THE LIMITS OF TRANSFORMATION IN WORLD POLITICS

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To the larger field of international studies, international relations theory must look horribly provincial. Despite the accelerating pace of economic globalization, the growing strength of non-state networks, and apparent willingness of the world's oldest nation-states to relinquish their sovereignty, mainstream IR theory remains preoccupied with the state and its material capabilities.[1] Can the study of international relations progress to the point where it incorporates more dynamic actors and processes into its theories?

To a certain extent, such concepts are already part of the discussion. There have been prior efforts to incorporate learning effects into international relations theory, for example (Haas 1958; Nye 1987). It has been a decade since Peter Haas (1992) developed the notion of epistemic communities as agents of change in international relations. How these emergent actors influence world politics bears a striking resemblance to the process described in the Keohane/Milner memo. When a transnational body of experts develops linkages with each other, they can reach a consensus on a particular policy issue, dispense that information to policy elites, and alter state policies via learning. Other authors emphasize this influence process as well (Slaughter 1997; Reinicke 1998; Braithwaite and Drahos 2000). Scholars that focus on global civil society posit a similar narrative (Wapner 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1997; Price 1998).[2]

With globalization, these new actors – combined with telecommincations innovations that enhance their ability to transmit new information and ideas – pose a problem for state-based international relations theories. Without question, non-state networks create new policy entrepreneurs with some agenda-setting powers, even in security affairs (Price 1999). These policy entrepreneurs, through transnational linkages, can promote both learning and changes in state policies. At a minimum, theorists employing this logic of causation have amply demonstrated the existence of a "world civic politics" that lies outside the plane of the state (Wapner 1995). At the maximum, some scholars argue that the dynamic processes of globalization require a radical reformulation of all international relations theory (Clark 1999; Mittelman 2002).

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[1] Economists would attribute this flaw to the law of comparative advantage. If economists specialize in explaining how markets function, and sociologists specialize in explaining how networks operate, then the advantage of political science comes from explaining the role of the state in social life.

[2] Keck and Sikkink (1997, p. 8) also argue that the many components of global civil society are organized as a network, "characterized by voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange." Different nodes of a network must be able to exchange information for this type of organization to be effective. The denser the network, the more effective non-state actors can be. The development of the Internet, e-mail, cellular phones, combined with the deregulation of air travel, enhances the networking power of global civil society.

However – and the rest of this memo will be an extended riff on "however" – any theory of world politics that incorporates these dynamic processes must also factor in the accompanying constraints and countervailing effects associated with globalization. The key to any new approach to world politics is not to explain the *existence* of information transmission and learning, but to predict the *variations* in the salience of these processes.[3] Undoubtedly, transnational linkages have been strengthened in the past decade. The effect of these linkages, however, has varied across issue areas. Consider again the role that transnational information links played in developing and enforcing the Montreal Protocol. The strength and dynamic density of environmental activists was unquestionably higher during the more recent negotiations on a global warming treaty (Kim 2002). One would predict a corresponding effect on the outcome. Instead, these transnational linkages had little effect on the outcome. The United States and Australia withdrew from the Kyoto protocol, objecting to the unfair distribution of costs and the absence of enforcement measures (Barrett 1998).

For other issues, learning processes are erroneously given pride of place in explaining outcomes. For example, some scholars (Kobrin 1998; Diebert 2000) argue that global civil society played a crucial role in the failure of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). Stephen Kobrin (1998, p. 98) concludes: "The story of the MAI is a cautionary tale about the impact of an electronically networked global civil society." However, a more thorough reading of the MAI case reveals that opposition networks made their presence felt only in the final, fruitless stages of negotiation. By that juncture, the U.S. and France were already at loggerheads over whether the MAI would have an exemption for cultural industries. Graham (2000, p. 16, 40) concludes: "the negotiations were indeed in very deep difficulty before the metaphorical torpedo was fired by the NGOs… this torpedo thus was more a *coup de grâce* than a fatal blow in its own right." Non-state networks played a role in the collapse of the MAI, but they were neither a necessary nor sufficient factor in the outcome.

