

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

R W. Mansbach

Department of Political Science, Iowa State University, USA

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Summary

This paper looks at the relationship between technological and political change in the context of global politics, focusing on the relationship between the Internet and sovereign territorial states. Technological change has always had important consequences for political organization. It was instrumental in the formation of the territorial state, culminating in the Peace of Westphalia, and it is crucial in understanding the erosion of the state today.

The Internet, along with other technological innovations, is devaluing territory and, in

doing so, also undermining states and contributing to new ways of defining political space and organizing for political ends. The paper describes seven ways in which the Internet is contributing to deterritorialization and discusses the efforts of states to resist this process. It goes on to discuss some of the normative implications of this process, especially the growing impediments to functional democracy.

The single most important consequence of technological change on global politics today, as in the past, is its impact on global governance. Governance as defined here is “rulership” or “authority” that “is as dependent on intersubjective meanings as on formally sanctioned constitutions and charters.” Governance connotes a fundamental shift both in the way the world does business and in the way people look at that world. It is difficult to consult the essays published in *Issues of Global Governance* by the Commission on Global Governance without recognizing the shift from thinking about global politics as a world of territorial states to contemplating a world of individuals no longer separated by the sovereign frontiers of states. Global governance, then, is the “new liberalism.” Nowhere is this clearer than when Richard Rosecrance argues that, “as factors of labor, capital, and information triumph over the old factor of land, nations no longer need and in time will not covet territory.”

1. Introduction

This paper argues that technology today, as in post-medieval Europe when the territorial state emerged, is relocating authority. This time, however, it is robbing the state of authority and empowering individuals and new élites. As James Rosenau argues, “it is possible to conceive of governance without government.” For theorists of global politics, this claim has profound ontological implications and undermines much of the power and statist theory that evolved in Europe, reappeared in North America under the names “realism” and “neo-realism,” and defined the field called “international” politics. Indeed, examining governance from this perspective opens the prospect of reuniting the subfields of political science (especially international and comparative) by eliminating the invidious and empirically less relevant distinctions between the so-called “domestic” and “interstate” arenas.

Rosenau writes of the changing capacities of citizens and of how the “concept of citizenship has been most deeply embedded in the territorial system of states that has organized world affairs for several hundred years.” He recognizes that this identity is no longer sufficient to describe human loyalties. Jorge G. Castañeda writes of the growing political self-consciousness of ordinary people, especially the demands for equality in an increasingly unequal world. Bimal Ghosh writes of massive new movements of people both within and among states. This emphasis on people rather than states correctly implies that the capacity and centrality of states are being eroded. Rosenau writes about “organizational proliferation” and “fragmegration”—the “simultaneous tendencies towards globalization and localization... more extensive integration across national boundaries and more pervasive fragmentation within national boundaries, towards a relocation of authority ‘upward’ to transnational entities and downward to ‘subnational’ groups.”

Underlying and necessary for all of these claims is another dynamic, that of the

diminishing importance of territory in global politics. The features of the Westphalian international system are all blurring. “The absolutes of the Westphalian system,” writes Jessica Matthews, “territorially fixed states where everything of value lies within some state’s borders; a single secular authority governing each territory and representing it outside its borders; and no authority above states—are all dissolving.” In the process, various forms of “private authority” are challenging the once unquestioned “public” authority of sovereign states.

2. How Has the World Changed?

Consider what the following have in common: a speculative attack on the Russian ruble, a nuclear submarine silently making its way under the arctic icepack, the initiation of a cyberwar against transnational corporations, the use of “electronic cash” in Korea, and a “meeting” of exiled Burmese opposition leaders? First, all reflect the declining impact of physical distance in limiting influence or authority. Second, all reflect the declining relevance of territory more generally in global politics and the proliferation of alternative conceptions of political space. “Geopolitics” is yielding pride of place to “geogovernance.”

Technology and politics have conspired to reduce the degree to which territory translates into power or wealth. Cities like Hong Kong and Singapore, like Venice and Florence a millennium ago, flourish in the absence of a significant territorial base, and are again becoming “central places where the work of globalization gets done.” Additionally, corporations, terrorists, religions, and advocacy and humanitarian groups among others have nonterritorial conceptions of space.

Yet even in contemporary global-politics theory the widespread belief that sovereign states are somehow special owes much to the belief that the state’s territoriality endows it with unique authority. In John Ruggie’s words: the “central attribute of modernity in international politics has been a peculiar and historically unique configuration of territorial space.” Without it, “the modern system of states may be yielding...to postmodern forms of configuring political space.” Exclusive control of territory is, along with hierarchy in which government acts as surrogate for subjects or citizens, a defining attribute of the modern state. Today, many scholars and practitioners remain mired in a “territorial trap.”

