State centrism in International Relations.

Strengths and limitations and possible alternatives¹

Carolina Velandia Hernández² *Northern Illinois University*

Realism, institutional-liberalism and constructivism are state-centric. State formation and consolidation as a unitary actor that concentrates sovereignty, population, territory, autonomy, and authority is a product of modernity. This essay first address how state centrism evolved in the principal theories in IR, then present the strengths and limitations of the state centric approach as a unit of analysis, followed by an analysis of the incorporation of new units of analysis such as transnational networks or subnational actors. Recently, there is a development of new unit of analysis, which shows a flow back where the subnational level and individual levels of analysis influencing international relations.

Introduction

Realism, institutional-liberalism and constructivism are state-centric. This means that state is understood as the primary unit of analysis and principal actor in foreign policy. Therefore, states' decisions and behavior shapes world politics. There are historical reasons inside IR as a field that can be an explanation for state centrism. The three main IR theories realism, institutional-liberalism and constructivism, even with its differences, coincide recognizing states are protagonist in events and policies that shape global politics such as the WWI, WWII and Cold War, institutionalization of cooperation, and determining what is the intersubjective understanding of security.

State formation and consolidation as a unitary actor that concentrates sovereignty, population, territory, autonomy, and authority is a product of modernity (Tilly, 1985; Weber, 1946; Habermas, 1981). This essay presents the argument that states should not continue being the primary unit of analysis. Realism, institutional-liberalism are contextually and historically dependent. The rise of non-state actors, epistemic communities, and subnational actors that shape the international level of analysis question the validity of state centrism, constructivism and other theories recognize that change. The development of new unit of analysis show a flow back where the subnational level and individual levels of analysis influence international relations. This essay first address how state centrism evolved in the principal theories in IR, then present the strengths and limitations of the state centric approach as a unit of analysis, followed by an analysis of the incorporation of new units of analysis such as transnational networks or subnational actors.

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² PhD student in the Political Science and Public Administration department.

1. State centrism as unit of analysis in IR

Historically the state is the principal unit of analysis in the realist, institutional-liberalist and partially on constructivism theories. Realist and liberalist can be considered part of rationalist approach, both argue that actors (states) pursue the maximum benefit and reduces costs. Realist and neorealist focus on the security and survival and institutional-liberalist and neoliberalist focus on cooperation and international political economy. The starting point in the state centrist approach, in the international system, is the realist and liberalist assumption that anarchy is the primary characteristic, that assumption leads to the argument that the only actors that can make decisions, creating foreign policy towards war (i.e. security dilemma) or cooperation (i.e. institutionalize global economy and trade) are states. For both in an anarchic system only states can act, take decisions, and promote policy changes pursuing the national interest. Therefore, rationalist is mostly concerned about on state behavior.

The modern version of state is composed by the elements of sovereignty, territory, control over the population and government. The modern version of state attributes a particular relevance to the territorial space configuration, due to the heritage from the Enlightenment ideas about objective science, universal morality, rationalism and state building (Habermans, 1981; Ruggie,1993). The modern project influences the view of realist and liberalist pointing out that the states were the only participants that matter to determine the world politics. The balance of power thinking on the treaty of Westphalia (1648) influences the realist version in its evolution of defensive, offensive realism and hegemony suggesting that states will manipulate and control the international system to achieve their national interest. On the liberalist tradition, the work of Kant and its idea of the perpetual peace amongst republics, evolved the argument that norms and institutions matter, democracies do not fight amongst each other, states will fulfill international law and institutional system commitments because it facilitates cooperation and provide legitimacy.

State centrist theories do not deny the existence of other actors however they suggest that state are the primary actors in world politics. States are the best “bet” to explain international relations because: first, states possess national interest, which explained its goals and motivations towards survival or cooperation; second, states authority controls its citizens, regulates individuals and groups interaction; states have the capability to restrain society and that makes them unique in the international system (Krasner, 1999; Lake, 2009) despite the differences of how states aggregate interest and form institutions (i.e. democracies and authoritarian regimes); third, in systemic theories, those that try to comprehend the relations between units of the international system and the most relevant elements of this structure, also consider states as the principal actor. Theories that can be considered systemic are first, agent-structure relations (Kaplan, 1957; Wendt, 1999; Braumoeller, 2012); and second, the motives and preferences of state behavior (Waltz, 1979; Organski and Kugler, 1980; Gilpin, 1981; Modelski, 1987).

