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On the Morphology of International  
Systems: Political Space as Structure and  
Process in Early Medieval Europe

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## Abstract

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This workingpaper suggests that political space is best analyzed as a set of processes, rather than as a structure. Any structural conceptualization of political space inevitably de-temporize and de-historize space, thus making it impossible to analyze change. The paper reviews the predominant conceptualizations of space in International Relations, and offer a processual alternative. This alternative focus on release of resources, discursive formations, and nesting as processes. The paper illustrate the arguments made with the formation of political space in early mediveal Europe.

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## **Introduction**

Writing on theory and the problem of change and continuity, archaeologist Ian Hodder argues that, in archaeology, “time has been treated as space – divided into blocks with relationships between them” (1999:130). The theoretical consequence of this is that the focus has been on shifts from one block of time to another; “transitions and origins have been the currency of theoretical exchange” (ibid.). A different conceptualisation of change and continuity is made possible, Hodder goes on to argue, if space and society are “temporalized” (1999:131). Although Hodder does not go into any detail of what “temporalization” might entail he does suggest that “structure and system can never be fully instantiated in the moment except provisionally and partially” (1999:131). In this paper I suggest that a similar tendency can be found in International Relations (IR). The situation in IR is somewhat less dire than in archaeology, as portrayed by Hodder, however: society – taken to signify also international society as well as the international system – is indeed in the process of being “temporalized” in IR. This paper attempts to contribute to a “temporalization” of space.

Taking its cue from Hodder’s remark about the never-instantiation of systems and structure, the main argument of this paper is that it might be possible to gain some intellectual leverage over the issue of change and continuity – or, in other words, world history – by accounting for political space in terms of process rather than structure, or in addition to structure. To support this argument the paper sets out with a brief, and highly selective, review of structural accounts of political space in IR. The paper then turns to a discussion of “relational sociology” (Jackson and Nexon 1999; Emirbayer 1997) and to a review of some temporarily named “proto-processualist” accounts of political space in IR. At this point the paper suggests that the concept of ‘heterarchy’ as used by archaeologists (see Ehrenreich et. al. 1995) might be a useful vehicle for a fuller development of a process account of political space.

Equipped with insights from the proto-processualists and with a re-introduced explorative concept the paper turns to the Late Antiquity in an attempt to mould these insights into a coherent argument about the usefulness of a process account of political space and of the concept of heterarchy.

A concluding section begins the work of formulating a research agenda on this basis.

Before proceeding, however, it would be useful to have some initial idea, or pre-understanding, of what “political space” refers to in this paper. By “political space” is not meant geopolitics, nor geography, in the sense of location and scale. This is not to say that location and scale, even in a thoroughly globalised world, are not very important. Neither does “political space” refer to subjective or intersubjective understandings of the political landscape, in the way archaeologists and historians at times use this concept. Instead, in this paper, perhaps idiosyncratically, “political space” refers to the morphology of political organisation.

## **Structural Political Space**

Daniel J. Elazar has observed that “there seem to be two principal ways in which people approach the study of the organisation of space, either by examining cores and their peripheries or by examining boundaries and what is included within them” (1999:877). This observation appears particularly valid for IR where two strands of thought – originating respectively with Waltz (i.e. 1979) and Wallerstein (i.e. 1974; 1976) – dominate thinking about political space. On the ‘boundaries’ half Barry Buzan and Richard Little (1996; 2000), as well as Adam Watson (1992) have found Kenneth Waltz’ (1979) neorealism a useful starting point, whereas, for instance, Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills (1993) and Christopher Chase–Dunn and Thomas D. Hall (1997) have started off from Immanuel Wallerstein (i.a 1974) on the ‘core–periphery’ half. In each case the new theory is something radically different from its genealogical “starting–text”, but some profound similarities remain. The structural realism of Buzan and Little, like Waltz’ neorealism, conceptualises political space in terms of structure and, arguably, with boundaries in focus. The “neo–classical WST” (see Hobson 2000:141p), like Wallerstein’s “classical” world–system theory, also conceptualises political space in terms of structure, with the relationships between cores and peripheries in focus.

### ***Boundaries***

That which generates political space in structural realism is governance. The distribution and organisation of governing functions across any given geographical extension is the equivalent of its structure; it is thus also the premise on which this extension is classified as one type of system or another. In other words, the units constituting the system are derived from the distribution and organisation of governing functions, and are defined as containing certain such functions but, possibly, not others. That which does not contain any governing functions is not a unit. The boundaries among governing functions thus constitute political space. In this conceptualisation structural realism does not differ from neorealism. However, drawing on Watson (1992) and Ruggie (1983) Buzan and Little (i.a.



