

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## Prologue Theorising transversal dissent

The question is no longer one that opposes the *global* and the *local*, or the *transnational* and the *national*. It is, above all, a question of the sudden temporal commutation which blurs not only inside and outside, the boundaries of the political territory, but also the before and after of its duration, of its history.<sup>1</sup>

Manifestations of popular dissent, such as street demonstrations, social movements and civil disobedience, have for long occupied central positions in most political landscapes. The processes through which they exert human agency, however, have recently undergone important transformations. In previous epochs, popular protests had a mostly local nature, that is, their dynamic was one that directly opposed ruler and ruled. By the late twentieth century the nature of dissent has changed fundamentally. The presence of mass media can transform a local act of resistance almost immediately into an event of global significance. Images of a protest march may flicker over television screens worldwide only hours after people have taken to the street. As a result, the protest soon takes on a much larger, trans-territorial dimension.

This book theorises the changing nature of dissent in the context of several historical and contemporary case studies. Among them is a detailed scrutiny of the protest forms that contributed to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and, ultimately, to a series of substantial transformations in global politics. East German popular resistance against authoritarian rule, which peaked in the autumn of 1989, illustrates how an act of dissent can draw immediate worldwide attention and

<sup>1</sup> Paul Virilio, *La Vitesse de Libération* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), p. 31.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

lead to strong outside pressures on the authorities against which the protest was directed. The events in East Germany were extraordinary by any standard. They marked perhaps the key turning point in the transition from the Cold War to a new phase in international politics. In their dynamic, though, these protests were not necessarily unique. There are countless other, comparable instances of dissent today. Consider, for example, the regular interventions by Greenpeace or Amnesty International, the so-called people power revolution against Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, the dissident movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, the riots that forced Indonesia's president Suharto to step down in 1998, or the actions of the Zapatista rebels who voice their discontent from the Chiapas mountains of Southeast Mexico via cyberspace across the world.

Dissent has become a significant transnational phenomenon, reflecting and shaping various aspects of global politics. In fact, dissent has become what could be called a *transversal* phenomenon – a political practice that not only transgresses national boundaries, but also questions the spatial logic through which these boundaries have come to constitute and frame the conduct of international relations.

The term transversal draws attention to various political transformations that are currently taking place. It has emerged in response to a growing need to rethink the manner in which the domain of international relations has traditionally been conceptualised. David Campbell, for instance, argues convincingly that globalised life is best seen 'as a series of transversal struggles rather than as a complex of inter-national, multi-national or transnational relations'.<sup>2</sup> The latter, he points out, are modes of representation that have strong investments in the very borders that are currently being questioned. By contrast,

<sup>2</sup> David Campbell, 'Political Prosaics, Transversal Politics, and the Anarchical World', in Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker (eds.), *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 24. The term transversal was used briefly by Michel Foucault to denote forms of struggle against authority that 'are not limited to one country'. See 'The Subject and Power', an afterword to H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), p. 211. Richard Ashley then introduced the concept of transversal struggle to the study of international politics. 'The term is useful,' he says, 'because it conveys much that attaches to the term *transnational*, while avoiding the latter's tendency to invest authority in the national boundaries that are being traversed.' Richard K. Ashley, 'Living on Border Lines: Man, Poststructuralism, and War', in J. Der Derian and M.J. Shapiro (eds.), *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 270, 296–99, 314.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Theorising transversal dissent*

to conceptualise global politics as a site of transversal struggles is to draw attention to the multiple and multi-layered interactions that make up contemporary life. It is to recognise the complex cross-border flow of people, goods, ideas, capital – in short, ‘the increasing irruptions of accelerated and nonterritorial contingencies upon our horizons’.<sup>3</sup>

What follows is an attempt to grapple with the consequences that emerge from viewing global politics as a series of transversal struggles. More specifically, the challenge consists of understanding the role of dissent at a time when old certainties are giving way to a continuously unfolding array of seemingly disparate political dynamics. Two interrelated objectives are central to this endeavour:

