War and the Turn to History

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War and the Turn to History

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LUND UNIVERSITY

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War and the Turn to History[1]

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to assess how the turn to history has affected the ways in which war is understood within the study of international relations. After briefly describing what has been at stake in the recent turn to history, the paper explores how war has been conceptualized in some prominent works within historical international relations. I argue that three things have happened to the study of war. First, whereas the traditional study of international relations has been invested in identifying the proper causes of war, the historical reorientation has brought a focus on its effects. Second, whereas the study of historical sociology traditionally has explored the role of war in state-making, historical international relations has explored the role of war in the making of the international system as a whole. Finally, whereas the focus on the constitutive and transformative functions of war has been instrumental in resolving the tension between history and structure in the study of international relations, it runs the risk of making war look as inescapable source of change in world politics.

I Introduction

What started over twenty years ago as a rebellion against what then was perceived as an overly static and state-centric worldview within the study of international relations is now coming of age as a vibrant and dynamic subfield devoted to the historical study of international relations broadly conceived. But to what extent has this historical reorientation contributed to a better understanding of war in world politics, given that war long has been a main preoccupation of academic international relations?

In order to answer this question, we must first consider what was at stake in the turn to history and what its claims to novelty have entailed before going on to analyze how war has been conceptualized and understood by those scholars who self-consciously have associated themselves with this turn. Hence, I will try to answer the above question by revisiting some recent scholarship in historical international relations which either directly or indirectly have sought to make sense of war and violent conflict in different historical and cultural contexts during the past couple of decades. Given the task at hand, I will not engage scholarship from academic international relations more broadly conceived but confine my inquiry to the growing and increasingly cohesive body of historically oriented scholarship that has emerged during the last decades.

As I shall argue, although those who have taken a turn to history have done little to challenge modern notions of war and warfare at the conceptual level, this reorientation has nevertheless brought a shift of focus away from the traditional preoccupation with the causes of war within the study of international relations in favor of an increased emphasis on the effects of war on international and global order. Yet whatever its intellectual merits, the turn to history has not yet produced a coherent understanding of the nature of war, let alone a theory about its effects. Judging from its role in this reorientation, the concept of war seems to have provided a mediating link between the traditional concerns of international relations and those of historical scholarship, thereby leaving a range of other possible functions that war might fulfill in the history of international relations unexplored. Thus, as I will conclude, historical international relations is challenged to develop a more coherent understanding of the role of war in world politics.

In order to assess the extent to which the turn to history has produced new insights into the function of war in academic international relations, I will start by revisiting the some of the common claims of those who have taken a turn to history and discuss its impact on the study of international relations. I will then proceed to discuss some works within this subfield that have explicitly engaged the problem of war – conceptually, theoretically, and empirically – in order to assess the extent to which this reorientation have yielded fresh and important insights beyond those conveyed by mainstream international relations. I will end this paper by briefly discussing the possibility of expanding the study of war in new directions given a historical orientation.

II The turn to history

What later was proclaimed and eventually acknowledged as a turn to history in the study of international relations initially grew out of a dissatisfaction with neorealism and its inability to account for historical transformation in the international system, especially in the light of its obvious failure to understand how and why the Cold War ended the way it did. Many scholars then called for a more historically oriented approach to the study of international relations, informed by insights modern social theory and classical historical sociology (Rosenberg 1994; Hobson 1998; Spruyt 1998). But as Halvard Leira and Benjamin de Carvalho have pointed out, this initial turn to history was quite reactive and mostly programmatic in character and did not translate into any series engagement with extant historiography. Nevertheless, it turned the tide in favor of historical processes at the expense of the neorealist obsession with structure in the study of international relations (Leira and de Carvalho 2016).

