
Comparing International Systems in World History: Anarchy, Hierarchy, and Culture

An INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY ONLINE symposium

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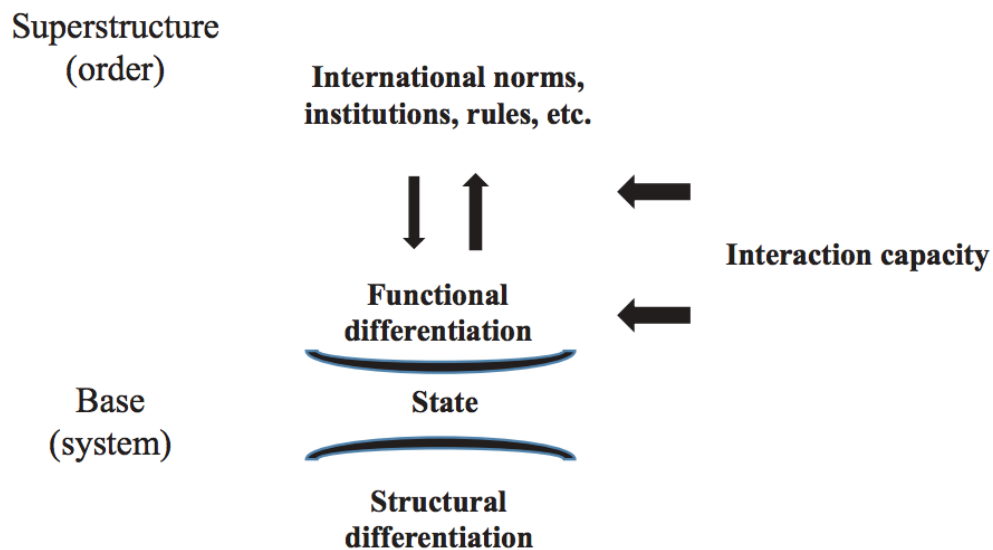
INTRODUCTION

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In “Between Eurocentrism and Babel: A Framework for the Analysis of States, State Systems, and International Orders,” Charles R. Butcher and Ryan D. Griffiths (2017) intervene in several important debates. These include, first, how we should compare international systems across time and space and, second, whether anarchy is a defining feature of international relations. Both are perennial issues of concern. But growing attention to non-European international relations (Acharya 2014) and the concurrent rise of the “new hierarchy studies” give them greater urgency (McConaughy, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018; Mattern and Zarakol 2016).

In many ways, Butcher and Griffiths (2017, 330) push back against recent trends. Rather than emphasize distinctiveness, they argue that critical variation in international systems—and the states that comprise them—comes down to the “extent to which states allocate authority functions to other states (functional differentiation) or to sub-state entities (structural differentiation).”



From Butcher and Griffiths 2017, 330.

This generates a fairly clean line between states and international systems, while preserving a “thin” version of the states-under-anarchy framework. They adopt a minimal definition of the state, derived from Tilly (1992, 1-2) as “coercion-wielding organizations that...exercise clear priority in some respects...over all other organizations within” a territory and have control over their foreign policy. From their perspective, “there is variation in the units (vassals, leagues, etc.), relations of super and subordination within anarchy, and the parceling out of authority functions, but these patterns are captured with the concepts of structural and functional differentiation” (Butcher and Griffiths 2017, 331).

As the title of their article implies, Butcher and Griffiths worry a great deal that current trends in the field render transhistorical comparison impossible. In particular, they contend that studying variation in international systems through a focus on differences of culture—in systems of meaning and patterns of authority—creates a variety of incommensurate understandings of systems. That is, doing so reduces to babel. Their alternative, they hope, provides a middle ground between the descent into idiographic analysis and the leveling effects of Eurocentrism, which washes out important variation across time and space.

The contributors to this symposium differ in their sympathy for these concerns, but all take issue with specific aspects of the broader argument. Alexander D. Barder sees it as a step backwards for ongoing efforts to make the field more sensitive to historical particularities. Along these lines, Ayşe Zarakol argues that the framework cannot accommodate important aspects of historical international systems—in part, because of problems with the way they discuss anarchy and hierarchy. Hendrik Spruyt contends that Butcher and Griffiths get it backwards: it is precisely cultural variation that gives us crucial leverage in understanding international continuity and change.

Benjamin Denison focuses on the distinction between anarchy and hierarchy, which he argues is far more blurry than Butcher and Griffiths contend. Megan A. Stewart also cuts into the Theory Note in terms of anarchy and hierarchy, and she suggests that “an actor-centric focus on scalable processes of governance” is an alternative way for thinking about political change. Seva Gunitsky, for his part, tackles how to understand the state. He argues “that any definition of a state that invokes the language of necessary and sufficient conditions... is doomed to run into serious problems, and that Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblance’ may be a more productive approach to creating a universal definition of the state.” Finally, Butcher and Griffiths respond to their critics.

MISSING THE TREES AND THE FOREST: ANACHRONISM DOES NOT LEAD TO ACCUMULATED KNOWLEDGE

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In their theory note, Charles Butcher and Ryan Griffiths develop an acutely parsimonious framework designed to facilitate comparative studies of states, state systems, and international orders. Their framework creates a “*baseline* and *unified* vocabulary for identifying...actors in a system...[and] variation[s]...across systems” (1). Their vocabulary is contingent on a “lean and culturally neutral conception of the state” (8), and it draws boundaries between ‘internal’ hierarchy and ‘external’ anarchy. As they argue, the necessity of such a framework for comparative systems analysis is in response to a growing trend to, on the one hand, contest Eurocentric IR theory, which they see as resulting in regionally focused analysis. On the other hand, the emergence of an inconsistent if not contradictory ‘vocabulary’ when it comes to terms like anarchy, hierarchy, state, empire, etc.—for them at least—essentially precludes knowledge accumulation.

One of the striking things about their theory note is how anachronistic it feels. It appears as a kind of throwback to a time (pre-1980s?) when systemic theorization and classification of international systems was very much constricted along ontological (state-centrism) and epistemological (neo-positivist) lines. For Butcher and Griffiths, it’s as if the variety of theoretical turns of the past two decades had not taken place; parsimonious scientism and ahistoricism are again assumed to be sufficient for accumulating knowledge. Nothing in their framework suggests that the various sociological, linguistic, cultural and, especially, historical turns have already contributed to a self-reflexivity about the limitations of comparative systems analysis along such lines. Butcher and Griffiths go in the opposite direction: stripping away anything that they’ve decided might get in the way of legibly comparing political orders on the basis of ahistorical and universal assumptions about political organizations (one can note their persistent usage of the word ‘lean’ to describe the concepts that make up their framework). We are then left with a reified concept of the state that is reduced to the ability to exercise internal coercion and external sovereignty. This last point, I want to suggest, is nothing but Eurocentric legal fiction that has little to do with the realities of power and authority in a variety of other contexts.

