Reframing the International

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How International Relations Has Normally Been Understood

The ‘modern’ world from the 17th century to the 20th was characterised by the consolidation of an ‘inter-national’ system, structured around relations among sovereign nation-states. This system grew out of the post-medieval European states system and the spread of European (and later American and Asian) interstate relations, 18th and 19th century imperialism, and great Power (later super Power) conflict in the 19th and 20th centuries, culminating in the emergence of postcolonial ‘new states’ and developing countries in the middle of the 20th century. This system was state-centric in two ways. On the one hand, the domestic politics of states focused increasingly on the centripetalisation2 of political power within those states into what have been called ‘arenas of collective action’; on the other hand, states increasingly interacted systemically with each other, making ‘credible commitments’3 in their roles as segmentally differentiated ‘unit actors’4 – or, indeed, credibly breaking those commitments through interstate conflict and war, only to establish new structural forms in their wake.5

These two dimensions have been seen as reinforcing each other in virtuous – or indeed vicious – circles until the late 20th century. In this context, the international – or interstate – system has been seen as characterised by hierarchy – that is, which states are up and which are down – and by polarity – that is, how many states (and their alliance formations) ‘counted’ as structurally significant actors. States were constrained mainly to seek ‘relative gains’ vis-à-vis each other rather than to pursue

2 I use the awkward term ‘centripetalisation’ rather than ‘centralisation’ in order to signal that this process does not necessarily involve a pyramidal hierarchisation of structures and institutions within states, but rather a potentially complex and endogenously differentiated system that is nevertheless dynamically unified around central principles and forms of institutionalisation and behaviour: see Bertrand Badie and Pierre Birnbaum, Sociologie de l’Etat (Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1979).
‘absolute gains’ for the system as a whole. ‘Modernisation’, however, progressively reduced the number of systemically significant actors, leading to ‘bipolarity’ in the Cold War and a brief period of ‘unipolarity’ or American ‘hegemony’ at the end of the Cold War. It is this ‘states system’ that is under pressure today from new structures and linkages above, below and across borders.

Paradigms and Paradigm Shift

This state-centric “paradigm” – what Kuhn describes as “universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners” – has been dominant, or “normal science”, in the modern world of International Relations in both study and policy practice, in Europe and the developing world as well as in the United States. However, longstanding secular structural tensions and flaws – what Kuhn terms ‘anomalies’ – in the interstate system have been there from the start, from economic linkages to social interaction to population movements to the spread of ideas and to the uneven spread of democratisation, along with a range of newer structural trends considered below. These taken together are leading to a fundamental reshaping of world politics. In some ways this is not dissimilar to what Keohane and Nye called ‘complex interdependence’, but that concept referred primarily to the vulnerability and sensitivity of states themselves to such trends in what remained a broadly state-centric system.

In contrast, I argue that this mutually reinforcing combination of trends is leading to a transformation of the system itself towards a more pluralistic structure dominated by crosscutting political-economic processes. A range of paradigmatic anomalies has been growing dramatically in recent decades, including economic globalisation, technological change, the rise of new social groupings and transnational linkages, the spread of Enlightenment values, the decline of interstate war and violent conflict in general, a turn towards a ‘post-hegemonic’ interstate structure, and the development of a fragmented but expanding system of global governance, including regionalisation (especially European integration) among others. The system is being restructured into a complex, functionally differentiated, but increasingly integrated range of multilayered structures and multi-nodal processes, linking state and non-state actors across and within sectors and issue areas – above, below and cutting across state borders.