Laments to the effect that academic international relations long had failed to properly embrace history were followed by sustained attempts to bring history and historical sociology back into the core of international relations theorizing. But these attempts merely reactivated a dormant tension between the social and the historical sciences. Whereas the former has been geared to the study of the present, the latter is by definition devoted to the study of the past. Whereas the former takes a nomothetic approach to its subject matter in order to explain why things happen, the latter takes an ideographic approach in order to understand how things happen. According to those who advocated a turn to history, scholarship in international relations had long been animated by conventional presuppositions of modern social science. To the extent that scholars had bothered to consult historical scholarship at all, this was only in order to excavate from the past examples that were used to illustrate present concerns or to corroborate their theoretical assumptions. This narrow focus on the present and the biased and often anachronistic mining of historical scholarship tended to reinforce a static view of world politics, making it difficult to come to terms not only with its past but also to chart its possible future transformations in a global context (Hobson 2002, 2007). Such a decontextualized account of world politics not only made the emergence of the modern state and the international system difficult to explain and understand, but also removed the vast multiplicity of political associations in other times and places from the scope of inquiry. Thus, to the same extent as the study of international relations was ahistorical in outlook, it was also Eurocentric more or less by default (Hobson 2012).

This worldview found additional support in the way in which students of international relations had approached the history of international thought, and especially those texts that had been singled out as exemplars of the disciplinary canon. In historiographical terms, this meant that authors from diverse historical contexts far apart in space and time – notably Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Kant – were read as if they were addressing the same problems and therefore also mobilized in order to solve present ones. Foremost among the works singled out for target practice in this regard were those by Kenneth Waltz (1959) and Robert Gilpin (1981), both of whom

not only maintained that international politics had remained essentially the same across the millennia, but that the rich legacy of international thought could be best understood as responses to the allegedly perennial problems of war and peace. In response to this habitually anachronistic reading, Duncan Bell soon proclaimed the dawn of a historiographical turn within international relations, in which the 'study of the history of political thought, as well as the intellectual history of the discipline, is now taken far more seriously, studied more carefully and explicitly, and plays a greater role in shaping the theoretical debate, than it has in the past' (Bell 2001: 123).

Apart from the presentist tendency to regard history as a repository of examples and lessons that could be invoked to support various theoretical claims, others used historical scholarship to debunk the nomothetic ambitions that had been underwriting much theorizing in international relations by insisting on the historical contingency and singularity of historical events (see Vaughan-Williams 2005). Yet according to Lawson (2010), both these forms of presentism merely served to reinforce rather than to overcome the divide between history and academic international relations. Instead of being considered autonomous enterprises with different subject matters and approaches to them, history and international relations should be considered a common enterprise, since '[a]s such, the choice is not one between a historical enterprise which can do with or without theory, but acceptance of the fact that history is a social science' (Lawson 2010: 221). Thus, from the viewpoint of international relations, the turn to history was a matter of assimilating those parts of historical scholarship deemed useful to its own research agenda, rather than reorienting the study of international relations in a more ideographic and descriptive direction.

Yet behind such claims to have inaugurated a new turn, it is obvious that the turn to history also marked a return to a particular way of studying history and to a set of problems that had long been crucial to the study of historical sociology. But although historical sociologists had been busy trying to explain how and why modern states had emerged, their search for causes had with few exceptions been confined to domestic societies rather than to the international system within which states simultaneously had become embedded. As a consequence, and as Hobden (1999) and Rosenberg (2006) pointed out, since traditional historical sociology lacked a sui generis conceptualization of the international context within which states had emerged and interacted, attempts to build an international historical sociology on such foundations would only issue in methodological nationalism.

Much of what has been going on since then can be understood as an attempt to make sense of the modern international system in ways that does not render it existence epiphenomenal to states, thereby providing the foundations of what can be termed a more genuinely international – and later also global – historical sociology. Thus, in what is perhaps the most comprehensive survey of the benefits expected to accrue from marrying the study of historical sociology and international relations together, Lawson argued that '[t]he rejection of universal, timeless categories and their replacement by multilinear theories of world historical development gives history the chance to breathe, and agency the chance to make a difference' (Lawson 2006: 415). From this observation it followed that 'by renewing the interest in temporality and, and, in turn, into the various logics within which world history takes place, the Westphalian

moment, and indeed the entire modern European states-system, become just one part in a much wider canvas.' (Lawson 2006: 415). Another benefit that would hopefully ensue from this union 'lies in its capacity to debunk taken-for-granted assumptions about central concepts and myths of origin in the discipline' (Lawson 2006: 416) that had followed from widespread tendencies to impose the disciplinary concerns of the present onto an alien past. As Hobson and Lawson (2008) were to argue, scholars of international relations took onboard theories and concepts from authors like Mann, Skocpol, Giddens and Tilly in order to explain the making of modern states and the international system along with their various transformations during the modern era, thereby offering a double punch: 'not just a focus on the historical details of particular dimensions of international relations, but also an emphasis on causal explanations wherever these were located, specifying how patterns, configurations and sets of social relations combined in particular contexts to determine certain outcomes' (Hobson & Lawson 2008: 433).