Butcher and Griffiths claim that the theory of the state initially derived from Charles Tilly, with the added capability of “external sovereignty” (i.e. of being able to conduct “foreign policy”), is not only historically ubiquitous within and beyond Europe but is essentially ahistorical. As they write, “coercion-wielding, foreign policymaking states are a *timeless* solution to human organization” (my emphasis). What seems to vary historically is functional differentiation and/or structural differentiation. As a consequence, they argue that their framework sees the transition from medieval Europe to the modern state system as a systemic change. “Seen through our framework,” Butcher and Griffiths argue, “the transition from European medieval period to what came after was not a systems change *because the units were always states*” (8, my emphasis). In other words, what distinguishes the medieval “state” from the 17th century administrative state is reduced to centralization

(structural differentiation) and its interactive capacity or manner (functional differentiation) with other similar states. This is stated without evidence, but is this plausible?

To speak of the medieval “state” is by no means an uncontroversial matter. For example, historian Rees Davies argues that the image of an autonomous coercive-wielding state is problematic, if not entirely anachronistic, in the medieval context. As he writes, “the concentration on the exclusive power of the state and its control of coercive processes is regularly in danger of underrating the plurality and overlapping context of sources of *social* power, of failing to recognize the interstitial and non-institutionalized forms of power, of overlooking the informal power structures of earlier times” (Davies 2003, 291; my emphasis). Power in the medieval polity, for example, cannot be understood as something “delegated” in a formal juridical sense from a central authority but rather reflective of striated relations of authority. Some historians have argued that a concept of “lordship” is more appropriate in that it better captures the blurring of authority, jurisdiction, and lack of clear difference between the public and private (ibid, 293). But even this concept of “lordship” doesn’t easily fit with Butcher and Griffiths’ idea of the state as a sovereign coercive body. The application of coercion could not have been centralized (even in the best case, that of England), as Andreas Osiander (2007, 225) argues, because of the obvious lack of a regularly standing army and the lack of organized taxation to fund it.

The problem for Butcher and Griffiths is that they take a reified political fiction of a European state and assume that in practice it operated along those lines universally, not wishing to grapple with the myriad practices and processes that coagulate into what forms its very institutions. Osiander makes the important point that in medieval Europe the gulf between a political theory of the state as embodying a political community versus its actual coercive abilities was substantial. As Osiander argues, “the crown had to fill, grow into, a political space defined by political theory, rather than political theory taking its cues from really existing kingdoms” (2007, 420). Moreover, the very notion of a bounded community as we might understand it today was problematic in a space of multiple identities and allegiances. In other words, to recognize the emergence of the modern state requires an understanding of not only its administrative centralization through incessant war, such as the Hundred Years’ War, but how its conceptual vocabulary (i.e. Skinner, 2009) begins to increasingly make sense of evolving political practices. This process of state-formation, and what would give rise to the very concept of the state, it should be clear, is contingent upon a particularly narrow Western European political, social, economic, and, especially, cultural history. The moment we begin to move, for example, towards Central or Eastern Europe, we are necessarily talking about different processes, transitions, and histories.

If Butcher and Griffiths’ framework gives us what I think is a deeply flawed view of the medieval European polity and a misrepresentation of the transition to the modern European state system, then I do not have much hope of what it might tell us about non-European systems, polities or orders. The problem is ultimately foundational to their framework. Though they anticipate the criticism, they do not adequately respond to it: there is no “culturally neutral” conception of the state (see especially Lebow 2009); viewing the state as an ahistorical/’culturally neutral’ institution is simply mistaking a representation, a legal fiction, that is reified and acting as if it was a real entity all along—a “timeless” institution. That they do not seem to recognize their own reification of the state is all the more puzzling given their appropriation of Marxist terminology such as base and superstructure. Nonetheless, this reification of the European state does in fact reflect “the same Eurocentric biases” that are then used to measure the “variation in local cultural content” of non-European systems/states. Though I’ve concentrated on their concept of

the state, the same argument can be made about their ubiquitous use of the term 'foreign policy'. Halvard Leira has argued that the term only surfaces as a distinct concept in modern Europe beginning in the eighteenth century. For Leira, 'foreign policy' emerges when there is a crystallization of the difference between public and private in early modernity Western Europe (Leira 2016).

What Butcher and Griffith propose then is a step in the wrong direction. In fact, it is a step backwards when the uses of anachronistic concepts were justified on the basis of building parsimonious theories for the sake of 'knowledge accumulation'. Maybe their framework would have been compelling 30 years ago. Today, however, I suspect that it will be much less so.

ARE EUROCENTRISM AND BABEL THE ONLY OPTIONS?

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Charles R. Butcher and Ryan D. Griffiths' theory note is a welcome addition to the growing literature in IR that aims to study 'international' orders pre-dating the modern one we are in. It is increasingly clear that we find ourselves in a moment of systemic transition, and it also seems obvious that our ability to imagine what could come next in world politics depends, to a large extent, on how well we understand what existed before modernity (Ruggie 1995 still makes the best case for this point). Unfortunately, mainstream IR has not been very good at understanding the past, having naively assumed that things taken for granted now—anarchy, modern states, Europe etc.—have always existed in some recognisable form in history. Until recently, this was reinforced with what may at best be termed tunnel vision in IR's dealings with history, where only those episodes from the past that seemed familiar (the Peloponnesian War, Westphalia, the Concert of Europe, World War I etc.) would even be considered as appropriate sites of inquiry. Having thus reduced all of human history to a few 'greatest hits', and hampered in the analysis of even those episodes by the ahistoricism of its conceptual toolkit (see e.g. Lawson 2012), IR would return from its excursions into history with its worst generalisations about the present confirmed, in the manner of an American tourist whose ideas about world cuisine were formed by sampling Big Macs at different national franchises in Europe.

Butcher and Griffiths open with the observation that in recent years things have been looking up on this front, and that a growing number of scholars are in fact studying non-Western and pre-modern state systems. Unfortunately, the list of works cited in support of this point in the very first paragraph, while admirable in many ways, does not make the strongest case that we have moved beyond modernist Eurocentrism, seeing that the majority still deal with Europe in some form and are in the modern period (and some are not particularly recent).

