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The Future of the State: Is A World State Inevitable?

While many people believe the future of the state is uncertain, Alexander Wendt suffers no such Hamlet-like doubts. Today we revisit his famous argument that "a world state is inevitable."

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Over the course of [this week](#), one of the questions we have tried to answer is why the nation-state's once lofty status as the dominant form of political organization in the world is under siege. Because of the growth of [the international law movement](#) and the rise of [normative cosmopolitanism](#) to cite just two examples, it now appears to be an open question whether the relative power of states is withering away, simply changing with the times, or remains as vibrant as ever. But whereas some of us might see things this way, others do not share such Hamlet-like doubts. Consider, for example, Alexander Wendt's controversial "[Why a World State is Inevitable](#)".

Wendt's belief in the inevitability of a world state has its roots in the classic Hobbesian distinction between individuals who exist in a 'state of nature' and states that operate in an international system. The light and airy Hobbes (irony intended) argued that while nature and the international system both feature "wars of all against all," individuals in a state of nature are far more vulnerable to violence from others than states are from other states. Famously, Hobbes argued that in a state of nature even the weakest man had enough power to kill the strongest, "either by secret machination or by confederacy with others." This primordial (and yet unacceptable) situation necessitated a "common power" - the Leviathan - to settle disputes and circumscribe violent behavior, primarily by magnifying peoples' fear of death and "keep[ing] them all in awe." In contrast, because states in the international system were not as vulnerable to predation as individuals in a state of nature, no common power was necessary to oversee international politics.

According to Wendt, however, what applied to the past does not necessarily apply to the future, particularly because of a key variable - technological advancement. The enormous increase in the destructiveness of warfare in the several hundred years since Hobbes posited his Leviathan means that today even the weakest states (not to mention non-state actors) have the potential to wreak havoc with stronger ones. (Although the North Korean regime, for example, can hardly feed its population, its jerry-rigged nuclear weapons represent an existential threat to the otherwise much 'stronger' South Korea and Japan.) And because "technological development is endogenous to the security dilemma" - i.e., because mistrust of other states leads to the development of new and more

powerful weapons, in addition to the amassing of existing ones – an internationally anarchic system “generates a tendency for technology and war to become more destructive over time.” All this suggests, or so Wendt argues, that 1) the international system today would benefit from the kind of Hobbesian Leviathan that already brings about existing domestic orders, and 2) that the case for such a Leviathan will only get stronger with time, as the destructive power of our weaponry only grows.

Notice though that Wendt’s argument is that a world state is *inevitable* – not merely that it would be an improvement over the present state of affairs. Even if a world state would be collectively rational, that does not automatically mean that it would be individually rational for great powers to surrender their sovereignty to it. International anarchy (or at least semi-anarchy in the case of Europe) combined with increasingly destructive technology might justify a world state as a theoretical destination point but, without some animating force moving the system in that direction, we may never get there. To Wendt, this animating force is the Hegelian “struggle for recognition” and the transformational effect it can have on collective identity. All individuals, Hegel argued, desire recognition, which essentially involves the acceptance by others that one is “a subject rather than an object” – i.e., an adult or a free human being, for example, rather than a child or a slave. Moreover, the only social orders that are stable in the long run are those in which recognition is ‘symmetrical’; that is to say, in which everyone is recognized equally as all adults, or all free men or women, or all children, or all slaves. And because all international systems made up of more than one state necessarily involve asymmetric recognition (because different states have different fortunes) all such systems are ultimately unstable in the long-run. When all is said and done, only a single world state can provide symmetrical recognition to all and so therefore only a single world state is ultimately stable.

Together, these two conditions – the advance of technology due to international anarchy and the Hegelian struggle towards symmetrical recognition – make a world state inevitable, according to Wendt. From the “top down,” Hobbesian anarchy will continue to lead states to develop increasingly destructive weapons, which will make a world-state increasingly appealing. From the “bottom up,” the struggle for recognition will ultimately tear apart every international order except for a world state, thereby driving history ineluctably in that direction.

It may be an exercise in understatement to call Wendt’s argument ambitious here. Social scientists are usually loath to suggest that the events of the past were inevitable, to say nothing of those of the future. In Wendt’s defense, he admits he cannot say more precisely when he expects a world state to come about than sometime in the next one or two hundred years. But, if Wendt is correct, the policy implications for us all are obviously profound. As he suggests in his conclusion, “if a world state is inevitable ... states should try to ‘get the best deal’ they can in the emerging global constitution, which counsels acceptance of international law and participation in multilateral institutions. Ironically, if a world state is inevitable, states that pursue such policies will do better for themselves in the long run than those that take a Realist view. In short, [it’s] better to ‘get with the program’ than wait till it gets you.”

Further Reading

"Recent Considerations of World Government in the IR Literature: A Critical Appraisal," James Yunker. *World Futures*, 2011

"What Happened to the Idea of World Government," TG Weiss. *International Studies Quarterly*, 2009

"Agency, Teleology and the World State: A Reply to Shannon," Alexander Wendt. *European Journal of*

International Relations, 2005.

"Wendt's Violation of the Constructivist Project: Agency and Why a World State is Not Inevitable,"
Vaughan P. Shannon. *European Journal of International Relations*, 2005.

"The Emergence of a World State is a Historical Inevitability: The Teleology and Logic of Anarchy,"
Alexander Wendt. *World Economics and Politics*, 2003.

["Collective Identity Formation and the International State,"](#) Alexander Wendt. *American Political Science Review*, 1994

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[Two Faces of Cosmopolitanism](#)

This paper analyzes the renewed interest in cosmopolitanism among theorists. The author explores the different notions and dimensions of the concept and elaborates on the two main ideas behind the different understandings of cosmopolitanism: cultural cosmopolitanism and political cosmopolitanism.

[Globales Regieren ohne demokratisches Fundament?](#)

This conference report (in German) discusses questions related to global democracy. The authors examine democratic legitimacy at a global level and existing structures of international input-legitimacy.

[Security in a Nuclear Weapons Free World: How to Cope with the Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons Threat](#)

This paper discusses how security in a nuclear-weapons-free world can best be achieved. The author analyzes the most severe security threats that the world might face and examines possible options to counter them.

[Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch](#)

In this short essay, Kant completes his political theory and philosophy of history, considering the prospects for peace among nations and addressing questions that remain central to our thoughts about nationalism, war, and peace.

Editor's note:

For the rest of our content on "The State in a Globalizing World," check out our [dossier](#) on the topic.

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