Given these venerable sources of inspiration, it would be reasonable to expect that the marriage of historical sociology to international relations would produce an intensified focus on war as its first offspring. Yet curiously this has rather brought an increased attention to other mechanisms of change in the international system, as well as to other effects of war than those traditionally associated with theories of state making. This endeavor has found additional support in the ambition to subject the study of international thought to the rigors of contextualist methodology and historiography. Although both these reorientations have yielded an avalanche of books and articles in recent years, they still represent distinct strands of scholarship and with few attempts to bridge the gap between their different starting points for the benefit of a more holistic understanding of the history of modern international relations. Loose talk of a historical turn also makes it easy to forget that the modern discipline of international relations has its very in a tradition of political-historical writing stretching back to early modern historiography and its focus on issues of international order and the balance of power, and that the writings of some of those who led the development of the discipline – such as Raymond Aron, Stanley Hoffman and Fred Halliday to name a few – displayed a clear and distinct historical orientation several decades before anything like a turn to history was proclaimed. Hence the claim that the study of international relations has been stuck with a static view of its subject matter and a rigidly nomothetic approach to its study itself anachronistic and indicative of the extent to which the discipline of international relations has been forgetful of its own history.

Yet before proceeding to assess the extent to which the historical turn has brought any added value to the understanding of war in world politics, it is important to note that the historical turn has been met with skepticism on grounds other that the veracity of its claim to novelty. One such line of criticism concerns the futility of trying to resolve the underlying tension between structure and history that some of those who have taken the turn to history claim to have done. For example, as Tom Lundborg (2016) has argued, while the difficulties involved in trying to combine international relations and historical sociology hark back to an underlying ontological tension between the study of structure and history in the social sciences, 'the study of history, as well as of structure, cannot be separated from certain assumptions about the nature

of this ground, what it consists of and who has the legitimate authority to stand on it and claim its presence and meaning' (Lundborg 2016: 116). But as I will suggest in the concluding section, the study of war has come to provide precisely the kind of mediating link between structure and history that has made the quest for such ground appear redundant, at least for the moment.

III The turn to war

Since so much work in historical sociology has been focused on the role of war in shaping the formation of modern states and the international system, we could expect that this would spill over into the historically oriented study of international relations as well. But whereas academic international relations has long been preoccupied with the causes of war, historical sociologists have been more concerned about its role in the making of states and empires. Although the turn to history has shifted concerns in the latter direction, it has also broadened the research agenda thanks to a sustained engagement with historical scholarship outside the confines of historical sociology. Many historically oriented scholars have thereby added important nuance and complication to the standard bellicist assumptions of much historical sociology. Rather than trying to corroborate the worn dictum according to which war made the state and the state made war empirically, pioneering statements in this field have instead emphasized the extent to which the making of states and the emergence of the international system were conditioned by a host of ideational and institutional factors that were independent of practices of warfare (Ruggie 1993; Spruyt 1994).

Yet many of those who have taken the historical turn have tried to understand how and explain why the modern international system emerged in Europe and later spread to other continents as well. This has compelled them to reassess and sometimes debunk conventional accounts of when and why a transition from a hierarchical world of empires an anarchical world of states took place. This tendency is most clear from the many reinterpretations of the Thirty Years War and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that have emerged in recent decades. Whereas textbook accounts of international relations long took the Peace of Westphalia as the starting point when an international system of territorially demarcated and mutually recognizing sovereign states first emerged, both Croxton (1999) and Osiander (2001) have pointed out that this conclusion did not find much support in the treaties of Münster and Osnabrück but was rather a product of later attempts to legitimize the international system and provide its study with a semblance of intellectual cohesion. From this kind of contention has ensued a series of reassessments to the effect that the Peace of Westphalia was nothing but a false caesura in the history of international relations, (Teschke 2003) and that the foundations of the modern international system were laid only much later largely thanks to the wide dissemination and uptake of Le Droit de Gens (1758) by Emer the Vattel (Beaulac 2004).