I do not disagree with the authors' general claim that there has been this turn, however. The historical IR section at ISA has grown rapidly since its inception less than a decade ago, and as the program chair this year, I can attest that there are a non-negligible number of works in the pipeline dealing with pre-modern and non-European political orders, not to mention a number very recently published (see e.g. Pardesi 2017, Sharman 2017). Given that this is a relatively new turn in IR, I do not want to criticise the authors too much about not engaging properly and broadly with the literature they are aiming to conceptually bring to heel in this theory note. As an example of the type of literatures omitted from the discussion, however, let me point to the 'Uneven and Combined Development' (U&CD) scholarship, which arguably has always operated in this particular corner of IR that is now attractive empirical real estate (see e.g. Rosenberg 1994, Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015, Anievas and Matin 2016 etc.).

I am not in this camp myself, but given that the U&CD literature has similar conceptually hegemonic aspirations as this theory note, I was surprised to see it entirely absent from the discussion. As fragmented as it is, I think IR could become a better discipline if we were to

somehow replace the norm wherein one approach moves into a territory others are already operating in and immediately declares it *terra nova* with a norm where we try to have substantive conversations across the various theoretical islands. (Note that the charge that I am levelling here at Butcher and Griffiths could easily be brought against U&CD and many other camps, so the problem is not with authors but with the discipline—I am sure I have been guilty of the same on occasion).

Let me underline emphatically that I am sympathetic to the authors' main concern that this growing literature is prone to fragmentation, particularly because each study operates with its own definitions of concepts such as state, system, order, etc. I completely agree that we should not replace Eurocentrism with a babel of regional studies. Where this theory note falls short for me personally, and I suppose others like me who are operating on the more historicist side of IR, however, is that despite all the welcome caution about Eurocentrism in the opening pages, the authors then build into their framework terms such as territory without worrying much about the commensurability of such terms across time and space (Territory is one of those concepts that seem so natural and universal, but actually has a very particular history. See e.g. Elden 2013).

The end result is a framework that cannot, for instance, accommodate the political order that existed in (what is now called) the Middle East from the eighth to eleventh centuries, not the least because the Tilly-ian definition of the state the authors are using does not adequately capture any of the actors operating in that space (see e.g. Zarakol 2017c), and despite scattered mention of vassals etc., I am not convinced that it works even for Medieval Europe (to provide an example readers will be more familiar with). Part of the problem is caused by the insistence of the authors to use the concepts of anarchy/hierarchy as interchangeable terms for external/internal. This choice can be explained from the vantage point of our discipline's particular (and peculiar) history (see Donnelly 2015, Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016), but in a world without Waltzian neorealism, 'anarchy', however thinly defined, would not be synonymous with 'external' (See also Hobson 2012, Donnelly 2017, Zarakol 2017a, Zarakol 2017b).

I could go on, but I do not mean to come across as overly critical—I do very much support the authors' goal of developing transhistorical concepts and frameworks of comparison, and can envision most of my criticisms being answered in a longer version of this theory note. Even in this short version, the theoretical framework that is being developed is a much better alternative to many that exist in the literature, especially on the positivist side of historical IR. Since that seems to be the primary audience of this note anyway, the contribution of the authors could not be overestimated.

HOW TO INTEGRATE GLOBAL HISTORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

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There is much to like in Charles Butcher's and Ryan Griffiths' contribution to historical studies in International Relations. They cover many previous analyses of states and state systems. And they rightly draw our attention to the increasing number of scholars who have turned to examining non-Western systems. Their proposed analysis braids multiple theories, specifically those of Waltz (1979) and Buzan, Jones and Little (1993). They build on Waltz in their proposition that domestic politics can be clearly demarcated from the international realm. They follow Buzan et al. in suggesting that interaction capacity constitutes a key causal variable.

But for all their insights, their proposed framework of analysis is flawed. Indeed, while they seek to incorporate the analysis of non-European systems to counteract the Eurocentric bias in international relations scholarship, their very approach ends up exemplifying that bias.

As always, where you end up depends critically on your point of departure. For Butcher and Griffiths, the point of departure is resolutely a positivist understanding of politics. Contrary to the (alleged) confusion of current scholarship, they seek "consensus" and a framework to "accumulate knowledge." They advance a comprehensive theory that allows one to compare systems and states across time and space in a rigorous manner, counteracting "the proliferation of ideas and concepts."

Note first of all their claim that there is such Babel-like confusion. But that assertion is contestable. True, scholars of historical polities and systems operate with contested meanings and concepts, and they lack an overarching consensus on the best framework for analysis (assuming such consensus is desirable). But that is something quite different than claiming that debates about concepts are themselves without meaning. One might have good reasons why one person's empire is another person's multi-ethnic state.

In this context it is impossible to discuss in detail the many reservations regarding positivist and empiricist approaches to historical studies. Constructivist and post-structuralist critiques abound in the international relations field (Ashley 1986, Wendt 1999). And philosophers of science have long critiqued the applicability of positivist approaches in the social sciences (MacIntyre 1976; Rorty 1996; Winch 1990). By contrast, a hermeneutic approach focusing on the self-understanding of the actors in question—how did they understand their polity and the relations between different communities?—would yield quite different conclusions than the ones that Butcher and Griffiths draw. (On hermeneutics and historical method, see Gadamer 2013).

Their argument, however, is clear. They advance a definition of the state "that is culturally neutral and that has existed across time and space" (2). They display their empiricist approach for all to see.

However, any person vaguely familiar with the later Wittgenstein's work will raise their eyebrows. Take the example of the concept "empire." If they are correct, we should be able to come to agreement on what exactly an empire is. But was the USSR an empire or a multinational state? For Russian scholars the answer is obvious: The USSR was a multinational state. Russia alone lacked its own communist party. It consistently downplayed Russian ethnicity in favor of the new Soviet citizen. Titular elites in the other republics were given access to the center of power itself and Russia funded the budgets of many of the union republics. For non-Russians in the "near abroad" the answer is equally obvious. Of course it was an empire: Russians dominated in the sciences, in the higher ranks of the armed forces, and the political upper strata. Tens of thousands of non-Russians were deported in times of crisis.

The point is that both views are equally valid. The meaning of the concept depends on the particular context and the reasons why one deploys a particular term. To echo Wittgenstein, "every word has a different character in different contexts" (Wittgenstein 1958, 181).

To be clear, I fully recognize that any analysis requires definitional choices on the part of the scholar. Butcher and Griffiths can choose any operational definition that serves their purposes. My point is rather that any definition is intrinsically culturally laden and not applicable across time and space. The British Empire of the 19th century was something altogether different than the Southeast Asian galactic empires that they mention.

