

# World Society and the Nation-State

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This essay reviews arguments and evidence concerning the following proposition: *Many features of the contemporary nation-state derive from worldwide models constructed and propagated through global cultural and associational processes.* These models and the purposes they reflect (e.g., equality, socioeconomic progress, human development) are highly rationalized, articulated, and often surprisingly consensual. Worldwide models define and legitimate agendas for local action, shaping the structures and policies of nation-states and other national and local actors in virtually all of the domains of rationalized social life – business, politics, education, medicine, science, even the family and religion. The institutionalization of world models helps explain many puzzling features of contemporary national societies, such as structural isomorphism in the face of enormous differences in resources and traditions, ritualized and rather loosely coupled organizational efforts, and elaborate structuration to serve purposes that are largely of exogenous origins. World models have long been in operation as shapers of states and societies, but they have become especially important in the postwar era as the cultural and organizational development of world society has intensified at an unprecedented rate.

The operation of world society through peculiarly cultural and associational processes depends heavily on its statelessness. The almost feudal character of parcelized legal-rational sovereignty in the world has the seemingly paradoxical result of diminishing the causal importance of the organized hierarchies of power and interests celebrated in most “realist” social scientific theories. The statelessness of world

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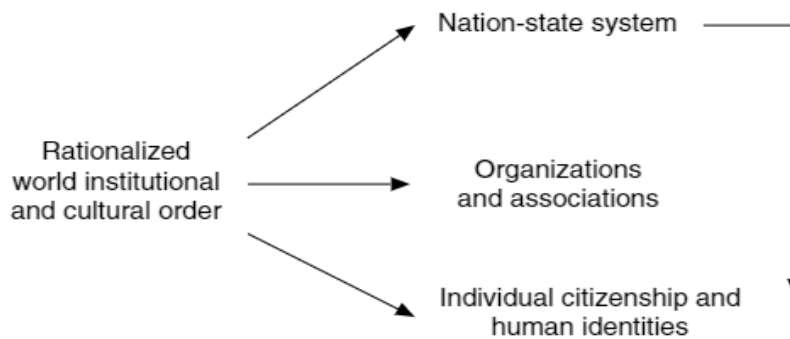
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society also explains, in good measure, the lack of attention of the social sciences to the coherence and impact of world society's cultural and associational properties. Despite Tocqueville's well-known analysis of the importance of cultural and associational life in the nearly stateless American society of the 1830s, the social sciences are more than a little reluctant to acknowledge patterns of influence and conformity that cannot be explained solely as matters of power relations or functional rationality. This reluctance is most acute with respect to global development. Our effort here represents, we hope, a partial corrective for it.

We are trying to account for a world whose societies, organized as nation-states, are structurally similar in many unexpected dimensions and change in unexpectedly similar ways. A hypothetical example may be useful to illustrate our arguments, and we shall carry the example throughout the essay. If an unknown society were "discovered" on a previously unknown island, it is clear that many changes would occur. A government would soon form, looking something like a modern state with many of the usual ministries and agencies. Official recognition by other states and admission to the United Nations would ensue. The society would be analyzed as an economy, with standard types of data, organizations, and policies for domestic and international transactions. Its people would be formally reorganized as citizens with many familiar rights, while certain categories of citizens – children, the elderly, the poor – would be granted special protection. Standard forms of discrimination, especially ethnic and gender based, would be discovered and decried. The population would be counted and classified in ways specified by world census models. Modern educational, medical, scientific, and family law institutions would be developed. All this would happen more rapidly, and with greater penetration to the level of daily life, in the present day than at any earlier time because world models applicable to the island society are more highly codified and publicized than ever before. Moreover, world-society organizations devoted to educating and advising the islanders about the models' importance and utility are more numerous and active than ever.

What would be unlikely to happen is also clear. Theological disputes about whether the newly discovered *Indios* had souls or were part of the general human moral order would be rare. There would be little by way of an imperial rush to colonize the island. Few would argue that the natives needed only modest citizenship or human rights or that they would best be educated by but a few years of vocational training.