What explains the variation in the effectiveness of dynamic learning processes? The usual suspects of geography and history should not be discounted. Although globalization reduces the transaction costs of transnational exchanges, the dynamic density of information exchange decreases with distance. For example, following the collapse of communism, a panoply of transnational networks were established to encourage learning about free-market democracies in the post-Soviet space. Despite these networks, there was considerable variation in the creation of market economies and democratic polities. Kopstein and Reilly (2000, p. 1-2) analyze this variation among post-communist states and conclude: "All of the big winners of postcommunism share the trait of being geographically close to the former border of the noncommunist world. This suggests the spatially dependent nature of the diffusion of norms, resources, and institutions that are necessary to the construction of political democracies and market economies in the postcommunist era."

Others have similarly noted the role of geographic proximity as a necessary condition for the successful transmission of ideas (Lazer 1999). One explanation for why "geographical determinism" would persist in an era of globalization is the distinction

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[3] I say this as someone working in the rational choice paradigm. A scholar working in the constructivist tradition might argue that the key is to explain how these new actors and processes are mutually constituted, and how their constitution affects the identity of the state.

between the transmission of information and the transmission of knowledge.[4] Certain forms of knowledge are tacit – they cannot be codified, only experienced (Polanyi 1967). These forms of knowledge greatly facilitate intersubjective understanding, a precondition for learning (Nye 1987; Wendt 1999). While the technological dynamism of globalization greatly facilitates information transmission, its effect on the transmission of tacit knowledge is more muted. Geographic proximity can facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge. For example, a Hungarian who spends several months in Switzerland will have a greater appreciation of the tacit rules that govern a free-market democracy than an Uzbek receiving an EU-sponsored civics lesson in Tashkent. Geography can play a constraining role on the generation of tacit knowledge, which in turn acts as a constraint on learning.

Even when the dynamic density of transnational networks is strong, history can either blunt or redirect learning effects. Consider, for example, the wave of enthusiasm for the deregulation and privatization of business activity that began twenty-five years ago. Both popular and scholarly treatments of this phenomenon argue that the enthusiasm for these policies came from the global spread of neoliberal ideas. However, closer examination reveals that these ideas were implemented in drastically different ways. Steven Vogel (1996) demonstrates that in the Anglo-Saxon economies of the United States and the United Kingdom, deregulation genuinely reduced the role of the state in regulating the economy. However, in Japan, Germany, and the other OECD economies, deregulation merely rerouted the state's ability to direct business activity. This variation in outcomes is consistent with Hall and Soskice's (2002) "varieties of capitalism," which are in turn a product of the diverse economic histories of the developed economies (Gerschenkron 1962; Gilpin 2001). These divergent economic institutions generate persistent variation in the behavior of multinational corporations (Doremus *et al* 1998). This variation in the effect of economic learning is consistent with theories of institutional path dependence (North 1990) that emphasize the role of history as a constraint on learning effects.

Another consideration is the relative fragility/durability of cross-border networks. The stronger these network ties are, the easier it is for disparate groups to exchange information, negotiate a consensus, and/or mobilize social movements. However, recent work on the structure of networks suggests that they are hard to create and can be disrupted. Henderson (2002) demonstrates that Western funding of the NGO community in Russia has led to perverse tradeoffs in the creation of a democratic civil society. When these civic organizations become more dependent upon foreign material resources, their ability to mobilize successful collective action among their alleged constituents decreases. This raises the possibility that cross-national horizontal linkages can weaken domestic vertical linkages. Network ties can also fluctuate over time, depending on how key actors legitimize their leadership positions. When those legitimation strategies are sufficiently narrow, network ties between actors with different sets of interests are severed, perhaps irreparably (Goddard 2002).