- 1 To scrutinise the phenomenon of transversal dissent through several concrete case studies: How have practices of popular dissent achieved transversal dimensions? How have we come to understand these practices and how has this understanding affected the manner in which they operate in practice? Are prevalent perceptions of dissent still adequate to appreciate the complex political dynamics of a world that operates increasingly along transversal lines?
- 2 To theorise questions of agency that inevitably arise with a conceptualisation of transversal dissent: What is the potential and limit of protest movements that transgress and challenge national boundaries? How can we understand the processes through which various forms of dissent shape – and are shaped by – the social and political struggles they seek to engage?

Before embarking on this double task, a relatively elaborate prologue is necessary to outline how an understanding of transversal dissent intersects with concerns that are, or at least ought to be, central to the study of global politics. Traditional approaches to international relations theory have treated dissident practices largely in repressive terms. In a nuclear age dominated by fierce Cold War rivalries, most theories of global politics were implicitly concerned with maintaining order, security and stability – to the point that manifestations of dissent have come to be seen as mere disruptive and disorderly phenomena, as ‘breakdowns of otherwise regular processes in national and

<sup>3</sup> Campbell, ‘Political Prosaics, Transversal Politics, and the Anarchical World’, p. 9.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

international society'.<sup>4</sup> Expressed in other words, the potential of dissent to engender transformation has remained largely unexplored by a field of study that treats the very notion of revolution with a mixture of 'disdain and neglect'.<sup>5</sup> It is through an extensive set of preliminary remarks that this book seeks to break this silence, so that alternative transversal voices can be heard and acted upon in the chapters that follow.

### **The level of analysis problem, or how to legitimise transversal stories about global politics**

An attempt that seeks to demonstrate the relevance of transversal dissent to the study of international relations is immediately confronted with the so-called level of analysis problem. Which issues, actors, institutions and phenomena belong to the domain of global politics? What is the proper subject matter of international relations, and how is it distinguished from other spheres of inquiry, such as domestic politics or political theory?<sup>6</sup> Indeed, are such conceptual divisions useful at all at a time when mental and geopolitical boundaries are being increasingly transgressed and challenged?

Realism, which is arguably the most important tradition in international theory, has defined the discipline's purview in a rather specific way. In his influential analysis of international politics, Kenneth Waltz differentiates among three approaches to the study of interstate conflict. Depending on whether the causes of war are seen in 'man' (i.e., individuals), the attributes of specific states, or the nature of the international system, he labels them first, second and third image analysis.<sup>7</sup> According to Waltz's neo-realist interpretation, international theory ought to be concerned only with the third, systemic level of analysis. The main task thus consists of theorising how the anarchic structure

<sup>4</sup> Fred Halliday, 'The Sixth Great Power: On the Study of Revolution and International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 16, 1990, 207.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of this debate see Barry Buzan, 'The Level of Analysis Problem in International Relations Reconsidered', in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 198–216; Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 92–118.

<sup>7</sup> K.N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Theorising transversal dissent*

of the international system affects the behaviour of states.<sup>8</sup> The result is a rather narrowly perceived understanding of global politics, one that assumes, as K.J. Holsti summarises, that the proper focus of study is the causes of war and that the main units of analysis are the diplomatic-military behaviours of the only essential actors, nation-states.<sup>9</sup>

Realism is, of course, not the only approach to international theory. Neither has its exclusive focus on war and states remained unchallenged. Various authors have recognised for long that 'the state has not always been the primary actor in global politics and has never been the sole actor'.<sup>10</sup> In North America, neo-liberal contributions have drawn attention to the importance of such factors as trade, interdependence, international institutions, multinational corporations or the ability of states to engage in cooperative behaviour.<sup>11</sup> In Europe, the so-called English school has always held a broader, more historical and philosophical understanding of international politics.<sup>12</sup> Some scholars have, indeed, explicitly acknowledged the transnational, that is, 'cross-frontier-relations involving "non-state" actors and forces,' as a legitimate aspect of inquiries into international relations.<sup>13</sup>

While opening up the study of global politics to a variety of new domains, most efforts to rethink the international have not gone as far as they could have, or, indeed, should have gone. Here too, questions of conceptualisation and representation are of crucial importance.

