FEATURED BOOK REVIEWS

Territorial States Buried Too Soon

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Polities: Authority, Identities, and Change is an ambitious book. Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach begin by observing that “Much international relations theory . . . has been curiously irrelevant to the political earthquakes of recent years” (p. 3). In particular, “The demise of the Soviet Union surprised power theorists because their theories were focused on states and their relations rather than empires and also were unable to comprehend the revival of old identities that began in Eastern Europe and fed back into the USSR itself. Power theorists have been equally at a loss to address the post-Cold War political disintegration occurring in much of the developing world from ethnic, religious, and class conflict. In sum, academics and practitioners are ill-prepared to make sense of events that do not fit statist theory—and few events that fill today’s print media and television screens do! It is no exaggeration to suggest that ordinary citizens who follow the daily news may have a better picture of the way the world actually works than the vast majority of blinkered IR theorists” (pp. 1–2).

Ferguson and Mansbach’s response is to “rethink the tools of our trade” (p. 3) by setting forth a new and improved theory of politics in two initial chapters, totaling sixty-two pages. But the bulk of Polities (316 pages) is devoted to six case studies intended to illustrate how their theory fits the historic record, followed by a thirty-eight page conclusion applying the lessons of the past to the contemporary scene.

The authors’ ambitions are, in fact, faithful to the tradition of the field. International relations became an academic subject in the wake of World War I when many well-meaning persons were convinced that better-informed public opinion about foreign affairs was all that was needed to prevent renewal of fratricidal war. When the drift toward World War II made that hope untenable, some first-generation professors of international relations—Arnold J. Toynbee (1924–1939) and Quincy Wright (1942) in particular—did exactly what Ferguson and Mansbach do in this book: search the historic record for patterns of human behavior that might explain what was happening around them. After World War II a new generation of U.S. academics found little use for Toynbee’s cycles of civilization or for Wright’s
efforts at quantification and for the most part accepted a German tradition of Realpolitik, carried across the ocean by such figures as Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Henry Kissinger (1964). This is the theory of international relations that Ferguson and Mansbach reject so vigorously and seek to replace with their own, historically attested, understanding of politics.

Much of what they set forth in the initial theoretical chapters seems entirely sensible, and less at odds with prevailing academic views than they claim. Who denies, for example, that state sovereignty is challenged from within by newly clamant ethnic, religious, and other subnational public identities? Who doubts that transnational organizations—business corporations, environmental groups, religious bodies, and the like, not to mention the European Union, United Nations, and other quasi-governmental bodies—are encroaching upon the sovereignty of territorial states as well?

But Ferguson and Mansbach seek to deprive the (fictitiously) sovereign territorial state of its pride of place among the overlapping loyalties and competing authorities that constitute the stuff of politics. The great error of their predecessors, they assert, was to build their field “around the (ill-defined) Westphalian state/polity, ignoring other political collectives” (p. 10). In fact, “state sovereignty is a relatively recent idea,” which served as “a viable, even a vital, source of legitimacy for European princes who had repudiated the universalist pretensions of the Holy Roman Empire and Roman Pope” (p. 11). Yet, “the Weberian idea that the state enjoyed a coercive monopoly was purely aspirational” (p. 12) because it remained “only one of many collective symbols with which people identify and to which they may be loyal” (p. 13). In short, “there is no logical, historical, or empirical justification for universalizing the Westphalian polity, which was only one of many forms of political organization” (p. 16).

A proper view of how people gather into polities to pursue collective ends erases the distinction between internal and external affairs. Instead, politics occurs within a “single arena” that “encompasses numerous layered, overlapping, and interacting authorities, which represent the shifting perceived interests and loyalties of individuals. . . . Competition for the loyalties of elites and publics is simultaneously conducted among authorities situated inside and outside sovereign borders, and ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ seek allies with each other. The concept of national interest hides this pulling and hauling and produces the impression that a ‘state’ serenely presides over the political process” (p. 25).

