**Conflict and the Separateness of Peoples: Investigating the Relationship Between Multiplicity, Inequality and War**

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**Abstract**

Anarchy is neither necessary nor sufficient for security-competition and the possibility of war. This article investigates whether the alternative concept of multiplicity can support a reintegrated account of insecurity in world politics. As highlighted by rational choice approaches, substantive conflicts of interest are a necessary condition for organised violence to be a permanent possibility within, across and between societies. A materialist argument is presented that the most enduring incompatible interests arise from clashes over rules of economic appropriation and redistribution, and the appropriate boundaries between social groups. Historically, unevenness and the possibility for exploitation have created structural pressures towards simultaneous social stratification and the institutionalisation of inter-societal warfare. Because of the central importance of social boundaries for structural inequalities, multiplicity has profound implications for both patterns of organised violence and the fundamental issue in the study of politics: who gets what, when and how.

**Introduction**

This article attempts to rethink the place of conflict and insecurity in world politics in light of ‘the fact that the human world comprises a *multiplicity* of co-existing societies’ (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 128). The concept of multiplicity offers the opportunity for the discipline to finally break with the claim that anarchy, the absence of a central authority at the highest level of human social organisation, is critical for understanding security-competition and the possibility of war between states. Instead this article argues that the structural cause of inter-state insecurity is not anarchy, but the existence of substantive conflicts of interest between groups. The possibility of exploitation between groups generates conflicts of interest, creating structural pressures towards both social stratification and the institutionalisation of inter-societal warfare. Economic inequality, the institutionalisation of violence and the crystallisation of separate states are interconnected.

Multiplicity is understood in this article as the existence of enduring social boundaries that separate groups of people and structure their interactions. Unlike in the ‘jigsaw’ model in which nation-states are imagined as separate, pre-existing ‘pieces’ (Biggs, 1999, p. 396), multiplicity is not conceptualised as fixed or invariant but as the product of a conflict-ridden historical process. Contemporary international society represents one way of institutionalising multiplicity and much of the conduct of international relations concerns the negotiation of the appropriate degree of political separateness between peoples (Sharp, 2009, p. 134). The boundaries of societies, and the desirable degree of separateness between them, are continuously being asserted and contested within world politics. Today, the dominance of the nation-state makes struggles over categorical boundaries within societies crucially important and often prone to conflict, as political inclusion within a national community determines access to vital resources. Multiplicity extends beyond international society: the human world consists of a plenitude of co-existing conflict groups, of which states are just one category.

This article examines conflict between groups under conditions of multiplicity in terms of inter-group exploitation and the struggle over the distribution of resources. Rosenberg’s reconceptualization of International Relations as the study of interactive multiplicity developed out of debates over uneven and combined development, one of the most fruitful recent materialist research programmes in international theory. This article contributes to this research programme by combining materialism with rational choice theory, making the assumption that actors often make decisions by evaluating the material costs and benefits of alternatives. Materialist arguments assume that, in aggregate and over the long term, the behaviour of actors is shaped by material constraints and imperatives — an assumption that overlaps with the rational choice strategy of explaining behaviour in terms of structures of incentives. This article uses a rational choice approach to demonstrate that arguments about the implications of anarchy are limited in their explanatory power and develop a reintegrated account of the causes of ‘domestic’ and ‘international’ conflict. It builds on Wagner’s *War and the State* (2007) to advance a historically-grounded exploration of the connections between social multiplicity, state-making, stratification and war.

Engaging with rational choice approaches to conflict and security highlights the political character of both the disputes between conflict groups and the boundaries between them. This suggests that the problem is not that International Relations has remained within the ‘prison’ of Political Science, as Rosenberg claims, but that an overemphasis on anarchy leaves us with ‘a science of *realpolitik* without politics’ (Kratochwil, 1993). Putting politics and substantive conflicts of interest back at the heart of International Relations enables us to investigate the structural interrelationship between multiplicity, violent conflict and economic inequality. Political Science is not a prison that must be escaped, International Relations should remain focused on the fundamental political issues of who gets what, when and how.