<sup>8</sup> K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), esp. pp. 38–59.

<sup>9</sup> K.J. Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory* (Boston, Mass: Unwin Hyman, 1985), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Richard W. Mansbach, Yale H. Ferguson and Donald E. Lampert, *The Web of World Politics: Nonstate Actors in the Global System* (Englewood Cliffs, NY: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, R.O. Keohane and J.S. Nye, 'Transnational Relations and World Politics', special issue of *International Organization*, 25, 3, Summer 1971; Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Lisa Martin, *Coercive Cooperation: Explaining Multilateral Economic Sanctions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Peter Haas, *Saving the Mediterranean: The Politics of International Environmental Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1992); R.J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Fred Halliday, 'The Pertinence of International Relations', *Political Studies*, 38, 1990, 503; See also R. Maghroori and B. Ramberg (eds.), *Globalism versus Realism: International Relations' Third Debate* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1982); James N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

Campbell stresses that for all their efforts to understand a wide range of global phenomena, most approaches to international theory have displayed a remarkably persistent compulsion to anchor an understanding of the complexities of global life in a ‘something-national’ formulation – whether it is ‘international’, ‘multinational’, or ‘transnational’.<sup>14</sup> Representative for such forms of conceptualising is Mark Zacher’s seemingly sensible claim that ‘non-state actors such as multinational corporations and banks may increase in importance, but there are few signs that they are edging states from centre stage’.<sup>15</sup>

Debates about the role of human agency display similar state-centric tendencies. There are disagreements on various fronts, but virtually all discussions on agency in international theory remain focused on conceptualising state behaviour. Alexander Wendt, who has been instrumental in bringing issues of agency to the study of international relations, has been equally influential in directing ensuing discussions on a state-centric path. He explicitly and repeatedly acknowledges ‘a commitment to states as units of analysis’ and constructs much of his theoretical work around an examination of states and the constraints within which they operate.<sup>16</sup> Here too, the logic behind adapting a state-centric form of representation rests on the assumption that ‘as long as states are the dominant actors in international politics, it is appropriate to focus on the identity and agency of the state rather than, for example, a transnational social movement’.<sup>17</sup>

Questions of agency in international theory should not and cannot be reduced to analyses of state behaviour. This book demonstrates how an instance of transversal dissent may influence global politics at least as much as, say, a diplomatic treatise or a foreign policy decision. At a time when processes of globalisation are unfolding and national boundaries are becoming increasingly porous, states can no longer be

<sup>14</sup> Campbell, ‘Political Prosaics, Transversal Politics, and the Anarchical World’, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Mark W. Zacher, ‘The Decaying Pillars of the Westphalian Temple: Implications for International Order and Governance’, in J.N. Rosenau and E.O. Czempiel (eds.), *Governance without Government: Order and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Wendt, ‘Constructing International Politics’, in *International Security*, 20, 1, Summer 1995, 72; ‘The Agent–Structure Problem in International Relations Theory’, *International Organization*, 41 (1987), p. 364; ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization*, 46, 2, Spring 1992, 424.