Their positivist approach continues in their proposed framework, which involves three steps, the first of which is crucial. They define states as "coercion-wielding organizations that...exercise clear priority in some respects...over all other organizations within a territory and have control over their foreign policy." This allows them to subsequently distinguish domestic politics from international politics. Having made this second step, they can then distinguish states in their level of internal hierarchy (structural differentiation) and compare systems by the level of hierarchy among states (functional differentiation). Finally, the density of interaction determines the level of structural and functional differentiation (4).

All hinges on the validity of their first analytic move, as they rightly acknowledge. By defining states as organizations that have exclusive control over their foreign policy, they can distinguish internal and external realms. Moreover, all sorts of polities that we thought of as distinct from states turn out to be essentially the same—differing only in scale.

Unfortunately, the first step in their sequential argument does not hold. For one, the definition is tautological. It assumes that one can unproblematically distinguish "foreign" policy from "domestic policy." But what is "foreign"? That very distinction of what constitutes the internal and external political realm requires investigation (Walker 2010).

Second, Butcher and Griffiths have the Westphalian state in mind and even reference their view to the Montevideo Declaration of 1933. Ironically, they thus interject a Eurocentric notion of the state to deploy in their analysis of non-European systems. They assume that the distinction of internal and external is unproblematic, even though many of the historical polities they refer to lacked such concepts themselves.

It is puzzling moreover, that their reading of widely different polities and systems leads them to conclude that these all fit within their framework. The difference between feudal organizations, city-states, and sovereign territorial states is one of scale in their view. They are not qualitatively different.

But a more interpretive stance would yield quite different conclusions. All sorts of actors—bishops, lords, cities, kings, emperors, popes, city-leagues—engaged in activities that we today would classify under the rubric of “foreign” policy. They conducted such activities in cross-cutting jurisdictional domains and issue specific areas. No one possessed a monopoly on the conduct of foreign policy.

Studying non-Western polities further illuminates how our conceptions of domestic and international are historically specific and contextual. For example, modern conceptions of “international” and “domestic” politics struggle to adequately capture the “galactic empires” of Indic Asia. In such empires rulers operated in political spaces of overlapping claims to power (multiple gravitational fields to expand the metaphor). Their rulers were “chakravartin,” the wheel turners, the conduits between heaven and earth who possessed no artificial conceptions of the internal and the external realm. Butcher and Griffiths suggest that such cosmological ideas simply served the pursuit of power. A culturalist reading of Wolters (1990) and Tambiah (1976) would reveal instead how collective belief systems in South and Southeast Asia determined how power was conceived in the first place.

Similarly, it is unclear to me how Butcher and Griffiths could reference Geertz’s work on the performative polity in Bali, where “power served pomp, not pomp power” and argue that such a polity might be understood in terms of structural differentiation and interaction capacity. Their short answer that material substructure determines superstructure, rings all too familiar of discredited historical materialism.

Does this leave us then with a Babel of incomprehensibility; the simple reading of tidbits of history for history’s sake? I think not. First, to argue for a historically sensitive interpretive approach does not imply epistemological incommensurability. To suggest the latter would logically make any historical study literally impossible.

Second, studying non-European systems serves several invaluable purposes. It illuminates the premises of the Westphalian system—the collective delineation and collective conceptions that created domestic and international realms of politics. Indeed, Butcher and Griffiths—by taking Westphalian principles as ahistorical and cross-culturally neutral—inadvertently illuminate exactly why studying other historical periods and regions is valuable. Doing so exposes the biases that inform our understanding of the world around us. Moreover, viewing other polities serves as a reminder of alternative trajectories, those of the past as well as those that might be in the future.

THE PERILS OF A BRIGHT-LINE BETWEEN ANARCHY AND HIERARCHY IN CONCEPTUALIZING INTERNATIONAL ORDERS

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Charles Butcher and Ryan Griffiths (2017) offer a compelling framework that allows one to define states, state systems, and international orders comprehensively but also in a culturally neutral manner. This rich framework pushes us to think about international orders across time and space while expanding our thinking on the consistency and change of how international politics are structured over time. While their framework provokes a great deal of discussion and raises a variety of interesting points, the complete partitioning of hierarchy from anarchy through their conceptualization of the state leads to some analytical problems that, as I argue below, permitting coercive international hierarchy into the framework would help rectify. Below I expand on this point while praising the framework and seek to push the authors to expand their consideration of the role international hierarchy plays in international orders.

Butcher and Griffiths (2017, 329-330) begin their excellent piece by accurately diagnosing the over-conceptualization problem in the literature on international orders, hierarchy, and state systems. Unfortunately in much of the literature, rather than theorizing about international systems and orders using similar building blocks and common units of comparisons, some claim the concept they are defining and theorizing is unique and contingent upon certain factors only present in one historical moment, creating what Butcher and Griffiths term 'babel'. While large incentives exist to claim concepts and systems are unique and contingent based on time and place, in practice this creates major analytic problems when trying to theorize about the construction and change over time of international orders and structures. One example of where we see this most clearly is with definitions in international law: often new concepts are constructed in order to avoid the connotations of previous international structures and their normative content (Wilde 2010). Similarly trying to claim unique concepts when discussing sovereignty, hierarchy, and international orders—however simply—leads to incomprehensible comparison.

While thankful for their diagnosis of this problem, I do disagree with a few points in the solution they propose within their framework. Butcher and Griffiths utilize a thin definition of the state as the building block for the framework. This thin definition builds on Tilly's (1992, 1-2) and adds to it a requirement to possess external sovereignty and independent foreign policy (Butcher and Griffiths, 330). As a strict definition of a state, this is quite useful and expands our definition of what the constitutive units of an international order can be in a fruitful way. However, requiring an independent foreign policy to define the

constitutive units of an international order misses the vast number of states we consider independent units in the international yet are under some form of foreign rule and lack truly independent foreign policy. Territories under military occupation, trusteeship, or some other form of coercive international hierarchy lack an independent foreign policy separate from their foreign ruler. When states occupy foreign territories but do not wish to bring them under their own domestic sovereignty, then it does not make conceptual sense to treat them as an independent state unit nor as a sub-part of another state, the only two choices seemingly permitted in this framework.