The article proceeds by demonstrating rational choice theory does not support the argument that anarchy is a necessary condition for conflict or that it exerts an independent pressure on states that pushes them towards security competition. Substantive incompatibilities of interest are necessary for conflict to be a permanent possibility, and such incompatibilities may exist within, across and between states. Rejecting the centrality of the ‘logic of anarchy’, the article demonstrates the continuity of ‘civil’ and ‘international’ conflict, arguing that the way that political multiplicity is institutionalised within international society both limits and enables organised violence. The article then turns to an examination of how societal multiplicity and unevenness can give rise to political multiplicity. It argues that the possibility of exploitation de-stabilises inter-societal relations, creating the possibility of specialisation in coercion, resulting in the institutionalisation of war and the state. Finally, the article examines how conflict between social groups has been transformed in an era of nation-states: internal societal multiplicity can generate ethnic rebellions for inclusion or secession, whilst external political multiplicity shapes struggles over popular empowerment and economic redistribution.

**Why ‘Anarchy’ Does Not Generate Permanent Conditions for Conflict**

Since the 1980s, anarchy has been treated as the central, defining concept of the discipline of international relations (Donnelly, 2015). According to Waltz (1979), without a world government to hold them in check, states are intrinsically threatening to one another. Each state’s effort to safeguard itself threatens others, pushing all states towards security-competition and power politics. The representation of the international system as a unique sphere of the social world, governed by a ‘logic of anarchy’, is deeply embedded within the discipline. Even some historical sociologists have claimed that the lack of a common authority is enough to push groups towards armed hostility (Glenn, 2012, p. 81). Yet although Waltz claimed that the ‘recurrence of war is explained by the structure of the international system’ (1988, p. 620), subsequent neorealist theory has emphasised anarchy less and acknowledged that it is at best incomplete as an explanation for conflict.

*Why Politics, Not Anarchy, is at the Root of Conflict*

A world populated by states seeking only survival would not have cause to fear each other and engage in security competition (Schweller, 1996). This is because, according to the ‘logic of anarchy’, each state faces a structural imperative to engage in power politics against other states to counter the use of power politics by other states. For the argument to hold this would have to be the unique equilibrium of a world without a central government, the set of strategies that no state could viably switch away from. This would follow if it was always advantageous to engage in security competition against other states, but the way the logic of anarchy is defined it is only conditionally advantageous. Schweller (1996, p. 104) makes a compelling case that Waltzian anarchy is a Stag Hunt, as mutual disarmament is preferable to domination, which is at least as good as mutual competition, which is preferable to being dominated (CC>DC≥DD>CD for all security-seekers). This is because for security-seekers, domination conveys no advantages beyond not being dominated. In this scenario both system-wide security competition and global disarmament are equilibria, so moving to a situation of disarmament should be possible for rational actors in communication with one another. The desire to avoid being coerced by others does not provide a reason to coerce others *unless there is reason to believe that at least some other actors have a reason to prefer to coerce others rather than coexist in peace*.

Positing that states universally seek power does not solve this problem, as under anarchy power does not necessarily make a state any more secure (Jervis, 1997, pp. 75-6). The most sophisticated versions of neorealism posit that some states do not just seek security but are motivated by the prospect of gaining territory, power or wealth for their own sake (Schweller, 1994). Glaser (2010) shows that the existence of ‘greedy’ states can compel even security-seeking states to adopt expansionist policies, to better defend themselves. The bad apples spoil the batch (Wendt, 1992, p. 408). Glaser account explains how uncertainty about the expansionist motives of others can lead to spiralling competition between states. But to explain the existence of greedy motivations it appeals to unit-level, domestic political factors that the theory itself does not account for (Glaser, 2010, pp. 36-7). Because ‘the international environment does not create a general tendency toward competitive policies’ (Glaser, 2010, p. 57), exogenous state interests rather than anarchy do most of the heavy lifting in Glaser’s argument.