1996; 2000; with Jones 1993) un-pack the neorealist second tier of structure, thereby allowing for functional differentiation of units. In addition, drawing on the work of world historians and historical sociologists, they introduce the concept of structural differentiation, which is “the issue of whether units have similar or different institutional arrangements” (2000:87). By making these two moves Buzan and Little are able to conceptualise, first, different types of anarchies (1996:430, fig. 8) and, second, conceptualise non-anarchical international systems (e.g. 2000:176pp). The different theoretically possible ways in which governmental functions are organised and distributed across any given geographical extension are thus multiplied – in comparison with neorealism – although neither the basic boundary metaphor nor the structural conceptualisation of political space is abandoned.

In the hitherto cited structural realist literature the concept of political space has not been explicitly addressed. Recently however, Little (2001; n.d.) has concerned himself more directly with this concept. In these two papers Little develops two arguments of interest to this paper. First, he argues that also IR theories – such as Christian Reus-Smit’s constructivist *The Moral Purpose of the State* (1999) and Justin Rosenberg’s Marxist *The Empire of Civil Society* (1994) – which challenge the neorealist ahistorical conception of political space ultimately fail to provide an acceptable alternative (2001). The reason is that they are both Eurocentric. Thus, for instance, Little argues that Reus-Smit fails to acknowledge that the ancient Greek international society – one of his cases – was itself a unit in a larger system. According to Little, Rosenberg, on the other hand, fails to acknowledge the very extensive trade-links that criss-crossed Eurasia when he argues that economics and politics have been fused for most of world history. Little continues that world history has shown “that economic systems have until very recently always extended far beyond the reach of political systems” (n.d.:n.p.). The second argument, which follows from and is premised on his critique of Rosenberg, is that international systems can be unstructured (2001). Drawing on anthropologists Little presents a hexagonal lattice model of unstructured international systems (see also Buzan and Little 2000:121). The basic idea of this model is that due to low interaction capacity, units are in direct contact only with the nearest surrounding units. Each unit, however, is in contact with their respective surround-

ing units. The system thus created is without borders. Through this system goods can be traded and ideas can, supposedly, be diffused. It is not dense enough to transport political structural effects, however. Units do not experience changes, in power for instance, in units far away. Little calls the system “arrested anarchy”, and uses the Silk Road as an illustration. Through the Silk Road a number of empires, city states, sedentary and nomadic tribal formations were linked through trade, but interaction capacity was not high enough to force these units to take all of each other into account: a system without structure.

Why are these two arguments important for this paper? Mainly because they indicate that structural realism might be in the process of formulating a non-structural conception of political space. This paper attempts to make the argument that this might be necessary for theoretically developing the notions of change and continuity. First, however, the conceptualisation of political space in neo-classical world system theory needs to be reviewed.

### ***Cores and peripheries***

Boundaries are of central importance to neo-classical world system theory, too. Normally, however, it is the boundaries of the system, not the boundaries within the system, which are of interest (e.g. Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997:16pp). World systems, of whatever spatial extension, are instead analytical units in their own right; they are the privileged ontological elements.

If governance can be said to generate political space in structural realism, capital accumulation generates political space in Frank and Gills’ version of neo-classical world system theory (i.a. 2000; 1993; Gills and Frank 1993a; for an overview of different versions of neo-classical world system theory see Denmark et. al. 2000). For Frank and Gills the story, or analysis, begins with economic surplus and what happens to it: “The capture, say, by elite A here (with or without redistribution here) of part of the economic surplus extracted by elite B there means that there is ‘interpenetrating accumulation’ between A and B” (1993a:92). Whether the capture is organised as trade or tribute, and whether the economic surplus takes the form of bulk goods or luxury items is not directly important.

What is important is that the transfer of the surplus connects not only the two elites A and B but also “the economic, social, political, and ideological organisation of their ‘societies’” (ibid.). There is thus an interdependence between political formations and “interpenetrating accumulation”. Primarily, the relations of accumulation give rise to an international (sic) division of labour as elites organise their modes of extraction to maximise their own accumulation while having to give up to other elites some of the extracted surplus. The result, for the purposes of this paper, is a centre, periphery, and hinterland structure to political space. The character of political space, here, is not expressed in terms of boundaries, but in terms of transfer of surplus between classes and between elites. Importantly, the world system is made up not of one centre and its periphery and hinterland, but by a multitude of centre–periphery–hinterland interlocking complexes. Moreover, among the centres of accumulation hierarchies can usually be identified. Frank and Gills (Gills and Frank 1993a:117) thus defines hegemony as a “hierarchical structure of accumulation between classes and states, mediated by force”. World hegemony, in the sense of there being only one hegemon in an entire world system, is historically rare or non-existent, however. For Frank and Gills this formulation can, with Little’s words (n.d.) “generate a world historical narrative” as “hegemonic transition” becomes “the central concept of change” (Gills 1993:119). This is obviously not to say that boundaries – states – do not exist, but rather that they are “often a direct reflection of the location and ever-changing direction of this same international commerce” (Gills 1995:142).