Having cleared away their predecessors’ errors in this emphatic fashion, Ferguson and Mansbach proceed to define their concept of “polity.” This is the term that gives their book its title and constitutes the keystone of their theory. Its definition has three parts: “A polity (or political authority) has a distinct identity; a capacity to mobilize persons and their resources for political purposes, that is, for value satisfaction; and a degree of institutionalization and hierarchy (leaders and constituents)” (p. 34). As defined, “value satisfaction” seems a distressingly vague locution, and if taken literally, it makes politics all but indistinguishable from human life at large. As a consequence, as Ferguson and Mansbach hasten to explain, “most social groups, from families to trans-national firms, are polities” (p. 34).

The enlarged political stage that their theory thus provides calls some commonplaces of political science into question. “Given the rise and fall of practically everything in history,” they remark, “one should be circumspect in crediting the supposed growth of ‘the autonomous power of the state’ over the past few centuries. . . . Every process of political integration (fusion) carries the seeds of its own destruction (fission)” (p. 41). That is because “ultimately, the individual is the bedrock unit of analysis. . . . The effectiveness of governance rests on the loyalties of
those for whom the authorities claim to act and on the willingness of the governed to contribute resources to the collectivities of which they are part” (pp. 42–43).

This assertion accords well with our prevailing democratic pieties, but historically it is quite unconvincing. In most social settings, individuals were and are far less autonomous than Ferguson and Mansbach assume; and throughout most of civilized history, force and the threat of force was what persuaded villagers to pay rent and taxes and perform corvée labor. Willingness had little or nothing to do with commoners’ subjection to landlords and rulers. Instead, coercion prevailed.

Ferguson and Mansbach are on far firmer ground when they go on to explain how identities and loyalties intertwine and overlap in complex, civilized societies. They declare: “Competition for loyalties among authorities of very different stripes has been the engine of social change since the dawn of history” (p. 45). Such competition takes two distinguishable forms: what they call “horizontal” clashes among peer polities, territorially distinct from one another; and “vertical” clashes among polities that share the same territorial space. Vertical clashes, the authors claim, have commonly been dismissed by students of international relations as merely domestic even though “many of the most interesting and consequential aspects of political life flow from the fact that polities share the same space and can claim loyalties of all or some of the same constituents. The phenomenon in which some polities are encapsulated by others and embedded within them, we refer to as nesting. Within a given space, one or another polity type may stand at the apex of an authority hierarchy . . . but such a hierarchy cannot be assumed” (p. 48).

Multiple and often conflicting loyalties indeed prevail in civilized societies; and, as a consequence, overlapping claims on the same populations constitute a critically important dimension of all political life. But can hierarchy among rival polities, which Ferguson and Mansbach declare “cannot be assumed,” be in fact so easily discarded? Armed men demanding submission do not offer their victims much choice. Throughout nearly all civilized history, in any given place, a particular group of armed men did in fact extract unrequited rents and taxes from their subjects until another similar group came along and displaced them. In other words, organized forces and military coercion played a far greater role in civilized politics and government than Ferguson and Mansbach are prepared to admit, and the primacy of territorial states, which they are intent on downgrading, rested on that elementary fact.

The argument that the familiar distinction between domestic and foreign affairs is often misleading is sound enough; but in their enthusiasm for broadening the study of international relations into what might be called “interpolity affairs,” Ferguson and Mansbach foolishly dissolve the baby into the bathwater, discounting coercion almost completely and treating territorial states as no different from any other sort of authority.

After hurriedly sketching this iconoclastic theory in the first two chapters, the authors devote almost all the rest of the book to illustrating how “world politics has always involved a crazy quilt of polities—foci of authority of varying domain and influence; distinctive in some respects and overlapping, layered, nested, and linked in others; competing and cooperating across space and issues; trying to attract and hold the allegiance and resources of individuals; and seeking to allocate values that have usually been in inadequate supply to meet demands” (p. 60).