Glaser offers a very compelling theory of strategic choice in a world already organised into separate states, some of which might be expansionist. But it does not explain why some states have the expansionist motives that provide the motor for the theory, leaving them to be explained by an unspecified theory of domestic politics. Contemporary neorealism, therefore, emphasises security dilemmas originating in conflicts of interest that are left unexplained. But if anarchy and the security dilemma at most deepen and amplify problems arising from incompatible interests, it might be a better strategy to build up a theory from an account of where those incompatible interests come from. Historical sociology offers one way to go about this, by ‘specifying the actual social relationships themselves which comprise the fabric of any society – and on tracing the particular institutional forms and distribution of resources which are reproduced by those relationships’ (Rosenberg, 1994, p. 47).

Rational choice approaches other than neorealism might be more helpful developing such a theory, as they de-emphasise anarchy and place more weight on configurations of interests. From a rational choice perspective, states are not necessarily unitary actors with the identical preference of ‘security’. Actors may be driven by a variety of motivations and may be subject to varying incentives. It is the incompatibility between the preferences of states that, under certain additional conditions, creates the possibility for violent conflict.

*War as a Continuation of Bargaining by Other Means*

The notion of anarchy is not particularly central to many rational choice theories of international conflict: the existence of a central authority does not guarantee that rational actors will be able to agree mutually beneficial bargains, nor does its absence necessarily prevent it. Many other domains might be characterised as self-help systems if that means a situation in which cooperation is not enforced (Bueno de Mesquita, 2009, p. 16). What separates international politics from some other domains is that actors are capable of coercing one another.

Common knowledge of incompatible preferences and awareness of the possibility of using violence to coerce others are not sufficient conditions for overt violence, however. Aware of the possibility of war, states and their leaders might bargain and agree a deal that is superior for both to fighting, taking into account the ability of each to inflict costs on the other and their willingness to bear costs. Nonetheless, each party has an incentive to bluff and misrepresent their military strength and willingness to bear costs, which may prevent a bargain being struck and lead to war (Fearon, 1995, p. 381). Intriguingly, characterising international crises in this manner suggests that bargaining between states is very similar to disputes between labour and management — with strikes and lockouts playing the same role as military conflict (Waltz, 1979, p. 114; Wagner, 2007, p. 106). Like employers and workers locked in industrial disputes, states may end up in overt conflict with one another because they dispute things that they value highly.

Much of the time the preferences of political actors will be common knowledge. Therefore they will not always be able to claim not to have the preferences that they do in fact have, even if they might want to. This means that at least some of the time states will be unable to credibly commit not to take advantage of changing circumstances, such as if a future increase in military power allows them to renegotiate previous agreements[[1]](#footnote-1). This may prevent those agreements from being struck in the first place. It also gives rise to the possibility of preventative war (Wagner, 2007, pp. 180-2), although this eventuality is not unique to international politics. In such conditions of uncertainty, it may be rational for states to retain their armies to deter potential opportunism by revisionists. But such an armed peace may make war more likely by making the status quo more costly (Fearon 2018).

Within a rational choice framework, conflicts of interest over substantive issues are necessary to create a world characterised by the permanent possibility of open conflict[[2]](#footnote-2). The root of international insecurity is the existence of substantive political conflict, not the logic of anarchy. But there remains the question of how multiplicity relates to these substantive political conflicts and the underlying social relationships that give rise to them.

*Global Civil Wars and Domestic International Wars*

Examining the origin of substantive political conflicts requires us to look at social relations within the state. International relations as a discipline assumes that domestic and international politics are fundamentally different in character. Systems without a central authority are represented as having the permanent potential for conflict, domestic politics is orderly. As influential as this assumption is, it is difficult to defend given the frequency of civil war. Indeed, Waltz anticipates its untenability: ‘If the absence of government is associated with violence then so also is its presence’ (Waltz, 1979, p. 103). Yet neorealist scholars have, very naturally, attempted to explain civil war in terms of the collapse of central authority and the descent into anarchy within the state (Posen, 1993). But state collapse and the emergence of a domestic security dilemma among social groups is not a common path into civil war — as will be discussed in more detail, severe political conflicts typically precede civil wars. Although state weakness may well create opportunities for rebellion, civil wars can emerge within states that remain hierarchical and centralised[[3]](#footnote-3). In conflict-ridden societies the state is rarely a neutral arbiter attempting to restrain contending social groups. Indeed, centralisation of power means there may be no authority capable of restraining an oppressive state, making it a threat to other actors.

