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Daniel H. Nexon: The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe

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Introduction

IN JUNE 1546 Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and ruler of a vast realm stretching from the New World to Central Europe, began preparations for war against the rebellious towns and princes of the Protestant Schmalkaldic League. He explained to his sister, Mary of Hungary, that

if we failed to intervene now, all the Estates of Germany would be in danger of breaking with the faith . . . After considering this and considering it again, I decided to embark on war against Hesse and Saxony as transgressors of the peace against the Duke of Brunswick and his territory. And although the pretext will not long disguise the fact that this is a matter of religion, yet it serves for the present to divide the renegades.¹

Charles's gambit inverts one of the standard stories found in political-science scholarship: that elites use the rhetoric of identity—whether religious, ethnic, or nationalist—as a way of generating support for policies that, in truth, serve their own power-political or material ends. Critics often challenge such stories, of course. They argue that a particular set of claims about identity reveal the genuine interests of elites. Or they suggest that even if elites deploy identity claims cynically, we still need to understand why such claims succeed or fail in generating popular support for particular policies.² We seldom, however, envision the reverse: that a head of state might seek to fragment the opposition by hiding his *religious* objectives behind a cloak of *political* rhetoric.

It is even more striking, then, that Charles's divide-and-rule tactics met with initial success; his forces scored a decisive victory in the Schmalkaldic War. But at the 1547–1548 Diet of Augsburg, he overplayed his hand. The 1548 Interim of Augsburg sought to reconcile religious schism in Germany, but instead prompted a new Protestant alliance against Charles.

¹ Quoted in Bonney 1991, 118. Cf. Repgen's interpretation, which argues that Charles does not, in this letter, "expressly concede . . . that his public justification of the Schmalkaldic War is only a pretense and a pretext." See Repgen 1987, 319–20.

² Fearon and Laitin 2000; Gagnon 1994–1995; Van Evera 1994, 30–33. For critical views, see Barnett 1999 and Kaufman 1996. For an overview and discussion of "instrumentalist" approaches to the relationship between religion and conflict, see Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000, 644–50.

With the support of the French king, Henry II of Valois, it seized the offensive against Charles and his supporters. Charles's brother, Ferdinand, opened negotiations with the rebels. Ferdinand ultimately concluded the 1555 Peace of Augsburg. Charles abdicated his titles and divided his domain between Ferdinand and Charles's son, Philip II of Spain.³

This chain of events represents only one puzzling part of a much larger story: *how the Protestant Reformations led to a profound crisis in the European political order*.⁴ Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the emergence of new forms of religious heterodoxy catapulted much of the European continent into violent conflict, caused political authority in entire states and regions to implode, and destroyed the Habsburg bid for European hegemony. Despite significant attention to early modern Europe among international-relations scholars, few treat these events as an explanatory puzzle. Some look to the period merely for evidence of the enduring struggle for security and domination among great powers. Others expend a great deal of energy arguing over whether or not the Protestant Reformations, and the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which supposedly put an end to inter-state religious conflict in Europe, marked the origins of the modern, sovereign-territorial state system.⁵

Contemporary developments render our comparative lack of interest in the dynamics of religious struggles in early modern Europe all the more puzzling. We live, many tell us, in an age of religious revival. Anxieties about violent religious movements now exercise a strong influence over foreign and domestic policy in the United States, Europe, and many other political communities. Most existing attempts to draw "lessons" from the European experience, unfortunately, suffer from extraordinary superficiality or a terminal infatuation with stylized stories about European political development. Thus, serious policy analysts inform their readers that "Islam's problem" is that it never had a "Westphalian moment." Some suggest, similarly, that Islam needs a "reformation" that will break the hold of its clerics and usher in an era of tolerant religious pluralism and secularism.⁶ Henry C. K. Liu, writing in the *Asia Times Online*, draws an even more breathtaking set of analogies:

The Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War, a secular war with religious dimensions. Subsequent wars were not about spiritual issues of religion, but rather revolved around secular issues of state.

³ For a detailed account of these events, see chapter 5.

⁴ Most historical and social-scientific texts refer to "the Reformation." I write of "the Reformations" to stress the temporal, spatial, and doctrinal heterogeneity of reformation movements during the early modern period.

⁵ See Gross 1948, Krasner 1993, Osiander 2001, Philpott 2000 and 2001, and Teschke 2003.

⁶ Miles 2003, Wilson 2002.

The “war on terrorism” today is the first religious war in almost four centuries, also fought mainly by secular institutions with religious affiliations. The peace that eventually follows today’s “war on terrorism” will also end the war between faith-based Christian evangelicals and Islamic fundamentalists. Westphalia allowed Catholic and Protestant powers to become allies, leading to a number of major secular geopolitical realignments. The “war on terrorism” will also produce major geopolitical realignments in world international politics, although it is too early to discern its final shape . . . [It] will eventually lay to rest U.S. hegemony and end the age of superpower, possibly through a new balance of power by sovereign states otherwise not particularly hostile to the United States as a peaceful nation.⁷

Whatever the merits of these claims, the fact remains that international-relations theorists have been staring directly into the face of a rich and consequential case of the impact of transregional and transnational religious movements on conflict, resistance, political authority, and international change for decades. Yet we have mounted few sustained investigations into its causal processes and mechanisms.⁸

This book addresses, first and foremost, this oversight: *I provide an explanation for why the Protestant Reformations produced a crisis of sufficient magnitude to alter the European balance of power, both within and among even its most powerful political communities.* I argue that the key to understanding this impact lies in the analysis of the dynamics of resistance and rule in the composite political communities that dominated the European landscape. Many of the most important political ramifications of the Protestant Reformations did not stem from any sui generis features of religious contention; they resulted from the intersection of heterogeneous religious movements with ongoing patterns of collective mobilization.

