
Geopolitical Relations in the European Middle Ages: History and Theory

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One thing is clear: the Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor could the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the manner in which they gained their livelihood which explains why in one case politics, in the other case Catholicism, played the chief part.¹

Uncertainty about the future of the contemporary states system, yet apparent certainty about the “decaying pillars of the Westphalian temple,”² has rekindled interest among international relations (IR) scholars in the meanings of sovereignty. Such renewed problematization of this core concept of IR has translated into greater historical sensitivity to forms of geopolitical social organization that arose before modern statehood.³ Dissatisfaction with universalizing IR theories has made room for arguing the historicity of international organization by inquiring into the nature of the political order that preceded the European absolutist and capitalist states systems. What was the nature of feudalism in the European Middle Ages? How did the specificity of the feudal mode of social organization inform wider forms of medieval geopolitical relations? What distinguishes them from modern and early modern interstate relations? What are the implications for IR theory?

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1. Marx [1867] 1976, 176.

2. Zacher 1992.

3. See Ruggie 1986, 1993; Holzgrefe 1989; Krasner 1993; Rosenberg 1994; Spruyt 1994; and Thomson 1994, 1995.

By elaborating on Robert Brenner's theory of social property relations, I offer a distinct approach to theorizing changing geopolitical orders.⁴ This historically informed and theoretically controlled interpretation constitutes a concrete substantiation of the principles of dialectical thinking, which Hayo Krombach, Christian Heine, and I have recently developed in a series of discussion papers.⁵ I argue that the nature and dynamics of international systems are governed by the character of their constitutive units, which, in turn, rests on specific property relations prevailing within them. Medieval "international" relations and their alterations over the centuries preceding the rise of capitalism have to be interpreted on the basis of changing social property relations. The dynamics of medieval change, however, are bound up with contradictory strategies of reproduction between and within the two major classes, the lords and the peasantry.⁶

I argue that, due to peasant possession of the means of subsistence, the feudal nobility enforced access to peasant produce by political and military means. Since every lord reproduced himself not only politically but also individually on his lordship, control over the means of violence was not monopolized by the state, but oligopolistically enjoyed by a landed nobility. Consequently, the medieval "state" constituted a political community of lords with the right to armed resistance. Interlordly relations were therefore inherently nonpacified and competitive.⁷ Forced redistribution of peasant surplus and competition over land occurred along three axes: (1) between peasants and lords, (2) among lords, and (3) between the collectivity of lords (the feudal "state") and external polities. Consequently, the type of geopolitical system that emerged was one of constant military rivalry over territory and labor between lords, and within and between their "states." The geopolitical dynamic of medieval Europe followed the zero-sum logic of territorial conquests. The form and dynamic of the medieval "international" system arise directly out of the generative structure of social property relations.

The theoretical implications of the social property approach for the discipline of IR go decisively beyond the case study of the Middle Ages. I suggest that its explanatory value and critical purchase apply to all geopolitical orders, be they tribal, feudal, absolutist, or capitalist in character. In each case, a definite set of property relations generates specific geopolitical authority relations governing and limiting inter-actor rationalities. By implication, I aspire not simply to trace the correspondence between property forms and international systems; I seek to uncover the dynamics of these systems in class-related strategies of reproduction, both within and between polities. Property relations explain institutional structures that, in turn, condition conflictual relations of appropriation explaining the dynamics of change. "Internal" changes in property relations, themselves subject to "external" pressures, alter external behavior. This perspective combines a substantive theory of social and international inter-

4. Brenner 1977, 1985, 1986, 1987. For a powerful related argument in IR, see Rosenberg 1994.

5. See Krombach 1997; and Teschke and Heine 1996, 1997.

6. The term *lord* (nobility) refers generically to all members of the land-holding ruling class, secular and ecclesiastical.

7. Brenner 1985, 1986.

action with a theory of sociopolitical structure. This, I suggest, should be achieved by a full historically informed account of the subtle interplay between the constraining structures of property and authority relations and the consequences of goal-oriented, yet bounded and antagonistic, agency that animate and change these social relations.⁸ This argument offers a starting point for a theory of large-scale geopolitical transformation.

Such a notion of social change seeks to recast the debate on whether economics “determines” politics or the domestic sphere the international sphere or vice versa.⁹ The problem is that reflection on the interrelation between these spheres or “levels” only sets in after their historical constitution, that is, after they have become differentiated in capitalist societies. The common methodological temptation is to play out one reified sphere against another—archetypically either an economic Marxist or a Weberian politicist account—without asking how they emerged in the first place and how they flow back into the reproduction of society as a whole. Similarly, analyses of precapitalist geopolitical systems suffer from projecting the familiar vocabulary of states and markets, the domestic and the international, into differently structured pasts.¹⁰ Much of the following argument revolves around the nondistinction between these spheres under medieval property relations, suggesting the analytical obsolescence of contemporary state-centric IR concepts. I argue, in turn, that the modern differentiation of society into these spheres is intimately related to the genesis of capitalist private property—a process of social struggle that left the direct producer (the peasant) propertyless.

For if, as we suggest, conditional property defines medieval authority relations and geopolitics, then modern private property defines capitalist sovereignty and the contemporary international order.¹¹ Briefly, by separating peasants from their means of subsistence and establishing a free labor market, a “free,” contractual, and “purely economic” labor relation was created for the first time in history between producer and employer. On the basis of absolute private property and “free” wage labor, the labor relation can *in principle* dispense with direct political coercion. Economy and state become differentiated. Capitalist sovereignty—the pooling of political power in an “abstract” state—marks the constitutive unit of contemporary international politics. The type of international system that emerges and its geopolitical logic exhibit a pattern completely different from its medieval and absolutist predecessors. After the violence-ridden historical constitution of the capitalist states system, international accumulation among capitalist societies, because it occurs primarily between private economic actors, is logically no longer directly and necessarily tied to a state-led politicomilitary and territorial process.¹²

8. For the dialectical epistemological issues involved, see Teschke and Heine 1996, 1997.

9. Classically discussed in Gourevitch 1978; recently Thomson 1994, 17.

10. On the “disembedding” of the capitalist market from sociopolitical “normative” principles, see Polanyi 1944. From a conservative angle, see Brunner’s critique of the modern “disjunctive mode of thinking,” Brunner 1992, chap. 2; for the correct interpretation, see Wood 1995.

11. Feudal conditional property is distinguished from absolute private property in that it requires the performance of specified political services. See the section titled “The Structure-Agent Problem in Feudal Terms.”

12. The degree to which legitimate or illegitimate political violence remains necessary for the reproduction of capitalism is a different question.

On the basis of changing social property relations, I contest not only the explanatory relevance of ahistorical and systemically induced rational-actor assumptions of neorealist provenance but also realism's methodological individualism, be it of critical-Kantian lineage or of classical Machiavellian persuasion. I also seek to expose some limits of constructivist intersubjectivity and the one-sided constructivist interpretation of the power of discourses. Furthermore, my elaboration of Robert Brenner's theory of social property relations mounts a direct critique of Weberian and current Neo-Weberian historical sociology—which has made important inroads into IR¹³—and of some of the more determinist, economic, and structuralist versions of Marxism. Finally, my outline of how medieval property and authority structures and dominant forms of agency are dynamically related presents a substantive alternative to Alexander Wendt's formal adaptation of structuration theory.¹⁴

The article is divided into five major parts. I first outline the treatment of history in the dominant paradigm of IR theory, neorealism, assess attempts within this tradition to rehistoricize its explanatory purchase, and criticize constructivist accounts of the Middle Ages on theoretical grounds. Against the background of Max Weber and Karl Marx's theories of feudalism, I then provide a theoretical foundation for the constitutive nexus between the political and the economic in feudal society using an interpretation of the medieval concept of conditional property to draw out its relevance for medieval "international" society as a "culture of war." In the third section I offer a positive account of how the agency-and-structure problem can be addressed in the framework of medieval society. In the fourth section I submit a dialectical phenomenology of medieval "international" institutions (state and domination, territory and frontiers, war and peace) by systematically relating their *political form* to their *social content*. In the fifth section I clarify diverging structuring principles of geopolitical organization in the early, High, and late Middle Ages. In the conclusion I reflect on the theoretical relevance of social property relations for postfeudal international systems.

History and Feudalism in IR

Attempts to reintroduce a historical dimension into IR theory are, for the most part, still deeply locked into the methodological parameters of neorealism and are correspondingly carried out in its peculiar idiom. Before turning more systematically to these historicizing retheorizations and their limits, I first set out the grounds on which history became cleansed from neorealism.

Waltz: History as Perennial Structure

In a bold claim Kenneth Waltz pegged the absolute limits of international politics to the overriding imperatives of anarchy as the fundamental structural principle of the

13. Discussed in Halliday 1994, 74–93, 124–46; and Jarvis 1989.

14. Wendt 1987, 1992.

international system. In this perspective, systemic qualitative transformation shrank to an alternation between two principles of system structure: anarchy and hierarchy.¹⁵ Such a binary distinction had the doubtful advantage of subsuming history under two rubrics: As long as the states system (or whichever forms of human organization make up such a system) comprises a multiplicity of functionally undifferentiated actors, anarchy would prevail; as soon as empires or other forms of central authority are identifiable, hierarchy reigns. Although Waltz allowed for alteration within the system as arising from variations in power capabilities within and between the constitutive units, they only had relevance for switches from multipolarity to bipolarity but did not affect the deep logic of anarchy. In a system of survival, units were forced to behave according to the tenets of self-help and power maximization to which power balancing and alliance building would bring stability, security, and order. Although acknowledging domestic causes in variations in power capabilities, Waltz's structuralist model—with the exception of the persistence of anarchy itself—is indeterminate in its predictive and retrospective, that is, historically explanatory, capacities. It depends on “exogenous variables” to explain why some actors opted in a specific situation for alliance building while others took to war.¹⁶ Both extreme potentialities (and an infinite number of intermediate solutions) are covered as long as the systemic end of equilibrium—regardless of the number of actors as long as there are at least two—is served through the workings of the balance of power. The survival of the system overrides the survival of any of its components.