Perhaps the neo-classical world system conceptualisation of political space is best formulated while set in juxtaposition with what its proponents, as well as many others, call Eurocentrism. In its different versions the “European miracle” thesis (Jones 1987; Hall 1985; North and Thomas 1973; etc) in essence argues that Europe rose to world hegemony or dominance through social and technological inventiveness bred from the competitive states–system. Other regions stagnated, declined, or never took off, due to imperial and hierarchical political, economic, and social relations. At a certain point Europe expanded beyond its geographical extension and incorporated other regions of the world in its system. In contrast to this, and in agreement with Janet Abu-Lughod (1998) Frank and Gills instead argue that something much less dramatic occurred: there was a hegemonic shift within the long–since existing system. It is not the bounda-

ries and their implications – i.e. competition vs. stagnation – which explain Europe’s ascendancy, but instead “the world systemic economic and hegemonic crisis of the mid–fourteenth century [which] gave Europe the ‘chance’ to ascend in the hierarchy of the old system” (Gills and Frank 1993b:182).

### ***Structural Political Space: A Critique and A Development***

The fundamental weakness of structural conceptualisations of political space is that they are not temporal. Whether of a boundary or core–periphery kind, these conceptualisations depict political space as instantiated. They are, in Walker’s terms, being, not becoming (1993). This is serious for two reasons. First, anything seen as instantiated risk becoming reified. The variability of instantiated structures is translated into a typology, or taxonomy, and comparative work gets under way. Obviously, there is nothing inherently wrong with historical comparative studies – on the contrary, there ought to be many more of them in IR. However, uncritical historical comparison – in the sense of not questioning its own terms of comparison and/or not paying attention to the distinction between constitutive and causal theory – is just bad scholarship. Equally obviously I am not implying that any scholar so far mentioned in this paper is uncritical, just that their approaches might become dangerous tools in the hands of less reflective followers. Second, and more important, structural, and therefore a-temporal, political space seems to fit less than perfectly with ambitions of developing a theoretical account of change. The suggestion here is not that structural realism and neo-classical WST are a-historical approaches, which they are not. It is rather that they have so far omitted to theorize historical change. Both approaches are paying a great deal of attention to change and continuity, but Buzan and Little by and large do so in a descriptive rather than explanatory way – focussing on formulating criteria for when a change can be said to have occurred, while Frank and Gills tend to emphasize continuity over change. In doing this both approaches let time, but not history, drop out of the analysis. A possible space (sic) for developing a theory of change is thereby closed off. In iconographic terms, both approaches can draw complex schemata over the variability of political space, but neither has the tools to draw an evolutionary tree. Comparison crowds world history out.

A second weakness of the two structural conceptualisations of political

space discussed is that they are both one-dimensional. As already argued it is governance or mode of accumulation that generates political space. In terms of political space, then, structural realism and neo-classical WST reproduce the political and economic determinism of more traditional theories, respectively. Furthermore, both approaches are forced to classify organizational forms as expressing only, but more or less of, the traits characterizing the two end-point extremes.<sup>1</sup> For structural realism these two endpoints consist of anarchy and hierarchy, while the world system history group see them, I suggest, as ranked and non-ranked. That is, while cores and peripheries are ubiquitous, the relations among cores, or hegemons, may be either ranked or non-ranked.

What is the problem with one-dimensional conceptualisations? The major problem is that there is information, or morphological complexities, that cannot be expressed with them. The argument here, then, is not that either structural realism or the world system history group is wrong, but that they could easily be able to say more about political space if they allowed for more generative sources of political space.

Recognizing that such a development could follow a number of different paths, I choose here to remain within the systemic and largely materialistic frame of reference established in the paper so far, and suggest that a simple combination of governance and transfer of surplus and mode of accumulation as “space-generators” produces a four-field matrix containing four basic morphological types of international systems (see fig. 1). “Ranked” and “non-ranked” do not refer to status but to the mode of accumulation such that the multiplicity of hegemons can have a core, or not, among themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a possible tension between Buzan and Little 1996 and Buzan and Little 2000 in this regard. In their 1996 article they formulate a four-field matrix linking functional and structural differentiation, thus arriving at a two-dimensional taxonomy of international systems (p. 430, figure 8). This theme is not developed in their 2000 book. Arguably, however, their four-field matrix mixes system-level characteristics with unit-level characteristics and, while possibly providing an empirical typology of international systems, can not be used as an analytical taxonomy of morphologies.