Religious contention, given particular formal properties and specific ideational content, triggered up to five processes extremely dangerous to the stability of early modern rule:

- It overcame the institutional barriers that tended to localize resistance against the rulers of composite states, thereby making widespread mobilization against dynastic rulers more likely.

⁷ Liu 2005.

⁸ Clark 1998, 1268. For exceptions, see Owen 2005, Philpott 2000 and 2001. Philpott’s theory, as I argue below, fails to adequately capture these processes precisely because of his focus on religion as a source of ideas about political order that produced the sovereign state system. Owen’s account dovetails with my own, but his decision to view religion as one source of inter-state ideological alignment misses other important dynamics set in motion by the Protestant Reformations.

- It undermined the ability of rulers to signal discrete identities to their heterogeneous subjects, thereby eroding their ability to legitimate their policies on a range of issues, from religion to taxation.
- It provided opportunities for intermediaries to enhance their own autonomy vis-à-vis dynastic rulers; religious contention complicated the tradeoffs inherent in the systems of indirect rule found in composite polities.
- It exacerbated cross-pressures on rulers—by injecting religious differentiation into the equation, by increasing the likelihood of significant resistance to central demands, and by creating often intense tradeoffs between political and religious objectives.
- It expanded already existing channels, as well as generated new vectors, for the “internationalization” of “domestic” disputes and the “domestication” of inter-state conflicts.

Given the right circumstances—a transnational, cross-class network surrounding religious beliefs and identities—the spread of the Protestant Reformation therefore activated many of the existing vulnerabilities in early modern European rule. Not every instance of religious contention, of course, produced all of these dynamics. Variation in institutional forms, the choices made by agents, and other contextual factors also influenced how these mechanisms and processes played out in particular times and places. And nonreligious contention sometimes triggered similar processes. On balance, however, the injection of religious identities and interests into ongoing patterns of resistance and rule made cascading political crises more likely than they might otherwise have been.

This explanation contributes to this book’s secondary task: *to assess the status of the early modern period as a case of international change*. Was the early modern period, as Daniel Philpott suggests, a “revolution in sovereignty” or otherwise, as traditionally understood in international-relations theory, a key moment in the emergence of the modern state system?⁹ My answer involves two claims. On the one hand, the Protestant Reformation shaped the development of the sovereign-territorial order, but in far more modest ways than many international-relations scholars assume. On the other hand, a better analytic approach to the concepts of “continuity and change” in world politics allows us to see what *kind* of a case of change the Reformation era represents: one of the rapid emergence of new actors—transnational religious movements—altering the structural opportunities and constraints of power-political competition.

The third, and final, goal of this book is *to specify precisely such an analytic framework for the study of international continuity and change*.

⁹ Philpott 2000 and 2001.

I develop an approach to this problem, called “relational institutionalism,” in the second chapter. It combines key aspects of sociological-relational analysis with historical-institutionalist sensibilities. This framework provides the theoretical infrastructure for my explanation of the book’s primary puzzle, as well as for how we should understand early modern Europe as an instance of international change. But I also intend it to serve as a novel way of approaching inquiry into continuity and transformation in world politics. Relational institutionalism, I argue, incorporates insights from the major prevailing approaches to the study of international relations; it also provides a way of reconciling some of their apparently very different claims about the fundamental dynamics that drive international relations.

The next three sections of this chapter offer a more comprehensive introduction to these facets of the book. I provide greater detail with respect to my central argument about the impact of the Protestant Reformations on early modern European politics, and I briefly elaborate on my claims about the Reformations’ role in the emergence of the sovereign-territorial state system. The second section situates the subject matter of this book within the broader debate about international change; the third section provides an overview of the analytic wagers and key claims associated with a relational-institutionalist approach to international change. In the final section, I discuss the organization of the rest of the book.

THE ARGUMENT

My argument begins with the most banal of claims: we cannot understand the political impact of the Protestant Reformations without reference to the institutional structures and dynamics of early modern European states. How, the reader might ask, could it be otherwise? Some of the most influential international-relations literature on international change in early modern Europe, I answer, pays very little attention to patterns of resistance and rule. Scholars too often content themselves with taking a “before” and “after” picture and then explaining the changes in between primarily through an assessment of the content of new religious beliefs and identities. This kind of analysis provides us with a great many insights, but it spends too much time in the realm of the spirit—of ideas, doctrines, and what constructivists call “constitutive norms”—and not enough in the profane world of political disputes over taxation and governance.¹⁰

¹⁰ For an elaboration of this point, see Nexon 2005.