Under these premises it is implicit in neorealism that history turned into a nonproblem. Anarchy shrank causally to a permissive cause, hierarchy eclipsed IR theory, and variations in unit-level causes did not entail variations in observable outcomes. Laconically, Waltz maintained that “the logic of anarchy does not vary with its content. . . . The logic of anarchy obtains whether the system is composed of tribes, nations, oligopolistic firms, or street gangs.”¹⁷ The case for history as reducible to perennial anarchical structure seemed to be established.

Ruggie: Forms of Property as “Modes of Differentiation”

Within the realist tradition, objections soon emerged that based their critique less on meta-theoretical questions than on more substantive issues.¹⁸ How helpful was neo-

15. Waltz 1979, 114–16.

16. Waltz 1988, 620.

17. Waltz 1990, 37. This amounts to a tautological statement. Anarchy prevails wherever the conditions for its existence are met. The key to unlocking the Waltzian theoretical tower seems to lie in questioning neorealism's hermetic epistemological nature, which is predicated on an *a priori* decision of what defines a legitimate IR theory. Waltz specifies first the appropriate field of inquiry (international system) by marking it off from all other spheres of human action, introduces one macro-*explanans* (anarchy), and then faults all other approaches for not conforming with his definition of a “scientific” theory of IR. Here, the eviction of human volition marks the criterion for neorealism's status as a science. Not only can no amount of empirical cases ever refute or validate its theorems, the whole argument becomes circular and self-referential. “No test is conclusive.” Waltz 1986, 334.

18. See Cox 1981; Keohane 1984, chap. 1; Ashley 1984; Bromley 1991, chap. 1; and Rosenberg 1994, chap. 1.

realism in understanding the nature of international formations not revolving around the core institution of sovereignty or in providing a theory of large-scale social change on a plane of temporality conceived to be epochal?¹⁹

John Gerard Ruggie set out to modify neorealism by confronting it with the non-territorial geopolitical organization of the Middle Ages and Waltz's inability to conceptualize "the most important contextual change in international politics in this *millennium*: the shift from the medieval to the modern international system."²⁰ Neorealism's failure to account for the specificity of medieval order, Ruggie argued, rests on a misunderstanding of the term *differentiation of units*—taking it to refer to differences between units. Since modern states were functionally alike, differentiation dropped out of neorealism's overall equation. According to Ruggie, however, the Durkheimian term refers to "the principles on the basis of which the constituent units are separated from one another."²¹ Whereas in medieval society conditional property was complimentary to fragmented and heteronomous political power, in modern society absolute private property came to be complementary to sovereignty. Conclusively, the "mode of differentiation" was to be found in varying property rights being constitutive of varying state forms generating incommensurable international systems—the medieval and the modern.

At the same time, it followed that any explanation of the transition from medieval to modern geopolitics would have to revolve around an account of how private property came to supplant conditional property in early modern Europe. Ruggie maintained that those changes derived from three "irreducible" dimensions of collective experience: material environments, the structure of property rights, and social epistemes. "Each was undergoing change in accordance with its own endogenous logic."²² Ruggie was circumspect enough to desist from establishing any clear-cut causalities between these phenomena; yet precisely because of their loose juxtaposition they failed to achieve what he set out to explain, namely the codetermining constitution of private property and sovereignty.

Overall, Ruggie's exercise fell short as a critique of neorealism. It missed challenging neorealism's fundamental proposition of the determination of the system's operation by hierarchy–anarchy, since he did not deny that one could understand the *operation* of the medieval system, like the modern one, in terms of the pressures implied by anarchy. Still, the recognition that different forms of property rights are *constitutive* of different types of political entities presents a real advance in the social grounding of historically varying forms of international order. Crucially, however, Ruggie refrained from unpacking the meaning of conditional property. He failed to see its rationale in the requirements of lordly surplus extraction vis-à-vis peasant possessors and its effects on lordly economic reproduction by means of political accumulation, points to which I shall return later in the article. At the same time, Ruggie opened up neorealism to such an extent that henceforth it is impossible to maintain convinc-

19. Ruggie 1989.

20. Ruggie 1986, 141.

21. *Ibid.*, 142.

22. Ruggie 1993, 169; compare 152–60.

ingly its distinct theoretical identity as conceived by Waltz. Two questions follow from Ruggie's inquiry. Why was feudal society characterized by conditional property, and why and how—if we agree that his three-dimensional account of the transformation is tentative—was conditional property historically replaced by capitalist private property? By tracing these questions, Ruggie would be forced to develop a theory of social action within the framework of an essentially structuralist IR theory. This would imply either a return to a classical realist theory of political action or to a wider theory of collective social action. Realism, however, is either confined to power-maximizing political decision makers or to a Kantian faculty of political judgment and intersubjective elite behavior, excluding a broader theory of social action. To answer these questions, one would need to abandon neorealism and realism and turn instead to a theoretical tradition in which property—not conceived of as an abstract juridical nomer but as a contested social relation—was always at the heart of social inquiry.

Fischer, Hall, and Kratochwil: The Middle Ages Between Neorealism, "Critical Theory," and Constructivism

Let us first look at two recent attempts to validate the explanatory power of neorealism and constructivism in their application to the Middle Ages. Markus Fischer's article intends to be an "empirical contribution" to the debate between neorealism and "critical theory" in which the latter is held to sustain the view that a "normative discourse of understandings and values entails corresponding practices."²³ Medieval moral doctrine, cosmological conceptions of order, the code of chivalry, and the rites of vassalic homage are invariably taken to constitute such a normative discourse. They are construed as prescribing political unity, functional cooperation, communal relations, and modes of just conflict resolution among feudal actors. Based on an analysis of relations among nobles in eleventh century Mâconnais—a region in southern Burgundy—Fischer concludes that violence, self-help, and power balancing were endemic. The overriding structural logic of anarchy ensured that feudal conflict units "in essence behaved much like modern states."²⁴ The claim was dismissed that differences in the constitutive units of a system and communal trans-actor discourses were consequential for alternative forms of geopolitical behavior.

Fischer's article suffered from the start in that the author was not prepared to meet Ruggie's challenge of showing how the "medieval-to-modern shift" was to be comprehended within the neorealist grammar. Yet, even on its own terms, the piece has since been duly criticized,²⁵ and it seems that only Fischer's trivialized perception of critical theory allows for the possibility of simply confronting utopian "medieval discourses" with more material "actual practices."²⁶ Rodney Bruce Hall and Fried-

23. Fischer 1992, 427–28.

24. *Ibid.*, 428.

25. See Hall and Kratochwil 1993, 479–91; and Ruggie 1993, 150.

26. In Habermas' work the very possibility for "undistorted communication" as a logic of social action arises historically with the advent of a specifically bourgeois "public sphere," which he traced to the

rich V. Kratochwil's critique, for example, exposes particularly well Fischer's methodological sleight of hand. Yet their critique should be read with care, for it relies on an overly pronounced constructivist reading of the self-perceptions of feudal actors. For example, it does not suffice to denounce, through the intermediation of such authorities as Norman Cantor and Susan Reynolds, Marc Bloch's writings as "structuralist" and crypto-Marxist, only to discard them in favor of the *mentalité* paradigm. What is more, Hall and Kratochwil's reply is itself riddled with questionable assertions. In spite of their dismissal of the form of structuralism that is allegedly pursued by Bloch, they have no qualms in supporting the work of Georges Duby, who is approvingly cited for noting that "thirty or forty successive generations have imagined social perfection in the form of trifunctionality. This mental representation has withstood all the pressure of history. It is a structure."²⁷ However, if what IR scholars should really be interested in is "to explain variation,"²⁸ then constants such as the mentality structures of thirty or forty successive generations will logically drop out of any theory of social change. Even if it was only a metaphor, how credible is Duby's suggestion that "an image of the social order endured in France for a millennium"?²⁹ Since the *mentalité* or the conventionality of intersubjective claims constitutes for constructivists the main "variable" for historical development, are we to infer that nothing ever changed in France for a thousand years? Hall and Kratochwil are less bothered by structuralism per se than by the focus on the *structures of exploitation and domination* in the feudal agrarian economy from which ideological structures are abstracted.

This points to a deeper theoretical failure in Hall's constructivist account of moral authority as a power resource in feudal Europe. As in Fischer's study,³⁰ Hall mentions the preceding crisis of the late Carolingian Empire during the Feudal Revolution that ushered in a new mode of exploitation based on serfdom and banal lordships, but it is not theorized in its consequences for the profound revolution in monastic and papal ideological orientation and moral lore.³¹ Theorization only sets in after the real causes of this ecclesiastical redefinition of meaning have been narratively externalized. What would have been required is precisely what Hall demands—namely, a prior understanding of "a situationally specific or historically contingent structure of coconstituted identities and interests"—but fails to provide.³² It is difficult to see how these identities and interests and their changes can be determined without a

experiences of seventeenth and eighteenth century England and France. Even though the institutional parameters are then set for open discourses, their effect on politics, not to speak of international politics, is not a foregone conclusion. Habermas explicitly denied the Middle Ages a public sphere in the sense of a prepolitical locus of reasoned argumentation other than being a forum for noble ostentation. Habermas [1965] 1989, 5–9.