Each case study devotes an initial chapter to “horizontal” political encounters, followed by a second that anatomizes “vertical” relationships. The whole inquiry was carefully structured in advance so that parallel chapters have almost exactly the same series of subheads. Theory, in short, allowed the authors to create a
series of pigeon holes into which they have to fit an impressive variety of information gathered through energetic reading of the best available scholarly accounts dealing with each of the cases they analyze.

There is much to admire in the scope of their reading, their choice of authorities to rely on, and their ambition of exploring widely divergent political systems. Ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, ancient China, Mesoamerica from the beginning to shortly after the Spanish conquest, Islam to about 1200, and Italy after Rome to about 1600 did indeed have very different political experiences, and the two authors anatomize each of them, first horizontally and then vertically, in accordance with each of the subcategories they set up ahead of time.

Given that they knew exactly what they were looking for, it is not surprising to find that they do indeed discover a “crazy quilt” of competing and “overlapping, layered, nested and linked” polities in each case. Historians habitually do the same thing, asking a question and combing the evidence for answers that accord with their expectation of human and natural probability. But the way Ferguson and Mansbach arrive at their expected answers is unusually clumsy. They crowd their pages with quotes from diverse authorities, disregarding all discrepancies of outlook. The result is a jumble of information, correct in itself, that lies about in dismembered fragments. To be sure, the authors tie successive quotes together with their own rather hasty analytic discourse, but this is disfigured by some minor errors of fact and a good many dubious phrases. For example, on a single page they refer to “the multipolarity of Minoan/Mycanean city polities” and a few lines below refer to “an alliance of practically the entire Greek world against the advance of the Persians” (p. 116). But “city polities” is a strange way to describe the thalassocracy of Minos; it is even odder when applied to the warlords of Agamemnon’s Mycenae and Nestor’s Pylos. Likewise, as they later point out with a quote from Martin Wight, the thirty-one poleis that resisted the Persians in 480 B.C. “must have been a very small proportion of all Greek cities” (p. 159).

My disappointment with Polities stems from two characteristics of Ferguson and Mansbach’s approach. First of all, they radically discount chronology. Lists of key dates at the beginning of a chapter are not a substitute for fitting successive political actions into an ongoing historical process. Moreover, many of their analytical remarks hover in a haze of chronological imprecision. Given that each case study covers a good many centuries, comprising some far-ranging changes along the way, general remarks applying to the political life of ancient Mesopotamians, Greeks, or Chinese as a whole are almost bound to be inexact and unsatisfactory. At heart, the inquiry remains profoundly ahistorical. The authors seek general truths about polities and politics, and, sure enough, they find what they expect—a plurality of identities and loyalties in competition with each other everywhere and always.

Second, the way in which Ferguson and Mansbach structured their chapters, by collecting data about horizontal and then about vertical relations among rival polities, is like studying anatomy by describing organs torn from the bodies of different animals—comparing legs with legs, eyes with eyes, and so on—without ever trying to put the parts together into a single, living whole. As a result, what really mattered often escapes them or is relegated to the margins of their attention. Yet, aspects of the past that were of little importance—the so-called tribes of ancient Athens, for example—are emphasized beyond their desert because they accord with the authors’ expectation.

“War and modes of diplomacy” is one of the pigeon holes in each “horizontal” chapter, and the authors’ theoretical distaste for giving armed force its due is reflected in the inadequacy and occasional inaccuracies of these sections. They confuse four-wheeled with two-wheeled chariots in ancient Mesopotamia (p. 80), for example, and entirely misdate the dawn of the chariot age as a result.
erroneously suppose that artillery of the fifteenth century used shells instead of solid iron cannon balls to level castle walls (p. 341).