But none of these objections has kept historically oriented scholars from continuing to attribute decisive importance to the Thirty Years War while adding

considerable nuance and complication to the received view. If the initial turn to history was more programmatic than substantial, more recent scholarship is much more attuned to the historiographical debates at hand and more inclined to make use of primary sources in more sophisticated ways (Leira and de Carvalho 2016). Yet many of the accounts of the emergence of the modern international system have taken war to be constitutive of its emergence. For example, even if Daniel Philpott is trying to explain how the meaning of sovereignty changed as a result of 'prior revolutions in ideas about justice and political authority' (Philpott 2001: 4), these decisive shifts could nevertheless 'arose out of a crisis, often a major war, sometimes a major upheaval in the international system' (Philpott 2001: 44) of which the Thirty Years War was a first and paradigmatic instance. Equally focused on the Reformation and its effects on international order, Daniel Nexon (2009) has forcefully argued that the rise of religious heterodoxy in Europe produced a crisis that upset the balance of power within as well as among the composite monarchies of the day, a crisis which had a destabilizing impact on the dynastic order and eventually issued in widespread religious warfare across the continent. But as Nexon also shows, the road leading from here to an international system of sovereign states was far from straight. Not only did many composite states survive decades of religious discord, but '[s]hifts in the nature of warfare and economic relations ultimately contributed more to a Europe composed of sovereign-territorial and nation-states than did the introduction of new religious ideas' (Nexon 2009: 10).

Another good example of this new emphasis on the constitutive function of war in the shaping of international orders, and of the early modern international order in particular, is provided by Andrew Phillips. Understood as 'the constellation of constitutional norms and fundamental institutions through which co-operation is cultivated and conflict contained between different political communities' (Phillips 2011: 5), international orders are sustained 'through the applications of authorized practices of organized violence' (Phillips 2011: 6). While such orders might undergo change whenever 'the relative distribution of power and prestige between different political units is altered' (Phillips 2011: 6), more fundamental change is likely to occur when its constitutional values and fundamental institutions change in tandem with its principle of unit differentiation.

This tendency to conceptualize international orders in terms of an amalgamation of material and ideational elements and explore multiple causes of their rise and demise has paved the way for some fascinating comparisons across time and space. Tin-Bor Hui's (2005) very sophisticated attempt to explain why a competitive system of sovereign states emerged in early modern Europe whereas similar structural and historical preconditions in ancient China instead produced a quest for domination and empire is a case in point. By the same token, Phillips (2011) not only tries to explain how the universalist Christian order was transformed into one composed of sovereign states, but also to compare it with largely parallel developments in the Sinosphere, arguing that both processes were driven by 'a combination of institutional decay, the collapse of prevailing social imaginaries and the accompanying emergence of anti-systemic ideologies, and increases in violence interdependence both within and between political communities' (Phillips 2011:7).

The renewed interest in the rise and demise of international orders has also produced a series of accounts of how the sovereign state and the international system were able to spread to other continents. Understanding how the states system was globalized has seemed especially urgent since Keene (2002) pointed to the sharp disjunction that have long existed between an 'order promoting toleration within Europe, and an order promoting civilization beyond' (Keene 2002: 7). Some explanations of this transition place war at the center stage, whereas others do not. Yet all of them struggle hard to avoid the obvious Eurocentrism of earlier diffusionist accounts of Western expansion. For example, as Ayse Zarakol (2010) has shown, conclusive military defeat at the hands of Western powers prompted the Ottoman Empire, Russia and Japan to adapt and conform to Western standards of statehood and emulate many of their political and social institutions in order to survive in an expansive international system dominated by Western powers. Others have emphasized how the modern international order emerged not so much as a consequence of disruptive wars but through a global transformation during the long nineteenth century. As Barry Buzan and George Lawson have argued, being the product of the combined forces of industrialization and the emergence of rational states and ideologies of progress, this global transformation meant that '[t]hose convinced of their cultural superiority and with access to advanced weapons, industrial production, medicine and new forms of bureaucratic organization gained a pronounced advantage over those with limited access to these sources of power' (Buzan and Lawson 2015: 9), providing not only for lasting power asymmetries between core and periphery in modern international relations, but also for the declining usefulness of war as an instrument of foreign policy among core states (Buzan and Lawson 2015: 269).