27. Hall and Kratochwil 1993, 485.

28. *Ibid.*, 489.

29. Duby 1980, 5. What Duby is really concerned with in his *Three Orders* is the establishment of a new "mode of production" during the crisis of the Feudal Revolution around the year 1000 and the concomitant ideological changes by the clergy in its wake. See Duby 1980, 153.

30. Fischer 1992, 440.

31. Hall 1997, 605–606.

32. *Ibid.*, 594.

systematic exposition of the conflicts over clerical sources of income derived from lordships, endowments, and tithes. Constructivists, precisely because the social and material reasons for changes in identities and interests remain outside their methodological purview, “lack the theoretical tools with which to understand the emergence, dominance, and demise of a specific discourse.”³³ If Fischer is faulted for drawing on a one-sided literature stressing interests and structures, it is not clear why we should fare better with an equally one-sided literature stressing subjectivities such as the religious motivations of the crusaders.³⁴

A short excursion into the history of inter-noble relations suggests that Fischer’s study marks a conjunctural episode in the “international relations” of medieval Europe—a power vacuum that constitutes simultaneously the transition from the early to the High Middle Ages in the Frankish successor principalities.³⁵ It is by no means representative of the Middle Ages as a whole. The following explanation of the competitive conduct of Burgundian castellans is grounded not in the mechanical to and fro between conflict units, but in the concrete reproductive needs of lordships in times of heightened economic hardship.³⁶ At the same time—contra Hall and Kratochwil—such a perspective allows us to see how the emergence of a specific ecclesiastical discourse is related to sharpened inter-noble altercations in the eleventh century in the old Carolingian heartlands.³⁷

A critical-theoretical perspective³⁸ on the doctrine of the Three Orders³⁹ would interpret it as a reaction by the local clergy to an attack on its very bases of income brought about by increasing lordly encroachments on ecclesiastical lands and treasures.⁴⁰ The dissemination of the lore of the trifunctional order presented the conscious policy of an economically threatened part of the ruling class that was not arms bearing and therefore defenseless over and against marauding lords. If the motivation was all too clear, its intention was to pacify lordly aggressiveness internally and to deflect it into external conquest. This occurred not only in the form of the Crusades but also in the simultaneous outward movements of the Norman Conquest of En-

33. Teschke and Heine 1997, 460.

34. Maintaining that “a desire for a share of the spoils on the part of many of the crusaders is something for which we were able to find little support in the crusading literature *we studied*” (Hall and Kratochwil 1993, 488; emphasis added) has perhaps more to do with the selection than with anything else. There is, in fact, an extensive corpus of writings (see footnote 41) that does not try to explain the Crusades abstractly in terms of pure greed nor pure religious motives, but seeks to combine the religious moment with an account of preceding land scarcity, noble overpopulation, and changing aristocratic property and family structures in the late Frankish heartlands around the millennium. These pressures intertwined with the interests of the post-Gregorian papacy, which became a major international actor in the eleventh century. Religion cannot sufficiently explain why the Frankish knights of the mid-eleventh century set out to conquer the European non-Frankish periphery, since the governing classes of England and Ireland were already Christianized when the Franco-Norman lords came, dispossessed, and killed them.

35. Teschke 1997.

36. Many lords turned into castellans in the tenth and eleventh centuries as they fortified their manors in the form of small, but high stoned castles that supported their regime of terror.

37. The lands between and around the Rhine and the Rhône Rivers.

38. Our understanding of critical theory derives from the early Frankfurt School. Horkheimer 1972.

39. In the eleventh century monks formulated the doctrine that society was functionally divided into three orders—knights fought, the clergy prayed, and peasants labored.

40. Flori 1992.

gland, the Spanish *Reconquista*, and the German Eastern Settlement—processes of noble land grabbing that all began in the eleventh century.⁴¹ Lordly proclivities to turn into lawless castellans have themselves to be set in the wider crisis of the tenth and eleventh centuries in the Frankish heartlands of Europe. The “Feudal Revolution”—in medievalist parlance—sealed the demise of the Carolingian Empire.⁴² This continentwide crisis was in turn an outcome of the late Carolingian monarchs’ inability to provide their aristocratic followers with the wherewithal of expanded personal reproduction as the opportunities for external conquest dried up from the middle of the ninth century onward.⁴³ As a counterstrategy, dissatisfied lords began usurping formerly public offices, turning them into patrimonies that implied hereditability, and enserfing a hitherto free peasantry. Such privatization of the formerly kingly power of command—the ban—by innumerable minor lords not only dismantled the public office structure but also broke the more informal feudo-vassalic chains between lord and overlord. Banal lords turned into quasi-sovereign units.⁴⁴ Once public power was completely personalized, they began to compete among themselves for land, labor, and treasure in the period of feudal anarchy proper.

Such complete fragmentation of public power is not generic to feudal political relations, but a latent possibility and a sign of systemwide crisis. By the same token, Fischer would be hard pressed to show why the power struggle among castellans did not—in line with neorealist axioms—generate a new equilibrium among its components, offsetting eventually lordly rivalries. For, according to Waltz, anarchy is equivalent not to endless warfare, but to the “invisible hand” that regulates the disequilibrating ambitions of any one actor.⁴⁵ To be sure, hostilities finally abated—not because the banal system self-stabilized, but because it vanished wholesale.

Counterfactually, a string of historical questions follow.⁴⁶ Why did anarchy not constitute the organizing principle within the preceding Frankish Empire? How was it that disintegration of public authority did not proceed nearly as far in the Eastern Kingdom, where the Ottonians managed to restore unity and where the duchies estab-

41. Bartlett 1993. Bartlett attributes the success of European knight-led aggressiveness primarily to technological innovations in weaponry. Yet his multifaceted account lends itself to a different interpretation; see the critique in Wickham 1994; Duby 1977a,b; Delbrück [1923] 1982, 225–312; Elias [1939] 1994, 292–98; and Flori 1986.

42. The revolution thesis was first developed by Duby 1980, 147–66. It is now the subject of lively discussions among medievalists. See Poly and Bournazel [1980] 1991; Bisson 1994; White 1996; Wickham 1997; and Reuter 1997.

43. Reuter 1985, 1990.

44. Hilton 1990, 160. Until the tenth century only the emperor and kings were banal lords in that they exclusively wielded the power of command, taxation, and adjudication in their realms. During the period of feudal anarchy, minor lords usurped these functions of kingship and, consequently, became banal lords in their small territories. See the section titled “Feudal International Systems.”

45. Rosenberg 1994, chap. 5. Waltz’s systems theory is, of course, directly predicated on a microeconomic theory of rational choice under free-market conditions. Although classical political economy and neorealism have roots in liberal traditions of thought in which rational choice is compromised by systemic considerations, harmony qua balance operates on the built-in assumption that in processes of “dynamic adjustment” entire nation-states might vanish as entire businesses do. Indeed, Waltz concludes that the security optimum is achieved in a bipolar condition—a historical conjuncture that converges not unsurprisingly with the duopolistic state of U.S.-Soviet relations in world politics at the time of Waltz’s publication.

46. Compare Hall and Kratochwil 1993, 486–87.

lished themselves after the Investiture Contest as the primary political units within a wider conception of empire? Finally, how, after the eleventh-century crisis, did feudal states overcome their internal interlordly rivalries and begin to reconsolidate themselves on more centralized principles? In other words, the anarchy between the castellans turned into the hierarchy of the French kingdom, which, of course, found itself simultaneously engulfed by the wider anarchy of the emerging feudal states system. The barren assumption of anarchy is immaterial in explaining these momentous variations in medieval inter-actor relations, and the mere pointer to self-seeking human nature is equally unable to account for such restructuring of medieval power. In line with general systems theory, neorealism has no intellectual tools to account for the system's emergence, reproduction, and death.

Spruyt: Systems, Units, Social Forces

Hendryk Spruyt recently offered an important account of how to theorize historically diverging international systems and their transformations by stressing the character of their constitutive units and the social forces prevailing within them. "A change in the constitutive elements of the system means a change in the structure of the system."⁴⁷ The feudal mode of political organization was a decentralized, nonhierarchical, and nonterritorial form of rule based on personal bonds.⁴⁸ Spruyt's explanation for this form of geopolitical order is couched, however, in terms of the military origins of feudalism, not its internal generative logic. Thus, although we learn that bonds between lords are militarily necessary for protection, we do not learn who had to be protected against whom and why. Although we learn about the nobility, the Church, and the empire, we do not learn about the constitutive units of political authority within them, the deep causes of decentralization and nonhierarchy, and the geopolitical dynamic among these units. In other words, as long as the politicomilitary structure is not understood as the coercive carapace that fixed property relations between lords and peasants, Spruyt's account remains limited to an institutional description of the medieval international system. It lacks a coherent explanation of the generative structure and specific inter-actor dynamics of the feudal order.

To recapitulate, in the orthodox neorealist tradition the Middle Ages present merely a variation on the transhistorical theme of anarchy. Ruggie's modified version seeks to shift the explanatory kernel for the form of medieval international relations away from the systemic level and toward property rights and their transformation without being much concerned with unfolding the social content that explains the pervasiveness of violence in medieval inter-actor relations. Fischer stresses the salience of medieval power politics yet ties it back—in an inconsistent manner—either to human nature or to systemic pressures without shedding much light on the social nature of feudal *realpolitik* in general nor on the historical rise and fall of the Mâconnais banal system in particular. Hall and Kratochwil seek to explain geopolitical variation

47. Spruyt 1994, 5.

48. *Ibid.*, 34–42.

in ideational terms, but they fail to uncover the sociomaterial determinants of interest and identify formation. Spruyt, in turn, offers an institutional description of the feudal mode of political organization without tying it back to the generative structure of medieval society and its war-prone geopolitical dynamic.