Some of the constructivist theories can also be considered systemic ones. The socialization and legitimization in a society composed by states affect states behavior as primary actor in the international politics. However, they suggest that at the systemic level, the process is based on diffusion and socialization, which are determined by the normative shared understanding of states about society, anarchy, or security. That explains why

anarchy is what states make of it. Even though constructivism is a reflective approach, states continue to be a useful unit of analysis (Wendt, 1992; Lake, 2008).

Until here, this section addresses how state centrism evolved on the main theories in IR. The next section evaluates the strengths and limitations of this perspective in each theory.

2. Strengths and limitations of state centrist theories

Rationalism is the underlying approach shared by realism and institutional-liberalism. The principal strength of the rationalist approach is the contribution to comprehend national interest formation. The rational thinking has a materialist core. That is, that states respond to material needs, pursuing individual advantages calculating cost and benefits (Lake, 2008). Rational thinking shared with behavioral revolution the focus on state behavior that consider how states are not only protagonists of the global economy and politics, but also how states create new realities that influence political, economic and social systems. State centrism on realism and liberalism is inherently linked with rational decisionism and the behavioral revolution (Shklar, 1964; Koremenos, Lipson & Snidal, 2001; Guilhot, 2011). The limitation of rationalism is that it denies that behavior can be driven also by emotions, beliefs, and intersubjectivity. However, constructivism suggest that interest and identities are not static. Norms, social norms, institutions, and intersubjectivity also shaped state behavior, and on top of this, states are just one more actor and not the only one that shapes world politics (Slaughter, 2004; March & Olsen, 1989; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). A more contemporary version of this limitation highlights that emotions, identities and beliefs influence global governance, communities, local spaces, and networks of actors; therefore, they can oppose state authority and can shape world politics from a non-rational component (Brenner, 1999; Marks, 2006).

2.1 Strengths and limitation of realism

The realist classical contribution to state centrism is theoretical. Realist contribute to the state formation understanding by explain how states allowed civil societies to overcome the state of nature and create institutions to prevent war. Realists consider that a similar process occurs on an international level due to the lack of global government. For them, state as protagonist came from anarchy, which builds the connection between the absence of central authority and states as sovereign and autonomous actor that shape the international system. (Waltz,1979; Morgenthau,1978; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Realism's positive contribution in state centrism is the recognition that states are independent and self-interested actors, based on the sovereignty attribute that considers states are not subordinated to another power inside of its border and the no intervention in other states domestic affairs. Realism's explanations allow IR scholars to understand war and conflict dynamics based on hegemony and balance of power systems. Realists claim that great powers are sufficient and important because their need for self-preservation and hegemony in the international arena (Watz,1979; Morgentau,1978; Mearsheimer, 2001). Also, they contribute by explaining that the security dilemma can occur when states are looking to protect themselves but in the process, they threaten the other states.

The limitations of realist state centrism are that it avoids considering cooperation as a possible outcome of institutionalized norms and creates mechanism to deal with conflict. Realist scholars also neglect the impact of hierarchies between states in the international system and the effect on dependent states. Institutional scholar criticized realist's lack of comprehension about international law and institutions' relevance for cooperation dealing with conflict, new kinds of conflict, failure to predict the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of multipolar system. For example, China is relevant after the Cold War, considering law and international institutions can also constrain states behavior and not only military power matters, China's political and economic power are reasons for it to be considered a powerful state.

2.2. Strengths and limitations of liberalism

Institutional-liberalism makes the core of its theory to respond to realist argument. Therefore, it highlights the interaction, interdependence, norms and institutions as primary influencers on state behavior and in world politics. Institutional-liberalism state centrism strength is the contribution of cooperation as a rational self-interested strategy (Keohane, 1984). Another strength is the argument about rules, norms, practices, and procedures for decision making shaping state's expectations and behavior. The increase of information, efficiency, and reciprocity in the use of international law also influence the rational behavior of states (Doyle, 1997; Krasner, 1982; Ikenberry, 2001; North, 1990). Liberalists are part of institutionalism but focused on post- second War World organizations and enhance the national characteristics of the individual states. Therefore, a strong contribution of liberalist is democratic peace theory, which claims there is no war between mature liberal democratic states. Liberals also include domestic politics, groups, and interest configuration that shape state's preferences (Doyle, 1997; Moravcsik, 1997). For institutional-liberalists states are still a protagonist, because their agreements are the ones that builds international norms and institutions. The advantage of liberalism is that it recognizes that reciprocal communications, diplomacy, common goals, and technological change can build trust and reduce the cost of cooperation in terms of the security dilemma that states face when agree to cooperate.