Similarly, as Andrew Phillips and Jason Sharman (2015) have noted in their study of how war, trade and rule were interconnected in the Indian Ocean during the early modern period, diversity of political forms long constituted the default setting of international orders even inside Europe. The puzzle is why such heterogeneity persisted even as interaction between actors increased, given that we would normally expect military and economic competition among units to bring about emulation and institutional convergence. But as they argue, the endurance of diversity was made possible by the fact that Europeans and regional rulers had compatible interests and broadly congruent ideas and institutions that allowed for common strategies of localization and power sharing. That pattern was reconfigured from the mid eighteenth century onwards, when new forms of imperial rule based on notions of indivisible sovereignty began to supersede the model of divided sovereignty upon which maritime empires had previously been built (Phillips and Sharman 2015: 46). But as Sharman (2017) has also argued, the European expansion into other continents was not based on military superiority, but the key to their success was instead 'local support and the cultivation of indigenous allies combined with a judicious posture of European subservience when faced by far more powerful Asian empires' (Sharman 2017: 503).

An apt way to characterize the above contributions would be to say that they are based on the founding assumption that war made the international system, and that the international system made war. This represent a significant advance on the methodological nationalism of earlier attempts to incorporate insights from historical

sociology into the study of international relations, as well as a conclusive departure from earlier tendencies to naturalize the international system. But this macro shift also comes with certain metahistorical commitments. Leaving aside for the moment the inherent ambiguities of the component terms of this equivocation, it is plain from these accounts that the wars that brought the international system into being are of a different kind from those that the anarchic structure of the same system later facilitated among its component parts. Those wars that so profoundly disrupted the pre-modern world order and helped to bring the modern world into being did not take place between sovereign and territorially demarcated actors with clearly discernible identities and interests but were instead instrumental in beating such entities into being in the most literal of senses. By contrast, the wars engendered by the modern international system were precisely wars between such sovereign entities, and during phases of imperial expansion, wars between them and those non-European polities that were lacking these defining characteristics of modern statehood, thereby compelling them to emulate these characteristics to gain admission into the international system and enjoy whatever legal protection it offered.

But this metahistorical characterization also raises the question of how this bifurcation of the modern world has been reproduced during the last two centuries. As Arjun Chowdhury (2018) has shown, strong and well consolidated states of the kind exemplified by Western European historical experience constitute an exception in the international system. The majority of states have always been weak, beset by inner discord, and often unable to cater to the most basic needs of their populations. Although European states were formed and consolidated through costly wars against alternative political forms, that path to statehood has not been accessible to the latecomers in the international system, since 'state formation itself throws up the possibility of alternatives to the centralized state and reduces the need to emulate that institutional form, which counters the expectation that units in world politics should emulate the strongest units in order to survive' (Chowdhury 2018: 23). Unable to monopolize violence and to deliver the basic goods that their citizens expect, and in the absence of any viable alternatives to statehood, the majority of states outside the West are condemned to a condition of lasting weakness and dysfunction as long as the structure of the modern international system remains the same. To the extent that the turn to history has also brought a macro reorientation in its wake, many phenomena previously thought to originate within individual states – such as state weakness and failure – now appear to have systemic causes with century-long trajectories of their own.

This focus on the disruptive and constitutive effects of war has arguably detracted attention from other forms of organized violence that were important in the shaping of the international system and its global expansion. European expansion and the subsequent global spread of the international system were not brought about by major wars against non-Europeans, but by other violent practices of what at least initially looks like less magnitude and intensity. Scholars of historical international relations have only recently started to inquire into how great powers have dealt with pirates and other non-state actors that have been seen as threats to international order, and how these practices have been important in reproducing the international system and

maintain the distribution of power within it (Löwenheim 2007). Others have vividly described how the creation of colonial armies and indigenous forces not only made imperialism possible, but also warfare more generally in a context characterized by multiple connections between core and periphery and the West and the rest (Barkawi 2017). Still others have argued that however destructive processes of colonial expansion were to those unlucky to be on the receiving end, these processes nevertheless created spaces necessary for the formation of new polities and thus also for those transformations that were integral to the formation of a genuinely global international system (Mulich 2018).