If we now assume that although the modern and medieval systems are anarchical yet profoundly different in their forms of anarchy—in the very actors who were qualified to participate in “foreign affairs” and in their geopolitical rationalities—we cannot simply deduce such differences from the self-same condition of anarchy. Our task is to synthesize the fragmented findings of IR scholars in a coherent theoretical framework by understanding the constitutive nexus between the medieval form of conditional property (structure) and the dominant form of lordly rationality (agency).

Theoretical Foundations: The Relation Between the Economic and the Political in Feudal Society

I have proposed that the key to understanding much of medieval inter-actor relations resides in determinate property relations that underwrite these political relations. I will now set the IR discussion into the “debate” between Max Weber and Karl Marx on the nature of feudalism to more clearly illustrate the nexus between political violence and property relations. I will then show how this nexus clarifies the levels-of-analysis problem and the agent-structure relation for feudal society.

Weber Versus Marx

One way to approach the controversial issue of feudalism resides in theorizing the relation between “the economic” and “the political” in medieval society—mirroring the *problematique* of the relations between the different levels of analysis in IR.⁴⁹ A fairly consistent and dominant line of reasoning running through the literature—essentially inspired by the work of Max Weber and Otto Hintze—identifies feudalism as a phenomenon of the political sphere.⁵⁰ Weber, especially, in an analogy to Marx’s economic significance attributed to possessing the means of production, elaborates on the political significance of possessing the means of administration for the decentralized form of the patrimonial state. As a specific system of government or a hierarchical-military relationship between carriers of political power, feudalism falls within the confines of political science, constitutional history, or a sociology of types of domination. For all their erudition and meticulous conceptual differentiation, these accounts generally tend to abstract from the agrarian social basis on which these forms of political power rest. In particular, they dissociate the “forms of government and domination” from the processes of lordly reproduction with which they were obviously connected. This observation, however, does not imply a plea for an equally

49. See Singer 1961; and Hollis and Smith 1990.

50. See Weber 1968, 1006–1110, esp. 1090–92; Weber 1948, 80–82; and Hintze 1968.

abstract consideration of “the economy.” Rather, it serves as a reminder that below the political “level” of relations between lords, feudal society exhibited a second “level” of political relations between lords and peasants, governing the specific modes of surplus appropriation.⁵¹

Conversely, some strands of Marxism interpreted feudalism economically as a nondynamic agrarian mode of production. The lack of sustained economic growth is explained in terms of underdeveloped forces of production, inefficient use of land, and negligible trade. However, a one-sided concentration on economic issues, such as the long-term tendency of the rate of lordly rents to decline,⁵² sits uneasily with a prevalence of political and military aspects in medieval society, which disrupted and contravened this tendency decisively. Therefore, some Althusserian Marxists have revised such undue preeminence given to economic considerations and argue for “treating the state as an independent social force” in feudal societies.⁵³ Whether the stress is on the economic or the political in Marxist traditions of thought, this simplified polarizing perspective has led many to question the capacity of Marxism to unify the political and the economic in a coherent theoretical account of feudal society as a totality.⁵⁴

Some contemporary Weberian sociologists of power have drawn the wider conclusion that Marx might have correctly identified the primary source of social power in capitalist societies as residing in the ownership of the means of production.⁵⁵ In traditional societies, however, the locus of social power shifts back to possession of the means of violence. This finding typically goes hand in hand with a typology of sources of social power—usually political–military, economic, ideological–normative, and cultural. Historical processes are then explained by a pluralist and multi-causal account informed by this typology.⁵⁶

To conclude, neorealists, Weberians, and Neo-Weberians concur in stressing the primacy of political and military aspects in feudal society in the face of which Marxian conceptualizations are held to be either irrelevant, deficient, or incommensurable in their concern for “the economy.”

Against this alleged incommensurability, attention was redirected in the wake of the debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism to Marx’s writings on pre-capitalist societies.⁵⁷ Here, Marx specified the constitutive role of political power as expressed in various forms of “extra-economic surplus appropriation” under conditions of direct possession of the means of subsistence by the immediate producer.⁵⁸ This passage identifies the crucial nexus with which the feudal relation between the

51. Brenner 1987.

52. See Bois [1976] 1984; and Kula [1962] 1976.

53. See Gintis and Bowles 1984, 19; and Haldon 1993.

54. Poggi 1988, 212.

55. Giddens 1985.

56. Mann 1986, 379–99. Mann’s argument that each society is codetermined by autonomous ideological, economic, military, and political spheres is virtually meaningless in its significance for the Middle Ages. Compare Poggi 1978, chap. 2; and Collins 1986.

57. Sweezy, Dobb, et al. 1976.

58. See Marx [1894] 1981, 926; Brenner 1977, 1985; Wood 1995; and Connell 1987.

economic and the political—indeed, their actual fusion—can be comprehended. This stands in sharp contrast to capitalist societies. In feudal society, property relations are such that the noble class reproduces itself primarily by forced appropriation of peasant surplus through administrative, military, and political means. Seen from this angle, the primacy conceded in the Weber–Hintze tradition to the political sphere rests on an abstraction in which the political form is emptied of its economic content and granted autonomous causal status in the process. Yet, it is precisely this political sphere in which the struggles over surplus are played out between the nobility and the peasantry as well as among the nobility itself.

The putative incommensurability thesis turns out to be an illusion. Theorizing the identity of the political and economic within a conception of totality does not simply offer an alternative to Weberian ideal-typical and pluralist accounts. It presents a real advance in terms of explanatory power and epistemological rigor vis-à-vis one-sided abstractions. It also offers a way to view the levels-of-analysis problem in IR for feudal society. “Extra-economic compulsion” in the form of specific political modes of surplus appropriation constitutes the central analytical principle for an understanding of feudal societies. It not only clarifies the relation between the political and the economic but also enables us to grasp the peculiar form of the feudal state, medieval territory, property, the meaning of peace and war, and medieval geopolitical expansion.

The Structure-Agent Problem in Feudal Terms: Lordship and Contradictory Strategies of Reproduction

In this section I specify the basic unit comprising the political and the economic. I then demonstrate how this unit governs specific forms of social action that pervade, animate, and possibly change the structural set-up. In other words, I show how the agent-structure problem can be thought of in feudal society.⁵⁹ In the following two sections I attempt to substantiate Heine’s and my dialectical claim that “although every single human act is willed and intentional (freedom), human beings are always already embedded in determinate social relations or historical institutions (necessity) that constrain and limit the range of human action, provided the actor wants to survive and to be recognized by society.”⁶⁰

Lordship as Conditional Property (Structure)

The institution of lordship represents the basic unit composed of the fusion of the economic and the political. It is central to recall time and again that the lordship was not simply an agrarian economic enterprise but a “unit of authority” in which ties between men were not mediated through “freely” entered contracts between private

59. Wendt 1987.

60. Teschke and Heine 1997, 465.

persons but stipulated through political power: domination.⁶¹ The “economic” was inscribed into the “political.” Men were ascribed to a lord. The striking peculiarity of medieval property, then, resides in the fact that property rights were political rights of governance as much as economic rights of tenure, and they were inseparable. This nonseparation is precisely captured by the Latin term *potestas et utilitas*. Mere property rights to land were meaningless if they did not include authority over the people who cultivated it, because peasants possessed their means of subsistence and were therefore under no internal compulsion to rent from or work for the lord to survive. This contrasts to capitalist property where ownership of land is “real” because it constitutes a value, precisely because cultivators no longer possess their means of subsistence and are correspondingly compelled to rent from or work for landlords.⁶²

Yet, although lords wielded political power, they did not, as a rule, constitute sovereign mini-states. Classically, they held their land in tenure as a fief that carried, next to specific rights of exploitation over the producing peasantry, military and administrative duties to the land-granting overlord. “Land, in fact, was not ‘owned’ by anyone; it was ‘held’ by superiors in a ladder of ‘tenures’ leading to the king or other supreme lord.”⁶³ The specific legal status of land has thus been variously described by jurisprudence as conditional property or usufruct (*dominium utile*), whereas the overlord retained nominally the overlordship (*dominium directum*). This meant that the fiefholder had no right to dispose freely of “his” land but could only enjoy its exploitation for definite purposes.⁶⁴ Property was conditional.