For instance, when the United States occupied Haiti and the Dominican Republic in 1915 and 1916 respectively, both states lost their ability to conduct independent foreign policy (Calder 1984; Schmidt 1971). And yet, neither was incorporated into America's domestic sovereignty, but rather operated as foreign ruled territories in the Caribbean under coercive international hierarchy. Under this framework however, either the Dominican Republic in 1916 does possess independent foreign policy despite being run by the United States (which leads to conceptual stretching of what independent foreign policy entails), or the Dominican Republic is considered part of the American imperial state (which is unsatisfying and inaccurate). Territories that lose complete external sovereignty and independent foreign policy but are not incorporated into the domestic structure of a more powerful state still matter when thinking about the construction of an international order.

Since the late 19th century, largely due to the development of the international law of belligerent occupation (Dinstein 2009; Roberts 1985) and territorial integrity norms (Zacher 2001; Fazal 2007), coercive hierarchy that maintains independent statehood but cedes control over certain functions of the state to a larger state against their will has been a crucial element of the international system. Being able to incorporate these forms of coercive hierarchy into one's definition of the international order is necessary as maintaining statehood while losing independent foreign policy becomes more common. Territories under foreign rule are crucial for understanding how international hierarchy is imposed in practice and how international orders operate to incorporate them.

As noted above, Butcher and Griffiths' definition of the state is an admirable approach, but its use as the constitutive unit in their framework suffers from their attempt to cleanly delineate the difference between hierarchy and anarchy in the international system. In seeking to bright-line hierarchy from anarchy, we lose the variation that can occur through different forms of international hierarchy that are crucial to understanding international orders. This complete separation of hierarchy and anarchy serves to move beyond differentiation and imposes a view that renders international hierarchy, and especially coercive hierarchy, obsolete. Instead, hierarchy and anarchy as described in their framework exist at both the international and national level, and there is nothing in their framework that prohibits the possibility of including both in their framework.

Building on this point, the level of choice implicit in this framework seems to omit the various forms of coercive hierarchy that make definitions of anarchy and hierarchy more murky than the strict categorization that they proffer. This removes international coercive hierarchy from their framework and can serve to strip power from our analytical toolbox when discussing international orders. Take, for instance, the focus on functional differentiation at the international level. As presented, functional differentiation is akin to contractual forms of hierarchy (Cooley and Spruyt 2009; Lake 2009) where states choose how to allocate the authority functions across different "foreign-policy-controlling entities" (Butcher and Griffiths, 330).

However, if a state is no longer in control of their own foreign policy due to coercive forms of hierarchy, can a state truly decide what they delegate? And if there is no form of choice, coercive hierarchy is a part of the system that needs accounting for in the international order when it is imposing functional differentiation. In addition, once you are involved in a coercive hierarchical relationship, other foreign-policy-controlling entities can impose structural differentiation across units below them in the international hierarchy, further complicating the bright-line between anarchy and hierarchy. Take, for instance, Bosnia and Herzegovina, a state that possesses high levels of structural differentiation imposed by other states rather than the result of a choice to delegate to lower levels (Hayden 2005). While the framework presented here could be easily modified to accommodate the imposition of structural and functional differentiation as well as anarchy and hierarchy at both the unit and international order levels, the implicit categorization between the two levels can create murky analysis.

Recognizing the problems with the bright-line means, I think, that treating anarchy and hierarchy as variables instead of categories can help improve Butcher's and Griffith's framework. Allowing coercive hierarchy to exist and contribute to our classifications of international orders would still allow differentiation to play a large role in determining how we classify and understand international orders. However, by allowing coercive hierarchy to play a role, we gain a more complete picture of the constitutive units in their analysis. Allowing hierarchy to matter at the international level in helping determine imposed functional differentiation as well as imposed structural differentiation presents a more honest and holistic understanding of the variety of international relationships that can exist inside various international systems. Strict categorization leads one back to the conceptual mishmash they are seeking to avoid. In order for a cross-cultural non-babel analytic framework to make sense, the framework needs to allow for variations in hierarchy among the international system and not just to define constitutive units. Keeping the same framework of structural and functional differentiation, but allowing for some form of hierarchical imposition of both forms of differentiation would greatly improve their conceptualization of international orders.

Embracing coercive international hierarchy and including anarchy and hierarchy as variables rather than categories does not necessarily entail a move to babel as long as the focus on removing over-conceptualization and a broader understanding of constitutive units and relationships remain present in the framework. Permitting coercive hierarchy to exist at the international order level permits states to remain the focus of the structure described in the framework, but allows for a more comprehensive framework that covers a larger range of orders and structures we see and are theoretically possible.

BEYOND THE STATE: ORDERING AS A SCALABLE PROCESS

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In their theory note, Butcher and Griffiths present an innovative approach to defining the state in a way that synthesizes disparate region-specific research and conceptions of the state. They arrive at an elegant conclusion: that a culturally neutral and encompassing definition of states is “coercion-wielding organizations that...exercise clear priority in some respects...over all other organizations within’ a territory and have control over their foreign policy” (Butcher and Griffiths 2017, 328). According to Butcher and Griffiths, differences in the forms of states arise from distinctions in the ways that states are organized internally, while the order of the international system is in turn shaped by the interaction capacity of the units (states).

By defining the state vis-à-vis domestic and foreign realms, Butcher and Griffiths further take on the unenviable task of delineating where the domestic begins and the international ends: what, therefore, is *foreign* policy, and what is not. In their conceptions, foreign policy relates to interactions within the anarchic international system, while the domestic realm of states is characterized by typically more hierarchic interactions, with differences between states arising largely from the arrangements of substate units. While Butcher and Griffiths offer an important, culturally neutral conception of what the state is, this definition becomes problematic when unpacking the distinction between the anarchic international system and hierarchic domestic sphere upon which they predicate their notion of control over foreign policy. Specifically, though many consider the intra-state (domestic) realm to be more hierarchic with actors subordinated to a central authority, the practice and reality of such assumptions is much more complex.

For instance, within the context of domestic conflict, multiple competing actors exist that enjoy a clear monopoly of control over territorial space, exercise priority in areas of political organization, education, utilities, health care and transit, and possess a relatively robust interaction capacity in terms of engagement with the international community, despite being a substate actor within the borders of formally recognized countries. Both Syrian and Iraqi Kurds have developed independent governing systems complete with traditional state-like institutions: education, health care, a military apparatus capable of challenging the Islamic State. At the same time, Iraqi Kurds are currently preparing the groundwork for a referendum vote on independence, while at the same time engaging with key regional powers and the United States, thereby exercising control over foreign policy.