Thus, without knowing anything about the history, culture, practices, or traditions that obtained in this previously unknown society, we could forecast many changes that, upon "discovery," would descend on the island under the general rubric of "development." Our forecast would be imprecise because of the complexity of the interplay among various world models and local traditions, but the likely range of outcomes would be quite limited. We can identify the range of possibilities by using the institutionalist theoretical perspective underlying the analysis in this essay to interpret what has already happened to practically all of the societies of the world after their discovery and incorporation into world society. [...]



**Figure 9.1** The world as enactment of culture.

## Explanatory Models

Most analyses see nation-states as collective actors – as products of their own histories and internal forces. We emphasize instead models of the sort depicted in figure 9.1.

Figure 9.1 presents the view that nation-states are more or less exogenously constructed entities – the many individuals both inside and outside the state who engage in state formation and policy formulation are enactors of scripts rather more than they are self-directed actors. The social psychology at work here is that of Goffman or Snow, emphasizing dramaturgical and symbolic processes in place of the hard-boiled calculation of interests assumed by rationalistic actor-centric approaches.

We have deliberately oversimplified figure 9.1 because the proposition we are examining focuses on the enactment dimension of world-societal development. Of course, states, organizations, and individuals also contribute to the content and structure of world culture, and much world-cultural change and elaboration occur within transnational organizations and associations independent of lower-level units. A more complete figure would depict recursive processes among the constituent parts of world society, but here we concentrate on enactment processes.

The exogenous cultural construction of the nation-state model makes it easy and “natural” for standard sociopolitical forms to arise in our island society. Models and measures of such national goals as economic progress and social justice are readily available and morally compelling. Also available are model social problems, defined as the failure to realize these goals, that make it easy to identify and decry such failures as inefficient production methods or violations of rights. Alongside these are prescriptions about standardized social actors and policies that are to be engaged in the effort to resolve these newly recognized problems. All this is widely known and ready for implementation. [...]

## Isomorphism and Isomorphic Change

Given other perspectives’ emphases on the heterogeneity of economic and political resources (realist theories) or on local cultural origins (microphenomenological theories), most lines of thought anticipate striking diversity in political units around

the world and in these units' trajectories of change. Our argument accounts for the similarities researchers often are surprised to find. It explains why our island society, despite all the possible configurations of local economic forces, power relationships, and forms of traditional culture it might contain, would promptly take on standardized forms and soon appear to be similar to a hundred other nation-states around the world.

Take the example of women in higher education. Microrealist or functional actor-centric models suggest that female enrollments in universities would increase in developed economies much more than elsewhere. Macrorealist arguments imply that female enrollments would expand in the core much more than the periphery, while micro-phenomenological arguments point to rising female enrollments in Western but not Islamic countries. However, female enrollments have expanded rapidly everywhere, and in about the same time period – a period in which world societal discourse has emphasized female equality. This finding makes sense only if common world forces are at work.

Isomorphic developments leading to the same conclusion are reported in studies of many other nation-state features: constitutional forms emphasizing both state power and individual rights, mass schooling systems organized around a fairly standard curriculum, rationalized economic and demographic record keeping and data systems, antinatalist population control policies intended to enhance national development, formally equalized female status and rights, expanded human rights in general, expansive environmental policies, development-oriented economic policy, universalistic welfare systems, standard definitions of disease and health care, and even some basic demographic variables. Theories reasoning from the obviously large differences among national economies and cultural traditions have great difficulty accounting for these observed isomorphisms, but they are sensible outcomes if nation-states are enactments of the world cultural order. [...]

### **Processes of World Society's Impact on Nation-States**

So far we have argued that the observable isomorphism among nation-states supports our proposition that these entities derive from models embedded in an overarching world culture. What processes in world society construct and shape these "actors" to produce such isomorphism? The usual approach to answering this question would seek to identify mechanisms whereby actors rationally pursuing their interests make similar choices and decisions. This approach implicitly assumes that actor definitions and interests are largely fixed and independent of culture. We find it more useful and revealing to focus on processes that produce or reconstruct the actors themselves. We identify three processes by which world-societal elements authorize and fashion national states: the construction of identity and purpose, systemic maintenance of actor identity, and legitimation of the actorhood of such subnational units as individuals and organized interests.