Princes, magnates, urban leaders, and ordinary people in early modern Europe pursued wealth, power, security, and status through the medium of existing authority relations and well-rehearsed forms of political contention. Their political struggles, within the confines of existing political communities, almost invariably involved disputes over the extent of local rights and privileges, the scope and distribution of taxation, and the relative power of different social classes.¹¹ Such conflicts often included what we would now call an “international” dimension. Princes, magnates, and even urban leaders sometimes negotiated, conspired, or allied with outside powers. Rulers exploited internal conflicts to advance their power-political interests and make good their territorial claims.¹²

Early modern European polities were neither radically decentralized “feudal” entities nor modern nation-states. Many historians now use the term “composite state” to describe the heterogeneous political communities that dominated the early modern European landscape. Whether confederative or imperial, ruled by hereditary or elected princes, or operating as autonomous republics, most early modern European states were composed of numerous subordinate political communities linked to central authorities through *distinctive contracts* specifying rights and obligations. These subordinate political communities often had their own social organizations, identities, languages, and institutions. Local actors jealously guarded whatever autonomy they enjoyed. Subjects expected rulers to uphold their contractual relationships: to guarantee what they perceived as “customary” rights and immunities in matters of taxation and local control.¹³

By the end of the fifteenth century, dynastic norms and practices almost completely dominated European high politics.¹⁴ Rulers and would-be rulers competed to extend not only their own honor, prestige, and territory, but also that of their dynastic line. They did so through principles—marriage, conquest, inheritance, and succession—that, as Vivek Sharma argues, “were the primary organizing principles of European government for over six centuries.”¹⁵ As Richard Mackenney notes, for “those who governed, the interests of the family were all important” and that, in consequence, “the survival or extinction of the dynasty was the difference between peace and war, and the accidents of inheritance shaped the power blocs of Europe as a whole.”¹⁶

¹¹ See te Brake 1998.

¹² See, generally, Bonney 1991 and Koenigsberger 1987.

¹³ Elliott 1992; Koenigsberger 1986, 1–26; Oresko, Gibbs et al. 1997; te Brake 1998, 14–17.

¹⁴ Mattingly 1988, 140.

¹⁵ Sharma 2005, 8. Sharma’s magisterial study constitutes the most thorough international-relations analysis of dynasticism yet written. For a Marxist variant, see Teschke 2003.

¹⁶ Mackenney 1993, 219.

Dynastic rulers enjoyed important advantages over other political leaders, including superior access to the means of warfare and greater political legitimacy in the context of political expansion and consolidation. Such advantages meant that the most significant pathway of state formation in the late medieval and early modern periods was dynastic and agglomerative. In Wayne te Brake's words, "Most Europeans lived within composite states that had been cobbled together from pre-existing political units by a variety of aggressive 'princes' employing a standard repertoire of techniques including marriage, dynastic inheritance, and direct conquest."¹⁷

Charles of Habsburg's expansive monarchy presents the most spectacular case of dynastic agglomeration. Between 1515 and 1519, Charles acquired—as a result of contingencies of dynastic marriage, death, insanity, and political maneuvering—a realm including present-day Spain, the Netherlands and Belgium, parts of what is now Italy, Germany, and Austria, as well as Spain's New World possessions. He became king of the Romans and, later, emperor, which placed him in charge of the unwieldy Holy Roman Empire.¹⁸ His wealth, territories, and his status as emperor "raised the spectre of a Habsburg universal monarchy in Europe, fuelled by the bullion of the Indies and the trade of Seville."¹⁹

Martin Luther began his public call for reformation of the Catholic Church in 1517. Historians and social scientists continue to debate why, and to what extent, Luther's actions sparked an explosion of heterodox challenges to the institutional structure and theological principles of the Catholic Church.²⁰ But his influence, and that of other religious leaders and movements, led to over a century and a half of tumult across Latin Christendom. The Reformations did so, as I have suggested, because of the ways they intersected with the underlying dynamics of early modern European politics.

Early modern European composite states suffered from chronic instabilities. They were, as we have seen, agglomerations of different peoples and territories divided by distinctive interests and identities. They enjoyed comparatively weak coercive and extractive capacity and relied largely on indirect rule through magnates, urban oligarchs, and other elites who often pursued their own interests and agendas. Endemic dynastic conflicts, for their part, outstripped the extractive capacities of early modern states, engendering resistance and rebellion among their subjects. Dynastic composite states, moreover, experienced recurrent succession crises.

¹⁷ te Brake 1998, 14.

¹⁸ Bonney 1991, 109.

¹⁹ Armitage 1998a, xix.

²⁰ See Elton 1964, Fernández-Armesto and Wilson 1996, Kittelson 1986, Lambert 1977, Matheson 1998, McGrath 2004, Ozment 1975, and Tracy 1999.

Dynastic succession only functioned smoothly if a ruler lived long enough to produce a competent male heir old enough to assume the reins of power. In an era of high infant mortality and minimally effective medical care, disputed successions occurred with great frequency.²¹

Many of these sources of instability, however, also conferred specific benefits to dynastic rulers. First, the composite quality of early modern states created strong firewalls against the spread of resistance and rebellion. Because subjects in different holdings had different identities and interests, and because they were ruled via distinctive contractual relations, they had little motivation or capacity to coordinate their resistance against the centralizing impulses of their rulers.