The limitations of the state centrism on institutional-liberalism are that do not recognize that institutions have pathologies and can be manipulated by powerful states. The international law has practical problems in terms of enforcement and efficacy, and it does not consider checks and balance that harmonize domestic regimes and jurisdiction with the international level. Another limitation is that institutional-liberalism diminishes the participation of subnational institutions and actors like cities, NGOs, communities, and activists. They can also influence the international agenda, decision making, and policy choices.

2.3. Strengths and limitations of constructivism

Constructivism challenges the rationalist foundation of realism and institutional-liberalism towards reflectivism. The intersubjective perspective questions IR variables (i.e. war, trade, international institutions, and domestic preferences) by suggesting that all are social constructions determined by history, ideas, beliefs, and norms. Constructivism complements state centrism by emphasizing identities, beliefs, and the role of social norms in world politics. Another strength is that by considering beliefs and

ideology, it introduces a serious analysis of how transnational and subnational actors influence state behavior. For example, constructivists consider NGOs; transnational corporations; networks of actors; and actors' roles in lobbying, diplomacy, persuasion, socialization, and decision-making processes. However, constructivism state centrist has limitations, particularly in methodological applications and the creation of empirical evidence through quantitative techniques.

The next section addresses general strengths that these theories share and then explores their general limitations.

3. General strengths of State-centric analysis in IR studies

State centrism has historically played an important role in IR theory to explain cooperation, war, and the emergence of international institutions. For the main theories in the field, it promotes research agendas that seek to understand peace and war dynamics, their causes, and other political world events. For example, Waltz's systemic theory explains that analyses of how world politics operate should consider individuals, states, and the international arena as part of a complete system. In his theory, the state is the primary unit of analysis that explain how world politics works (Waltz, 1959). Unit of analysis is understood here as the category that frames what is being analyzed in a study (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). This section addresses contributions that state centrism provides to IR as a field in theory building and methodological implications.

Another positive contribution of state-centric approach was the launched a tradition of examining the impact of domestic politics on interstate behavior. Waltz (1959) levels of analysis argue that the state interest building cannot be reduce to its internal parts, therefore de individual level and groups preferences cannot influence the totality of the state. Krasner (1978) also argues that states pursue long term interest that do not reflect groups interest. However, the primary critics made against interest formation and its influence on state behavior is that national interest does not exist. The domestic political interest and the institutions mobilize different context and variate national interest deepening groups biases (Gourevitch, 2002; Moravcsik, 1997; Rogowski, 1999). To fully understand how diverse groups move political protest and institutions transform interest in policy, IR requires consider the domestic level of analysis.

State as unit of analysis contributes with theory building and data collection. For instance, in the comprehension of the role of states to negotiate international agreements, adopt and implement policies, decided to declare war or execute war acts. Therefore, the state centrist scholars wanted to answer what could explain state interest or state behavior in security matters. For example, theory and methodology advanced because IR scholars were motivated to find an explanatory variable such as militarization, geography, size, alliances, or uncertainty. This part of IR literature focused on inter-state wars, considered security dilemmas, and offensive and defensive actions (Evera, 1998), state capabilities for war (Gartzke, 1999), rational explanations (Fearon, 1995), the conditions for war to occur (Bremer, 1992), military alliances (Morgenthau, 1967; Waltz, 1979), and regime type (Russett and Oneal, 2001; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999; Doyle, 1986; Schultz, 1999).

To summarize, in the 20th century, paradigm shifts in IR strengthened state centric approaches. For example, in the relation of state and war, the evolution of theories influenced by important events like the Russian revolutions, the World Wars, and the end of the Cold War. It is observable the shift from the idea of war as a rational instrument of

national policy (Clausewitz, 1832) to rational instrument only used as a modern version of state survival or attached to national, or state sovereign interests shows how central the state is in variable analysis (Morgenthau, 1967). In the liberal theory, research agenda shift focusing on peace, human rights, norms, and international institutions. This studies follow the rational logic, but argue that the state positions and reevaluated the international system, democratic peace argument, and war as an exclusive phenomenon between states (Moravcsik, 1997; Van Evera, 1990; Doyle, 1986; Russett, 1994; Bailey, Goldstein, and Weingast, 1997; Legro and Moravcsik, 1999).