Wagner points out that if arguments about the dire insecurities of anarchy were correct then an obvious solution would be fewer nation-states (Wagner, 2007, p. 35). Waltz indicates awareness of the limits of the logic of his own argument: ‘The prospect of world government’, he notes ‘would be an invitation to prepare for world civil war’ (Waltz, 1979, p. 112). The ‘correct’ level of separateness or unity seems to be the central issue under dispute in many conflicts, such as the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971. The suppression of East Pakistan by the military of West Pakistan in conjunction with local allies led to the intervention of India, in part due to a rivalry stemming from the unresolved issue of the status of Kashmir and the political legacy of Partition and British decolonisation. Such wars are, furthermore, difficult to categorise as either domestic or international conflicts. Within the Correlates of War dataset, the Vietnam War is recorded as a South Vietnamese civil war in 1960, an internationalised civil war from 1961, and an inter-state conflict from 1965 due to US bombardment of North Vietnam (Sarkees, 2011, p. 24). But these were transformations of the same war, a war closely linked to the preceding French-Indochina War of 1946-54.

Noting up to three quarters of civil wars involve foreign support for at least one side, Fearon and Laitin suggest that civil wars might fruitfully be considered a form of ‘international politics by other means’ (Fearon & Laitin, 2008, p. 20). States experiencing civil conflict are more likely to *both* initiate and be the target of militarised interstate disputes, often linked to the domestic conflict (Gleditsch, Salehyan, & Schultz, 2008). There are limits to the separation between societies. As historical sociologists have long recognised, it is mistaken to ‘maintain the idea that conflict at the international level can be isolated from that within states’ (Halliday, 1990, p. 220).

The distinction between domestic and international conflicts still structures much of our thinking about organised violence in world politics, but it is often difficult to maintain. For some purposes, it might be better to distinguish between *re-ordering conflicts* and *boundary-setting conflicts*. The world wars were re-ordering conflicts and involved the imposition of ideologically affiliated regimes. For Gilpin, hegemonic wars are directly analogous to revolutions because they re-order the system: overturning existing status hierarchies, redistributing resources, reformulating political institutions and transforming modes of economic organisation (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 45-7).

Many international interventions appear to be moments within wider re-ordering conflicts that take place simultaneously within, between and across states. These conflicts aim at effecting profound changes in the way societies are governed. Revolutions within states have historically set off rounds of intervention and counter-intervention (Owen, 2002). Most revolutionary regimes have been supportive of the spread of their ideology. Within the rational choice framework outlined above, common knowledge of this fact puts revolutionary and non-revolutionary states into a situation of insecurity with one another. Revolutionaries do not have any straightforward way to commit to refraining from exporting their revolution, should opportunities arise. In turn, counter-revolutionary states cannot claim that they would not take advantage of circumstances allowing for the rollback of the revolution. Peaceful co-existence may be difficult even if it is preferred by both to escalation.

As Halliday noted, if we view the world as a single social system, it becomes plausible to claim that ‘[i]nternational politics is not politics between states but civil war’ (Halliday, 1990, p. 220). But there are limits to this perspective. Multiplicity persists and societies remain relatively although not absolutely distinct from one another. Counter-revolutionary states may be better able to tolerate a foreign state committed to revolution than domestic actors with the same agenda. Multiplicity reduces the stakes; world government would indeed be a prescription for world civil war.

This illustrates how the persistence of multiplicity may mitigate conflict. Multiplicity allows for pluralism, or rather it is one way of managing pluralism in world politics. Nonetheless, not all actors may agree to the separation of societies and disagreement may arise over the precise terms of separation. Many conflicts within, between and across states can be understood as boundary-setting conflicts in which the terms of unity or separation between societies are negotiated through violent means. A wealth of empirical evidence supports the argument that much of the organised violence in the modern international system arises from disputes over boundaries. Territory has been the issue at stake in a high proportion of serious inter-state conflict, and territorial militarised interstate disputes are more likely to escalate to war than any other type (Holsti, 1991; Vasquez & Senese, 2008). Unsettled, poorly-demarcated and arbitrary borders are associated with conflict, especially those drawn between that geographically contiguous former colonies and imperial provinces (Gibler, 2007; Gibler, 2016). A related legacy of empire is the tendency towards conflict over which groups will dominate in the post-independence state (Wucherpfennig, Huziker, & Cederman, 2015). When a state is ethno-linguistically ‘incoherent’, its territorial boundaries and its very existence may be challenged both internally and externally, generating instability that may affect whole regions (Miller, 2007). So although the institutionalisation of multiplicity helps to mitigate to some forms of conflict, it intensifies conflicts within and between states over the boundaries between societies.