This brings us back to the question of how the pretension to lordship was asserted, both over and against overlords and rival lords and a subjected peasantry. Otto Brunner classically distinguished the character of lordship from great estate through an interpretation of the medieval concept of *Gewere* (domain). It refers to “the actual possession and use of a thing, with the presumption of a property right in it.”⁶⁵ Decisively, however, the lord exercised politically legitimate violence (the medieval right of resistance) in the realization of these rights over and against noncomplying peasants and rival lords. In contentious cases, this could be his own overlord. In the last instance, his arms-bearing status asserted his political lordship. *Gewere*

presupposed the “lawful force”—namely the protection and safeguard that a lord exercised in defense of his domain, not simply as an owner of property, but literally as the lord of his lands. . . . We see here a constitutional structure that recognized the use of force by members of the legal community against each other, with no state of the modern sort to claim a monopoly of legitimate force, and with every member of the legal community having a measure of executive power.⁶⁶

61. Bloch [1931] 1966, 236. Compare Kula [1962] 1976, 9.

62. Marx [1867] 1976, 873–907, [1894] 1981, 917–50.

63. Berman 1983, 312.

64. Ganshof 1964, 144–46.

65. Brunner 1992, 209. On *Gewere* compare Berman 1983, 313.

66. Brunner 1992, 210. Compare Holzgrefe 1989, 12.

It is crucial to recognize that “domestic” violent resistance was not criminalized but inscribed in the feudal constitution. It was legitimate and lawful if the overlord failed to comply with his obligations vis-à-vis his vassal and vice versa. Such break-up of the monopoly of violence had profound consequences for the nature of the medieval state, its form of territoriality, the meaning of war as feud, and the entire structure of political power and “international” organization. To conclude, we now start to see why medieval property is central to understanding conceptually and historically those institutions central to IR.⁶⁷

Contradictory Strategies of Reproduction (Agency)

From these concrete settings, I now proceed to outlining the dominant forms of medieval agency, though first I will reiterate the preconditions for class-specific and therewith conflicting feudal strategies of reproduction. Medieval society constituted a system of agrarian production for use-values⁶⁸ and simple commodity production based on peasant labor. Its most fundamental sources of wealth were land and labor. The means of production (land, tools, livestock, dwellings) were possessed by the direct producers, so that peasant communities formed subsistence communities. In this context, what were the major forms of social action?

Let us first turn to the noble class.⁶⁹ The arms-bearing lord stood in a double-edged position between a subjected peasantry tilling “his” estate and competing rival lords, vying for land and labor. To survive in this competitive situation, lords (1) maximized feudal rents by a direct squeeze of the peasantry—the intensification of labor. Alternatively, nobles (2) cultivated land internally through land reclamation; or (3) colonized and settled land externally, usually in connection with warfare and conquest; or (4) conquered neighboring regions, established client-states, or exercised suzerainty over such regions without direct occupation but under conditions of annual tribute-payments. Furthermore, they (5) engaged in direct internecine warfare, either by direct conquest and annexation or through cavalades, plunder, pillage, and the demand of ransom money. Finally, lords (6) conducted dynastic marriage policies to amass lands and to increase their income bases.

These lordly strategies of reproduction have here been set out analytically. Historically, not every single lord engaged “rationally” in such strategies. Yet the ruling class as a whole reproduced itself by conforming to such “systemic” pressures of domination. Such bounded rationality tells us something about the absolute limits of social action under specific property relations.⁷⁰ In times of crisis and social struggle,

67. I disagree, therefore, with Krasner, who maintains that the medieval world did not possess “a deep generative grammar.” Krasner 1993, 257.

68. Production was largely for direct consumption and barter and not for exchange on the market. Although long-distance trade in luxury goods existed throughout the period and took on renewed vigor in the twelfth century, inter-urban trade did not alter the social relations of exploitation in the countryside. Merrington 1976.

69. The following paragraphs are inspired by the work of Brenner 1985, 1986, 27–32, 1987, 173–78; see also Duby 1974.

70. In IR the classic rationality assumption has been compromised by Keohane’s notion of “bounded rationality.” Keohane 1984, 110–32. The broader epistemological crux is that rational-choice theory makes

of course, the very institutions of surplus extraction were at stake. Depending on the resolution of these conflicts, new forms of bounded rationality sprang into existence. However, what all six feudal strategies implied, in one form or another, was investment in the means of violence. Robert Brenner subsumed such violent strategies under the general concept “political accumulation.”⁷¹

The success of lordly strategies of reproduction was suspended between the internal cohesion of the members of the nonproducing class and the collective resistance of the producing class. As a rule, peasant strategies of reproduction stood in irreconcilable contradiction to the interests of the lords. With the integration of peasant rationality into the overall equation, an encompassing picture emerges of clashing forms of agency in medieval society.

Living in subsistence communities, the peasantry—crucially!—was economically independent, that is, nonmarket dependent. Peasants had no need to sell their labor power as wage labor or to rent out land nor to invest productively in agriculture under pressures of market competition and its price mechanism. Under these circumstances, since the peasantry was under no internal economic compulsion to render dues, it developed a specific form of economic rationality that should not be dismissed as irrational, but corresponded precisely to feudal conditions of social action.

1. Being self-sufficient and given that food formed the main part of total consumption (yet was in uncertain supply), peasants engaged in strategies to minimize risk by diversifying agricultural products cultivated on their plots. In marked contrast to capitalist rationality, nonspecialization in rural produce ensued.
2. Nonmarket dependency translated into reducing labor-time, which meant striking a balance between lordly demands and socioculturally established needs of the peasant and his family. Again, nonprofit-oriented economic rationality constituted the essence of everyday life.
3. Risk minimization led to early marriages, a high rate of peasant reproduction, and land division upon inheritance.
4. Against lordly demands, peasants organized in communities, developed forms of collective class organization to resist lordly encroachments, or withdrew their labor power through flight.

A “Culture of War” Based on Political Accumulation

The fortunes of reproduction depended on the collective ability of both peasants and lords to redistribute peasant-produced surplus as circumscribed by respective bal-

propositions about efficient means but remains silent on the ends; they appear as given constants. If we historicize rationality and set it within specific property relations, we can also make propositions about preferences themselves and can call past behavior rational, which in a contemporary perspective would pass as irrational; for example, noble conspicuous consumption only becomes meaningful when embedded in definite social structures. Godelier 1972, 7–30.

71. Brenner 1985, 236–42.

ances of class forces. Whereas peasant reproduction as a rule generated economic stagnation, the material needs of the lordly class instantiated a systemic pressure to build up military power. Unsurprisingly, development of agricultural technology was relatively lethargic, whereas military innovations based on systematic investment in the means of violence were, throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, spectacular.⁷² Thus the quest for military might ensured the successful maintenance of an established aristocratic mode of life. Violence and chronic warfare were the *raison d'être* of the noble class. The pursuit of the martial profession was the dominant form of rationality among the land-owning, arms-bearing, and ruling class. The various processes of “political accumulation” drove the sociopolitical dynamic of feudal society; they reveal the hidden meaning of the Middle Ages as a “culture of war.” At the same time, it turns out that “international” interlordly relations do not follow any transhistorical systemic logic to be theorized in abstraction from the social relations of lordship. Feudal property structures and dominant forms of social action are dialectically mediated.⁷³

A Phenomenology of Medieval “International” Institutions

In this section I determine the character of a series of medieval “international” phenomena by seeking “the evidence of social relations contained in every single social phenomenon.”⁷⁴ By systematically relating political form to social content, I demonstrate the validity of the dialectical claim that “every aspect of society acquires meaning when linked to the wider specific praxes through which society reproduces itself and can only be comprehended in this context.”⁷⁵

The “Medieval State”: Tensions Between Localized Appropriation and Centralized Authority

The sovereign state was an unknown entity in the Middle Ages.⁷⁶ Political rule bore the name of domination. Since every lord appropriated individually, medieval polities faced the problem of squaring lordly geographical particularism with the security needs of central self-organization.

72. A whole literature takes this epiphenomenon as the point of departure to argue in various shades for a military technodeterminism toward either the modern territorial state, capitalism, or “the rise of the West.” See Tilly 1990; Parker 1988; and Downing 1992. Although the “military revolution” has been situated in early modernity, analysts have recently argued that continuity in military innovations stretches back to the High Middle Ages. Ayton and Price 1995.

73. Constructivists tend to base their structure-agency accounts on Giddens’ structuration theory. Giddens 1984. In terms of epistemological systematicity, the Hegelian-Marxist dialectical idiom conceptualizes the problem of action-in-structure (or praxis-in-concretion) in a more coherent way. Teschke and Heine 1996.

74. Teschke and Heine 1997, 459.

75. *Ibid.*, 462.

76. Quaritsch 1970; Ehler 1961.

What are the implications of individualized lordship for the form of medieval states? Except during the tenth and eleventh centuries, not every lordship constituted a “mini-state.” Lordships were generally linked through feudo-vassalic relations as expressed in the classical feudal pyramid to an overlord. Such relation was established through a “contract” between lord and vassal. Its decisive characteristic lies in its interpersonal and reciprocal nature specifying proprietary and personal rights and obligations between the two “contracting” parties. Thus medieval “states” rested on a series of interpersonal bonds between the members of the land-holding class. They presented ensembles of lordships.

Crucially, however, the fief-holder was not a mere functionary or official of the state, but a fully fledged political lord.⁷⁷ He did not represent the “state” nor was his status delegated or derived from it, but the “state” was the sum total of the lordly class—the self-organization of the ruling nobility. German constitutional historians termed this unique phenomenon a *Personenverbandsstaat* (a state of associated persons) to clearly demarcate it from the Weberian rationalized state.⁷⁸ Due to this interpersonal setup of relations of domination, public power was territorially fragmented, decentralized, personally dispersed, and only loosely held together through the bonds of vassalage.⁷⁹

Such a configuration of medieval power was no static affair. To the extent that lordly localized appropriation required a policing group of armed retainers, lords found themselves simultaneously in competition with their own overlords and other rival lords. Based on this underlying contradiction, two dynamic processes of feudal centralization and decentralization can be observed time and again in the history of the European Middle Ages.⁸⁰

First, strong unifying forces are discernible wherever a competent warlord set out to lead his co-ruling nobles into successive cycles of campaigning and the subsequent redistribution of conquered land and the wider spoils of war (slaves, women, hostages, treasure, tributes, armaments) among his contented warriors. In a sense, there is a self-regenerating logic to these cycles of conquest and redistribution, for they fostered loyalty to the supreme warlord and simultaneously provided the means and manpower for further campaigning. The reputation and standing of Charles Martel, Henry Plantagenet, and Otto I, to name but a few, and the relative stability of their respective polities were directly predicated on such dynamic mechanisms of political accumulation. Dialectically, however, military success always contained the seeds of fragmentation. Those nobles who had flocked to a supreme warlord to generate a tightly knit military unit and who came to receive large estates for their services now turned into potential rivals of their erstwhile leader. As long as the latter could plausibly prove his military prowess, strategic competence, and punitive capacity vis-à-vis rebellious magnates, these nobles continued to peg their fortunes to their war-

77. Sovereignty was therefore “parcelized” (Anderson 1974, 15) and “divided” (Brenner 1985, 229), and each lord was a “fragment of the state” (Wood 1995, 39).