The territorial or sovereign state was perhaps Europe’s greatest political “invention,” and it enabled Europeans to expand outward and conquer much of the remainder of the world. Before the emergence of Westphalian states, much of the world was pre-territorial. According to Ruggie: “Writing of Mongol tribes, [Owen] Lattimore pointed out that no single pasture would have had much value for them because it soon would have become exhausted.” Territory also played a relatively small role in the Islamic Empire that flourished between the seventh and eleventh centuries A.D. That empire, described by Adda Bozeman as an “empire-in-motion” and “the greatest of all caravans,” was, like the Mongol and Ottoman Empires, a “tribal empire.” In medieval Europe, politics “reflected ‘a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights of

government,' which were 'inextricably superimposed and tangled,' and in which 'different juridical instances were geographically interwoven and stratified, and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties and anomalous enclaves abounded'."

The shift to a world of territorial states, like other transformations in the nature of political community, "produced "a 'legitimation crisis' of staggering proportions." A similar crisis is apparent today as the interstate world is transformed into a more complex universe that has been described as "unruly time" with "ungovernable globalization, turbulent governance, and disorderly geography."

2.1. The Changing Nature of Political Space

There remains a propensity to confuse political space with territory among those who ignore that the two only became identified with one another in a particular time and place in association with the development of political sovereignty as a source of political legitimacy. Territory, however, hardly exhausts the possible ways of delineating space just as the state hardly exhausts the ways in which people organize themselves for political ends. As we shall see, political authority does not need to be territorial at all, and patterns of authority can both overlap and share political space. The key to making sense of this is a focus on political identities.

Individuals today as in the past have multiple identities that may become loyalties to a variety of authoritative polities. Each identity implies a "location" that helps determine perceived interests and, therefore, political behavior when two or more identities come into conflict. Political space refers to the ways in which identities and loyalties among adherents to a polity are distributed and related to one another. It defines patterns of authority and, therefore, value allocations. In doing so, political space also distinguishes what is "inside" polities from what is "outside," but it does more than that. Marx, for example, thought political space was defined by class. Like class, caste, ethnicity, gender, and other identities often connote vertical relationships rather than the horizontal ones implicit in a territorial system. Political space, for Sheldon Wolin, is that area "where the plans, ambitions, and actions of individuals and groups incessantly jar against each other—colliding, blocking, coalescing, separating...." Today, such activities may even take place in the virtual worlds of cyberspace and *only* in those worlds.

The manner in which political space is organized has important consequences. According to Wolin, Roman political thought was stymied by the effort to apply Greek ideas based on a system of small city-states to a growing imperial polity: "[I]n Greek thought," he writes, "the concept of the political had become identified with the determinate spatial dimension of the *polis*. The rigid limits that Plato and Aristotle had set for the size and population of their ideal cities and the detailed attention that they devoted to matters of birth control, wealth and commerce, colonial and military expansion were part of their belief that the life of the *polis*, which they considered synonymous with its political character, could be articulated only within the narrow confines of the small city-state...This total absorption with a small, highly compact community imparted to Greek political thought a nervous intensity which contrasts sharply, for example, with the mood of later Stoicism which leisurely...contemplated

political life as it was acted out amidst a setting as spacious as the universe itself.”

When Rome collapsed, political and economic space again became largely local. Organizational forms, declares Michael Mann, “were confined within the intense local relationships of the village or tribe, plus a loose and unstable confederation beyond,” and economic relations were limited to “small-scale, decentralized units of production, controlled by a lord using the labor of dependent peasants.” The medieval Church was an exception to this; its “law and morality represented long-distance regulation” that “was particularly important for trade,” and its clergy were “the first translocal, transtribal, transfeudal, trans-national class in Europe to achieve legal and political unity.” Unlike medieval political and economic space which was essentially local, the territorial state reduced impediments to trade such as brigandage, local tolls and customs duties, and the absence of standardized weights, measures, and currencies over a wide area. It also provided a definition of “us” based on residence in a common territory rather than based on “blood” as in tribes in Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East, or on lineage as in medieval Europe and Han China.