## Construction of nation-state identity and purpose

World society contains much cultural material authoritatively defining the nation-state as the preferred form of sovereign, responsible actor. The external recognition and construction of sovereign statehood has been a crucial dimension of the Western system for centuries, with new claimants especially dependent on obtaining formal recognition from dominant powers. With the anticolonial and self-determination movements of the twentieth century, all sorts of collectivities have learned to organize their claims around a nation-state identity, and the consolidation of the United Nations system has provided a central forum for identity recognition that diminishes the importance of major states. Entry into the system occurs, essentially, via application forms (to the United Nations and other world bodies) on which the applicant must demonstrate appropriately formulated assertions about sovereignty and control over population and territory, along with appropriate aims and purposes.

More than 130 new nation-state entities have formed since 1945. They consistently proclaim, both internally and externally, their conformity to worldwide models of national identity and state structure. So, too, would our island society. But older states, too, have learned to adapt to changes in these models. Thus, through both selection and adaptation, the system has expanded to something close to universality of the nation-state form. Realist theories, grounding their analyses in each country's particular resources and history, would predict a much wider variety of forms, including the retention of older statuses such as formal dependency or indirect incorporation of small or weak entities.

World-cultural models of sovereign identity take concrete form in particular state structures, programs, and policies. As described above, worldwide models of the rationalized nation-state actor define appropriate constitutions, goals, data systems, organization charts, ministry structures, and policies. Models also specify standard forms for the cultural depiction of national identity. Methods of constructing national culture through traditions, museums, tourism, and national intellectual culture are highly stylized. Nation-states are theorized or imagined communities drawing on models that are lodged at the world level.

Often, copying world models or conventions amounts to simple mimesis that has more to do with knowing how to fill in forms than with managing substantive problems. For instance, to compile comparable educational enrollment data in the 1950s, UNESCO statisticians chose to report enrollments for a six-year primary level and three-year junior and senior secondary levels. In ensuing decades, many countries structured their mass schooling systems around this six-year/three-year/three-year model, generally without investigating whether it would best meet any of the presumed purposes of schooling.

Strang shows the extraordinary impact of the legitimized identity system on the survival and stability of states. Throughout modern history, dependent territories have moved to sovereign statehood at a steadily increasing rate that accelerated rapidly in the postwar period. Once sovereign, countries almost never revert to dependence. Even the breakup of the Soviet Union produced not dependent

territories but formally sovereign nation-states, unprepared as some of the former republics were for this status. Thus, it is highly unlikely that our island society would be incorporated as a dependent territory of an extant nation-state; this would be too great a violation of the legitimized right to self-determination. Moreover, establishing the island society's sovereign status in the international system would stabilize its new state, though it would not preclude, and might even increase, instability in the state's government.

Orientation to the identity and purposes of the nation-state model increases the rate at which countries adopt other prescribed institutions of modernity. Having committed themselves to the identity of the rationalizing state, appropriate policies follow – policies for national development, individual citizenship and rights, environmental management, foreign relations. These policies are depicted as if they were autonomous decisions because nation-states are defined as sovereign, responsible, and essentially autonomous actors. Taking into account the larger culture in which states are embedded, however, the policies look more like enactments of conventionalized scripts. Even if a state proclaims its opposition to the dominant world identity models, it will nevertheless pursue many purposes within this model. It will develop bureaucratic authority and attempt to build many modern institutions, ranging from a central bank to an educational system. It will thereby find itself modifying its traditions in the direction of world-cultural forms.

### Systemic maintenance of nation-state actor identity

If a specific nation-state is unable to put proper policies in place (because of costs, incompetence, or resistance), world-society structures will provide help. This process operates more through authoritative external support for the legitimate purposes of states than through authoritarian imposition by dominant powers or interests. For example, world organizations and professionalized ideologies actively encourage countries to adopt population control policies that are justified not as good for the world as a whole but as necessary for national development. National science policies are also promulgated as crucial to national development; before this link was theorized, UNESCO efforts to encourage countries to promote science failed to diffuse. As this example illustrates, international organizations often posture as objective disinterested others who help nation-states pursue their exogenously derived goals.

