informal empire in Central America since the turn of the twentieth century, a sphere-of-influence over Europe and northeast Asia since the Second World War, and economic dependencies around the globe (Lake 2007*b*). Most dramatically, the USA today has asserted the right and actually overthrown the governments of two sovereign states, Afghanistan and Iraq, occupied their territories, installed new governments beholden to Washington, and retained a virtual veto over the institutions and policies of each even after their return to formal sovereignty. Russia continues to exert similar authority over several now sovereign states in its "near abroad" (Cooley 2005; Hancock 2006). Hierarchy did not disappear in international relations with the end of the overseas empires, but lives on in a variety of weaker and informal authority relationships even today (Dunne 2003).

These international hierarchies are only now beginning to be explored in a systematic way (see Lake 1999*a*). Yet, hierarchy appears to have important consequences for whether and how states balance against one another (Weber 2000), their levels of defense spending (Lake 2007*a*), the possibilities for economic and political reform (Cooley 2005), and even whether they choose to fight one another (Wimberley 2007). States governed more hierarchically by Germany during the Second World War were more vigorous in carrying out the "final solution" and killed larger fractions of their Jewish populations in the Holocaust (Hollander 2006). Hierarchy can have important constraints on dominant states as well, including the need to tie their hands or bind their power in order to demonstrate

their limited ambition (Lake 1999*a*, 62–3; Ikenberry 2001). More consequences are likely to emerge as scholars dig deeper into theory and its empirical expectations. As the debate about the new American empire also suggests, hierarchy can have real implications for the conduct of contemporary foreign policy (Lake 2007*d*).

All three of these research frontiers maintain a focus on states as actors, but allow their internal attributes or external relationships to vary in ways that go beyond those now specified in state-centric theories. Even if we focus on states as states, there is more variation in the real world than we currently allow in our theories. States are more complicated entities and relations between states are more variegated than we commonly recognize. Capturing this richer and more complex world will greatly enhance and deepen even state-centric theories of international relations.

4 CONCLUSION

To develop or use state-centric theory is not to take an ethical position on the state as a form of political organization. State-centric theorists do not necessarily endorse the state as a social institution. Rather, state-centric theorists merely attempt to leverage the central role of states to explain the patterns and trends of world politics, including when violence is more or less likely, when economic interdependence will rise or fall, and whether societies will be able to address collectively threats to their common future. The question is not whether states are good or bad, but whether by focusing on states and their actions we can explain critical problems of international relations effectively and parsimoniously.

States are likely to remain central actors in world politics. As such, they are necessary to any explanation of international relations. The critics of state-centric theory make important points. State-centric theories can be misleading when domestic interests are highly divided and their internal sovereignty is highly constrained. Scholars should be careful in specifying when states are likely to be important rather than assuming that their role in the real world and in our theories is constant. Yet, given the crucial role of states in international politics and the pragmatic need to build parsimonious yet powerful explanations, state-centric theory will continue to be a valuable—indeed, an indispensable—tool for scholars seeking to understand the world in which we live. Scholars who ignore the state do so at their peril, since no analysis of international relations can do without it. Even so, the research agenda remains exciting and promises to improve our understanding of world politics in new and potentially important ways.

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