<sup>17</sup> Mlada Bukovansky, ‘Identity and Agency in the International System’, in Eun Ho Lee and Woosang Kim (eds.), *Recasting International Relations Paradigms: Statism, Pluralism, Globalism* (Seoul: Seoul Press, 1996), p. 245.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Theorising transversal dissent*

viewed as the only consequential actors in world affairs. Various scholars have thus begun to question the prevalent spatial modes of representation and the artificial separation of levels of analysis that issues from them. They suggest, as mentioned above, that global life is better understood as a series of transversal struggles that increasingly challenge what Richard Ashley called 'the paradigm of sovereign man.' Transversal struggles, Ashley emphasises, are not limited to established spheres of sovereignty. They are neither domestic nor international. They know no final boundaries between inside and outside.<sup>18</sup> And they have come to be increasingly recognised as central aspects of global politics. James Rosenau is among several scholars who now acknowledge that it is along the shifting frontiers of transversal struggles, 'and not through the nation state system that people sort and play out the many contradictions at work in the global scene'.<sup>19</sup>

Once one accepts the centrality that transversal struggles play in today's world it becomes impossible to differentiate between political dynamics that take place in local, national or international spheres. It is the very transgressions of these spheres that drive and shape much of global life today. And once one has accepted the presence of these transgressions and the ensuing spatial contingencies, then, Campbell stresses, the levels of analysis problem is no more.<sup>20</sup>

If we are to gain an adequate understanding of contemporary dissent, and of global life in general, we must look beyond the lines that have been arbitrarily drawn into the sand of international politics. We must think past the current framing of the levels of analysis problem. It is the steady breeze, the gusty bursts of energy, the transversal forms of agency, that are gradually transforming the lines and shapes of contemporary global life. Expressed in more prosaic words, a multitude of actors, actions, spheres and issues must be recognised and discussed as legitimate parts of international relations debates. Needless to say, there are countless forms of dissent and agency that are

<sup>18</sup> Ashley, 'Living on Border Lines', pp. 296, 299. See also his 'Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problematique', in *Millennium*, 17, 2, 1988, 227–62.

<sup>19</sup> James N. Rosenau, *Along the Domestic–Foreign Frontier: Exploring Governance in a Turbulent World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 5–6. See also J. Agnew and S. Corbridge, *Mastering Space: Hegemony, Territory and International Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, 'Political Prosaics, Transversal Politics, and the Anarchical World', p. 22.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

operative within transversal struggles. Various authors have already identified the international in spheres hitherto unseen, unappreciated and untheorised. Feminist scholars, for instance, have located women and their influence on the global economy in such spaces as households, assembly lines, sweat shops, farms, secretariats, guerrilla wars and brothels that have sprung up around foreign military bases.<sup>21</sup>

To expand the scope of international theory and to bring transversal struggles into focus is not to declare the state obsolete. States remain central actors in international politics and they have to be recognised and theorised as such. In fact, my analysis will examine various ways in which states and the boundaries between them have mediated the formation, functioning and impact of dissent. However, my reading of dissent and agency makes the state neither its main focus nor its starting point. There are compelling reasons for such a strategy, and they go beyond a mere recognition that a state-centric approach to international theory engenders a form of representation that privileges the authority of the state and thus precludes an adequate understanding of the radical transformations that are currently unfolding in global life. Michael Shapiro is among an increasing number of theorists who convincingly portray the state not only as an institution, but also, and primarily, as a set of 'stories' – of which the state-centric approach to international theory is a perfect example. It is part of a legitimisation process that highlights, promotes and naturalises certain political practices and the territorial context within which they take place. Taken together, these stories provide the state with a sense of identity, coherence and unity. They create boundaries between an inside and an outside, between a people and its others. Shapiro stresses that such state-stories also exclude, for they seek 'to repress or delegitimise other stories and the practices of identity and space they reflect.' And it is these processes of exclusion that impose a certain political order and provide the state with a legitimate rationale for violent encounters.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women and the International Division of Labour* (London: ZED Books, 1986), Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London, Pandora, 1989); Jan Jindy Pettman, *Worlding Women* (London: Routledge, 1996); Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> Michael Shapiro, 'Sovereign Anxieties', in Lee and Kim, *Recasting International Relations Paradigms*, p. 212. See also his *Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) and William Connolly, *Identity/*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Theorising transversal dissent*