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7 It should be noted, however, that Sheldon Wolin and other theorists such as Mattei Dogan have argued that the social sciences, as distinct from the natural sciences, have always been characterised by competing alternative paradigms, as in the field of political philosophy. Sheldon S. Wolin, ‘Paradigms and Political Theories’, in Preston King and B.C. Parekh (eds.), *Politics and Experience: Essays Presented to Professor Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of His Retirement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 125–152.
The structural trends identified here are diverse, but cannot be treated in isolation from one another. They intersect and generate interaction effects in an evolving process of structuration. Pinker, for example, has suggested that the reduction of violent conflict in recent decades has involved the interaction of economic globalisation, the spread of Enlightenment values and the deepening of state institutions themselves.\(^\text{11}\) Similarly, I identify three dimensions of change – economic globalisation, transnational social change and governmentatisation – and three driving forces within each dimension – the material, the ideological and the political. Political change is particularly significant, as it comprises an embryonic overarching process that proactively shapes the structuration of the system as a whole. However, this political variable, embedded as it has been until recently and even today in the traditional states system itself, has been the slowest to change.\(^\text{12}\) I will now look briefly at some of these anomalies and consider whether, taken together, they signal an uneven, still embryonic Kuhnian ‘paradigm shift’.

**Economic Globalisation, Neoliberalism and the Competition State**

The term ‘globalisation’ usually refers to economic globalisation, i.e. the growth of international trade since the end of the Second World War, the expansion of multinational corporations (MNCs), the development of extended, differentiated and specialised transnational production chains, and the explosion of internationalised financial markets, especially since the breakdown of the Bretton Woods agreement in the 1970s and the hegemony of the deregulatory approach among both the economics profession and economic policymakers. But economic globalisation is not merely an economic phenomenon. It involves all three of the driving forces set out above.

In the first place, economic globalisation clearly involves material change. The post Second World War settlement was primarily about the expansion of world trade, and a range of agreements from the 1940s to the 1990s progressively reduced the sort of trade barriers that had been blamed for the deepening of the Great Depression of the 1930s.\(^\text{13}\) What Ruggie termed ‘embedded liberalism’ became predominant in economic practice and spread to previously autarchic and peripheral states.\(^\text{14}\) MNCs expanded and the specialisation of production processes across borders progressively incorporated postcolonial areas of the world and eventually socialist and Communist states too. Trade liberalisation, despite occasional setbacks in recession and crises, as in the 1970s, came to be seen as a ‘win-win’ policy, although exceptions for particularly vulnerable sectors and infant industries were also negotiated at various times. In more recent years, financial deregulation and the dramatic expansion of international capital flows have increasingly dominated the world economy, as

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demonstrated by the explosion of debt and the global financial crisis that began in 2007 and lingers today.

However, these changes were not due merely to the inevitable expansion of market forces per se. They were enabled and promoted by ideological and political change. The victory of the Allies in the Second World War, and later the breakup of the Soviet Union and the post-Communist transition, ensured that Western capitalism, especially Anglo-American liberal market capitalism, was rooted not merely in embedded liberalism – which retained a strong domestic role for the Keynesian state, as in the postwar European social model in particular – but increasingly in ‘neoliberalism’. Neoliberalism in its various forms15 has been rooted in the belief that the freer the market, the more that market will be self-correcting and self-regulating, and that therefore, as Ronald Reagan stated: ‘Government is not the solution. Government is the problem’; and Margaret Thatcher declared: ‘There is no alternative’. Underpinned by theories of ‘shareholder value’ – that is, that capitalist firms had no other duty but to maximise profits for its owners16 – and the ‘efficient (or rational) market hypothesis’,17 neoliberalism by the 1990s had become a dominant paradigm, spreading from the United States and Britain to policymakers and even mass politics around the world, ironically strengthened, not undermined, by the global financial crisis. While the European model originally claimed to retain a greater social – social democratic or ‘social market’ – content, it too evolved rapidly towards neoliberalism.18