	<b>Functional differentiation</b>	<b>Functional non-differentiation</b>
<b>Ranked</b>	Hierarchy (empire)	(Super-)Hegemony (pre-1500 China? rare/non-existent?)
<b>Non-ranked</b>	Heterarchy (Early Medieval Western Europe. Historically and pre- historically ubiquitous?)	Anarchy (Mythical Westphalia)

Figure 1: Four configurations of structural political space.

Hoping that the four field matrix is fairly self-explanatory the discussion here will confine itself to the morphological type of heterarchy. The concept of heteronomy has been used in contemporary IR theory by Ruggie (1993) and Reus-Smit (1999:90). With reference to the European Middle Ages they let this concept signify a system of rule which was “structured by a nonexclusive form of territoriality, in which authority was both personalized and parcelized within and across territorial formations and for which inclusive bases of legitimation prevailed” (Ruggie 1998:179). To the best of my knowledge the concept of heterarchy has not been used in IR before. Enticed by anthropologist Timothy Earle’s definition of this term, however, I suggest a displacement. Earle argues that “[C]omplex societies are not so much hierarchical as they are ‘heterarchical’ (Ehrenreich, Crumley, and Levy 1995), meaning simply that segments have separate internal hierarchies that deflect overall social centrality” (1997:1). Furthermore, Earle argues in parallel with Michael Mann’s (1986) IEMP model:

Even within a specific medium of power, such as ideology, control was often problematic and multiple, partially overlapping power strategies were created. Thus chiefdoms were often characterized by very complicated and fractured institutions of power – heterarchies, as opposed to hierarchies (Earle 1997:151).

It may be problematic to apply a concept developed in the context of the political evolution of chiefdoms to that of the international system. The sin

of conceptual stretching is less serious than the sin of not questioning received definitions, however, and so I ask the reader to bear with me, if only for the sake of the argument.

In this paper heterarchy is distinct from anarchy in terms of governance. In anarchy governance functions are distributed over the geographical area of the system in a homogeneous manner, with each boundary containing the same set of functions, which IR calls sovereignty. In heterarchy governance functions are not distributed homogeneously, and there is no implication that geographical location and governance functions are related. In other words, boundaries are still the containers of governance functions, but boundaries are not as such identifiable as geographical.

This type of pattern is recognisable also in hierarchy. Heterarchy is distinct from hierarchy, however, insofar that the various boundaries containing governance functions need not stand in any given relationship of rank with one another. In this paper “rank” has so far referred to transfer of economic surplus, but other premises for rank – ideology, for instance – are fully conceivable. In other words, in hierarchy there is a centre of accumulation to which more surplus is transferred than removed, while there is no such centre in heterarchy. While not all participating units need be fully egalitarian with all the others, neither is there a discernable pattern in the direction in the flow of surplus. The section after the next will attempt to illustrate the concept by using it in a discussion of the Late Antiquity in Western Europe. Combining two structural conceptualisations of political space to form a two-dimensional formulation does not solve the problem of timelessness. The next section addresses this problem.

## **Political Space as Process**

If the first step in theoretically developing the notion of political space in the study of international relations as world history is to develop a two-dimensional structural formulation, the second step is to investigate whether this formulation may incorporate a processual formulation as well. I do this by, first, discussing some concepts from relational sociology, and second, by briefly discussing some attempts at what can be seen as processual conceptualisations of political space. A caveat should be noted. For the purposes of this paper I am interested in processes as causes of structural spatial configurations; not the processes and process formations (Buzan and Little 2000:xx) which each such configuration might generate. The distinction is obviously for analytical reasons only, and must – probably – be discarded in any serious attempt at writing history.

### ***Relational Sociology***

It is not the purpose of this paper to inquire in depth into “relational sociology” (Emirbayer 1997) nor to relate it in a grand manner to IR theory (Jackson and Nexon 1999). Instead, I will appropriate a few relational sociological concepts, with which I hope to be able to talk about political space as process.