Likewise, as South Sudan inched closer to recognition, the United States government, NGOs and the United Nations worked directly with the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) to build and bolster the SPLA/M’s infrastructural underpinnings with the institutions that states typically possess (Mampilly 2011; Sommers 2005). In so doing, the U.S. circumvented the technically legal sovereignty of Sudan, leaving the SPLA/M to exercise control over the domestic and foreign policies of South Sudan, even if South Sudan had not yet been formally as an independent state. A far less extreme example that nonetheless demonstrates how subnational units overturn, complicate and

challenge domestic-level hierarchies is U.S. state- and city-level commitments to uphold the Paris Climate Accords despite federal-level intentions to withdraw. As an international agreement, adherence to the Paris Climate Accord represents an aspect of foreign policy over which the state ought to exercise priority, according to Butchers and Griffiths. Yet in this case, subnational units exercise control over a particular foreign policy issue, thereby challenging internal hierarchies of foreign policy control.

Though these organizations lack[ed] formal recognition as states in the international system, they nonetheless controlled foreign policy to some extent as it related to the areas under each actors' command, while also exercising domestic priority in several other sectors typically under the purview of state regulatory behaviors. Both Kurdish organizations and the SPLA/M possess[ed] all the trappings of a typical state, even by the definition articulated by Butcher and Griffiths, while American cities and sub-national states were able to exert their authority over certain foreign policy areas, in direct contradiction of the federal government. Even in cases where the breakdown of internal order is far from imminent, subnational political actors can nonetheless subvert the formal hierarchical structures and foreign policy priorities thought to belong to the state actor, in turn complicating assumptions about domestic hierarchy.

While intra-state processes can be understood as heterogeneous in terms of their hierarchic and anarchic natures, so too does variation emerge within the international system (Lake 1996, 2011). The European Union, for example, exercises foreign policy as a body in and of itself (for instance, as it coordinates efforts with the United Kingdom over "Brexit" negotiations), while the individual states within the EU also have some degree of control over foreign policy. Likewise, the pre-eminent public goods the hegemon provides is that of security, free trade and order, and creating sets of global and regional, formal and informal institutions that regularize and regulate behavior in these areas (Gilpin 1981; Ruggie 1982; Ikenberry 2001). As a result, amid the so-called anarchy of the international system, certain actors create order and exercise super-state authority over state-level foreign policy, while domestic actors challenge the substate hierarchies in which they are enmeshed. Thus, the domestic realm below the state is not always characterized by hierarchical ordering, while the international system is not always anarchic. If the identifying feature of the domestic and international realms is not particularly identifying, then using such a demarcation to define the state becomes problematic.

What then might explain why we see aggregations of hierarchy and order? Though Butcher and Griffiths cite Poggi (1978) to delineate politics as allocation and politics of "Us Against the Other," such a distinction is a distinction without difference that obscures the intertwined nature of both types of politics. The politics of resource allocation is the politics of in-group/out-group: who gives what to whom is a central question that persists on both an intra-state and inter-state level. Whether refugees are entitled to protection and welfare benefits is as much a question of the politics of distribution as it is a question of belonging, just as whether a state or country determines to allocate troops to defend a NATO country after an attack is also a dual question of distribution and of belonging. Who can reap the benefits of membership to a certain organization, such as the World Trade Organization, is a question of us and them (who is a member and what are the membership requirements) as well as resources (certain economic goods), in as much as social politics of race and religion (us versus them) shape preferences and policies over redistribution (economic, political and security goods). Certain political actors thus face the same questions of who gets what and who does not at multiple levels of analysis.

The ways in which such resources are allocated and distributed, and to whom, represents governance. Resources, broadly understood to include security goods, economic goods, or political goods like support, coordination, agreements, and institutions are allocated to people across space in ways that regularize interactions and set expectations (Avant 2016). The central authority responsible for resource allocation to its constituency or constituencies can disburse and distribute goods directly or indirectly through subcontracted units (Nexon and Wright 2007). The provision of governance, and the contracts, agreements, institutions or organizations created in pursuit of such governance, represent a political order. As an example, the state may contract with religious institutions, NGOs or businesses to supplement the provision of certain types of goods, much in the same way as Saudi Arabia has contracted a significant portion of its security to the United States, or the way that China subcontracts with local NGOs to supplement state services (Tsai 2011). As the authority to allocate an increasing portfolio of resources over an increasing constituency expands, governance (and ordering) capacity also expands.

The expansion of governance reflects Butcher and Griffiths' claims that differences between city-state, state and empire are differences in size and not kind, quantitative not qualitative differences. Stateness, to an extent, is scalable. Likewise, in this alternative conception that eschews a structural focus on hierarchy and anarchy for an actor-centric focus on governance, governance too is scalable, with similar processes of contracting and resource allocation to certain constituents occurring at multiple levels of analysis. Though the state is the most common, or best recognized actor providing such governance, it is not the only one, and similar processes of governance and ordering likewise emerge within an "international realm" (hegemons, empires) and a "subnational realm" (rebel groups, NGOs, local churches, mafia and organized crime syndicates). A focus on how concentrations of governance capacity emerge, as opposed to a focus on domestic and international, thereby recognizes variation in hierarchy and anarchy while accepting similarities across the state-like behaviors of distinct actors across multiple levels of analysis.

Butcher and Griffiths offer an innovative, synthetic and important conception of the state that remains culturally neutral by recognizing the importance of the state as the chief interlocutor within the anarchic international system. Yet, such a conception raises questions about the nature and structure of both the international (anarchic) and domestic (hierarchical) environments upon which such a definition of the state is predicated. Instead, an actor-centric focus on scalable processes of governance obviates the need to distinguish the hierarchic and anarchic realms while acknowledging both convergence and variation in the structures of actors providing governance.

DEFINING THE STATE: IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

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Frank Zappa once claimed that the defining mark of a state is having “a beer and an airline.” If only things were so easy. As it turns out, defining “the state” is a considerably more complicated and perhaps even quixotic task. In their article, Butcher and Griffiths make a valiant and useful attempt to offer a transhistorical, “acultural” definition of the state, and to situate that concept within varied political systems and global orders. This is, to put it mildly, an ambitious task for a nine-page article. The fact that they do not fully succeed should not detract from the lucid and helpful insights produced by the paper.

At its root, the article is grasping for a common conceptual language, and thus for a common meaning with which to see the international system through history—part Giovanni Sartori, part Viktor Frankl. Linguistic metaphors abound, from the Babel of the title to the repeated calls for “a consistent vocabulary” (328, 329, 330, 335). So perhaps it’s appropriate that my response draws upon the work of a linguist—Ludwig Wittgenstein—as the source of its critique. Here I want to set aside the various elements of the Butcher-Griffiths argument, and focus on their definition of the state. After all, as they note, from that definition flows much of the rest of the argument—“[t]he composition of both anarchy and hierarchy depends on how you define the state” (331.) Put briefly, I argue that any definition of a state that invokes the language of necessary and sufficient conditions—as Butcher and Griffiths do—is doomed to run into serious problems, and that Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblance” may be a more productive approach to creating a universal definition of the state.