78. See Mayer 1963, 290; and Mitteis [1940] 1975, 5.

79. Compare Hintze 1968, 24–25.

80. See Weber 1968, 1038–44; Elias 1994, 275–86; Le Patourel 1976, 279–318; Brenner 1985, 239; and Haldon 1993, 213.

lord. Otherwise, they used their newly acquired landed power base either to establish their independence or to challenge him directly.

Second, in this case an inverse cycle of intraruling class altercations set in, inviting external exploitation by foreign tribes of such internal weaknesses. Corroding central state power lead to regionalization, which, in short, meant the end of ruling-class solidarity. Customarily, these processes went hand in hand with the usurpation of public offices; they are visible, for example, under Louis the Pious and his even weaker successors. Internal redistribution of land and rights of jurisdiction became the logical alternative to external conquest. In other words, the possibility of central government always rested on a compromise—a fragile alliance for mutual gain—between the members of the lordly class. The perennially brittle nature of the medieval state, therefore, rests on this internal predicament: how to organize political power in the force field between centrifugal tendencies of localized appropriation and centripetal tendencies of political consolidation and noble self-organization over and against the peasantry and for purposes of external defense or conquest.

Domination was patently not asserted on a day-to-day basis by the sharpness of the lord's sword. The subdiscipline of historical semantics has carefully distinguished the peculiar form of domination from other notions of political power.⁸¹ Domination refers to the actual practices of rule inseparable from the body of the incumbent. Its meaning, therefore, includes all those social practices that kept dependents in a subordinate position and demonstrated a lord's faculties of rule to his co-rulers.

Theocratic privileges, miraculous healing powers, and charismatic gestures of leadership were part and parcel of domination. Rule was mediated by a peculiar sphere of noble representation: conspicuous consumption, largesse, the maintenance of luxurious households, and the lavish display of symbols of power are not to be dissociated from the business of domination. Medievalists have elaborated at length on the significance of the imagery for the rites of medieval power.⁸² The circulation of gifts was an essential part of inter-noble class consciousness and a clear indicator of social might.⁸³ Therefore, interpreting these aspects of representation pejoratively as irrational extravagance, subjective prodigality, or medieval mysticism is misleading. Rather, the political economy of symbolic reproduction reveals how ostentation and conspicuous consumption served as a clear pointer for both noble peers and dependent peasantry to the social power and extractive capacities of the lord.⁸⁴ To this extent, there is nothing mysterious about symbolic representation, even for “the structuralist hardened by a more materialist historiography.”⁸⁵

The Political Economy of Medieval Territory and Frontiers

We have come to think of states as exercising sovereignty over a spatially specified and territorially consolidated area with clear-cut boundaries. Modern territoriality is

81. Moraw 1982.

82. See Bloch [1924] 1973; Kantorowicz 1957; and Duby 1974, 48–57.

83. Ganshof 1970, 43.

84. Habermas [1965] 1989, 5–9.

85. Hall and Kratochwil 1993, 485. N.B.: The villain here is neorealism!

exclusive and uniform in its administration. The diplomatic institution of “extraterritoriality” and the principle of nonintervention are the classical upshot of this form of international organization. The Middle Ages confront us with an inverse image. As a rule, medieval territory was coextensive with the ruler’s ability to enforce his authority claims. Thus we have to turn to the techniques of exercising political power under conditional property relations to understand the constitution of medieval territoriality.

First, a clear distinction between internal and external within feudal Europe cannot be drawn. Wherever the fief constituted the basic cell of political territory, authority claims by respective overlords to this territory were mediated through the vassal. The vassal’s will, however, was not a bureaucratic instance to be sanctioned through codified written procedure, but expressed political power. Personal loyalty was maintained on a day-to-day basis through the paraphernalia of medieval patronage. The problem was compounded when the feudo-vassalic chain stretched over more than two links, so that the rear vassal owed first allegiance to his direct overlord and only secondary or no allegiance to whoever occupied the apex of the feudal pyramid. In this instance, a part of the territory was completely removed from the royal reach yet formed neither an exclave nor a part of a third state.

Where territoriality itself stands on shifting grounds, its assertion requires the lord’s physical presence. In this respect, the peripatetic nature of the royal households is indicative of the structural difficulty of maintaining effective state authority over the territory. Yet ceaseless royal mobility was shadowed on a smaller scale by ceaseless mobility on the part of lesser lords. Few enjoyed lordship over a territorially compact area. Most estates were scattered over far-flung territories, reflecting the vicissitudes of military acquisition and the politics of land partition on inheritance. Consider, for example, the case of those Franco-Norman knights who followed William the Conqueror to the shores of England. After the conquest, the eradication of the Anglo-Saxon land-holding class, and the subsequent redistribution of dispossessed land among the barons of the invasion army, many lords found themselves masters over an incongruous body of estates. In addition to their ancestral homelands in northern France, they now had to ensure the running of their newly granted lands in England and, in the course of the conquest of the British Isles, of their lordships in Wales, Ireland, or Scotland.⁸⁶ To this extent, William’s incessant transmaritime voyages were mirrored by the migrations of his greater barons. Anglo-Norman lords were essentially “cross-Channel lords.”⁸⁷ State territory was coterminous with the land-holding patterns of the ruling class.

The institutional organization of political power over medieval territory was not uniform. Whereas an administrative distinction between center and periphery within modern states is meaningless, frontier regions in medieval states—the marches—exhibit certain symptomatic traits over and against the center.⁸⁸ Ethnic, religious, natural-topographical, or linguistic aspects were secondary in determining the “de-

86. See Bartlett 1993, 57; and Given 1990, 91–152.

87. Frame 1990, 53.

88. Smith 1995.

marcation” of frontier regions. The extension of medieval territory followed the opportunities of military conquest, that is, political accumulation. The administration in the periphery reflected a careful balancing act between the eradication or co-optation of the local conquered nobility, the needs of newly established conquest lordships, and the wider security interests of the state. This created another dilemma for feudal overlords: To the degree that marcher-lords had to be invested with special military powers of command to deal effectively with unruly neighbors, they became semiautonomous.⁸⁹ More often than not, they abused their privileges for the buildup of regional strongholds. For example, the liberties enjoyed by the Anglo-Norman lords of the March of Wales, set between native-controlled Wales and the English kingdom, persisted well into the sixteenth century, even though the victorious Edwardian campaigns (1282–83) had sapped their *raison d'être* centuries earlier. In the Welsh marches, the king's writ was devoid of force.⁹⁰ Under these conditions, where did state territory start and where did it end?⁹¹ Not surprisingly, therefore, modern linear borders historically have been preceded in Europe by zonal frontier regions contested by semi-independent lords.⁹²

To sum up, feudal territoriality can best be visualized as concentric circles of power projection. Only the sporadic assertion of royal overlordship over semiautonomous peripheral lords reconstituted a sense of bounded territoriality at temporal intervals. As a rule, central claims to authority petered out in frontier zones constantly on the verge of secession and busily engaged in their own “foreign policies” vis-à-vis adjacent regions. Amorphous medieval territoriality is thus not explained simply as a mismatch between insufficient central administrative capacities (lack of means of communication and enforcement)⁹³ and spatial extension, but as deeply engrained in the land-based political economy of lordships. Medieval political geography is the story of the cohesion between and fragmentation of feudal lordships—a phenomenon of ruling-class organization.

War and Peace: Medieval Feuding as Legal Redress

Given that political power was dispersed among a multiplicity of political actors, and the criterion defining a political actor was his arms-bearing character, the *problematic* of war and peace can only be understood as embedded in a diffuse oligopoly in the control of the means of violence. Against this background, the lines of demarcation between pacified domestic politics and essentially hostile international relations, between criminal law and international law, become blurred. In fact, they are impos-

89. Werner 1980.

90. Davies 1989, 1990.

91. Smith 1995, 179.

92. This does not mean that lines were not drawn on the geopolitical map. The Treaty of Verdun (843) divided the Carolingian Empire into three clearly demarcated territories. Although this gave some degree of legitimacy for the respective rulers to claim the allegiance of “their” local lords, it had to be practically negotiated and enforced from case to case.

93. Weber 1968, 1091.

sible to draw. What are the implications of such organization of political power for the modes of conflict resolution, for questions of war and peace in the Middle Ages?

War as feud. The answer to this question lies in an interpretation of the feud.⁹⁴ It receives primacy of attention since it mediated exemplarily the “internal economic” contradictions of the ruling class into “external political” conflicts by dint of inter-noble competition. The focus on the feud does not imply, of course, that all medieval wars were interlordly feuds. Only conflicts among feudal actors took the form of feuds. What is central here is that public peace always stood on the shaky ground of the noble right to armed resistance. Since the right to resort to arms was part and parcel of conditional property, legitimate feuding was exclusively restricted to the noble class. Although monarchs attempted time and again to outlaw feuding in letter, they rarely succeeded (England was the partial exception) in enforcing the peace of the land in practice.