But factual mistakes do not explain the authors’ general failure to comprehend the way that changing forms of warfare altered and shaped the general course of politics in each of the societies they anatomize. The successive impact of compound bows, two-wheeled chariots, cavalry, crossbows, and gunpowder weapons on Eurasian politics is obvious and undeniable (see, for example, McNeill 1982). Shifts in military training, organization, and supply—although less clearly cumulative—were no less decisive in shaping who won and who lost particular wars and how local sovereignties arose and dissolved. Unfortunately, the central role of military organization and participation across time and space in affecting politics at large is entirely obscured by the fragmented and cursory treatment—one or two pages in every second chapter—that warfare receives in this book. Indeed, Ferguson and Mansbach’s deliberate inattention to this dimension of human behavior allows them to treat all the diverse polities they discover—kinship, religious, urban, occupational, territorial, and more—as equivalent in importance and theoretical interest.

Having devoted most of Polities to imposing a new theory of politics upon the past, Ferguson and Mansbach devote their concluding chapter to applying the same theoretical lessons to world politics today. They again fall back on their familiar organizing principle, treating first the “Horizontal Dimension of Politics” (pp. 382–393) and then, triumphantly, taking up “Nested Polities: Towards a New Conception of Political Space” (pp. 393–404). They wind up with an enthusiastic description of the revolt against the “Westphalian state,” which they take to be the overriding phenomenon of our time.

Much of the conclusion repeats points made in the two introductory chapters, and when the authors summarize lessons they draw from their case studies, they provide more vapid generalizations than illumination. For example, “polity types are ideal constructs, which fail adequately to capture the range of actual forms, the continuous process of political evolution, and the extent to which different types and the identities associated with them—for example, family, tribe, city, and empire—consequently blur into one another” (p. 386).

Quite so; but so what? Above all, what about villages? Such communities provided the context within which the majority of human beings have lived since food production took over from hunting and gathering. Yet, the village, the primary human community of every complex society before 1800, is almost totally absent from Ferguson and Mansbach’s purview. This oversight, along with their disregard for the role of force in human relations, constitute the two central defects of their theory—and practice.

On the other hand, I am inclined to accept their view that “the end of the Cold War was less the result of stalemate between two powerful governments than of competition between two rather different empires and sustained vertical pressures on governments by competing non-governmental authorities” (p. 415). More particularly, “in the end, the USSR was torn apart by the revival of national memories, such as the division of the Ukraine in 1667 by Poland and Russia. Nested polities in the Soviet empire reasserted their cultural identity and political independence. Events in the East should not be viewed in isolation. . . . Despite the widespread expectation that relations among the Western democracies would be disrupted by the end of the Cold War, the reality is that relations within those democracies has been more profoundly disturbed” (p. 417). Ferguson and Mansbach conclude that “It was the ‘Westphalian Moment’ that was exceptional. The real world has always been one of numerous layered, overlapping, and nested polities. Our task as
theorists is to explain the most defining characteristic of politics—the manner in which people come together (or are brought together) to behave collectively. . . . The Westphalian ideal seems remote . . . while most of what is really important politically takes place among other polities in a variety of arenas. We are in an era in which there will be many experiments with new polity forms. This sort of thing has happened repeatedly in human history, and it will not cease because Hegel, Fukuyama, or someone else declares history to have ended” (p. 419).

Polities closes with these prophetic words. The authors are almost certainly right in anticipating far-ranging changes among human polities, connected with the extraordinary alteration taking place in our modes of communication and in the kinds of information now being diffused to nearly all humankind through radio, television, and computer networks. But the most significant change wrought by the communications revolution of the twentieth century is the disruption of age-old village communities—everywhere, or almost everywhere. What will replace vanishing village communities as the nexus for sustaining the continuity of human life across the generations? This question is surely the principal issue of human politics and society for the twenty-first century. Yet, Ferguson and Mansbach remain entirely unaware of this seismic shift in human affairs, which, nonetheless, underlies and goes far to explain the political turbulence of our time—which provoked their entire inquiry. This may well be their greatest mistake.

Finally, Ferguson and Mansbach are wrong to suppose that competition among all the diverse kinds of polity that they discovered will not continue to give pride of place to whatever authorities are able to organize and maintain superior armed force. This implies that their requiem for the Westphalian state is premature. So far, no promising alternative to the territorial organization of armed force has even begun to emerge.

References