Second, the underlying bargains of composite states reflected and exacerbated the stratification of early modern European society along divisions of class and status. Composite states distributed rights and privileges among urban centers, aristocrats, and rural society in such a way that for one group to gain an advantage meant a diminishment in the position of another. Rulers exploited these fault lines through strategies of extending differential privileges, such as granting exemptions to nobles to secure their loyalty during periods of urban unrest.

Subjects riven by class and regional differences could not easily join together to oppose their rulers. Dynastic agglomerations, therefore, usually only suffered widespread internal conflict under three conditions: when exogenous shocks, such as famines, led to generalized unrest; when rulers severely overreached in their demands and thus provoked simultaneous uprisings; or when a succession crisis drew in contending elites from across the dynastic agglomeration in the high stakes struggle over who would control the center.²²

Early modern struggles over central and local control, taxation, and the distribution of rights and privileges were often contentious; they usually ended in blood and tears. But only under specific circumstances did they spiral out of control and risk collapsing central authority. The spread of heterodox religious movements intersected with sources of chronic instability in early modern Europe and made them more dangerous. At the most basic level, once a dispute over tax collection took on religious dimensions, the stakes became even higher: the ultimate fate of one's immortal soul. The interjection of religious disputes into routine political disagreements rendered them much more difficult to resolve.

The spread of heterodox religious movements also produced new social ties centering around common religious identities and grievances. These

²¹ Sharma 2005, 16.

²² te Brake 1998, 14–21. For a general discussion of these factors, see Zagorin 1982a and 1982b.

ties often crossed regional, class, and even state boundaries. In doing so, they created the potential for the most dangerous kinds of resistance to rulers—insurrections that were well funded, militarily capable, highly motivated, and that mobilized diverse peoples and interests against their rulers.

Religious disagreements were neither necessary nor sufficient to produce such rebellions. Religious conflict played, at best, an indirect part in the Catalan (1640–1652) and Portuguese (1640–1668) revolts against the Habsburgs and the French *Fronde* (1648–1653). All of the major “wars of religion,” in fact, involved disputes over some combination of taxation, local autonomy, succession, and factional control of the court. Religious movements, particularly if they had limited class or regional appeal, might actually hinder individuals and groups from forming effective alliances against their ruler’s demands. The Dutch Revolt (1572–1609), the Schmalkaldic Wars (1546–1547), the French Wars of Religion (1562–1629), and other religious-political conflicts in early modern Europe all displayed aspects of this complex relationship, in which the spread of reformation interacted with the structural dynamics of resistance and rule to produce both a variety of different specific outcomes and an overall crisis in the European political order.

What, then, were the ultimate implications of the Protestant Reformations on international change in early modern Europe? Not, I argue, the emergence of a sovereign-territorial state system in 1648. The Reformations stretched early modern states to their limits. They nearly collapsed the French composite state and produced an independent Dutch polity locked in conflict with its erstwhile Habsburg overlords. The Reformations directly undermined the Habsburg bid for hegemony and weakened the dynastic agglomerative path of state formation. They expanded the conditions of possibility for the future construction of national, sovereign states by linking religious differences to territory.²³ As J. H. Elliott writes of Castile and England, “As strong core states of composite monarchies,” both “sharpened their own distinctive identities during the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century, developing an acute, and aggressive, sense of their unique place in God’s providential design.”²⁴

As many international-relations theorists note, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries marked the rise of new theories of sovereignty, of notions of “reason of state,” and of the balance of power.²⁵ The Reformations contributed to these developments. Most of the important theories of sovereignty developed in the period were reactions to the turmoil produced

²³ Gorski 1993, 1999, 2000, Schilling 1992.

²⁴ Elliott 1992, 59. See also Marx 2005.

²⁵ Armitage 1998a, xx.

by religious conflict.²⁶ Conflicts between dynastic and religious interests forced statesmen and scholars to justify their policies through doctrines of “necessity” and other conceptual innovations that held, in essence, that long-term religious goals should be made subservient, in the short-term, to security and power.²⁷ We cannot fully appreciate such conceptual changes in the absence of an understanding of the practical political consequences of the Reformations.

State institutions, if not the specific contours of dynastic agglomerations, weathered the storm of the Reformations. This fact suggests that we need to be extremely careful about overplaying the broad impact of religious contention on the emergence of the modern state.²⁸ Shifts in the nature of warfare and economic relations ultimately contributed more to the emergence of a Europe composed of sovereign-territorial and nation-states than did the introduction of new religious ideas.²⁹ But recognizing the more subtle impact of the Reformations on European state formation should not blind us to their importance in the study of international relations and international change.

EARLY MODERN EUROPE AS A CASE OF POLITICAL CHANGE

The field of international relations has a strong “presentist” bias. Colin and Miriam Elman argue that “social scientists have an explicit mandate to seek out policy-relevant knowledge, and to answer the ‘so what’ question.”³⁰ I believe that international-relations scholars study world politics, whether in its historical or contemporary manifestations, and that this “explicit mandate” justifies, on its own, analysis of the political impact of the Protestant Reformations. The study of early modern Europe, however, has important implications for the debate about continuity and change in international-relations scholarship.