Noble “self-help” was not a state of emergency, civil war, or the sudden reimposition of a precontractual Hobbesian state of nature into an otherwise pacified society. Nor was it a Waltzian form of reactive power maximization to be inferred from international anarchy. It was a generally acknowledged and permissive form of jurisdictional redress seized by an aggrieved party.⁹⁵ All secular nobles had the right to settle their disputes by force of arms—both in cases of failed and, ironically, successful arbitration. In this case, the execution of the sentence was the responsibility of the righted party in the absence of an overarching executive.⁹⁶

Can we then distinguish meaningfully between the status of the feud and the status of war in the European Middle Ages? Brunner suggested that within Christian Europe contemporaries distinguished between feuds and war only by the magnitude of the conflict in question, not by the principle underlying both forms of violence.⁹⁷ He backed up this interpretation by pointing out that warfare (legal feuding), both between minor lords and between powerful monarchs, was conducted according to the same formal proceedings. Notwithstanding the frequent transgression of these prerequisites and limits, we are here faced with a mode of conflict resolution that (1) was exercised within states as well as between states; (2) was regarded as a form of legitimate and jurisdictional redress; (3) was therefore not covered by some incipient international law; and (4) can only be adequately interpreted when set against the background of decentralized political power based on the necessity of localized appropriation. To be sure, for superficial observers, these modes of conflict resolution could constitute a self-help system in which might generates right, but only at the price of abstracting from its social rationale and a concomitant coarse equation of modern interstate wars with medieval feuds.⁹⁸

94. See Brunner 1992; White 1986, 1996; and Geary 1986.

95. Brunner 1992, 24.

96. See *Ibid.*, 28; and Bloch [1940] 1961, 360.

97. Brunner 1992, 33–35.

98. In the neorealist perspective, it does not matter whether the object of inquiry refers to urban gang warfare or the classical age of the European Concert of Powers. In the dark night of neorealism, all cows appear to be gray.

The Many Peaces. As there was no “international” concept of war, there was no “international” concept of peace. Within states and between states, lords stood principally in nonpacified relations to each other. They were agents of war and peace. Since the authorities who sponsored peace were “functionally differentiated,” those efforts reflected the hierarchy of peacemakers (the king’s peace, the Peace of God, the Peace of the Land, the peace of towns, the peace of lords) and were geared toward the pacification of inherently bellicose interlordly relations. The vocabulary of anarchy and hierarchy does not suffice to grasp such a unique state of affairs. The mechanisms of peacemaking, in turn, were as variegated as the diversity of feudal public actors. Let us exemplify this diversity of peacemaking under feudal property relations by looking at the activities of the bishops in the tenth century.

Efforts to establish peace and order during the Feudal Revolution were everywhere initiated and orchestrated by regional bishops. The episcopal peace movements, evidently, were thus not motivated by abstract considerations of nonviolence or moral theology, nor even of compassion for a hard-hit peasantry that bore the brunt of lordly marauding; instead, they were a direct reaction to lordly encroachments on Church land and treasure.⁹⁹ In the absence of royal protection, the immunities granted to the Church were now without legal and military protection. In this precarious situation the clergy, the only part of the nonproducing class that bore no arms, developed a long-term secular interest in establishing modalities of peace to maintain their socioeconomic basis. Alternatively, bishops began to arm themselves. However, the most effective means in their hands were privileged access to the means of spiritual reproduction. More drastically, the monopoly over the means of salvation provided the preferred ecclesiastical lever for interference in worldly matters for the pre-Gregorian Church: excommunication.¹⁰⁰ To be sure, we should not be misled by its spiritual connotations, for it was not simply the moral capital of the praying class, but an effective means of exclusion from the legal community, usually with devastating social and material consequences. Deprivation of the Holy Communion was analogous to the loss of citizenship today.¹⁰¹

What then did the *pax dei* and the *treuga dei* entail? The bishop-led peace movements did not intend to nor were they in a position to outlaw feuding, since noble demilitarization would have undermined the very *raison d’être* of the knightly mode of life. Rather, they aimed to restrict and regulate the law of the fist by specifying exemptions to warring, first in terms of persons and objects (Peace of God), later in terms of time and space (Truce of God).¹⁰²

In summary, the peace movements were a conscious strategy of appeasement on the part of the unarmed clergy and an attempt to contain the feudal crisis of the tenth to twelfth centuries by those most afflicted before newly consolidated monarchies set themselves to work to restore peace by public means. Their example elucidates the nonstate character of peacemaking in the Middle Ages.

99. See Flori 1992, 455–56, 1986; Brunner 1992, 15; and Duby 1980.

100. Poly and Bournazel [1980] 1991, 154.

101. See Berman 1983, 114; and Geary 1986, 1119–20.

102. Bisson 1977.

Feudal “International Systems”: Anarchy or Hierarchy?

What was the structuring principle of “international” organization in the European Middle Ages? Waltz, Ruggie, Fischer, and Spruyt agreed on the anarchic nature of the Middle Ages.¹⁰³ I will now qualify this assertion and fine tune the anarchy–hierarchy *problematique* using a more detailed historization of structures of lordship.

One of the weaknesses of the IR debate on the Middle Ages is that none of its participants deemed it necessary to specify his statements in time and space. About which Middle Ages are we talking? If we focus on the changing forms of lordship, we have a criterion at hand that allows us to draw out visible differences between the medieval centuries without renouncing their essential identity. For these alterations in lordly property rights flow from social relations that underlie changing geopolitical contexts: feudal empires (650–950), feudal anarchy (950–1150), feudal state system (1150–1450). In other words, the degree to which political powers of extraction were wielded in the hands of the land-holding class conditions the organizing principle of feudal “international” orders.

Banal, Domestic, and Landlordship

The literature distinguishes broadly between three dominant forms of lordship in the European Middle Ages.¹⁰⁴ Banal lordship refers to what could most readily lay claim to medieval public state authority, namely, royal powers of command, public taxation, punishment, adjudication, and decreeing. Being authorized to wield the powers of the ban conferred the most encompassing form of domination and exploitation to the incumbents, constituting what Duby called the “master class” within the medieval ruling class.¹⁰⁵

Domestic lordship was the prevalent form of domination on the classical bipartite manor of Carolingian times. Here, the lord’s land was divided into a seigniorial demesne to be tilled by slave labor and specified peasant services and into surrounding peasant plots cultivated independently by the tenured peasant. The “lord’s men” had no access to public courts, nor did they have to pay taxes of a public character, but they were exclusively subject to the disciplinary measures of manorial control.¹⁰⁶

Landlordship emerged in various regions of Western Europe from the late twelfth to the late fourteenth century. Here, the personal character—both between lord and vassal and between lord and peasantry—receded in favor of the proprietary character of the holding. The continental West European peasantry became enfranchised (the end of serfdom) and managed to fix its rents in peasant charters.¹⁰⁷ Lords forfeited

103. See Waltz 1979, 88; Ruggie 1986, 141; Fischer 1992, 461 ff.; and Spruyt 1994, 13.

104. See Duby 1974, 174–77; and Comninel 1992. German terminology distinguishes *Leibherrschaft*, *Banngrundherrschaft*, and *Abgabengrundherrschaft*. Rösener 1992, 10–13.

105. Duby 1974, 176.

106. Bloch [1941] 1966, 70.

107. Brenner 1996.

their power of command and taxation. The demesne and therewith labor services lost importance in relation to rents in kind and increasingly in cash (monetarization).

Conditional Hierarchy, Personalized Anarchy, Territorial Anarchy

I will now set out how specific lordship constellations translated into diverging structuring principles of early, high, and late medieval “international” systems.

The Carolingian Empire was built on a combination of banal lordship wielded by the emperor and his public officials (*missi*, counts), domestic lordship wielded by lesser lords in the exploitation of their estates, and free and arms-bearing peasant proprietors.¹⁰⁸ In specifying the internal structure of the empire, we find a weak presumption of hierarchy. All noble land was handed out by the emperor, fiefs were nonhereditary, the Church was still politically integrated into the empire, and the power of the ban overrode lordly rights. Having said that, the assumption of hierarchy must be relaxed because the emperor was not simply head of state; he was the supreme vassalic lord and was bound in this capacity by the reciprocal terms of the vassalic contract. The hierarchy of authority claims was further eroded through the spreading institution of immunity, which exempted ecclesiastical estates from any state interference.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, one must speak of *conditional hierarchy*. Although a variety of competing autonomous sources of law coexisted next to royal law, conditional hierarchy flowed from the emperor’s politicomilitary authority over his imperial aristocracy and lesser lords. Talk of conditional hierarchy rests, of course, on the assumption that the empire can be considered an “international system” in the first place. To the degree that the empire comprised a multiplicity of semi-independent political actors, whose *ultima ratio* was the lawful recourse to arms, bound together through a series of interpersonal contracts, I contend that this is justifiable.

This brings us to the problem of “external sovereignty” defined as the exclusive capacity to conclude international treaties, declare war, and have diplomatic representation. Although only the emperor could perform these functions in the name of the empire, Carolingian magnates equally engaged in these forms of international relations, not only with “foreign political actors” but also among themselves. Finally, we have to inquire into the relation of the empire to its surrounding polities and great powers. Here, a string of neighboring polities were bound to the Franks either through vassalage or through tribute payments, without being at any time incorporated into the empire. They were subjected to Carolingian suzerainty. Some polities, however, were outside the sphere of Frankish influence (the Byzantine Empire, the Califat of Córdoba, and the kingdoms of the British Isles). In this wider geopolitical perspective, neither hierarchy nor formal anarchy can be maintained. With the exceptions of the latter polities, the Frankish Empire was hegemonial.

