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A New World Order?: Considering Slaughter's Notion of the Disaggregated and Networked State

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Cover Page Footnote

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A New World Order?: Considering Slaughter's Notion of the Disaggregated and Networked State

The inadequacy of realism¹ as a dominating political lens is exemplified by the proliferation and the growing importance of trans-/international networks and institutions, many scholars argue. Realist thought tends to focus primarily on hard power² even though soft power, or “the power of persuasion and information” (Slaughter, 2004: 4), has proved to have a meaningful role in contemporary politics. Furthermore, although International Relations theory traditionally sees the state as the most important and primary actor, the nonstate has been, nonetheless, key in understanding the politics of today. This is a sentiment echoed by scholars such as Anne-Marie Slaughter who argues there is an ongoing transformation (or intensification) so apparent and notable, that it warrants the terminology of ‘a new world order.’

This order is a world system built up of disaggregated and networked states with significant stakes and relationships with trans-/international institutions and organizations. She explains this as the preferable alternative option to the “globalization paradox—” the issue of requiring more governance in light of globalization but at the same time not wanting to face the corresponding expected downsides of government centralization or the degradation of democracy. Instead, disaggregating/networking provides an outlet to pursue these new demands of globalization, such as dealing with international problems (such as regulation to limit environmental problems). In the words of Slaughter, “networked threats require a networked response” (Slaughter, 2004: 2).

What are Disaggregated and Networked States?

The disaggregated state, as Slaughter explains, entails political interactions that reach beyond a state's territory. Governments willingly share information with each other and collaborate with other states as well as non-state institutions. Slaughter illustrates this disaggregation with many examples. For instance, the frequency of regulators visiting their foreign counterparts has increased as well as the foreign affairs budget for regulatory agencies.

The networked state exhibits relationships of, as Keohane and Nye would word it, ‘complex interdependence’ (Slaughter, 2004: 39). In a globalizing world, issues and demands are ever more intertwined and transnational, and consequently so are the groups facing and resolving them. Similarly, Cerny (2010) discusses an

¹ Political realism is defined in Keohane (1986) through three essential assumptions: states are key units of action, states seek power, and they generally have rational behavior.

² For context, hard power specifically refers to forms of military and economic power which tends to focus on competition between states and coercive behavior.

expansion of linkages and interests that extend past borders and results in solidifying ‘transnational webs of power’ in the world system. In analyzing disaggregated and networked states, Slaughter looks at the role of regulators, judges, and legislators and the influence of information, enforcement, and harmonization networks (2004).

How Has Sovereignty Been Reshaped From the Disaggregation and Networking of States?

Slaughter differentiates traditional from “new” sovereignty. Historically, sovereignty has been about political insulation and respecting the domestic authority of other states. However, sovereignty for the disaggregated and networked state, in accordance with the research of Abram and Antonia Chayes, entails the state’s involvement in institutions and organizations on the world stage. In essence, new sovereignty finds itself compatible with complex interdependence and is “relational rather than insular” (Slaughter 2004: 268).

On a similar note, Cerny describes webbing globally of interdependence and linkages that are impactful to the state but also stresses that this does not replace or impair the sovereign state in actuality (2010). Instead, he holds, that power is reorganized. Therefore, the disaggregated or “splintered state” (Machin & Wright qtd. in Cerny 2010: 79) is one governed by this ‘new sovereignty.’

The nature of sovereignty, being transformed rather than made obsolete can be visualized through judicial comity. In exploring essential aspects of the global landscape of judicial discourse, Slaughter lists both maintaining mutual respect for each other’s national legal and court systems as well as still being open to “clash” with those other courts (Slaughter 2004: 87). Although there is a substantial discourse and interaction between judges and judicial officials in general, there is still the fundamental acknowledgment of state sovereignty and autonomy.

What are Some of the Effects of the Disaggregation and Networking of States?

Even though this disaggregating/networking does not mean the end or dismantling of the nation-state, there have been other substantial changes apparent. The transformation of disaggregation and networking that Slaughter discusses entails a shift from hierarchical to networked structures and from domestic to the trans-/international. This disaggregating/networking happens in many different layers and dimensions. The resulting institutions and organizations differ in formality, type of membership, scope/reach, purpose, and more. Networks carry out functions that Slaughter categorizes as “convergence, compliance, and cooperation” (2004: 169).

The European Union is a great example of the capability of states to establish socially constructed norms and values on a supranational level, thanks to the formation of institutions and networks. In fact, in Hill et al., the EU is given as “the most developed example of an international society” (2017: 85). However, as Slaughter recognized, this is not to say such an example should be similarly expected on a global stage where trust, identity/loyalty, and sense of unity are less certain. Nonetheless, there are other instances where networks and trans-/international institutions affect politics, although perhaps less ambitiously.

For instance, both horizontal and vertical networks exist among judicial systems, and there is a “community of courts” that exists trans-/internationally (Slaughter, 2004: 68). Additionally, in policymaking and law-writing, communities of experts and foreign counterparts bring issue-specific expertise and interests to the table (Slaughter, 2004). Slaughter presents Keohane & Nye’s notion of the “club-model” of ministers engaged in international organizations focusing on certain professions/issues (2004: 46). International and regional organizations help bring about regulations potentially onto a wider scope which is particularly important when those issues are also trans-/international in nature.

What are Some of the Concerns and Critiques of the Disaggregation and Networking of States?

This substantial shift towards the disaggregated and networked does not go without concerns and criticisms and Slaughter addressed many of these points. For instance, she notes, certain networks, in contrast to domestic systems, are insulated from democratic accountability and consultation which has meant meaningful concern from scholars such as Antonio Perez, Philip Alston, and Sol Picciotto. Certain trans-/international organizations and institutions may “escape” the political landscape (Slaughter, 2004: 219) and decision-making may be stained by elitist bias. Indeed, Cerny mentions the growing role of private entities in international relations, noting what Lake terms “the privatization of governance” (qtd. in Cerny, 2010: 76).

Continuing on, Martin Shapiro argues that the “blurring of lines” between domestic governments with trans-/international gives private actors more opportunity to obfuscate functions and accountability from the public eye and authority (2004: 224). Also, power dynamics are not rendered irrelevant in networking. Indeed, power relationships cross over and impact these networks and their contributions. Slaughter gives the example of the Basel Committee and IOSCO (International Organization of Securities Commissions) in this regard, where powerful states have the loudest and most influential voice anyways. Slaughter, nonetheless, is optimistic about the potential of resolving some of these concerns with, for instance, increasing transparency and the implementation of a “grab-bag of domestic solutions” (Slaughter, 2004: 231, 241).

Conclusion and Additional Thoughts

Whether we are heading toward a global civil society or towards a dystopian global technocracy is unclear; at least one or the other in an unadulterated form seems unlikely at the moment. There have been substantively clear beneficial outcomes tied to transnational networks/institutions: value groups and epistemic communities are critical in the battle against climate change and for advocating Human Rights through norm-constructing, discourse, and so forth. Nonetheless, the persisting limitations of such efforts (seen for example by the U.S. leaving the Paris Accord) and impacts of less positively intentioned or elitist groups (such as IMF conditionality leaving nations worse off) suggest downsides to this ‘new world order.’ All in all, context and case-by-case consideration are crucial in examining the advantages as well as issues that emerge with this new world order made up of disaggregated and networked states.

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