One of the most enduring questions in international-relations theory—even before there was such a distinct field of inquiry—concerns whether the nature and conduct of world politics undergoes significant alterations over the course of time. Realists argue that their basic parameters are constant: world politics has been, and will always be, marked by a struggle for power between political communities. Cultural practices, norms,

²⁶ See Bodin 1992 and Hobbes 1951.

²⁷ Elliott 1984, Mackenney 1993.

²⁸ Glete 2002.

²⁹ Nexon 2005, 715–16.

³⁰ Elman and Elman 1997, 8.

beliefs, and identities may alter, but they themselves will never change the underlying texture of international relations.³¹

In this view they echo one of their canonical theorists, Niccolò Machiavelli, who chastised those who read history as if “the heavens, the sun, the elements, human beings had changed in their movement, organization, and capacities, and were quite different from what they were in days gone by.”³² Or, as Kenneth Waltz notes in his seminal but much-maligned *Theory of International Politics*, “State behavior varies more with differences of power than with differences in ideology, in internal structure of property relations, or in governmental form.”³³

A variety of other schools disagree. English-school scholars adopt a strongly historicist approach to world politics; they trace mutations in international society as a way of understanding the “primary institutions” that govern contemporary world politics.³⁴ A more recent approach, known as “constructivism,” articulates a view of international relations as socially and historically contingent: as cultural and social relations alter, so, too, does the basic texture of international politics. “Anarchy,” as the title of one of Alexander Wendt’s well-known articles claims, “is what states make of it.”³⁵

Nonrealist scholars, in general, study international change with two objectives. They seek to demonstrate that the basic processes of international politics are far more malleable than realists suggest. But they also hope to discover from past instances of international change how present developments might alter the parameters of international relations in the not-so-distant future.³⁶ In this latter task, they are joined by those in the realist tradition who, while stressing the basic continuity of power-political competition—whether in the form of the rise and decline of hegemonic states or the workings of the balance-of-power mechanism—also want to understand how shifts in military technology, economic relations, and other factors might shape future struggles for power.³⁷ We need more, not fewer, inquiries into the two crucial questions of international-relations theory: how plastic the texture of international-relations really is and under what kinds of circumstances that texture undergoes significant alterations.

³¹ See Mearsheimer 2001.

³² Machiavelli 1994, 83.

³³ Waltz 1986, 329.

³⁴ Bull 1977, Bull and Watson 1984, Buzan 2004, Buzan and Little 2000, Watson 1992.

³⁵ Wendt 1992. See also Dessler 1989, Hobden and Hobson 2002, Onuf 1989, Ruggie 1998, and Wendt 1987, 1994, 1996.

³⁶ E.g., Bukovansky 2002, Hall 1999, Holsti 2004, Philpott 2001, Spruyt 1994.

³⁷ E.g., Gilpin 1981, Van Evera 1998

But all of this is merely prelude. No one can accuse international-relations scholarship of *lacking* interest in the development of the European state system. If anything, “eurocentrism” might be a more pressing problem for international-relations theory than its presentist bias.³⁸ So what, after all, does another study of early modern Europe contribute to our understanding of international continuity and change and the pressing problems of the day?

First, most international-relations scholars approach the period with the wrong set of questions. Many, as I noted at the outset, understand its significance primarily in terms of sovereignty, rather than as a case of the impact of religious contention on resistance, rule, and international conflict. They treat the most important question—why the Reformations led to a profound crisis in European politics—as, at best, subordinate to the debate over the relative importance of ideas, warfare, or economic change in the emergence of the modern state system. Realists, on the other hand, tend to see the fate of the Spanish monarchy as either an archetypal case of hegemonic overextension or the workings of the balance-of-power mechanism.³⁹ Both processes operated in the period, but their theoretical framework overlooks not only the role of religious contention in the defeat of the Habsburgs, but also the underlying mechanisms of resistance and rule that account for Habsburg overextension. As I argue in later chapters, Habsburg overextension stemmed less from an iron law of the rise and decline of great powers than from the politics of imperial management—problems exacerbated by religious politics.

Second, as Colin and Miriam Fendius Elman note, “the stakes are high” in matters of historical analogies “because once constructed, historical understandings have an important effect on political behavior.”⁴⁰ The standard accounts of the period, as a key moment in the development of state sovereignty or as a straightforward process of hegemonic overexpansion and counterbalancing, inform not only international-relations theory but, at least indirectly, policymaking. We have already seen, moreover, that pundits and analysts struggling to make sense of the current era draw upon the early modern European experience. This study demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of those analogies by providing a theoretically informed account of the consequences of the intersection of religious movements with hegemony, empire, and composite states in early modern Europe.

³⁸ Hui 2004 and 2005; Wong 1997.

³⁹ Gilpin 1981, 120–21, 164–65, 176–77; Kennedy 1987, 112; Kupchan 1996, 35; Walt 1985, 15.

⁴⁰ Elman and Elman 1997, 9–10.