Yet the focus on the constitutive function of war in the making of international orders easily issues in a misfortune cookie whose taste is bitter. Although few of the authors discussed in this paper claim to say anything about the future trajectories of the modern international order, some of their narratives are motivated by a concern that the current international order is under challenge by a variety of forces, with potentially disruptive consequences for the international system as a whole. The desire to make sense of the genesis of the international system springs partly out a conviction that its demise is imminent. Such worries do seem proportionate to the explanatory power attributed to war and other forms of violence. If the current international order is believed to have been constituted by wars and violent practices of the past, the more likely it seems that any future changes will come only as a consequence of cataclysmic violence.

IV Conclusion

War remains a central concern of historical international relations. Less focused on its causes and more interested in its effects, historically oriented scholars have tended to regard war as both disruptive and constitutive of international orders across a series of geographical and historical contexts: major war is frequently invoked as the primary cause of transitions between international orders. Such wars are believed to affect not only the distribution of power between polities but are also believed to condition the identities and interests of these polities, as well as the fundamental institutions and norms of the international system as a whole. By investing war with so much explanatory power, the historical study of international relations has been able to provisionally resolve the perennial tension between structure and history that runs through most of the social sciences, and which has found expression in prior attempts to supplement the traditional concerns of international theory with a diachronic account of how the structures and actors of world politics once emerged and under what conditions they are likely to change. The turn to war has offered a way of overcoming the tension between these explanatory priorities and distinctive approaches to the subject matter of international relations, telling us how we got from one international order into another without any apparent loss of theoretical coherence or unnecessary sacrifice of historical detail. Yet this has come with the cost of naturalizing war itself to the point of investing it with a productive force of its own.

Still the turn to history has yielded an incomplete understanding of the role of war in world politics and has left students of historical international relations with at least three challenges. First, while focusing on its transformative effects on international orders, scholars have been less interested in the causes of war and more so in its consequences for the structure, institutions, and norms of the international system. Most likely this is less a consequence of the turn to history as such, but more a consequence of their reorientation away from realism, coupled with a selective uptake of relevant historical scholarship. Ironically so, since before realism emerged in its structural and nomothetic incarnation in the late seventies, many of its core assumptions had animated historical scholarship all the way from Ranke to modern diplomatic history. Although this latter field has undergone some serious intellectual convulsions during the past decades, some of these seem to have aligned it more closely with the concerns that once prompted scholars of international relations to integrate cultural factors into their explanations of international phenomena (Reynolds 2006; Schweizer and Schumann 2008). A serious re-engagement with contemporary diplomatic and international history could provide students of international relations with an opportunity to study war from within a historical framework that takes the distribution of both internal state capacity and the distribution of capabilities into consideration.

A second challenge to the understanding of war within historical international relations comes from the historiographical turn mentioned earlier. Although the resulting historiography has been preoccupied with international thought about almost everything else but international war, scholarship within this field indicates the extent to which war among European states as well as their expansion on other continents was accompanied, and in some instances propelled by, changing justifications of war and warfare within European legal thought from the early modern period onwards (Koskenniemi 2001; Anghie 2007; Armitage 2012; Pagden 2015; Pitts 2018). Yet there is still a curious disconnect between the historical study of international thought and the study of historical international relations proper that at least in part stems from tensions between their different epistemological starting points, tensions that are waiting to be overcome for the benefit of both (Bartelson 2014).

The third and final challenge comes from the current attempts to question the extent to which the concepts of social theory actually can help us make non-Eurocentric sense of political orders as it they were meaningfully experienced by other people in other times and in other places outside Europe. Although many of those who took the turn to history have struggled hard to overcome the most blatant forms of anachronism and Eurocentrism, much contemporary theorizing still remains indebted to modern social theory in the shape it evolved in the early twentieth century Europe. This has made some scholarship within historical international relations vulnerable to the kind of criticism that maintains that the categories and concepts of modern historical sociology and international relations embody profound and unacknowledged forms methodological Eurocentrism that need to be overcome through a more sustained focus on international and global interconnectedness (Bhambra 2010; Bartelson 2015; Go and Lawson 2017).

V Suggested readings

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