The next section will address the limitations of states as a unit of analysis in IR. After the Cold War, changes in economic, political, and cultural globalization challenged state-centric theories. The academy questioned the superiority and unique perspective that state centrism brought to IR. The question of states as a unit of analysis came from the recognition of non-state actor's relevance, the flaws of state to manage effectively global problematics, and the emergence of strong political and economic actors that challenge state authority. These contemporary debates are around issues as governance, and the implications of globalization in collective action dilemmas at a global scale.

4. Limitations of the state as unit of analysis approach and the contribution of non-state actor approaches.

The field of IR's evolution beyond state centrism introduced new units of that recognize that non-state actors also matter in foreign policy. International organizations, networks of actors, cities, even terrorist groups challenge state authority and influence international relations. This explanation can be seen in the emergence of globalization and governance as a relevant matter that challenges systemic explanations of IR.

Globalization is understood here is an economic, political and institutional process that include in integration of markets, mobility of the factors of production, multinational production international finance, does the world looks as a global market. Similarly, globalization denotes cultural, social, linguistic and territorial interconnectedness. Producing impacts in domestic policies. Institutionally globalization elements are the harmonization or standardization of procedure, rules and promotion of governance (Gadinger & Peters, 2015; Sassen, 2003).

Governance concept is understood here as a global system of actors, authorities, institutions, and regimes that regulate, create, implement, and evaluate policy outcomes. The elements that constitute governance are new sources of authority, flexible regimes, possibilities of withdrawal obligations, voluntary adoption of a standardized regulation, conflict resolution, and the creation of new institutions (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Agranoff and McGuire, 2003; Leach and Sabatier, 2005).

The incorporation of transnational units such as networks, international organizations, international society or community are based on globalization and governance. IR incorporates the definition of globalization because of increasing interconnection and interdependence among different actors. The state centric approach to IR is challenged from two levels: one that focuses on the important role of sub-state actors and the other on forms of organization above the state that create a form of "global governance" or even an "international society."

These changes produced several conceptual and theoretical impacts on IR literature. IR scholars recognized that theoretical and methodological models and research required

an update to include networks, international organizations, and international society. Liberalism contributed to this analysis with the study of international institutions and how institutionalized cooperation can promote international peace. The emergence of themes like terrorism, climate change and trade wars inspired a series of scholars like Hoffmann (2011); Andonova et al (2009); Bulkeley et al. (2014) to suggest that the emergence of new actors promoted a fragmentation in the authority of state, and the participation of public and private actors lead to governance experiences that not only operate across boundaries but also transnationally. For studies of climate change there are multiple levels of governance that reengage questions of agency and authority. These questions go beyond local, national, and international spaces and actors, but also include urban politics (Bulkeley, 2005), create governance experiments (Hoffmann 2011), and institutional networks across and beyond States (Ruggie, 2004). Since the constructivist perspective intersubjective practices promote a new approach to authority at the local level linked with sovereignty in a particular territory (Agnew, 2005).

Challenging state centrism is based on a new understanding of governance that question sovereignty and also introduce sub-state actors as unit of analysis in IR. The following examples illustrate the recognition of these sub-state actors. Cities and networks of cities can influence the international arena because their autonomous behavior produces global policy outcomes. Explanations of civil war, rebellion and social movements integrate local and domestic politics and their international implications. Finally, contentious politics applications show other units of analysis which try to address internal conflict besides states themselves.

The first example are cities. Many cities have taken autonomous action to fight climate change and merit study as a new unit of analysis. For example, cities across the world made commitments to the Paris agreement, implementing environmental policies that are analyzed in the study of Lee (2015). He argues that cities are becoming the principal actor in IR theory because they engaged global environmental governance by joining translocal networks for climate change. His models evaluate the voluntary participation in translocal climate networks as C-40 and CCP. The dependent variable is city environmental participation and the key independent variable is global 'cityness' taking from the globalization and world cities and based on Sassen's definition of global cities. Analyzing how city diplomacy evolved in networks, in the same line, Acuto (2013) claims that State-centrist theories are blind to the opportunity to understand the new governance, and the relationship between IR and diplomacy in a globalized context. He argues that cities can "produce political structures that influence the geography of its diplomatic relationships. The key is not only to find the cities agency, it is also how these relationships defines world politics."

Another example founded on conflict literature considers sub-national actors' relevance to explain the causes of civil war, rebellion, and revolution based on individual motivations and collective action. After the Cold War strengthened of state as unit of analysis based on challenges to its authority came from rationalist bases. However, rationalist explanations are only one of many explanations for conflict, looking for individualist benefit and the resources available (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Explanations based on an individual perspective conformed grievances school (Huntington, 1986; Gurr, 1970), ideology and contentious politics consider groups formation, the domestic level and the social basis for the formation of social movements, coalition class and regimes types.