Butcher and Griffiths adopt a two-part definition. First, drawing on Tilly, they define states as “coercion-wielding organizations that...exercise clear priority in some respects...over all other organizations within” a territory (Tilly 1992, 1-2, quoted in Butcher and Griffiths 2017, 330). These “some respects” include basic state functions like “taxation, the mobilization of armed force, and the creation/administration of law and justice” (331). Significantly, as they note, some states may delegate these powers to other sub-state entities like cities or even powerful families. Doing so produces “structurally differentiated” states that cede much of their authority to sub-state actors—yet they remain states because these sub-state actors accept both “the center’s supremacy” and the “limits on their ability to interact with other states” (331).

Practically speaking, it’s hard to envision a state-like entity that collects no taxes, mobilizes no armed forces, creates no laws and administers no justice—yet still retains supremacy and foreign policy control over the sub-state actors to whom they delegate these tasks. And presumably Butcher and Griffiths don’t expect this either—rather, they seem to claim that states vary in the degree to which they exercise these functions, and that such variation is built into the structural differentiation of states. In stating that states exercise a “clear

priority” over “some” of these functions, the argument implies that there is a threshold of state activity below which the organization ceases to act like a state. How they function once they reach this threshold, however, varies across space and time (and accounting for this variation is part of trying to create a common conceptual language with which to describe states).

The second part of the definition, on the other hand, invokes a necessary condition—the ability to conduct foreign policy and “manage its own diplomatic affairs,” which Butcher and Griffiths equate with possessing “external sovereignty” (330). It is this move that allows them to separate states from other entities like “federacies, protectorates, and various other types of vassalage that cannot enter into relations with other states as an equal” (330). Interestingly, the ability to enter into relations as equals implies a degree of peer recognition, but the two need not go together. The USSR, for example, was not recognized by the US until 1933, but presumably still qualified as a state since it had control over its foreign policy beginning around 1921.

But the inescapable problem of defining a state by a necessary condition is that we can almost always find states—or at least, entities commonly accepted as states—that fail to possess this critical necessary condition. Here are four categories in which this requirement creates definitional issues, from least to most problematic:

First, this definition clearly excludes states under foreign occupation—thus Austria, for example, ceases to be a state between 1937 and 1955. We may be willing to say that Austria is not a state in 1938, but can we say the same in 1954? Perhaps, although the vast majority of datasets would disagree.

Second, under this definition many countries experiencing civil war would also cease to be states—namely, in those cases where control over foreign policy itself becomes contested.

Third, this requirement would also exclude failed states that have no power to conduct foreign policy and are held up only by the barest thread of peer recognition—Somalia, for example. In such states, sub-state actors rather than the state itself are in the business of foreign policy. Studies of African politics, as Douglas Lemke (2003:129) points out, abound with examples of “substate political actors forming alliances with each other, waging wars, trading—in short, carrying out traditional international relations activities even though they are not official states.”

Fourth, this requirement also excludes entities like members of the Warsaw Pact for the duration of the Cold War. Though *de jure* independent states and full-fledged UN members, the Warsaw Pact countries (perhaps with the exception of Romania) had very little room for an independent foreign policy for the majority of the Pact’s existence. Are the authors prepared to say that Poland, for example, was not actually a state for long stretches between 1945 and 1989, since it did not possess independent control over its foreign policy? I’m not so sure.

In short, any definition of a state that posits necessary conditions is bound to run into anomalies. I propose that a more tenable definition would abandon the language of necessary and sufficient conditions altogether, and instead focus on the notion of “stateness” as family resemblance.

In his 1953 book *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argued for the idea of a family resemblance as a way to think about complex and amorphous concepts. When seeking to define a concept like a “game,” for example, we should not look for a common unifying

pre-requisite, or some basic quality that unites all games under a single conceptual umbrella. As Wittgenstein argues, there may not even be a single characteristic common to every single member of the “games” category, and the search for such necessary conditions is thus futile. Instead, members of the category are included because they share certain features that recognizably link them together under the same conceptual umbrella.

Note, by the way, that the first part of the Butcher-Griffiths definition actually comes close to adopting a “family resemblance” approach - while there are certain common domestic functions that all states fulfill, there is not a single domestic function that *must* be a part of the state’s repertoire in order to be declared a state. The second element of the definition, however, undercuts this approach by adopting the language of necessary conditions and in doing so generates intractable anomalies.

I don’t pretend to offer any sort of definitional solution here. A “family resemblance” approach to stateness will undoubtedly produce its own (perhaps lethal) problems that are far too convoluted to examine here. Moreover, I hope the authors take the argument here as a constructive critique of their lucid, ambitious, and helpful article. Domesticating an unruly concept, let alone a series of essentially contested concepts, sets a very high bar for a conversation about the nature of states and international systems. Butcher and Griffiths have produced a valuable contribution to this conversation, but the debate continues.

BETWEEN EUROCENTRIM AND BABEL: A RESPONSE TO OUR CRITICS

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It was a pleasure to receive these critiques from six thoughtful scholars. We cannot respond to all of the comments given space limitations, so we will focus on three general issues that are organized hierarchically (irony intended): positivism, our definition of the state, and the internal/external divide. In the process we will revisit the inductive and deductive foundations of the framework and tell the story of how we came to write this article to help contextualize it.

This all began with a data collection effort that we published in 2013: the International System(s) Dataset (ISD). We argued in that article that the Correlates of War (COW) state member list, on which so much quantitative work is based, has a clear Eurocentric bias built into its definition of the state in the pre-1920 period—to count as a state a polity needed to have diplomatic relations with both Britain and France. By adopting a regionally sensitive approach to recognition, we recovered 100 states that were excluded from COW and the vast corpus of related work, and the great majority of these states were located in Africa and Asia.

The next step came when we were invited to present a paper at a truly outstanding ISA panel consisting of scholars that all contribute to what Amitav Acharya calls the New Agenda—to examine non-European systems and orders that have hitherto been ignored. The result was the 2015 article that used our data to compare the pre-colonial state systems in West Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Here we ran into a problem that has motivated our research ever since: scholars differed considerably in terms of how they defined the state and how it should be differentiated from other political forms. It was that confusion of terms that led us to search for a framework for comparative analysis. Importantly, we did not see the research we engaged with as meaningless, as Spruyt concludes. Rather, we struggled to draw comparisons within this research because scholars tended to use terms in different, often incommensurable ways.