Transversal dissident practices can be seen as forms of thought and action that not only transgress, but also challenge the political order which has developed around the assertion of national sovereignty. They either question the arbitrariness of this division and its corresponding system of exclusion, or simply reveal how inadequate it has become in a world that has undergone fundamental change since the state system emerged with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This is why transversal alternatives to prevalent state-centric perspectives must be recognised as legitimate aspects of international theory. To dismiss them as reductionist, as Waltz suggests,<sup>23</sup> and to relegate them to some other sphere of inquiry, is to run the risk of entrenching the very dilemmas that international relations scholars are trying to address and overcome. It is thus with both an analytical and a normative objective that the present inquiry seeks to demonstrate the relevance of transversal dissent to an international relations audience. This effort is as much an expression of the need to understand the complexities and the changing nature of contemporary global politics, as it is a desire to heed and engage a variety of counter-narratives that may well give rise to ideas and practices that engender political transformation in international spheres.

### **Beyond objectivism and relativism, or how to move the structure–agency debate into discursive terrains**

Once brought into the purview of international theory, transversal forms of dissent must be submitted to detailed scrutiny. What is their exact relevance to global politics? Where and under what circumstances can they influence the course of events? In other words, how do transversal forms of dissent exert human agency?

Questions of agency have been discussed extensively in international theory, mostly in the context of the so-called structure–agency debate. Although strongly wedded to a state-centric view, this debate nevertheless evokes a number of important conceptual issues that are relevant as well to an understanding of transversal dynamics. The roots of the structure–agency debate can be traced back to a feeling of

*Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 207.

<sup>23</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 60–78.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77829-9 - Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

discontent about how traditional approaches to international theory have dealt with issues of agency. Sketched in an overly broad manner, the point of departure looked as follows: At one end of the spectrum were neorealists, who explain state identity and behaviour through a series of structural restraints that are said to emanate from the anarchical nature of the international system. At the other end we find neoliberals, who accept the existence of anarchy but seek to understand the behaviour of states and other international actors in terms of their individual attributes and their ability to engage in cooperative bargaining. If pushed to their logical end-point, the two positions amount, respectively, to a structural determinism and an equally far-fetched belief in the autonomy of rational actors.<sup>24</sup>

The structure–agency debate is located somewhere between these two poles. Neither structure nor agency receive analytical priority. Instead, the idea is to understand the interdependent and mutually constitutive relationship between them. The discussions that have evolved in the wake of this assumption are highly complex and cannot possibly be summarised here.<sup>25</sup> Some of the key premises, though, can be recognised by observing how the work of Anthony Giddens has shaped the structure–agency debate in international relations. Giddens speaks of the ‘duality of structure,’ of structural properties that are constraining as well as enabling. They are both ‘the medium and outcome of the contingently accomplished activities of situated

<sup>24</sup> For reasons to be articulated in more detail later, the task of this book is not to engage and explore treatments of agency in international relations theory. Hence, this overly sketchy portrayal inevitably does injustice to the complexities that make up the interaction between neorealist and neoliberal approaches to international theory. It also overlooks issues of agency that have been addressed in the context of foreign policy decision making. For a summary and juxtaposition of current realist and liberal approaches see, for instance, D.A. Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Charles W. Kegley (ed.), *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995). Examples of literature that deal with issues of agency in foreign policy include Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971); Alexander L. George, *Presidential decision making in foreign policy* (Boulder: Westview, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> Contributions include Wendt, ‘The Agent–Structure Problem’, pp. 335–70; David Desler, ‘What’s at Stake in the Agent–Structure Debate?’, in *International Organization*, 43, 3, Summer 1989, 441–473; Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, ‘Beware of Gurus: Structure and Action in International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 17, 4, 1991, 393–410; Walter Carlsnaes, ‘The Agency–Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 36, September 1992, 245–70; Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).