Resistance to world models is difficult because nation-states are formally committed, as a matter of identity, to such self-evident goals as socioeconomic development, citizen rights, individual self-development, and civil international relations. If a particular regime rhetorically resists world models, local actors can rely on legitimacy myths (democracy, freedom, equality) and the ready support of activist external groups to oppose the regime. Nation-state "choices" are thus less likely to conflict with world-cultural prescriptions than realist or microphenomenological theories anticipate because both nation-state choices and world pressures derive from the same overarching institutions.

## Legitimation of subnational actors and practices

World-cultural principles license the nation-state not only as a managing central authority but also as an identity-supplying nation. Individual citizenship and the sovereignty of the people are basic tenets of nationhood. So too are the legitimacy and presumed functional necessity of much domestic organizational structure, ranging from financial market structures to organizations promoting individual and collective rights (of labor, ethnic groups, women, and so on). World-society ideology thus directly licenses a variety of organized interests and functions. Moreover, in pursuing their externally legitimated identities and purposes by creating agencies and programs, nation-states also promote the domestic actors involved. Programs and their associated accounting systems increase the number and density of types of actors, as groups come forward to claim newly reified identities and the resources allocated to them.

A good example is the rise of world discourse legitimating the human rights of gays and lesbians, which has produced both national policy changes and the mobilization of actors claiming these rights. As nation-states adopt policies embodying the appropriate principles, they institutionalize the identity and political presence of these groups. Of course, all these “internally” generated changes are infused with world-cultural conceptions of the properly behaving nation-state.

Hence, if a nation-state neglects to adopt world-approved policies, domestic elements will try to carry out or enforce conformity. General world pressures favoring environmentalism, for example, have led many states to establish environmental protection agencies, which foster the growth of environmental engineering firms, activist groups, and planning agencies. Where the state has not adopted the appropriate policies, such local units and actors as cities, schools, scout troops, and religious groups are likely to practice environmentalism and call for national action. Thus, world culture influences nation-states not only at their centers, or only in symbolic ways, but also through direct connections between local actors and world culture. Such connections produce many axes of mobilization for the implementation of world-cultural principles and help account for similarities in mobilization agendas and strategies in highly disparate countries.

Explicit rejection of world-cultural principles sometimes occurs, particularly by nationalist or religious movements whose purported opposition to modernity is seen as a threat to geopolitical stability. While the threat is real enough, the analysis is mistaken because it greatly underestimates the extent to which such movements conform to rationalized models of societal order and purpose. These movements mobilize around principles inscribed in world-cultural scripts, derive their organizing capacity from the legitimacy of these scripts, and edit their supposedly primordial claims to maximize this legitimacy. By and large, they seek an idealized modern community undergoing broad-based social development where citizens (of the right sort) can fully exercise their abstract rights. While they violate some central elements of world-cultural ideology, they nonetheless rely heavily on other elements. For example, religious “fundamentalists” may reject the extreme naturalism of modernity by making individuals accountable to an unchallengeable god, but they nevertheless exhort their people to embrace such key world-cultural elements as nation building, mass schooling, rationalized health care, and professionalization. They also



are apt to reformulate their religious doctrine in accordance with typical modern conceptions of rational-moral discipline. In general, nationalist and religious movements intensify isomorphism more than they resist it. [...]

## Conclusion

A considerable body of evidence supports our proposition that world-society models shape nation-state identities, structures, and behavior via worldwide cultural and associational processes. Carried by rationalized others whose scientific and professional authority often exceeds their power and resources, world culture celebrates, expands, and standardizes strong but culturally somewhat tamed national actors. The result is nation-states that are more isomorphic than most theories would predict and change more uniformly than is commonly recognized. As creatures of exogenous world culture, states are ritualized actors marked by extensive internal decoupling and a good deal more structuration than would occur if they were responsive only to local cultural, functional, or power processes.

