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Review

Symbologies, technologies, and identities: Critical junctures theory and the multi-layered nation–state☆

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ABSTRACT

Critical junctures theory draws from complexity theory/dynamical systems theory to investigate how ethnically, religiously and ideologically defined communities interact and coexist within and between states defined on the basis of Westphalian principles. States are theorized as dynamical political systems identified by three system parameters: (1) a symbology—systems of symbolic meaning attached to and promoted by the state, (2) an identity space—the groups and group identities that vie for legitimacy and control of state apparatuses, and (3) a set of technologies—the institutions and technological means used by the state to maintain and reproduce itself. The system is thought to be located in an international political geography that provides initial starting conditions and system constraints. The system parameters are viewed as a family of variables rather than a single measure, and their operation is contingent upon specific actualizing conditions consistent with the philosophy of critical realism: this allows for both quantitative hypothesis–testing research and qualitative–hermeneutical work under a unified theoretical framework. The theory is illustrated by a Special Issue that spans historical case studies of Singapore and Turkey, history textbook analyses of the European Union, interviewing the institutional role of history teachers in transmitting Estonian national identity, the transformative ideological work of biblical narratives in Israeli state-building, and several papers that illustrate how social psychological phenomena can be located within the historical trajectories of evolving states.

Contents

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Grand theory in history and the social sciences as epitomized by the works of Weber, Marx, Hegel, or Parsons has largely been abandoned. At one level, this is a healthy corrective to totalizing, linear, hegemonic meta-narratives from Eurocentrism to patriarchy (Said, 1979). At another level, social scientists have sacrificed generalization in favor of reflection on and analysis of specificity in both qualitative and quantitative ways. Globally, social systems are increasingly complex and interconnected (Ritzer, 2011); yet generally speaking, discipline specific scholarship fails to theorize interaction between the global, the national and the local. This is the result of disciplinary compartmentalization and methodological exclusivism that leads scholars to reject findings based on methods other than their own, without due consideration of their implications for addressing larger issues. The upshot is that academic disciplines speak past one another, at the very time when societies are increasingly interconnected.

There is a tangible need for a return to grand theory that transcends disciplinary orthodoxy, and hones in on the nexus between the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Without such a framework, we are hard pressed to address what is arguably the outstanding empirical and normative research question facing the social sciences today: *How, in a converging but fragmenting world can communities coexist within and between states defined on the basis of Westphalian principles*[1].

This question is especially relevant for the study of nations, nationalisms and inter-state relations—phenomena at the heart of the ongoing transition from post-imperial, Westphalian models of the state toward a globalizing but also fragmenting world in which non-state actors ranging from NGOs to trans-national religious movements, diasporas and supra-national structures such as the European Union are increasingly significant (Rosenau, 1997). In this context, different layers, and multiple agents are contesting for legitimacy. On one hand, there is an emerging social, economic, and political order—driven by information technology and global capitalism characterized by convergence and the collapse of time and space. This is leading to increased contacts and interdependence as well as catalyzing mutual engagement and perhaps mutual recognition (Fisher Onar & Paker, 2012). It suggests we could be moving toward a global (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007; Ritzer, 2009) or cosmopolitan order (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Nussbaum, 1994). At the same time, the very same processes and technologies are creating diversity and fragmentation, and heightening friction between individuals and groups thrown together despite their very basic distrust and dislike of one another's preferences and values (Arnett, 2002). This is evident in the proliferation of post-modern tribalisms, fundamentalisms, micro-nationalisms, and identity formations that cut across these (Appadurai, 1998).

A case in point is the way the emergence of a multi-centered world system and the persistent lure of Europe and North America as destinations for immigrants from the global periphery have together created anxieties fuelling the emergence of far right, even nativist movements such as the British Defense League in England and the Tea Party in the US. The role played by new technologies is highlighted by events such as the Utoya massacre in Norway where the internet provided gunman Andres Breivik, with an "imagined community" that affirmed his world-view of a nation under threat by immigration. The technology of the state conceived by Anderson (1983) must now meet the challenge of containing the technologies undermining the state and/or weakening its sovereign power.

The analytic framework presented in this paper emanates from complexity theory, also known as dynamical systems theory, in its dual forms as a scientific paradigm (Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2010; Geyer & Pickering, 2011) and as a metaphorical system of explanation (Bousquet & Curtis, 2011; Lehmann, 2012). It combines ontology/epistemology and tools/methodology in ways that can help us address some of the critical questions of our times across disciplines and cultural geographies. Specifically, we employ complexity theory to (1) bridge the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of the world and state, institutions and groups, and individuals, and (2) bridge disciplines that address common issues from the perspectives of alternative paradigms. The key as we see it is to not reduce the complexity of states as dynamical systems to a single, overly simplistic system of measurement or explanation, but to create a framework that sustains the integration of multiple perspectives and multiple modes of inquiry within a coherent analytical and discursive system.

Complexity theory is especially relevant for and under-utilized in the study of this emerging post-Westphalian global order. Gellner (as cited in Hall, 1998) spoke of the need for a theoretical apparatus that captured rather than bracketed complexity, but there is a dearth of such studies on nationalisms and inter-state relations. This is surprising given its application in adjacent areas like social theory (e.g. Buckley, 1998) security (e.g. Clemens, 2001), and international relations (e.g. Kavalski, 2007) as well as many others (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The toolkit emanating from complexity theory also has been influential in theorizing path dependence (e.g. Pierson, 2000; Mahoney, 2000) and is congruent with much work in historical institutionalism from epic macro-historical accounts *a la* Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, and Stein Rokkan, to case studies that borrow from notions like critical junctures, increasing returns, sequencing, tipping points, and lock-in. However, as Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) note, these instruments are all too often invoked as *deus ex machina* without systematic reflection about their epistemological foundations.

[1] Where each state has sovereign power within its territorial boundaries.