There are other reasons information networks can vary in their robustness. For some issues, such as stratospheric ozone or apartheid, it is comparatively easy for transnational linkages to develop on the basis of policy consensus. Other cross-border

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[4] I use the terms "knowledge" and "information" as they are used in economics; information is knowledge that can be codified and transmitted across space and time.

issues – the regulation of genetically modified organisms, core labor standards, ballistic missile proliferation – have yet to foster such accord. This can promote competing linkage networks to transmit different sides of a policy debate. The growth of countervailing networks of information exchange has two effects on information transmission. First, it decreases the signal-to-noise ratio in policy debates. The proliferation of disparate and contradictory streams of information makes it difficult for learning to occur. Second, it leaves rival networks vulnerable to manipulation by strategic actors – such as great power governments.

The existence of multiple information networks combined with the thickening of intergovernmental networks can – paradoxically – empower the agenda-setting and information-transmission abilities of governments. Even if they are merely agents of domestic or transnational interests, governments remain the vessels through which most policies are implemented. Governments that face internal, transnational, and external pressures can play such pressures off each other to achieve their desired outcomes. Putnam (1988) and Milner (1997) both illuminate how governments can use domestic constraints as bargaining leverage. Global constraints can be just as effective. Even great powers use international institutions as a means to bypass domestic or transnational roadblocks to action (Drezner 2003; Wolf 1999).

The proliferation of intergovernmental organizations also enhances the substitutability of difference global governance structures (Most and Starr 1984; Drezner 2002). Great powers can forum-shop policy proposals across a variety of formal and informal regimes; the distribution of interests determines the optimal fora. Such forum-shopping includes the conscious delegation of governance tasks to non-state actors. In some circumstances, such as human rights treaties, states entrust non-governmental organizations to act as fire alarms for international agreements (Mitchell 1998; Dai 2000). In other situations, such as product standardization, governments will go further and delegate negotiating, management, monitoring, and enforcement powers to private orders (Haufler 2001). Even on issues in which there are large zones of agreement, states will manipulate private forms of authority to achieve their desired ends.

The disparate regimes that comprise Internet governance provide an excellent case study of how great powers exploit the substitutability of governance structures.[5] If globalization has transformed international relations, its effects are most pronounced in the regulation of the Internet. For some international relations theorists (Scholte 2000, p. 75), the defining feature of the Internet is that it "overcomes all barriers of territorial distance and borders." Because the transaction costs of communication are so low on the Internet, non-state actors can coordinate their activities to a much more sophisticated degree than in the past. Deibert (2000, p. 264) concurs, arguing: "What the Internet has generated is indeed a new 'species' – a cross-national network of citizen activists linked by electronic mailing lists and World-Wide Web home pages that vibrate with activity, monitoring the global political economy like a virtual watchdog."

Nevertheless, the political economy of Internet governance contains a striking amount of *realpolitik* behavior. For Internet issues where states have strong disagreements – content regulation, intellectual property rights, e-taxation, and privacy rights – states have acted decisively to protect their interests in those issue areas. In the case of content regulation, governments activities range from the heavy-handed – as in

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[5] The next few paragraphs are a distillation of Drezner (n.d.).

Saudi Arabia (Al-Tawil 2001) – to the more subtle step of cooperating with Internet service providers to effectively screen out unwanted content – as in China or Singapore (Wang 1999).[6] For both privacy and intellectual property rights, great powers have successfully used the threat of economic coercion from multilateral organizations to extract policy changes from recalcitrant trading partners.

Even in the regulation of technical protocols, an arena that has largely been the domain of private actors, great power governments have consciously selected actors for the delegation of governance, in order to advance their own interests. At two crucial junctures in the growth of the Internet – the acceptance of the TCP/IP protocol for exchanging information across disparate computer networks, and the creation of the ICANN regime for governing the Internet domain name system – governments took active steps to ensure that the outcome serviced their interests and that the management regime remained private but amenable to state interests. In the first episode, governments acted in concert to prevent firms from acquiring too much influence over the setting of standards. In the second episode, the United States played one transnational network off another to advance its preference for free-market competition of Internet domain names. The outcome was the creation of a private organization – the Internet Consortium for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) – that predominantly reflects U.S. interests (Mueller 1999; Marlin-Bennett 2001).