This is an appropriate moment to stop and address the first of three general issues. Our work is clearly positivist. Barber writes that our framework is anachronistic in its positivist and systematizing approach and fails to see that the discipline has moved on. Although it is true that some scholars have moved on, it is also true that a substantial portion of the IR scholarship remains firmly grounded in positivist research. A casual review of the latest work in *International Studies Quarterly* and *International Organization* bears this out. Barber is questioning the ontological and epistemological foundation of our framework. His point is to some extent reinforced by Spruyt, who argues that while the term “empire” is used in different ways by different scholars, each usage is still valid. Here, Spruyt references Wittgenstein who says “every word has a different meaning in different contexts.”

This is a worthy critique that deserves a full debate, but it is a different debate to the one we seek in the article because we begin by implicitly assuming a positivist orientation. As Spruyt

foreshadows, if you are not on board with how we start, then you will not like how we finish. But a substantial portion of existing scholarship starts from the same place. For example, in his landmark 1994 book, Spruyt argues that the sovereign state beat out its institutional competitors in early modern Europe. In a more recent but equally noteworthy book, Phillips and Sharman showed how different institutional forms were able to co-exist in the Indian Ocean littoral during the same period. Both studies are positivist, and both relied on a typology of three different political forms that were in competition with one another, but they reached opposite conclusions: Spruyt saw a tendency toward institutional convergence; Phillips and Sharman found the endurance of diversity. It is natural to compare those findings, as Phillips and Sharman have done, and draw larger conclusions about the variety of state systems and orders. But how can those comparisons be made without a framework for comparison? Barder and Spruyt may reject the notion that such a framework can be constructed. We disagree, and think that the exciting scholarship related to the New Agenda requires it.

Constructing a framework for comparative analysis requires definitions that can reach across time and space. Here, it is important to revisit the data-driven origins and character of our project. We contend that there is a way to go beyond the Eurocentrism of COW to study diverse state systems and orders using a consistent vocabulary. Doing that requires the specification of the basic units in systems, and a way to classify political order within and between those units. This is no easy task.

Our solution was to define states as “coercion-wielding organizations that...exercise clear priorities in some respects...over all other organizations within a territory and have control over their foreign policy.” Gunitsky writes that our definition is doomed to fail because it invokes necessity. Like Spruyt, he references Wittgenstein and argues that a definition based on a “family resemblance” is better because it avoids the problem of outliers and anomalous cases. He is correct, of course, that our definitions do not always fit reality. However, the construction of data out of complex phenomena requires tight definitions for organization purposes. We are currently managing a team of researchers collecting data for the second version of the ISD. In practice, we are often forced to fall back on a family resemblance, but our choices in this regard are made easier when we have clear and precise terms to work with.

This discussion on definitions sets up the third issue regarding the internal/external divide in our conception of the state. In one way or another, this issue came up in all of the critiques. Stewart, Denison, and Gunitsky highlight modern examples of political arrangements that don't neatly fit our internal/external divide. Zarakol Barder, and Spruyt question our ability to apply it to systems of the past.

We defend our definitions in two ways that are connected to the development of the project. First, there is an inductive foundation to our framework. In our empirical work to date, involving the analysis of hundreds of states in diverse regions since the 1700s, we have found that the internal/external divide usually holds. For example, in 18th century West Africa, the Oyo Empire was centred on the capital, Oyo Ile, where foreign affairs were “vested in the hands of the King.” Subordinate polities retained independence in the areas of justice and revenue extraction while acceding to the supremacy of Oyo Ile where relations with other states were concerned. Smith emphasizes that this focus on controlling foreign relations was common to leaders across the region. This is one of many examples we came across in our research, and we therefore stress that our concept of the state is in part inductively derived from the study of non-European state systems and not disconnected from historical analysis.

Second, there is an important focal character to our definition, one that has a deductive quality to it. There are clearly other ways to define the state, but we contend that ours is the most useful for enabling broad, systematic (albeit lower resolution) comparisons across time and space and illuminating continuities within and across state systems rather than sharp differences that have been highlighted in recent work. In our view, the best competing definition of the state is to lower the bar and drop the requirement that states control their own foreign relations—what matters is that there exists an internal state apparatus. We considered this approach but ultimately rejected it because, as international relations scholars, we were interested in relations between states, and we knew that this competing definition would result in a more heterogeneous set of states, and many of them would lack control over their external relations. We also knew that our concept of structural differentiation would capture these other political forms. All conceptual frameworks are simplifications, and we think ours is useful for a broad range of projects in the positivist study of comparative systems.

For a framework to be capable of consistently classifying units across diverse regional systems, it must be founded on elements that are constant across those systems. There is a long tradition in IR scholarship claiming that rulers face challenges of state-making that are constant over time. Rulers want to extract revenue and survive in power, and that requires security from internal and external attacks. The possibility that subordinate polities will form alliances with other states constitutes a threat to that security. As such, rulers have an enduring interest in controlling how neighbouring states interact, which has in turn provided enduring incentives for states to construct inside/outside boundaries differentiated on this basis. This is most pronounced in the domain of war and peace where it is common for polities to accept prohibitions on alliance formation or limitations on the use of violence in exchange for protection. The control over foreign relations is a foundational dilemma of state-making that numerous scholars, including scholars of non-European state systems, have identified. Non-contiguous territories, fluctuating and fuzzy boundaries, and states with tiny, even ad-hoc armed forces are consistent with these foundations. Such aspects represent variation in types of states in our framework rather than constitutive aspects of states.

Overall, we recognize that our concept of the state is imperfect because some phenomena won't fit our framework, but we see it as better than all the competitors. We note that the criticism on this matter focuses on omission—i.e. pointing to anomalous cases—rather than arguing for a superior definition. If you are on board with our positivist approach, and our belief that clear definitions involving necessity are useful for sorting phenomena, then the question becomes: what is the best definition? We stand behind ours.

That is not say that we are opposed to refinements. On the contrary, one of our purposes with this article was to start a conversation that contributes to the New Agenda. We welcome debate on how to proceed. Stewart argues forcefully for the utility of an actor-centric approach to comparative analysis. Denison suggests that we examine the purpose behind different forms of hierarchy (e.g. coercive). And Zarakol contends that the anarchy/hierarchy distinction may just be a distraction. These are good points. We look forward to the conversation.

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