As the Western world expanded in earlier centuries to dominate and incorporate societies in the larger world, the penetration of a universalized culture proceeded hesitantly. Westerners could imagine that the locals did not have souls, were members of a different species, and could reasonably be enslaved or exploited. Inhabiting a different moral and natural universe, non-Western societies were occasionally celebrated for their noble savagery but more often cast as inferior groups unsuited for true civilization. Westerners promoted religious conversion by somewhat parochial and inconsistent means, but broader incorporation was ruled out on all sorts of grounds. Education and literacy were sometimes prohibited, rarely encouraged, and never generally provided, for the natives were ineducable or prone to rebellion. Rationalized social, political, and economic development (e.g., the state, democracy, urban factory production, modern family law) was inappropriate, even unthinkable. Furthermore, the locals often strongly resisted incorporation by the West. Even Japan maintained strong boundaries against many aspects of modernity until the end of World War II, and Chinese policy continues a long pattern of resistance to external "aid."

The world, however, is greatly changed. Our island society would obviously become a candidate for full membership in the world community of nations and individuals. Human rights, state-protected citizen rights, and democratic forms would become natural entitlements. An economy would emerge, defined and measured in rationalized terms and oriented to growth under state regulation. A formal national polity would be essential, including a constitution, citizenship laws, educational structures, and open forms of participation and communication. The whole apparatus of rationalized modernity would be mobilized as necessary and applicable; internal and external resistance would be stigmatized as reactionary unless it was couched in universalistic terms. Allowing the islanders to remain imprisoned in their society, under the authority of their old gods and chiefs and entrapped in primitive economic technologies, would be unfair and discriminatory, even though the passing of their traditional society would also occasion nostalgia and regret.



Prevailing social theories account poorly for these changes. Given a dynamic socio-cultural system, realist models can account for a world of economic and political absorption, inequality, and domination. They do not well explain a world of formally equal, autonomous, and expansive nation-state actors. Microcultural or phenomenological lines of argument can account for diversity and resistance to homogenization, not a world in which national states, subject to only modest coercion or control, adopt standard identities and structural forms.

We argue for the utility of recognizing that rationalized modernity is a universalistic and inordinately successful form of the earlier Western religious and post-religious system. As a number of commentators have noted, in our time the religious elites of Western Christendom have given up on the belief that there is no salvation outside the church. That postulate has been replaced by the belief among almost all elites that salvation lies in rationalized structures grounded in scientific and technical knowledge – states, schools, firms, voluntary associations, and the like. The new religious elites are the professionals, researchers, scientists, and intellectuals who write secularized and unconditionally universalistic versions of the salvation story, along with the managers, legislators, and policymakers who believe the story fervently and pursue it relentlessly. This belief is worldwide and structures the organization of social life almost everywhere.

The colossal disaster of World War II may have been a key factor in the rise of global models of nationally organized progress and justice, and the Cold War may well have intensified the forces pushing human development to the global level. If the present configuration of lowered systemic (if not local) tensions persists, perhaps both the consensuality of the models and their impact on nation-states will decline. On the other hand, the models' rationalized definitions of progress and justice (across an ever broadening front) are rooted in universalistic scientific and professional definitions that have reached a level of deep global institutionalization. These definitions produce a great deal of conflict with regard to their content and application, but their authority is likely to prove quite durable.

Many observers anticipate a variety of failures of world society, citing instances of gross violations of world-cultural principles (e.g., in Bosnia), stagnant development (e.g., in Africa), and evasion of proper responsibility (in many places). In our view, the growing list of perceived "social problems" in the world indicates not the weakness of world-cultural institutions but their strength. Events like political torture, waste dumping, or corruption, which not so long ago were either overlooked entirely or considered routine, local, specific aberrations or tragedies, are now of world-societal significance. They violate strong expectations regarding global integration and propriety and can easily evoke world-societal reactions seeking to put things right. A world with so many widely discussed social problems is a world of Durkheimian and Simmelian integration, however much it may also seem driven by disintegrative tendencies.