THEORIZING INTERNATIONAL CHANGE

Many of the processes found in early modern Europe resonate with pressing concerns in the study of world politics: the rise of transregional and transnational religious movement; the fate of hegemonic powers, empires, and composite states; and the role of such processes in shaping (or not shaping) the fate of sovereign modes of authority. This book also advances a broader theoretical and analytical agenda: how we should approach questions of continuity and change in world politics.

International-relations scholars deploy a wide variety of analytical and theoretical frameworks in their studies of change. Realists focus on shifts in the relative power of states, the changing sources of military and economic power, and alterations in variables such as the relative efficacy of offensive and defensive operations. Their approach captures important features of political change in early modern Europe, but it comes up short in at least two crucial respects. It presupposes that the structure of early modern European politics approximates the states-under-anarchy framework deployed in realist theory. The composite character of early modern European states, as well as the structure of identity and authority relations generated by dynasticism, disappears from our purview.⁴¹ Contemporary realist theory, furthermore, simply cannot make sense of the power-political dimensions of nonstate movements, let alone of how their dynamics might interface with different forms of state organization.⁴²

The predominant constructivist and English-school accounts of international change focus on, variously, the autonomous role of beliefs and ideas, alterations in the constitutive norms of international politics, or the workings of international cultural systems. This allows them to treat practices and norms, such as dynasticism, as changing and alterable. It also creates far greater room to consider the role of nonstate actors in world politics. Yet it also leads to problematic accounts of international change. Some argue, for example, that change results from contradictions between various norms, beliefs, and practices that produce “legitimation crises” or, less usefully, from the alteration of norms, beliefs, and practices.⁴³

Indeed, between predominant realist and social-constructivist accounts we face a set of unpalatable alternatives. Realists provide straightforward ways to generalize across time and space about processes of continuity and change. International systems, they argue, are characterized by anarchy—the lack of a common authority—and vary in terms of their distribu-

⁴¹ See Osiander 2001, Sharma 2005, and Teschke 1998.

⁴² See Keck and Sikkink 1998, Sikkink 1999.

⁴³ E.g., Hall 1999, Holsti 2004.

tion of power. Hegemonic, bipolar, and multipolar systems, they claim, involve broadly similar dynamics no matter where or when we find them. Constructivist scholarship makes clear the problem with this view: it obscures important differences in the structure and texture of international politics across time and space.⁴⁴ Yet because constructivists often render international structure in terms of a catalogue of unique norms, identities, and rules, they both make it difficult to generalize in useful ways about processes of change and they have difficulty “explaining the astonishingly similar types of . . . behavior evident across many different types of different polities, cultures, and historical eras.”⁴⁵

This book puts forward an alternative framework for understanding international continuity and change that I call “relational institutionalism.” I elaborate this approach in the next chapter; here, I put forth some of its core principles. Relational institutionalism combines the historical-institutionalist insight that “institutions” operate as “ligatures fastening social sites, relationships, and large-scale processes to each other to produce historically variable outcomes”⁴⁶ with a sociological-relationalist understanding of structures as patterns of social interaction (social ties) that take on particular network properties.⁴⁷

This approach provides us with a way to cut into what constructivists refer to as the “co-constitutive” relationship between agents and structures. Once we treat structures as networks composed of social transactions, it follows that structures exist by virtue of ongoing processes of interaction but simultaneously position actors in various structurally consequential positions relative to one another. This applies across different levels of aggregation: states themselves are network configurations, but they are also social sites—or collections of social sites—within the broader network-structure of the international system.⁴⁸ For example, we can say that the relationship between two actors is “anarchical” in the absence of relevant authoritative ties, either between one another or with a third social site (see Figure 1.1).⁴⁹ But these relations are a far cry from the full-blown states-under-anarchy conception of the international system found in realist theory.

⁴⁴ E.g., Biersteker and Weber 1996, Bukovansky 2002, Hall 1999, Hobson 2002, Hobson and Sharman 2005, Onuf 1989.

⁴⁵ Cooley 2005, 12.

⁴⁶ Katznelson 1997, 103.

⁴⁷ E.g., Emirbayer 1997, Jackson and Nexon 1999, Tilly 1995, 1997b, 1998.

⁴⁸ On agent-structure co-constitution, see Bhaskar 1989, Dessler 1989, Giddens 1984, 1995, Wendt 1987, Wight 1999. For elaborations on this point, see Jackson and Nexon 1999, 2001, and 2002. My argument here draws inspiration from Ferguson and Mansbach’s conception of “nested” polities. See Ferguson and Mansbach 1996, 48ff.

⁴⁹ Hobson and Sharman 2005, Lake 1996, 2001, 2003.