Drawing a sharp distinction between domestic and international conflict, on the basis that relations in the international realm are governed by the logic of anarchy, is misleading. The resort to violence remains a possibility even within the state. This fact contributes to the mutual insecurity of states, as states may have the capability and motive to support the domestic threats that others face. Conflicts within, across and between states may be fought to re-order societies or to renegotiate the boundaries between them. The tendency for societies to establish and dispute boundaries between each other generates one category of organised violence, but it limits conflict over the rules that govern society.

Nonetheless, the discussion in this section has taken the existence of distinct societies and the disputes between them as a given. The following section will attempt to examine some of the structural foundations of the separation of societies and of inter-societal conflict.

**From Societal Multiplicity to War and the State**

In his reassessment of realist theory, Wagner argues that political order within states is closely related to political order among states. For Wagner, the discipline’s error was to follow Hobbes in focusing on the threat of decentralised violence, the war of all against all (Wagner, 2007, p. 70). Outside of imaginary states of nature, actual wars are prosecuted by armies — organised groups that wield deadly force. In Wagner’s account, armies are fundamental: ‘[a]rmies can exist without states, and states are among the possible by-products of conflicts among armies’ (Wagner, 2007, p. x).

The level of institutionalisation of war has varied over time and in different regions of the world (Holsti, 2004, p. ch. 9). Armies have in certain times and places been largely autonomous, at other points they have been under the control of political authorities and the prosecution of war has been highly regulated. Building on the arguments of Tilly (1992), Wagner argues that the modern state-system is the product of tripartite bargaining between political authorities, armies and producers (Wagner, 2007, p. 98). Wagner’s account is somewhat synoptic; Spruyt’s analysis provides a richer account of the selection and diffusion of state institutions, taking into account the role of trade as well as warfare (Spruyt, 1994). The role of dominant social groups in promoting or impeding state development, examined by Halperin (2004), are also under-theorised by Wagner.

Nonetheless, like Tin-Bor Hui’s analysis of the Warring States period in ancient China (2004), Wagner provides reasons why warring armies need not necessarily give rise to a state-system. For Wagner, the state system, and so the preservation of political multiplicity, is the product of a specific set of self-enforcing institutional arrangements. These arrangements are the product of bargains among armies, political authorities and social classes within and across societies (Wagner, 2007, p. 76). It is not just that states have agreed certain common institutions to govern their interactions with one another (Bull, 1977 [2002]). Rather, the state-system is one possible set of agreements that establishes a pattern of behaviour that is difficult for political actors to defect from. Therefore ‘a world of independent states is not a world without a global order—the independent states are the global order’ (Wagner, 2007, p. x). The fact that modern states can control armies is both what allows them to make war but also what enables them to make peace (Wagner, 2007, p. 129). International society assigns rights to political bodies capable of controlling the use of armed force within certain territories, providing potential incentives for groups to engage in boundary-setting conflicts over the demarcation between societies. Enforceable international agreements create the possibility of altering those agreements, which might result in large-scale re-ordering conflicts — ‘world civil wars’.

*The Political Economy of States and Armies*

However, we still have the problem of why armies exist in the first place — “to provide protection from other armies” is an unsatisfactory answer. We need more than anarchy to explain war. The reasons why groups and societies have come into conflict are innumerable, as human beings can believe almost anything and be motivated by almost anything. Given such idiosyncrasies one approach is to remain agnostic about the substantive interests that give rise to conflict. A materialist approach, however, emphasises that there are certain fundamental material requirements for human survival that must be satisfied, independent of local beliefs and value judgements. The means through which human beings meet these needs are nonetheless historically variable. Some realists have emphasised scarce resources as the basis for conflict (Hamilton & Rathbun, 2013), but this approach does not develop an account of the changing ways in which resources are appropriated and humans exploited across different social systems. Material relations are not the only source of human conflict, but they are perhaps the most enduring and often exert influence on other sources of conflict such as ideology and identity.