Political change did not merely involve economic policymaking; it affected the overall role of the state itself. 1930s economic policies in reaction to the Great Depression and the postwar consensus, as reflected in embedded liberalism, had led to the expansion of the welfare state, not only to protect those left behind by capitalism and to integrate workers into the system, but also to underpin capitalism itself.19 By the 1990s, the national state had become a ‘competition state’, with its core role being to pursue competitiveness in the global economy as the path to prosperity at home.20 Thus what is called economic globalisation involved a range of developments that fundamentally altered the domestic as well as the international role of the state, undermining its sovereign autonomy and increasing its imbrication in a multi-nodal world, involving new sources of both stability and destabilisation in a complex process of evolution. In the postwar world, major economic crises were avoided until the 1970s and the financial crises of the 1990s and post-2007. However, the world economy today is growing ever more interdependent. The 21st century


global financial crisis and growing inequalities both within and across state borders are signs of the declining economic policy capacity of nation-states and the states system in general.

**Transnational Social Change**

Social change also involves material, ideological and political characteristics. The material driving forces primarily include technological change, the movement of peoples, migration and diasporas in particular, social modernisation as rural societies increasingly give way to urban-based industrial and post-industrial ways of living and working, and the new forms of inequality that result around the world. When the continued development and global expansion of information and communications technology, along with the changing class structures associated with it – what Reich two decades ago described as the growing gap between ‘symbolic analysts’ and the rest – are linked with population movements and new kinds of social mobility both across and within borders, including the growing significance of cross-border financial as well as human flows, two things happen. On the one hand, expectations of more mobile sections of the population are raised significantly in both developed and developing worlds as they seek a globalising middle class lifestyle. On the other hand, these fundamental challenges to traditional familial, tribal, etc. – essentially rural – ways of life lead to anomie and uprooting, to ethnic and religious reactive conflicts (both local and cross-border), and in some cases to terrorism.

Ideologically, social change has several aspects. The first is multiculturalism. Multiculturalism challenges states and the interstate system in two ways. In the first place, it creates a foundation for social bonds that contradicts one of the core elements of the nation-state itself – cultural, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, whether real or imagined. Both advanced and developing societies are today in the throes of trying to reconcile some lingering or imposed form of national identity with not merely a more globalising consciousness, but also the various ways that conflicts between different cultural groupings can be reconciled – or not – within existing state structures. In the second place, the cross-border spread of a range of groups, from less skilled immigrants to ‘global tribes’, along with the transborder spread of information and communications technology, create not only the sense of a ‘global village’ in which people are increasingly aware of happenings in myriad other places but also new horizontal processes of stratification where cultural, religious and ethnic conflicts become transnationalised.

Combining the ideological and the political, the spread of Enlightenment values – the central role of the individual in society, economics and politics, liberalism in

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In its broadest sense, the rule of law, pluralism, democratisation and the like – has been said to have led to what might be called the ‘State Paradox’, that is, the territorial embedding of states domestically as arenas of collective action and the increasing inviolability of state borders in most of the world. Pinker, in particular, argues that the dramatic reduction of violent conflict in recent decades in terms of numbers of deaths compared with earlier historical eras – not only interstate conflict but also violent domestic and cross-border civil conflicts – is paradoxically due to a large extent to the acceptance of pluralism and the legitimacy of the rule of law within states themselves 27 – and within organisations like the European Union, recipient of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize for this reason. When combined with economic globalisation and the hegemony of liberal and neoliberal capitalism, states might be seen once again as the ironic generators of a post-state-centric international system. Nevertheless, these changes can result in destabilisation as well as stabilisation, in anomie and the uprooting of social bonds and norms, as well as liberal or neoliberal convergence.