2.2. Political Space and the Westphalian State

Had either the Church or Holy Roman Empire triumphed, an imperial political form similar to that which evolved in China following the warring states era might have emerged in Europe instead of the system of competing territorial states that did. The fact that it did not was to have immense consequences for global politics. Indeed, there were moments, for example, during the Crusades or the formation of alliances to fight Turk and Tartar during which a conception of Europe as a unified cultural construct seemed to predominate, much as a conception of Hellenic identity for a brief time enabled Greece’s feuding city-states to ally against the Persians. In both cases, culture rather than geography or territory defined political space. In the end: “the medieval governance system was supplanted during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the emergence of a system of autonomous *sovereign* states, a transition that involved two inextricably related processes: the centralization and territorial demarcation of authority and the rationalization and consolidation of hierarchy.”

The existence of territorial states that, as Rousseau phrased it, touched “each other at so many points that not one of them can move without giving a jar to all the rest” and the absence of supranational ideology or institutions fostered the perception of an interstate security dilemma. This perceived dilemma fanned a technological arms race which provided Europeans with weapons unavailable to non-Europeans and encouraged Europeans to make use of innovations like gunpowder that had actually been invented elsewhere. In addition, the invention of sovereignty enabled Europe’s rulers to access all the resources of the territory over which they ruled. Secular and specialized bureaucracies provided the organizational skills, taxes, and other resources essential to state power. In this way, Europe’s states could build larger and better-equipped armies and navies than the tribal or personalist polities with which they collided first in the Americas and later in Asia and Africa. Thereafter, the state as a political form was globalized and, in the process, was imposed upon older competing political forms with different conceptions of space.

2.3. From Territoriality to Post-Territoriality

The European era in global politics that has lasted more than three centuries is drawing to a close. In the developing world especially but not solely, identities and loyalties that were submerged by the imposition by Europeans of the Western concept of “citizenship” defined by territoriality are re-emerging. Many of those identities, especially those based on ethnicity, religion, or profession, are not anchored in territory. Partly for this reason, they are not easily influenced by the conventional diplomatic and military practices used by states, but they are available for manipulation by political entrepreneurs. If we are, as Rosenau claims, entering a postinternational epoch, then that epoch is also post-territorial.

Recognition that citizenship is only one of many possible identities available to individuals should also remind us that state boundaries are often incompatible with other politically relevant boundaries. The boundaries of cultures, markets, ethnicities, and religions generally cut across and often stretch beyond state boundaries. Economic and environmental issues are essentially nonterritorial.

International politics grew out of a tradition that assumed that interstate relations exhausted what we need to know about the political universe and that the seminal problem of that universe was interstate war. But, such wars are becoming rare, as are wars fought over territory. Clausewitz was the spokesman for that tradition. “‘War as the continuation of policy’,” observes John Keegan, “was the form Clausewitz chose to express the compromise for which states he knew had settled. It accorded respect to their prevailing ethics -- of absolute sovereignty, ordered diplomacy and legally binding treaties -- while making allowance for the overriding principle of state interest.” And, especially in the case of “failed states,” war and crime have become largely indistinguishable, as have “foreign” and “domestic” politics.

The fact that there have been relatively few interstate wars in recent years does *not* mean that the world is at peace. Instead, violence is largely *across* or *within* states rather than *between* them. The key labels are not Rwanda and Zaire; they are Hutu and Tutsi, Bakongo and Ovimbundu, Pushtan and Hazara, and so forth, and wars do not pit states against each other but rather engulf the “Great Lakes Region” of Central Africa (the region around Lakes Kivu and Victoria). Today’s wars are not among states but among peoples, and it is this that persuades some observers that the future will be dominated by inter-civilizational and inter-ethnic conflicts.

Much of today’s violence is in those regions where Europe planted its flags and left its political forms and practices, and much of this violence is related to the re-emergence of older political identities and loyalties that lack territorial conceptions of space. And where European-type states were imposed on top of older polities, their differences reflect their paternity and genealogy. For example, much of the Arabic Near East retains the tribal and clan-based identities and nomadic practices of its origins; in Mexico, Mayan and European are the key categories. In other words, states are cleaved and sometimes smashed along the fault lines of prestate and non-territorial identities and loyalties. And as the European epoch comes to an end, older identities and loyalties are resurfacing and joining a host of technological, economic, and military factors to force

the territorial state to share pride of place with other collectivities. Today, race, gender, class, caste, religion, and profession are only a few of the politically-relevant identities that can compete with “citizenship” for loyalties, and, unlike citizenship, offer non-territorial conceptions of political space.