The purpose of relational sociology is to formulate approaches that “take social interaction as logically prior to the entities doing the interacting” (Jackson and Nexon 1999:301). The alternative to relational sociology is substantialist sociology, in which entities exist as such, prior to any relationships. According to relationalists, this means that substantialists are forced to concede that entities have essences without which they could not be said to exist. What can vary are certain attributes – such as power, or social identity. Jackson and Nexon (1999:293pp) argue that this is the reason substantialists cannot explain change without resort to exogenous shocks: variation in attributes does not qualify as change, and any tampering with the essence would mean that the entity no longer exists. There can thus be nothing between being a state and a no-state, for instance. For Jackson and Nexon this means that “we are only left with the ability to say ‘here we



have a feudal system of organization, but now we have state” (1999:296). Relationalism, or processual relationalism – as Jackson and Nexon prefer – can say more, they submit. Four concepts form the core of processual relationalism: process, configuration, project, and yoking. A process is “a causally or functionally linked set of occurrences or events which produce a ‘change in the complexion of reality’” (Jackson and Nexon 1999:302). Taking the process of interdependence as an example, Jackson and Nexon argue that a study of interdependence from a processual relationalist approach would “focus on the ways in which trade and other networks are constitutive of the boundary conditions of the state”, rather than on how interdependence – without affecting the essence of the state – causes changes in certain variables (1999:3030p). Thus, the relation of interdependence is logically and analytically prior to the state entity.

A configuration is a particular pattern of processes (Jackson and Nexon 1999:304). The reason for making a distinction between process and configuration is analytical: by studying configurations – which of course are processes in themselves – their constituent processes can be treated as primitives. War-making, for instance, is a configuration, but it can be treated as a process in a study of the configuration of state formation (Jackson and Nexon 1999:304).

With projects processual relationalism makes a qualitative leap. Projects are configurations with agent properties (p. 307), and it is here that processual relationalism becomes interesting. Leaving aside for the moment the issue of how configurations acquire agent properties, projects are interesting because by replacing ‘units’ with them the study of change might finally find a theoretical, rather than narrative, foundation. If we consider polities as projects – bundles of processes, that is – we can break away from the logic of essence – in which a polity either exists or not – and develop a logic of unfolding, or, to borrow from Walker (1993), of becoming. Arguably, neither Jackson and Nexon (1999) nor Emirbayer (1997) embark on this enterprise.

The way in which configurations take on agent properties and become projects is called yoking (Jackson and Nexon 1999:313; see also Abbott 1996). Yoking is the least developed theme, or the theme most in need of elaboration, in relational sociology. The core of the idea seems to be that “sites of difference”, which are culturally negotiated, create insides and outsides. Within insides processes of Weberian rationalization take place

and, supposedly, this creates agent properties (Jackson and Nexon 1999:314). Of particular importance for this paper is the conclusion that “boundaries come before the entities which they bound, and the relations of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ precede supposed substances like ‘the state’ and help to produce the effect of substantiality” (Jackson and Nexon 1999:315).

For reasons of time and space, justice has not been done to relational sociology in this paper. I have merely tried to indicate what sort of analytical premises I believe are useful in approaching questions of change as well as political space. Several strengths and weaknesses and possible pitfalls of relational sociology have not been touched upon; most seriously perhaps the risk of committing the “Process Reduction Fallacy” which occurs when analysts attribute yoking to the activities of pre-existing individuals and entities (Jackson and Nexon 1999:317). Obviously, this would be a substantialist move which would belie the whole relationalist approach.

Of what use are these limited recapitulations of, and remarks on, relational sociology? I suggest that hierarchy, heterarchy, hegemony, and anarchy, are four different configurations containing different sorts of projects. Thus, for instance, hegemony is not equal to anarchy plus an extra attribute for one of the units. Instead, the configuration of hegemony is constituted by sets of processes in part different from those of anarchy. The projects unfolding in hegemony do not stand in a one to one relationship with those in anarchy, nor are they mutually and fully exclusive. Likewise, heterarchy is not anarchy minus territorial exclusivity: it is, in part, a different set of processes. This position could not have been reached from a substantialist starting-point. Starting from there, one would have to argue that the politics in the four fields of figure 1 above are either indistinguishable as to their essences, or that they are, instead, fundamentally different. Both positions are not only counter-intuitive, but also detrimental to a theoretical approach to change. From the processual relationalist starting-point we can instead say that the politics in the four fields are bundles of processes, or projects, which share some processes but not others. Given this, we can start asking questions about which types of processes combine into which types of projects, and how the unbundling of projects allows new configurations, and thence new projects.

### ***Three Types of Processes: Release of Resources, Nesting, and Discursive Formation***

Not wishing to partake in the obsolete search for historical master causes, in the next few paragraphs I will still suggest three types of processes as particularly important. These are releases of resources (Mann 1986), nesting (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996), and discourse (Linklater 1998). I know well that war (Tilly 1992) identity formation (Hall 1999), capitalism (Rosenberg 1994), and so forth are highly relevant processes, but wish to suggest – tentatively and to some extent implicitly – that they are best understood as configurations, and that releases of resources, discourse, and nesting are the rock bottom processes.