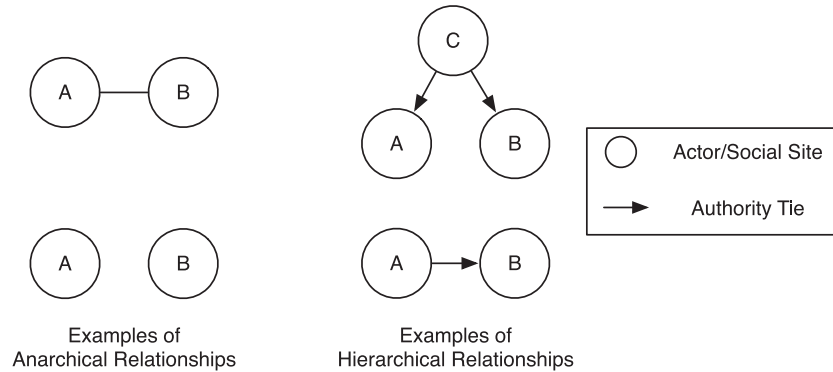


Figure 1.1 Anarchy and Hierarchy as Relational Structures

When realists refer to the international system as “anarchical,” they implicitly describe a nested network-structure in which (1) ties *between* states are relatively sparse and contain no significant vectors of authority, (2) collective identification *between* states is, at best, weak, (3) ties *within* states are relatively dense and involve significant patterns of legitimate domination, and (4) collective identification *within* states is comparatively strong. The realist world is one of billiard-ball like nation-states; in relational terms, the network-structure of inter-state anarchy is co-constitutive with the network-structure of states themselves: each produces the other.⁵⁰

Relational institutionalism, therefore, helps make sense of why realists and constructivists see such different things when they examine early modern Europe. Early modern Europe contained elements of anarchy. The relations between dynastic heads of state did sometimes involve asymmetric authority ties but such ties seldom rendered their relations nonanarchical. But in other ways the relational structure of early modern Europe departed significantly from realist descriptions of anarchy: authoritative ties crisscrossed composite states, collective identification frequently shared little relationship with the boundaries of dynastic agglomerations, and ties within segments of dynastic agglomerations might be stronger than ties between them.⁵¹ Thus, even without considering the effects of the spread of heterodox religious movements, it should be clear that a system composed of composite states generates a different

⁵⁰ I develop this argument in chapter 2. On these assumptions, see Keohane and Nye 1989, 24–25; Lapid and Kratochwil 1996; Waltz 1979, 88, 104–5; Wendt 1994; Zacher 1992.

⁵¹ Greengrass 1991.

kind of international structure than that associated with realist descriptions of international anarchy. Such an international structure, as I argue in this study, produces distinctive patterns of collective action and collective mobilization from those associated with the states-under-anarchy framework.⁵²

A relational-institutionalist approach, in fact, resolves at least two problems found in international-relations accounts of state formation and international change. First, it enables scholars to persuasively link variation in the organization of political communities to variation in international structure. Second, it provides a reasonable compromise between, on the one hand, the social-scientific goal of nontrivial generalization and, on the other, a recognition of historical particularity and contingency.

Recall my central arguments for why the Protestant Reformations led to a crisis of European politics and state formation: the spread of religious heterodoxy intersected with ongoing dynamics of resistance and rule in ways that, given the right circumstances, made resistance far more dangerous to central authorities. These arguments, as such, apply only to a form of political organization—dynastic agglomerations—that existed in a particular period of European history. They also invoke a host of historical contingencies to account for the particular impact of the Reformations in specific times and places. Some readers might rightly wonder, therefore, how we could possibly construct generalizations with any applicability outside of the confines of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. We can, I submit, generalize about the *mechanisms and processes associated with the formal network-structures of composite states*.

In chapter 4 I construct an idealized account of the structure and dynamics of composite political communities based on an analysis of their network properties. These network characteristics make sense of many aspects of the dynamics of resistance and rule in early modern Europe. But they also suggest that we can generalize about those dynamics, such that when we find similar institutional network-structures in other times and places we should also expect to see broadly similar mechanisms and processes at work.⁵³ The ideal-typical network-structure of composite states, in fact, shares important similarities with that found in many formal and informal empires, as well as in hegemonic systems that involve informal imperial characteristics.⁵⁴ In consequence, as I argue in chapter 9, we can make a number of limited and provisional generalizations about contemporary processes of international change.

⁵² Hall 1999, 28–46.

⁵³ Cooley 2005, 2–7, 12–13; Simmel 1971, 25–26.

⁵⁴ See chapter 3. This claim receives further elaboration in Nexon 2006.

How these structural dynamics resolve in any particular setting will, as in the early modern European cases, depend on a variety of historically specific factors, such as prevailing norms, the ideological content of institutional legitimacy, adjacent macro- and microlevel processes, and how the structural relationship is embedded in other network configurations. No single theory will ever encompass the complex causal configurations that produce unique historical outcomes, but that should not prevent us from generalizing about how specific institutional structures act as ligatures in the translation of events and processes into political outcomes.⁵⁵

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book adheres to a rather conventional structure. Chapters 2–4 deal primarily with questions of broad theory and the character of early modern European political relations, chapters 5–7 with the theoretical analysis of cases from early modern Europe, and the remaining chapters with conclusions about European state formation and the general problem of international-political change.