It is not that the territorial state is vanishing; after all, as long as people live on territory they need to “name” their location, just as they need frequencies to locate radio broadcasts. Some argue that state capacity has increased, especially in the expansion of welfare concerns in the second half of the last century. Yet, whatever new capacities and responsibilities states assumed, the capacities of most have been surpassed by the explosion of citizens’ demands. As Susan Strange observes: “Politicians everywhere talk as though they have the answers to economic and social problems, as if they really are in charge of their country’s destiny. People no longer believe them.” International organizations provide states with additional capacity, but for many it is too little and too late.

But how to account for the growing numbers of states? The main reason lies in the fragmentation of other larger states with greater capacity. As illustrated by the successor states to the USSR and Yugoslavia or the tiny island states of the Caribbean or South Pacific, the more states, the less their capacity to cope with the problems they face. Like the hundreds of tiny German statelets of the Holy Roman Empire, many contemporary states have little capacity and little control over their frontiers. At best, some are “quasi-states,” as Robert Jackson puts it, “a parody of statehood indicated by pervasive incompetence, deflated credibility, and systematized corruption.” “Their governments are often deficient in the political will, institutional authority, and organized power to protect human rights or provide socioeconomic welfare.” Some states, like Cambodia and Somalia, have been sustained by INGOs and IGOs, and, far from providing a “hard shell” of protection for citizens within their boundaries, some are even “outsourcing war” to private mercenaries.

Influence and authority over most of the things that matter, especially people, no longer require territorial control, and occupation of territory is, in contrast to earlier epochs, a source of weakness rather than strength in the face of politically conscious masses. Russia’s experience in Chechnya is a metaphor for the fate of unwanted occupiers everywhere. Moreover, other boundaries increasingly diverge from those demarcating sovereign territory—cultural, ethnic, and economic to name a few.

Nor does physical distance say much any longer about peoples’ attitudes to one another. Owing to technology, perceptions of difference and the absence of empathy—that is, psychological distance—do *not* increase with physical distance or decrease with proximity. Technological change and the advent of globalized economic and cultural systems make it possible to achieve psychological intimacy even at great physical distance. And the presence of vertical cleavages in societies within shared physical spaces does not assure empathy as reflected in the psychological abyss that separates urban shanty towns and favelas from globalized élites living in the same cities.

In consequence, new ways are emerging to depict political space in non-territorial ways. The economic meltdown that began in Asia, and spread to Russia, and then reached the

Western Hemisphere bears witness to the declining protection offered by physical distance or sovereign frontiers. None of the contagion's victims doubts the potency of global capital flows even though they exist largely in cyberspace. "Traders," declares one observer, "do not need to come to market any more because computer networks can take markets to traders, wherever they are.... Younger American exchanges, such as Nasdaq, cannot be said to be based anywhere in particular. Nor can its new online brokers, such as E*Trade, whose services are directly available through any computer hooked up to the Internet."

Even though the flows of ideas, persons, and things rarely appear on political maps, such flows, as well as TNCs and mafias exist in political spaces that bear little similarity to conventional physical geography. All this requires new conceptions of political space such as that offered by Moisés Naím in describing "the neighborhood effect" during Mexico's 1994 economic crisis: "In the aftermath of the latest Mexican crisis, financial markets moved to attack currencies in Thailand, Spain, Hong Kong, Sweden, Italy, and Russia, substantially weakening them. The Canadian dollar hit an eight-year low against the U.S. dollar, and financial markets in Poland, South Korea, Turkey, Nigeria, Bulgaria, India, Malaysia, Hungary, Pakistan, and the Philippines all experienced sharp drops....The Mexican crises of 1982 and 1994 show that increasingly financial markets tend to cluster those countries perceived to be in the same 'neighborhood' and to treat them roughly along the same lines. This time, however, the neighborhood is no longer defined solely in terms of geography. The main defining criterion is the potential volatility of the countries; the contagion spread inside risk-clusters, or volatility neighborhoods."

Governments are seeking new ways to overcome the limitations and challenges posed by non-territorial groups. The United States, for example, sends its policemen beyond its frontiers to capture terrorists and drug kingpins, and it asserts extraterritorial authority to prevent foreign firms and foreign subsidiaries of American corporations from dealing with adversaries such as Iran and Cuba.

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Biographical Sketch

Richard W. Mansbach is Professor in the Department of Political Science at Iowa State University, USA. He is author of numerous scholarly works, including *The Elusive Quest Continues: Theory and Global Politics* (with Yale H. Ferguson) Prentice Hall, 2002).