To call ‘release of resources’ a type of process may seem slightly odd. The concept is not at first sight specific enough to discriminate among a host of phenomena. A more specific meaning can be imparted, however, if one accepts Mann’s carefully hedged argument that there might be some dialectical pattern to the interactions between the two main types of power configurations that dominated the world history covered in his 1986 book (until 1760 A.D.): empires of domination and multi–power–actor civilizations. In principle, and in other words, Mann’s argument is that each type of power configuration specialized in certain types of power relations. He also asks whether each was “capable of certain innovations before reaching the limits of its own power capacities? And was further social development possible only when its polar opposite type arose to exploit precisely what it could not?” (Mann 1986: 535). Hesitantly Mann gives an affirmative answer to these two questions: “Its very developmental success has set in motion other power networks – which are antithetical to its own institutions” (Mann 1986:537). I can now formulate ‘release of resources’ as a type of process – although Mann to my knowledge never uses this particular expression: A release of resources occurs when sources of power are systematically ignored or under–utilized, such that they might mobilize new configurations or projects. This is most likely to occur when a polity (project) has institutionalised its ‘moment of success’. An example of the phenomenon is the Japanese Bakufu’s failure in taxing merchants in addition to rice–producers, which led to a dual economic system. The existence of this dual system – consisting of a Bakufu controlled rice economy and a non–controlled money economy – led to the formation of a new

configuration most easily described as a coalition between merchants and certain non-Bakufu samurai clans. This project turned into the Meiji restoration-cum-project (this argument is elaborated in Hall 1999). Further illustrations will be presented in the discussion of the Late Antiquity. The unfolding of such configurations as trade and capitalism, but also such as intellectual and artistic bursts of activity, would probably be interesting to study from this perspective, for instance.

Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach define “nesting” as the “phenomenon in which some polities are encapsulated by others and embedded within them” (1996:48). They offer a colourful illustration of it:

Rome had to deal with the Huns head on but succeeded in accommodating Goths and Visigoths to such an extent that the western Empire was ‘barbarianized’. That is the reason that Rome never ‘fell’, as Gibbon claimed, but was transformed gradually, and why many Roman practices and ideas lived on. Neither Rome nor the barbarian tribes were as they had been before (1996:395).

Focusing their analysis on polities, which are organizations with distinct identities, the capacity to mobilize resources, and some minimal hierarchy, and recognizing that these need not be territorial – that they might even share space with one another – Ferguson and Mansbach arrive at a powerful language for the narration of change, if not its explanation. Through the concept of nesting they can avoid the comparative description of steady states, and start talking of changes as ongoing in time. However, their politics-framework is not conceptually developed enough for theory-building. Or perhaps it is just free of jargon. It is noteworthy, however, that their view of politics lies close to the notion of heterarchy developed here:

Just as important as the fact that the polities in our cases had different notions of territorial space is that many of them shared the same space. All cases revealed layered and overlapping polities, sometimes lacking a clearly established hierarchy – certainly any that was applicable to all issues (1996:394).

It is important to avoid two possible pitfalls while considering nesting. The first is the Process Reduction Fallacy. In other words, it is not pre-existing polities which add or lose some attributes of their essences when they ‘nest’

or are being nested. Instead, it is the unfolding of process which leads to new boundary–drawing practises. Second, nesting is a type of process, like release of resources, which says very little about what is concretely going on. Nesting can obviously take place through military, economic, or cultural conquest; nesting in the form of the unfolding of new projects within already formed projects can take place through release of resources. Neither type of process is a trans–historical meta–cause, and nor can they form the basis of a causal theory of world history – if one were to search for that Grail.

The third type of process to be considered here is that of discursive formation. Andrew Linklater’s energizing *The Transformation of Political Community* (1998) – which is my source here – easily defies summary, and as with release of resources and nesting, I will just attempt to bring out the gist of this phenomenon as a processual generator of political space. The basic premise of Linklater’s book – and thus of discursive formation as a process in this paper – is that communities are “systems of inclusion and exclusion” (1998:2). Though Linklater recognizes the historical sociological (Skocpol, Giddens, Mann, Tilly) argument about the Westphalian state’s monopolization of a number of power resources – the totalising project – he adds a dimension not usually developed. Linklater argues that few of these historical sociological accounts

attach as much importance, at least explicitly, to the role played by the rationalisation of the moral code in modern societies. Yet these societies have been the site for unique experiments in rationalising the ethical criteria which states and their citizens have used to evaluate the legitimacy of the dominant modes of inclusion and exclusion (1998:146).

By discursive formation as a process I refer to this, and other, rationalisation processes of legitimising inclusion and exclusion. A few remarks are in order. First, I would not suggest, and nor do I believe that Linklater suggests, that only modern polities rationalised their inclusion/exclusion criteria. On the contrary, the study of ritual and mythology shows that this, if anything, is a rather invariant trans–historical rule (Bell 1992; Bloch 1989; Lincoln 1989). Second, while not wanting to enter into a discussion of what “ethical” might or might not denote, I would *prima facie* allow for other types of criteria as well.