As a starting point, Wagner suggests that we consider ‘a world in which people are free to organize themselves in order to profit from the use of force’ (Wagner, 2007, p. 103). From a rational choice perspective, we can only expect armies to form and persist when they can support themselves by using or threatening force. Where armies can support themselves by threatening populations, they can also support themselves by selling protection. Boix argues that organised predation was not possible in the pre-agricultural world. Due to the low storability of output, the ease of exit for the exploited and the inherent risks of violence among relatively equal persons, looting and enslavement are not effective strategies among hunter-gatherers (Boix, 2015, pp. 22-31). Predation is less worthwhile than work, so permanent armies do not form and violence remains inter-personal and decentralised. Yet with settled agriculture, predation becomes viable. Wagner discusses the conquest of settled peoples by organised predators who establish themselves as an elite (Wagner, 2007, p. 118). Yet settled peoples can also take or purchase slaves to put to work on the land that they occupy.

The exact pathway is less important than the structural shift brought about by agriculture. Some groups organise themselves for violence, and this forces others to either reward potential predators for protection, organise for their own defence or engage in predation themselves. Sharp geographic differences in agricultural productivity push groups towards specialisation. Accounts of early-state formation emphasise the gradual process of specialisation and stratification that occurred within and across societies due to the interactions between the agrarian core of Mesopotamia and marcher peoples on the periphery (McNeill & McNeill, 2003, p. 42; Mann, 1986, pp. 84, 98-9). According to Turchin (2009), empires grew on unstable frontiers due to conflict between settled and semi-nomadic societies, which set off an organisational arms race. The closure of the Eurasian frontier between the death of Tamerlane and the nineteenth century is a central theme of Darwin’s history of empire (2008). The empires of settled Eurasia won out, although ruling dynasties such as the Qing were established by nomadic warrior elites.

For producers, living under a state where armies are under control of political authorities may be preferable to being exposed to marauding armies. ‘Roving bandits’ have no reason not to take every lootable resource, whereas ‘settled bandits’ have an incentive to limit what they take from producers to avoid impairing their future output (Olson, 1993). If warfare is self-financing then political authorities may not be able to control roving bandits, as seems to be the case in certain contemporary civil wars where lootable resources are present. But even if warfare is costly, the potential spoils of victory may make conflict between settled bandits endemic. The exploitability of producers in an agrarian society provides bandit-states with both the resources to engage in warfare and the incentive to acquire more territory. Thus the relationship between producers and protectors is one of exploitative interdependence: the protectors are dependent on the producers for their material wellbeing, but the greater the vulnerability of the producers to expropriation by predators, the greater the surplus that can be extracted by those providing protection.

The need to avoid appropriating too much, along with the residual ability of the exploited to rebel, may result in a set of local and quite diverse bargains concerning taxation, property and political rights. This is what accounts of European state formation suggest occurred as warfare became more capital-intensive and those in control of organised violence came to depend more on producers. In some circumstances intense conflict among predator-protectors might alter their relations with those they exploit. Simultaneously, faced with the resistance of the exploited, political authorities may attempt to moderate their conflicts by acknowledging one another’s control over distinct geographical areas. Wagner notes that this ‘set of agreements among economic predators to divide the world among them might be called a world of independent states’ (Wagner, 2007, p. 115).