In the wake of the cessation of Frankish expansion, the empire disintegrated from the mid-ninth century onward into its constituent building blocks: lordships. In this

108. Teschke 1997.

109. Quaritsch 1970, 190–96.

process, local lords began to usurp the kingly power of the ban. They “privatized” high justice, taxed their “subjects,” territorialized their fiefs, patrimonialized their lands through the introduction of hereditability, and subjected the remaining free peasantry to serfdom.¹¹⁰ The merger of banal and domestic lordship during the Feudal Revolution converted the estate into a fully independent *seigneurie*. This chronologically and territorially uneven process culminated in the eleventh century but was geographically confined to the Western Kingdom due to the persistent opportunities of conquest of the eastern frontier¹¹¹. What was at one time an internally consolidated polity turned into a multiplicity of petty-conflict units. Widespread feuding and the militarization of the countryside unleashed “feudal anarchy.” The castellans and knights rose to power. The French king became one small-scale actor among many. The predominance of this power configuration led medievalists to talk of the “second feudal age” and “parcelization of sovereignty.”¹¹² If, for the sake of argument, we consider this political constellation an international system, we have to call it an anarchy among “functionally differentiated” actors—an anarchy based on changes in the proprietary patterns of the land-holding class. Since, however, the fragmentation of political power cascaded down the ladder of territorial districts to the smallest possible conflict unit, the castellan or even the knight, I propose to call this pattern a *personalized anarchy*. Every lord was his own conflict unit.

Finally, a new separation of banal and domestic lordly power emerged during the period of reconsolidating feudal states in the late twelfth century and after. Whereas banal lordship was reappropriated by greater magnates and eventually monopolized by a few kings, landlordship became the basis of reproduction for the nobles on the land. “Bastard feudalism” transformed lordly military services into money payments to the overlord. In France, lords were increasingly drawn into the service of greater magnates. The reconstitution of higher royal courts, in turn, was a result of competitive processes between feuding lords. By the thirteenth century, competition had given rise to a reterritorialization of banal powers in the hands of a dozen still competing principalities, among which the Capetians emerged eventually victorious in France.¹¹³ Although vassalic relations among the bigger conflict units (even the king of England remained nominally vassal to the king of France until the fifteenth century) still compromised an exclusive notion of territoriality, their significance receded to the degree that feudal services were successively replaced through the tax-office structure by more centralized states. This meant the emergence of feudal *nonexclusive territorial anarchy* in the late Middle Ages. The nonexclusivity of this form of territoriality must be stressed, since landlords retained substantial political powers over their peasants, emergent towns, based on urban law, freed themselves from seigneurial control, and the reformed papacy now asserted its authority claims through transnational canon law.

110. Bonnassie 1991.

111. See Elias [1939] 1994, 281; and Leyser 1968, 31.

112. See Bloch [1940] 1961; and Mitteis [1940] 1975.

113. Hallam 1980.

To conclude, domestic lordship in connection with a kingly monopoly of the ban underwrote early medieval empire building, which endured as long as the Franks successfully conquered surrounding tribes. The structuring principle here is a *conditional form of hierarchy* (internal conditional hierarchy, external limited hegemony). Furthermore, the heyday of “feudal anarchy” was based on strongly personalized banal lordships. *Personalized anarchy* brought to the fore the inherently fragile basis of feudal state formation under localized conditions of appropriation (internal hierarchy, external personalized anarchy). Finally, I maintain that the separation of banal lordship and landlordship allowed public power to be reterritorialized. From this transition *nonexclusive territorial anarchy* emerged between the units of the feudal state system (internal conditional hierarchy, external heteronomous anarchy).

Conclusion

I have provided an analysis of the nature and dynamics of medieval geopolitical relations to expose some fundamental shortcomings of current IR theory. I began with the assumption that the character of international systems expresses the nature of their constitutive units, which are themselves predicated on determinate social property relations. I showed how historicizing neorealists have failed (1) to understand the generative structure of medieval geopolitical order that determines an inherently bellicose geopolitical dynamic, (2) to account for internal shifts in system structure within the European Middle Ages, and (3) to specify how the emergence of the modern states system can be theorized within the parameters of a structuralist IR theory. I also pointed to some limits of constructivist readings of medieval discourses and self-understandings in the absence of their social grounding in conflict-ridden processes of reproduction. I went beyond a description of medieval institutions by unpacking feudal conditional property as a social relation among lords and between lords and peasants. This relation is institutionalized in the lordship—the constitutive unit of feudal order—establishing political access to peasant produce. Induced by collective peasant resistance and the needs of external conquest and defense, lords self-organize in a “state of associated persons.” The “state” guarantees noble property and lordly survival. Lordly reproduction follows the logic of political accumulation, being both an “economic” (lord–peasant) and a geopolitical (lord–lord) process. However, the nexus between lordly individual appropriation and the legitimate right to resist, fixed in the noble right to bear arms, precludes a state monopoly in the means of violence. Interlordly relations are then by definition neither international and therefore anarchic, nor domestic and therefore hierarchic. “Sovereignty” is parceled among politically appropriating lords. I thus unfolded the historically bounded meanings of the medieval “state,” territoriality and frontier, war-as-feud and peace, hierarchy and anarchy, and deduced the competitive geopolitical rationality of feudal actors from property relations.

The theory of social property relations does not only vindicate the common objection to neorealism’s lack of a generative grammar and transformative logic but ques-

tions its very assumption that there is a distinct international level in medieval Europe that can be meaningfully theorized in abstraction from the internal properties and reproductive logic of feudal society. The state and the market, the domestic and the international, are not yet differentiated into separate spheres. This opens up the question of the genesis and constitution of the modern international system.

How should we understand the passage from medieval parcelized “sovereignty” to modern absolute sovereignty? The concept of sovereignty is historically connected with absolutism and the Westphalian states system. Let us unravel its social property regime. French absolutism was built on a combination of widespread peasant property in land and “private” property in state offices held by the old nobility and a new office-holding state class.¹¹⁴ Although serfs no longer pay politically enforced rents to their lords, absolutist appropriation continues to be a political process, because taxes are politically enforced on free peasants by the state. Despite the pooling of military power in the absolutist state, state and economy remain undifferentiated. The relation between the producer (free peasant) and the nonproducer (state) remains politically constituted. The personal element of domination persists, since absolute power is invested not in the state, but in the person of the king. “*L’Etat, c’est moi*” connotes sovereignty as the personal property of the king.

As in the feudal case, this translates immediately into a specific geopolitical dynamic of the absolutist states system. International accumulation proceeds politically through war and marriages between dynastic states. State-sponsored mercantilism and not the capitalist policy of free trade marks the leading economic doctrine of the age. Against conventional IR assumptions,¹¹⁵ absolutist sovereignty and therewith the Westphalian states system and its territorial geopolitical logic are thoroughly premodern institutions.¹¹⁶ Early modern international relations remain locked in the zero-sum game of political accumulation.

On the basis of the nonmodernity of absolutist sovereignty, we must go a step further. If the parcelization of “sovereignty” under feudalism expresses the politico-military nexus between serfs and lords, and if absolutist sovereignty expresses the politico-military nexus between free peasants and king, then modern sovereignty presupposes depoliticizing this nexus. Only after historically accomplishing this depoliticization can sovereignty be pooled, in an abstract state, above economy and society. This process is intimately connected to the transformation of politically constituted property into private property and the concomitant transformation of free peasant proprietors into wage labor.¹¹⁷ Since the labor relation is henceforth based on a private, “noncoercive” contract, accumulation turns into a “purely” economic process. The economic then becomes disembedded from the political.¹¹⁸ A “purely” political

114. Brenner 1985.

115. Krasner effectively questions many assumptions on Westphalia’s essential modernity. Yet, rather than specifying modern sovereignty’s deep generative structure, he dissolves its content as a permanently contested, and thus “contingent and pliant,” social practice, which, apparently, can no longer be theorized. Krasner 1993, 238.

116. Rosenberg 1994, 135–39.

117. Brenner 1985, 284–91.

118. Polanyi 1944. Indeed, the first capitalist state turns out to be England. Wood 1991.

state, based on monopolizing the means of violence, and a “free” market, based on commodifying all factors of production, spring into existence. Contrary to Ruggie’s assertion, “modern” sovereignty expresses precisely the separation between private property and public authority.¹¹⁹ However, if this argument holds, it follows that in the leading European nation-states the “decaying pillars of the Westphalian temple” already lay in ruins in the nineteenth century, if not earlier.

If private property marks the constitutive principle of capitalist sovereignty, international anarchy—contrary to what constructivists argue—is more than “what states make of it.”¹²⁰ The critical-theoretical claim that “sovereignty is a practical category”¹²¹ applies only to the state’s functional dimension, not to its constitutive dimension.¹²² In other words, the generative structure of capitalist property relations sets absolute limits on what a community of coreflective political leaders can practically do. The secret of the state lies outside its own sphere of influence. This then points to the question of whether the present international system of sovereign states is necessarily linked to the persistence of private property. What can be maintained is that although anarchy endures, the primary dynamic of interaction between advanced capitalist states is no longer military competition over territory as a source of income.

By identifying social property relations and their conflictual contestations as constitutive of all international systems and their distinct geopolitical dynamics, I advance a theory of IR based on dialectical meta-theoretical premises that combines a transformative logic with a principle of generative structure. Thus, the argument goes decisively beyond current assumptions in IR, be they of neorealist, realist, constructivist, or “critical-theoretical” persuasion.

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119. Ruggie 1986, 143.

120. Wendt 1992.

121. Ashley 1984, 273.

122. This is Thomson’s distinction. Thomson 1995, 224.

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