How does all this work out in the Early Middle Ages in Western Europe, and can it afford us any leverage on the issue of change in this period?

## **Political Space in Early Medieval Europe**

In this section of the paper I will suggest that the Late Antiquity of Western Europe can best be understood as a heterarchy. I will proceed in three steps. First a theoretical inquiry into the Late Antiquity of Western Europe has to begin with an understanding of what the Roman *limes* actually were.

The traditional view of the *limes* is that they were distinct borderlines separating the Roman Empire from barbarism (see Whittaker 1994: ch. 1). In the North, this view has it, the *limes* were crossed by growing numbers of barbarian tribes, increasingly with a view to settlement, beginning in the second or third century AD. Soon the West Roman Empire fell and was replaced by a number of barbarian successor kingdoms – deriving from the tribes. These kingdoms were in turn replaced by the Carolingian empire, and then the Middle Ages proper began.

This view, thus, builds on a reification of the Romans and barbarians and of the difference between them. These populations are entities and there is a border between them, albeit one that successively loses its territorial integrity. The political morphology is characterized by an instantiated change from hierarchy to anarchy.

If instead we posit that the *limes* were frontier *societies*, a very different story unfolds. This is the story of the failure of the imperial government to block groups, of both ‘Roman’ and ‘barbarian’ origin, from usurping power and resources, and of the expansion of the frontier society geographically to include more and more of the imperial hinterland.

Two analytically separate developments are crucial in understanding the beginning of this story. First, starting already in the second century, it had become increasingly difficult for the imperial government to collect the taxes required for maintaining the army. The reason for this was not necessarily a decline in the economy, but rather the growth, in the whole western empire, of vast landholdings to which peasants could turn for ‘protection’ from tax-collectors. In addition, it became increasingly difficult to fill the ranks of the army, with more and more of the rural population protected by wealthy and influential magnates, who in return acquired labour and a loyal following. Whittaker (1994:240) calls this process “nucleation”, and he remarks that it gave the landlords a great deal of social control.

The second development, temporally preceding the first, was the estab-

ishment and growth of a frontier society. Ever since the second century people had moved and traded across the borders in Europe. The societies which had grown up on both sides were indistinguishable from each other. In the words of Malcom Todd:

What is observable on and beyond the northern Roman frontiers, from the third century onward, is the emergence of frontier societies, neither purely Roman provincial nor entirely barbarian. Typically, such societies on long-established frontiers develop a material culture which draws on elements from both sides while remaining part of the dominant political order. When that order weakened or collapsed, a frontier society often remained in being and filled the political vacuum. (1995:147)

From these societies recruits for the armies were drawn, and some of these recruits would rise to become generals and military overlords. Others, perhaps from beyond the frontier society, would be brought into the empire as federate armies to replace the diminishing numbers of Roman peasants.

Particularly towards the fifth century, these two developments combined, and the landlords would become warlords, and the warlords, landlords. With the declining presence of the Roman army, the landlords would have to arm their retainers, and the federate leaders would be given land in payment, and sometimes made Roman governors over 'their' areas. Thus, Whittaker makes it credible that both the Frank Childeric and his son Clovis – who founded the Merovingian dynasty and the Frankish kingdom – were recognized as Roman governors. Among these landlords, warlords, and generals, it was not easy to sort out who was what. As Whittaker writes: "Gaul and Germany had turned into a confusion of rival generals, some claiming Roman authority, others Frankish; and some both" (1994:252). Averil Cameron supports this view, and adds an explanation for the prevalence of the "invasion thesis" in the contemporary sources:

But there is enough [archaeological evidence] to show that the Roman government was not so much faced with discrete incursions as with a slow but steady erosion of Roman culture in the western provinces from within. [...] contemporary interpretations of highly charged events such as the battle of Adrianople and the barbarian settlements which followed it are thus liable to mislead if taken too literally. (Cameron 1993:45)

At the battle of Adrianople, in 378, the empire's army was defeated by Goths and the emperor Valens was killed.

The twin development of nucleation and warlord-ism is something which will be very difficult for historical atlases to depict, no matter how many arrows are drawn in a criss-cross pattern across Europe. Anyway, it was in this environment that more and more people moved across the rivers Rhine and Danube, driven there first by Attila the Hun, and later by other Asiatic nomad war hosts, and they added on to it in a quantitative rather than qualitative manner.