Chapter 2 lays the analytical and theoretical groundwork for the rest of the book. It elaborates the relational-institutionalist framework through a critical engagement with, on the one hand, major schools of international-relations theory such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism and, on the other hand, a number of important studies of international change. I discuss the specific problems generated by, in particular, attempts to apply mainstream realist and constructivist frameworks to early modern Europe. But I also illustrate my conceptual and theoretical claims by drawing on a wide variety of examples, including the 2006 military conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, the American-led invasion of Afghanistan, and the problem posed by “weak states” for conventional international-relations analysis. This reflects my attempt to develop relational-institutional analysis as a general way of parsing international continuity and change.

I make, in this respect, a number of important arguments. First, one of the fundamental debates between contemporary varieties of realism, liberalism, and constructivism concerns the pathways of and proclivities for change in the international system. Second, relational institutionalism provides a way of conceptually unifying many of the most important claims found in these approaches, specifically in their systemic variants. Third, we should approach social-scientific generalization about continuity and change not by identifying invariant relations between causes and

⁵⁵ On configurational and singular causal analysis, see Jackson and Nexon 2002, Katznelson 1997, Tilly 1997b.

effects, but by specifying recurrent dynamics associated with similar social-structural conditions.

Chapter 3 supplies the crucial empirical infrastructure for this last task. I show how dynastic agglomerations constituted the ascendant form of political organization in early modern Europe, and that the dynastic-imperial pathway of state formation remained a vibrant trajectory of political change. Alterations in the mode of warfare and economic relations, as well as the inherent logic of dynasticism, contributed to the predominance of the dynastic-imperial pathway. A sovereign-territorial system was not the inevitable outcome of underlying processes of political transformation; the European state system we take for granted in international-relations theorizing remained only a contingent possibility well into the early modern period.

Once we recognize the composite nature of early modern European states, in fact, the problems with many accounts of the emergence of sovereignty fall into place. While some early modern European polities—both before and immediately after the Peace of Westphalia—had many of the attributes of modern states, they did not combine these attributes in ways that justify identifying them as inexorably “on their way” to becoming modern states.

Chapter 4 brings together my theoretical architecture with the empirical infrastructure elaborated in the preceding chapter. I construct an idealtypical account of the network-structures of composite states, which provides a deductive basis for explaining observed patterns of resistance and rule in early modern Europe. This, in turn, allows us to identify the mechanisms and processes triggered by the spread of religious heterodoxy. Throughout the chapter I draw not only upon cases from early modern Europe, but also from other composite polities with imperial, or empire-like, structural characteristics. I provide a sustained evaluation of these mechanisms and processes through a comparison of three uprisings in the Low Countries between 1477 and 1540.

The next section of this book applies this framework to developments in early modern Europe. Chapter 5 explores the rise and fall of Charles V. Chapter 6 traces the Spanish bid for hegemony from Charles’s abdication through the start of the so-called Thirty Years’ War. Chapter 7 deals with the French Wars of Religion—the decades-long political struggles in France marked by the emergence of the Huguenot movement and culminating in its political isolation and defeat. Within these cases I examine dynamics of resistance and rule, shifting political coalitions, and interdynastic conflict with a focus on a number of subcases. In some, such as the *Comuneros* revolt (1520–1521), religious difference played only the most peripheral of roles. In others, such as the Schmalkaldic War (1546–1547)

and the Dutch Revolt (1572–1609), religious differences decisively shaped the onset and direction of the conflict.

Each of these chapters also focuses on one or two competing explanatory frameworks. Chapters 5 and 6 highlight the problems with balance-of-power and hegemonic-order explanations for the rise and decline of the Habsburg bid for European preeminence. Ideationalist accounts provide the major foil for my analysis of the French Wars of Religion in chapter 7. In none of these chapters do I dismiss competing accounts outright, but instead show how relational analysis both corrects and modifies the arguments advanced by their proponents. My argument, I contend, identifies the key mechanisms and processes that translated power-political and ideational developments into historically specific outcomes.

The final section of the book contains two different kinds of conclusions. Chapter 8 opens with a discussion of the Thirty Years' War, the Peace of Westphalia, and its aftermath. After dispensing with arguments that the Peace of Westphalia marked the origins of the sovereign-territorial state system, I expand my purview beyond the empirical ground covered in the second section and reflect broadly on the often subtle ways in which the Reformations shaped European state formation. Chapter 9 returns us to the general theme of international change and what “lessons” we can extract from early modern Europe for the present. I focus on three major points.

First, not only did composite states never disappear from the world, but they may be back with a vengeance. The last century has seen developing fissures, in Europe and in many other areas of the world, along the fault lines produced through state building via territorial agglomeration.⁵⁶ Supranational and regional formations, such as the European Union, reflect, in some ways but not in others, a movement “back to the future” in world politics.

Second, broader processes of globalization are shifting the “opportunity structure” for collective action in world politics in ways that favor the emergence of transnational and transregional movements. Some of these movements have, to put it mildly, a religious dimension. Although many, but far from all, contemporary states enjoy greater capacity than early modern polities, these movements do, as well.

Third, contemporary developments are leading many scholars and pundits to rethink the widespread assumption that the dynamics of empires and imperial formations matter little in the era of nation-states. The conjunction of these developments suggests that the material studied and theorized in this book has at least some, however qualified, relevance for the analysis of contemporary and future international change.

⁵⁶ Roeder 2007.