These constraints do not imply that the dynamic processes of globalization and information-transmission networks are either irrelevant or unimportant. However, they demonstrate how new international relations theories need to incorporate these processes without discarding the progress than existing paradigms have made in explaining world politics. This step would constitute genuine progress in understanding both the comparative statics and the dynamics of world politics (Lakatos 1971).

The next generation of theory will need to provide an explanation for the conditions under which powerful governments are compelled to act because learning has taken place via the dynamic processes discussed above. When does the dynamic density of non-state networks constrain or alter the great power ability to forum-shop across disparate governance structures? The aforementioned constraints suggest a number of research questions worth pursuing systematically. They include:[7]

1) Under what conditions can globalization create single global cultures at the elite level? Huntington (1996) derisively refers to the "Davos culture" among global elites, but clearly such cultures matter in the link between dynamically density and learning. The world society approach relies on the creation of singular global cultures (Meyer and Strang 1993), for example. Chwieroth (2002) demonstrates and tests one mechanism – educational networks – through which global economic cultures are created. Further theoretical and empirical work in this area is needed.

2) To what extent can transnational networks generate learning in mass publics as well as elites? Clearly, there are some issues – genetically modified foods,

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[6] See also Kalathil and Boas (2002).
[7] These research questions represent only some possible trajectories for future work, given the current trends in world politics.

enforcing the nonproliferation regime – where the learning process has diverged across borders. On other issues, such as land mines or apartheid, the learning process has led to genuine intersubjective understanding. More research is needed on the role of political communication in the global public sphere (Mitzen 2002).

3) Is it possible to encourage analytical eclecticism in the development of international relations theory without losing the intrinsic merit of parsimony? It is clear that the dynamic processes of globalization affect politics at multiple levels of analysis. Theories that employ such processes as causal mechanisms similarly need to operate on multiple levels of analysis. However, an unfortunate legacy of Waltz's (1979) emphasis on systemic rigor has been to denigrate theories that parse the state into its constitutive parts are reductionist, explicitly equating that term with a valueless approach.[8] Since *Theory of International Politics*, greater attention has been paid to grand systemic theories of international relations. Far less attention has been paid to IR theories that incorporate subnational actors into their models. This shift has certainly increased the analytical rigor of international relations theory, but the cost in lost explanatory power should not be discounted. Research into how networked actors influence state preferences necessarily works at multiple levels of analysis. The question of preference formation in particular will require more analytically eclectic approaches.

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[8] Waltz (1979, p. 65) states explicitly: "It is not possible to understand world politics simply by looking inside of states. If the aims, policies, and actions of states become matters of exclusive attention or even of central concern, then we are forced back to the descriptive level; and from simple descriptions no valid generalizations can logically be drawn." A close reading of Waltz (1979, p. 71-2) shows that while he gives pride of place to systemic approaches, he also believes that reductionist theories of foreign policy were useful for understanding "why different units behave differently despite similar placement in a system." While Waltz's ideas might have acknowledged the role of foreign policy theories, his rhetorical style does not. At the same time as Waltz makes it clear that theories of foreign policy had a place at the table, he also criticizes most existing theories of international relations as reductionist. By privileging systemic approaches and variables, Waltz made it clear that international relations theorists did not need to explain specific variations in individual country foreign policies. It is worth noting that the responses to Waltz's version of realism, whether supportive or critical, implicitly agree with this sentiment (Keohane 1984; Wendt 1999; Mearsheimer 2001). Waltz's caveats about the relevance of unit-level factors to explaining particular foreign policy decisions are usually ignored.

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