Another line of reasoning that indirectly supports the argument made here – that the barbarian invasions were not as much barbarian invasions as a nucleation and militarization – concerns the ethnic heterogeneity of the peoples historical atlases show moving around Europe. Particularly Hedeager (1997) and Geary (2002) have shown the motley make-up of the barbarian war-bands, and how various creation myths, then used for legitimising purposes, have led later scholars astray. The phenomenon is well known in anthropology: often in the process from tribe to chiefdom to state, tribal affiliations are initially replaced by new warrior-elites as the source of authority, and these new elites promote the creation of a new mythology or cosmology in order to legitimise their rule (see also Hedeager 1992; Earle 1991). In the words of Peter Brown:

Life would have been easier, in the post-imperial west, if these *gentes* – these so-called 'tribes' – had been what modern scholars once imagined them to be: compact, clearly defined groups, nothing less than the ancestors of the modern European nations. In reality, active membership in a specific army – and not ethnic origin in and of itself – defined membership in a specific *gens*. (1996:59)

These war-bands would typically consist of a range of different people, including Romans. Various strategies for galvanizing these war-bands into "peoples" were made and they all included, in the words of Geary (2002: 108) an "attempt to transform the culturally disparate members of their armies into a unified people with a common law and a common sense of identity". This common identity would typically derive from ancestry, whether from some mythological hero or god, or, as in the case of the Franks, from Troy.



A significant example of discourse as a generator of political space is the mass of histories which had as their topic the various Germanic war bands of the Early Middle Ages in Western Europe: the Nordic Eddas, Gregory of Tours' *The History of the Franks*, Jordanes' *Gothic History*, Paul the Deacon's *The History of the Lombards*, and so on and so forth. All these mythologies had the sole purpose of creating what we today would call nations, and of localising them in time and space.

In this view of the *limes* and Roman history all three processes of nesting, release of resources, and discursive formation are present.

The most interesting resource which was being released in this case is the weakening central capacity. From the perspective of the great landholders the possibility of 'protecting' the peasants from tax-collectors and army recruiters was clearly important. Likewise, the "retreat" of Roman Imperial authority allowed smaller-scale authorities – barbarians with or without Roman office – to develop.

Discourse also developed in interesting ways. The transformation of the Roman empire and of the barbarians prompted active myth-making. Whereas both Christianity and Rome – or *romanitas* – could supply a functioning ideology, neither could confer unity and distinction, or identity, in other words. Histories had to be invented and cultures forged.

These two processes – myth-making and nucleation – were not taking place at the same time. South of, and including, the *limes* nucleation precedes myth-making quite significantly. Nucleation is evident from at least the fourth century AD, while myth-making to the best of my knowledge starts in earnest in the sixth or seventh (north of the *limes* myth-making had been going on for quite a while as a consequence of social reorganization in the face of Roman military and economic expansion). The process linking nucleation and myth-making was nesting. Polities that were legitimate because of their invented identity and viable because of their effective control over populations and resources formed within the Roman empire, but not always in opposition to it. For instance, and in the longer run, the development of the Papal state (see e.g. Noble 1984) and its impact on Italian peninsular politics from the time of the Lombard invasions and on is probably best understood in terms of nesting.

The political morphology of this period, in this second view, is best characterized as a heterarchy. There is a lack of an over-all social and political centrality, while politics was not "bordered" enough to create an anar-

chy, complete with entities and an inside/outside *problematique*. The political space was continually produced and reproduced in the various processes of nesting, resource-release, and discursive formation. During the centuries that followed these processes would form, first, the Carolingian Empire and subsequently different forms of feudalism. It is not until then, at around the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, that political space became crystallized enough to assume a deceptive similarity to a structure.

## Concluding Remarks

In whichever way we look at political space – as boundaries or as cores and peripheries – we are by conceptual equipment inclined to think about it as a structure. My argument in this paper is that both boundaries and cores/peripheries are continuously produced and reproduced. They are processes, not structures; movements, not instantiations. For IR seriously to engage with world history and change, conceptual and theoretical developments need to, at least, address this argument and the relational and processual “tradition” it is derived from.

Boundary–drawing does not occur once and for all. It is not an event, any rituals or mythologizations connected to certain moments notwithstanding. Relations of core and periphery too are constantly created and recreated. They are not fixed. Boundaries and core–periphery relations thus do not exist as instantiations, they only exist as unfolding processes. And yet it seem problematic to dispose of all structural notions of political space. This paper suggested a matrix of four configurations of structural political space, and, further, that these four morphological types contain, or, more correctly, are constituted by, different sets of selections from the universe of processes. This unresolved tension – between containing and constituting – can be resolved, I tentatively suggest, by abandoning the language of structure *or* process, and adopting that of morphology and morphogenesis.

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