**Governmentalisation**

The glue of the traditional interstate system was the political development of states themselves. From the emergence of the European interstate system in the post-medieval era to the late 20th century, the political institutions of the state, from post-medieval centralisation to 19th and 20th century bureaucratisation to democratic or pseudo-democratic legitimation and mass politics, were the power centre of political processes, first in the developed world and more recently in the developing and post-colonial worlds. However, these underpinnings of state-centrism are under pressure from a range of institutional and behavioural trends today. Material, ideological and political driving forces interact to form a diffuse, decentralised governmentalisation of world politics – a material, ideological and political shift from *raison d’État* to a globalising *raison du monde*. 28

There are several levels at which this transition can be identified. In the first place, starting from the bottom up, one can identify a process of endogenous transnationalisation of the state and domestic politics. In material terms, this process can be seen in the way domestic material or ‘sectional’ interest groups and pluralist political forces have increasingly been both enabled and constrained by economic globalisation to fit their perceptions of their positions and problems and their policy claims to changing conditions. ‘Glocalisation’, or the links between particular local and regional sectors of the economy and related sectors of the international economy, has placed individuals and groups into relationships with analogous groups in other parts of the world and constrained their ability to build domestic coalitions to pursue their interests.

In particular, budgetary constraints placed on the welfare state, the call for flexibilisation of labour regulations, dependence on either (or both) export performance or import competition, and so forth, have limited the scope of distributive and redistributive mass politics, as demonstrated in the recent Eurozone crisis, while the de-


28 This argument is developed at more length in Cerny, *Rethinking World Politics*, *op. cit.*
mands of businesses for trade protection and industrial policy have given way to free trade policy and the demands of international business competition, as manifested in the current negotiations for a Trans-Pacific Partnership and a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Indeed, the advent of the competition state has altered the entire range of economic policy alternatives available to state actors. And in the wake of the global financial crisis, austerity has trumped Keynesian stimulus. At the same time, what has been called the ‘hybridisation of the state’ – that is, the blurring of the boundary between the public and private, from privatisation to the ‘new public management’ to contracting out public services, public-private partnerships, and even ‘socialism for the banks’ and the ‘permanent bailout nation’ – has underpinned government support for and integration of the priorities of an increasingly globalised private sector. These changes have been matched by the development among state actors of ‘transgovernmental networks’ of policymakers, regulators, legislators and the like.

This exogenisation of the domestic has been matched at the international level by a number of wider structural trends. The first is the turn towards what might be called a post-hegemonic interstate structure. The ‘unipolarity’ of the post-Cold War world has been increasingly undermined by both the rise of competitor states and the advance and partial ‘decoupling’ of the developing world, especially the ‘emerging market economies’ and the ‘BRICs’ (larger developing countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and some ‘near-BRICs’ like Turkey). A second trend has been the changing character of warfare, with the decline of interstate war and the civilianisation of security, as represented by the pioneering international role of Europe. The third has been the growth of heterogeneous forms of what has been called ‘global governance’, in other words the uneven emergence of what are essentially intergovernmental bodies, from regional institutions such as the European Union, to global bodies like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation, to a wide variety of more limited organisations, some with regulatory powers and some merely negotiating bodies. Sometimes these organisations work together and sometimes they are at odds with each other, representing competing coalitions and memberships of state and non-state actors.

The result of all this has been the crystallisation of ‘multi-nodal’ or ‘multilayered’ politics, or even a kind of complex ‘neomedieval’ structure. Thus international politics works as an increasingly complex institutional and behavioural superstructure crisscrossing with both domestic politics, domestic and transnational society, and sub-units of states. This complex process, both bottom up and horizontal, with a loosely organised and generally ineffective top down superstructure, enmeshes states, state actors, domestic politics and interstate politics in complex webs of power and multi-dimensional political processes. Indeed, the global political process

works not so much through traditional institutional policy capacity as through the internalisation of the sort of attitudes and practices Foucault calls ‘governmentality’.  

Towards Paradigm Shift? Scenarios of Change

Each of these developments and structural branching points is dependent on idiosyncratic events, crises and partial, uneven restructuring. In particular, the lack of an overarching, authoritative world state is not leading back to a more traditional form of interstate politics or international ‘anarchy’ among states as ‘unit actors’ but rather to a complex system the overall shape of which is still unclear. Will it be a case of ‘towards a more viable pluralism’ or a more conflict oriented neomedievalism, a ‘global village’ and raison du monde, or a complex, open-ended politics of ‘muddling through’? Given the increasingly nebulous character of system transformation, I argue that the shape of the future will depend on the way strategically situated agents of all kinds shape that process, whether consciously or unwittingly.

