Taming the Sovereigns

Institutional Change in International Politics

It is commonly claimed that international politics has recently entered a new era, following the end of the Cold War and then the events of September 11. In this book, Kalevi Holsti asks what we mean by ‘change’ in international politics. How do we identify it? How do we distinguish between significant and unimportant changes? Do we really live in a new era or do we see more continuity than transformation in the texture of international politics? Combining theoretical and empirical argument, Holsti investigates eight major international institutions including the state, sovereignty, territoriality, international law, diplomacy, trade, and war. Having identified the types of change these institutions have undergone during the past three centuries, Holsti analyzes the sources of those changes and speculates on their consequences. This is a major book, likely to have lasting influence in the study of international politics.

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Taming the Sovereigns

Institutional Change in International Politics

K. J. Holsti
For Karina, Dan, and Peter
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Preface

When a layperson asks scholars and theorists of international relations “What do you do?” the answer is more likely to puzzle than to enlighten. The idea that there are big pictures to describe, generalizations to establish, and essential characteristics to discover, explain, and debate eludes those who are more likely to see the field as one involving expertise on the latest world crisis. Even media people, when telephoning to ask an academic if they will comment on the new crisis in Bhutan or Tuvalu, are not easily put off by the answer that the “expert” knows nothing more about those places than is already available in a reasonably competent newspaper. An expert in International Relations is supposed to know everything about everywhere in the immediate sense. Theory simply will not do because it does not explain or provide adequate background to a series of events in location $a$ at time $b$. Few laypeople are interested in questions about relative gains, international norms, the construction and change of identities, prisoner’s dilemmas, agent–structure debates, and the like.

However, when the question of change comes into the discussion, everyone has opinions and immediately the conversation between the layperson and the theorist becomes engaged. One conversation might go as follows:

**IR PERSON:** The main lines of American foreign policy have certainly changed since the events of September 11, 2001.

**LAYPERSON:** I don’t agree. States always follow their national interest, as they define it. The Americans, whether under Eisenhower or George W. Bush, place their country first, and the rest be damned. If others share American interests, then there might be alliances; but absent those interests, the alliances will fall apart.
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IR PERSON: You imply that international relations is a game of clashing national interests and that the texture and rules of the game remain the same regardless of historical context.

LAYPERSON: Yes, that’s it. It’s just like all people are and always have been. I come first, I do what I want and no one tells me what to do . . . aside from paying taxes.

IR PERSON: I’m not certain the personal analogy holds very well, but even if it does, we can debate about the extent to which you are as self-centered as you claim. Aren’t there certain rules in your house that you must observe in order to maintain domestic harmony? And next time you drive to work, consider why you drive on the right (or left in England and Japan) side of the road.

LAYPERSON: Of course there are rules, but in the case of those of the household, I set them up in the first place. They reflect my interests. As for the highway, I drive on the right because I am accustomed to do so (I always have trouble driving in the UK). I do it also because I am not suicidal. I follow my interest in self-preservation.

IR PERSON: But surely major events or trends can change rules. The rules in your household are probably not the same as they would have been fifty years ago. Driving rules have also changed to keep pace with technological innovations.

LAYPERSON: OK, OK; you have a point. Some things do change, but I still think that in international politics, states do only what serves their immediate interests. That was the case three hundred years ago and it remains so.

Change is a mighty engine for debate. It is the hidden stuff of arguments in pubs, formal academic seminars, newspaper editorials, and at least implicitly, in countless treatises on international politics, international relations, and “global politics.” This should not be surprising. Our attitudes about the possibilities of change in the realms we inhabit are based on more general opinions about life and the social world. Conservatives, liberals, and radicals disagree on many issues, but the most fundamental one is the possibility and desirability of social or political change. Conservatives’ images of the world tend to highlight “eternal truths,” to which the radicals reply that that is exactly the problem: the present world and its antecedents are not the worlds we wish to live in any longer. We must therefore change them.

In the more rarified contexts of intellectual debates among theorists of international relations, a major axis of controversy also revolves around questions of change: where, when, for what reasons, and how. Indeed, most of the great debates in the field, going back to its early years at the beginning of the twentieth century, have been implicitly arguments about change. On one end of the continuum, realists such as Kenneth
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Waltz (1979) and Robert Gilpin (1981) insist that the “texture” of international relations in anarchical systems remains essentially the same regardless of historical context or of the properties of the units that constitute the system. At the other end, constructivists insist that identities, and therefore interests, are constantly redefined through social interaction. Relationships can range from close collaboration, even integration, to total war. There is no single variable that determines their character, whether power, interest, anarchy, or structure. All politics are about the social construction of identities through interaction and the development of intersubjective meanings. Change in the character of relationships is thus ubiquitous. The “texture” of international politics never remains the same but depends upon, among other things, the social and cultural context in which they take place.

Agreement between these and other views is not likely because their proponents are wedded to different conceptions of change. But what are they? Curiously, the field is largely bereft of serious analysis of the nature and sources of change. We assume that change is obvious to all, that it needs no analysis on its own terms, and that anyone should be able to identify it when it occurs. But the debates that go on about change suggest that matters are more complicated. We do not all recognize change; we often do not or cannot describe it; and sometimes we do not even “see” it when it is obvious. On the other hand, our openness to novelty, fads, and appearances may seduce us to cry “change” every time something appears different from the previous day. Major events in international relations are particularly prone to be interpreted as markers of fundamental change and of novelty. The ends of major wars are notable times when hope for, and signs of, a better world appear in both public and academic discourses. However, if we are to take the 1930s and the 1950s as main post-war eras, then the hopes of 1919 and 1945 would seem to have been misplaced. Many things changed, but the often cruel “texture” of international politics was not one of them. In contrast, many people today insist that the forces of globalization are changing things for the better, bringing nations and peoples closer together, and thus undermining the traditional bases of warlike behavior. The foundations of national power and welfare today reside in information and knowledge, not conquest of foreign territories, the establishment of empires, or creating trade monopolies. So, things have changed and continue to do so.