The challenge to a singular analysis based on the rationalist assumption of states and individuals behave maximizing their profits opens the door for other interpretations political process. For instance, the literature embraces difference types of conflicts that appear after the end of the Cold War opening to new explanations of causes of war far from the single state perspective. The literature evolution in IR considers other forms of conflict, non-state actors' participation (Gartzke & Gleditsch, 2006; Davis & Moore, 1997).

This literature focuses on comprehending different units of analysis by providing innovative independent variables. As mentioned, grievances that motivate groups to rebel is the explanatory variable studied by Gurr (1970), the factors that shape opportunities for mobilization of collective action is the independent variable developed on the work of Tilly (1978), or Greed and rents in conflict that promote violence are the explanations in the work of Collier and Hoeffler (2004).

Voices that relax the state centrism can be found in the interception of liberalism and institutionalism. Liberalism recognizes that societal factors support political actions, creating a bottom up perspective. Moravscik (1997) argues that liberalism should reinterpreted itself and privilege social actors, forming a bottom up approach. Social interests are the ones that constitute the conditions for actors moving towards conflict or cooperation. According to Moravscik, a reformulation of liberalism should relax the state centrism and consider two main assumptions. First, the state is a representative institution captured and recaptured by coalitions of social actors. Second, the state formally or informally can privilege a particular group of interest. Finally, liberal versions of state preferences are the most popular but not necessarily the only unique liberalist explanation for IR questions.

Part of the debates against rational approach that focus on States as principal actor in IR comes from the evolution of institutional and constructivist analysis. Institutionalism and constructivist shared the understanding that global governances based on layers, multilevel or networks of actors that also influence norms productions and behaviors. For example, the work Bulkeley et al. (2014) presented the idea of Transnational Climate Change Governance (TCCG). They systematized the theory based on the construction of a global governance mechanism that includes a mix of sources of authority. Governing the climate requires interrogation about the policy responses for the problem of a warming world. These scholars are focused on the regime construction, the role of the local level, the consumption inefficacy, and the international agreements, with relation among security, climate change, and violence that suggest political instability caused by the environmental an energy emergency. The state remains as the central unit of analysis in this line.

Opposing this understanding, scholars such as Hoffmann (2011), Andonova et al (2009), and Bulkeley et al. (2014) suggest that the emergence of new actors promoted a fragmentation in the authority of State. For them, the participation of public and private actors leads to governance experiences that it not only operates across boundaries within nation States but also transnationally. Concerning climate, there is a multilevel of governance that reengages questions of agency, authority and goes beyond local, national and international spaces and actors, that also includes urban politics (Bulkeley, 2005), creates governance experiments (Hoffmann 2011), and institutional networks across and beyond States (Ruggie, 2004). Since the constructivist perspective the intersubjective practices promotes a new approach to authority at the local level linked with sovereignty in a particular territory (Agnew, 2005).

In the line of institutionalism, Slaughter (2004), argues that governance and IR paradigms are shifting. For her the “state it is not disappearing, it is disaggregating.” The interdependence and the networks that connected the institutional evolutions make that the states that once was domestic change the significance of their sovereignty. In fact, the interdependence creates a new order system that is built on networks of networks. The author describes a vertical and horizontal dimension that explain the new governance networks, reproducing the same branches of the power (regulators, global judiciary system, and executors). The role of international organizations is not only for managing information; it is the institutional process of cooperation in the international realm that changes and influences the performance and evolution of public management all around the world from the local level.

The field is heading towards the reemergence of actors and networks that promote an integration of “top-down” and “bottom-up” research. Cities and networks of subnational actors advance themes of local-global relationships. The relevance of themes like climate change, pandemics and institutional answers, and conflict can be addressed by connecting the local actors to foreign policy.

Conclusion

Realism, institutional-liberalism, and constructivism are state centrist. Historically in IR state is understood as the primary unit of analysis. It is the principal actor that shapes world politics. However, those historical conditions had change due the impact of the substantive and methodological debates in the field, and also new dynamic impulse by globalization. States should not continue being the primary unit of analysis. The rise of non-state actors, and subnational actors that also shape the international level of analysis shows how state centrism validity decrease to answer current IR puzzles. Additionally, new units of analysis show a flow back where the subnational level and individual level influence and shape world politics.

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