There are several possible long-term scenarios of change. Of course, globalising pressures could merely trigger a range of adaptive behaviours on the part of state-centric political agents reacting to pressures for change by increasing the capacity of states and traditional forms of international cooperation (and conflict), which could either permit emerging global challenges to be more or less effectively managed or at least provide sufficient ‘sticking plasters’ to prevent them spiralling out of control. Some, even many, of the most influential actors may prefer this outcome, for example entrenching even further the clout of international financial market actors, while maintaining the ideological façade of democratic or developmentalist legitimacy and keeping domestic constituencies under control.

A first alternative scenario might be based on the predominance of transnational social movements and their ability to shape the agendas of other actors, both within and cutting across states. Two linked hypotheses can be raised again here: on the one hand, the development of a ‘global civil society’, based on common transnational norms and values, despite the limitations suggested earlier; and, on the other, the emergence of a cross-cutting genuine pluralism. Held, for example, has suggested some mixture of analogous developments might well lead to the emergence of a transnational ‘cosmopolitan democracy’. However, this remains a ‘rosy scenario’, an idealised state of affairs which it is unwise to expect.

A further scenario is that of economic and business globalisation. Economic agents, through the transnational expansion of both markets and hierarchical (firm) structures and institutions, increasingly shape a range of key outcomes in terms of the allocation of both resources and values. Neoliberal ideology presents such developments as inevitable; in Mrs. Thatcher’s famous phrase quoted earlier, usually expressed by the acronym TINA. Of course, capitalists are concerned first and foremost with competing with each other, not with policing the system (which can eat up profits), and there is no collective mechanism, no ‘ideal collective capitalist’

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34 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, op. cit.
to regulate the system in the interests of capital as a whole, other than the state. Nevertheless, indirect forms of control, for example through neo-Gramscian cultural hegemony or Foucauldian governmentality – approaches that have had more impact in European intellectual debates than in the United States – may be more important than the state per se. Private sector-based mechanisms of control at a transnational level may indeed replace the state as a ‘committee of the whole bourgeoisie’. However, the crystallisation of various differently structured sectors of international capital can also be envisaged, reflecting an unequal distribution of power or representation. In today’s world of dramatic international capital movements, financial markets might be seen as exercising a ‘sectoral hegemony’ over the international system.

A final scenario, already mentioned, is that exogenous pressures on the nation-state or states system, interacting with and exacerbating the tensions within that system, will cause that system to erode and weaken in key ways, but without providing enough in the way of structural resources to any category of actors to shape effectively the overarching structuration process. In other words, no group or group of groups will be at the steering wheel of change, and competition between groups will in turn undermine the capacity of any one of them to exercise such control. In such circumstances, the outcome might be what has been called an ‘archipelago’ form of governance: a fluid, multilayered structure of overlapping and competing institutions, characterised by cultural flux, multiple and shifting identities and loyalties with different ‘niches’ at different levels for groups to focus their energies on. The medieval world was not a world of chaos; it was a world of ‘durable disorder’.

In each of these scenarios, then, we can see a complex feedback process, based on actors’ evolving strategies, behaviour and discourses. However, the shape that process takes will differ depending on which actors and coalitions of actors develop the most influence and power to manipulate and mould particular outcomes within and across a range of critical issue-areas. The traditional state-centric paradigm of International Relations as both academic discipline and policy practice is increasingly outmoded whatever shape the 21st century world comes to take. However, just noting the anomalies is no longer enough. International Relations scholars must identify and theorise the kind of paradigm shift that they see taking place and attempt to reframe the international far more holistically than has been the case until now.

40 Cerny, ‘Collective Action’, *op cit.*