I have been puzzled as to why, when the nature, qualities, and sources of change in international politics are so fundamental to academic
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debates, so few have turned their attention to the phenomenon. What do we mean by change? How do we know it when we see it? What is significant as opposed to insignificant change? On what sorts of foundations do we make assertions about the character and possibility of change in the texture of international politics? There are many other questions that come to mind. This study addresses some of them in the hope that the debates in the field can become more disciplined.

The domains of change

Scholars and laypersons are likely to use the terms “international politics,” “international relations,” and “global” or “world” politics interchangeably. It is important to identify the scope of the phenomena we address in this study. Many of the debates in the field arise because proponents of one or the other view of the sources, nature, and desirability of change are not talking about the same domain. I take the term global politics to mean the main political and sociological processes or trends occurring around the world. One example would be the rise of ethnic, religious, and other forms of political mobilization taking place within countries, and the relations between them in different countries (e.g., the relations between ethnic “liberation” movements such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the Tamil diaspora in many other countries). Another would be the political consequences of the globalization of capital and investment.

International relations, in my view, refer to the structured and organized relations between established entities that may or may not become involved in the major political issues of the day. They include the growing global networks of activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) surrounding issues such as human rights, feminism, environmental problems, and the like. There has been a dramatic growth in such networks and organizations, and their role in identifying, promoting, and advocating their preferred solutions to the international agenda has been a notable change in the past two or three decades. This is not a new phenomenon (think of the international anti-slavery network in the nineteenth century), but its dimensions have grown rapidly in more recent history. There are all sorts of fascinating (and sometimes dangerous – the multi-billion-dollar drug trade network) changes taking place in global networks and they rightfully demand scholarly inquiry. Governments are concerned with them, sometimes dealing with them through reasonably effective
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regulations, and sometimes unable to do much about them. In other instances, governments mobilize them to promote their own purposes.

But networks and non-governmental organizations usually have particular sets of activities, purposes, values, and interests to promote. In the broad sense of the term, these are “political.” However, most of the time they are not directly involved in the major diplomatic and security issues on the global or regional agendas. Unless they are mobilized by states for state purposes, they are not part of the domain of international politics. However, if they seek to enter that domain through lobbying, fund-raising, or other types of activities that seek to change the agenda of international politics, then they are part of it. Otherwise, they remain mostly isolated in the issue areas that are of primary interest only to them. These networks and organizations have grown rapidly in numbers and members in the past few decades, and they are a phenomenon worthy of systematic examination. But a comparative study of, let us say, the International Association of Taxidermists and the International Ice Hockey Federation would not tell us much about international politics.

International politics take place in the realm inhabited by governments of states and a few other actors such as the Secretary-General of the United Nations or the Commissioner of the European Union. Empirically, it is the domain comprising the ideas, beliefs, practices, and actions of states in their mutual relations. The actors are public authorities and their representatives (e.g., diplomats, armed forces officers). The main, though by no means exclusive, issues which these authorities address include peace and security at the local, regional, and global levels, commerce and finance, international development, environmental problems that transcend national borders, and the regulation of hundreds of types of private transnational activities. This is a domain of bargaining, locating solutions to common problems, persuasion, threats, and occasional use of public force. It is the latter phenomenon that distinguishes actors in international politics from the activities of international NGOs and other types of organizations and individuals involved in transnational relations.

This study is confined to the domain of international politics. It is not an exploration of that huge contemporary topic, globalization. It does not examine the many facets and types of changes taking place in global politics or international relations, except where these have a demonstrable impact on the quality and texture of international politics. In some cases, the line between the relationships of public authorities acting on behalf of states and governments and relationships with other
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types of private actors and associations is not strict, but for analytical purposes it is useful to keep the distinction in mind. Otherwise, the task of analyzing change in all three domains would be Herculean and beyond the competence of a single person. The most notable efforts to erase the lines and to examine the impact of changes in different domains upon each other are represented in the works of James N. Rosenau (1990, 1997, 2003). Yet even Rosenau acknowledges that the domains are separate and distinct. This is implied in his concept of the “Two Worlds of World Politics,” one world populated by sovereign state actors, the other by non-sovereign actors.

I am indebted, first, to many undergraduate and graduate students who populated some of my courses at the University of British Columbia. In one of them, I specifically used the concept of international institutions as the framework for the course. Student discussions and essays brought to mind a number of points and conceptual distinctions that in one way or another have found their way into the analysis that follows. Two graduate students, Will Bain and Mark Salter, offered a number of insights that have strengthened the chapter on colonialism. I am also indebted to Mark W. Zacher and Miki Fabry who read one or more chapters in draft form and who made numerous useful suggestions. Robert Jackson, James Mayall, Sasson Sofer, Georg Sørensen, and Mark Zacher and members of the audience made numerous meaningful criticisms and suggestions during a panel centered on a synopsis of this work at the 2002 meetings of the International Studies Association. I continue to find inspiration in the work of Barry Buzan and am pleased to acknowledge his observations on some of the problems introduced in the first chapter. I also acknowledge the helpful and critical comments of the two external reviewers of the original manuscript.

Earlir and abbreviated versions of chapters 1 and 4 appeared, respectively, in Holsti (2002) and (2001).