Establishing order within states and establishing order between states have always been deeply interrelated. The underlying structural cause of conflict is not the logic of anarchy, but the potential for exploitation of producers by organised predators. This creates the opportunity for protection rackets. But these rackets must be continuously renegotiated whilst competing with other predator-protectors. Localised and more geographically extensive processes of bargaining took place in the context of one another, and in Europe the eventual outcome was the distinction between domestic and international politics. Agreements between parties were negotiated in the shadow of the possibility of conflicts with other actors. Thus, in the sense that there is no such thing as an isolated agreement, external multiplicity has been essential to war-making and state-making. But the contemporary institutionalisation of political multiplicity is equally a product of the struggles fought between states and their subjects. The global order in which states claim to represent peoples and exert sovereignty within territorially delimited boundaries is the end-product of centuries of war, peace settlements, popular struggle, colonialism and resistance.

Internal stratification and external multiplicity have been closely linked in their historical development: the potential for exploitation creates the opportunity for inter-societal predation, creating the need for defensive political organisation, leading to various mixed models of protection/predation. Societal multiplicity creates the possibility for specialisation in violence and thus permanent armies and internal hierarchies.

**Conflict and Distribution Between and Within Groups**

The process of contestation and bargaining between populations and political authorities is an ongoing, open-ended process. In the modern era, the nation-state has become the dominant model of relations between populations, political authorities and armies. Wimmer (2013: 11-17) argues that nationalism is a compact that allows political elites to command the loyalty of populations in exchange for inclusion as members of the nation. This compact has been remarkably effective and contributed, in conjunction with certain geographical advantages and the feedback loops created by colonial exploitation (Pomeranz, 2000), to the European imperial dominance of much of the world. However, the principle of nationalism was seized upon as a strategy of mobilisation by aspirant political elites in the world outside of Europe. The principle of ‘like over like’, that all peoples should be ruled by national kin, spread through colonial empires (Wimmer, 2013, p. 137). Decolonisation both undermined the European imperial order and universalised the nation-state as the founding principle of domestic and international order. Multiplicity crystallised as a global lattice of nation-states.

The existence of multiple states with their corresponding national societies remains relevant for the continuous process of negotiation between political authorities and peoples. But whilst territorial boundaries are important in a world of nation-states, they are not the only boundaries. Tilly argues that social boundaries establish ‘categorical inequalities’ between the groups that they define, as they enable opportunity hoarding and the exploitation of members of one group by another (Tilly, 1998, pp. 7-8). Boundaries are durable because those that benefit from them — at the expense of out-groups — have a shared interest in preserving them. Inequalities are especially stable where organisational boundaries map onto social categories (Tilly 1998: 78), as within the nation-state system where citizenship largely maps onto nationality. But the state system is not the only basis for such boundaries, as the history of segregation in the United States and caste systems in South Asia demonstrate. In the sense that members of groups within such structures live parallel lives, multiplicity may exist within territorial units.

Because they are disadvantageous to excluded groups, such boundaries may be politically contested. The option to resort to force, it is not an exclusive feature of anarchy. Politics therefore always takes place in the shadow of the possibility of rebellion. In a classic discussion of democratisation, Rustow makes a compelling argument that the end-result of political conflict depends on whether the groups share a ‘sense of national unity’ (Rustow, 1970, p. 361). Where a strong categorical boundary exists, inter-group conflict tends towards secession and the institutionalisation of the boundary. Deep *intra*-group conflict may however lead to a re-ordering and transformation of the state itself.

*Horizontal Inequalities and Wars Between Peoples*

The internal multiplicity of ethno-linguistically diverse states need not result in overt conflict. Yet research on ‘horizontal inequalities’ has collated evidence that inequalities between ethnic groups are a major source of the grievances that fuel civil wars (Stewart, 2008). Exclusion from power and relative economic deprivation are risk factors associated with a group being involved in civil war (Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013: 108). There appears to be a tendency for excluded majorities to participate in civil wars to change the government, and excluded minorities to participate in secessionist conflict (Cederman, Gleditsch, & Buhaug, 2013, p. 157). Inter-group inequality gives rise to attempts by excluded peoples to establish their own states or seize them. There is also some evidence that groups with above-average incomes are more likely to fight to secede (Deiwaks, Cederman, & Gleditsch, 2012). Wallerstein may have been correct to anticipate that the combination of ethnic difference and relative wealth would produce separatist claims in post-colonial states, as in the case of Katanga within the Republic of Congo (Wallerstein, 1961, p. 88).

Civil war in the contemporary world seems to be linked to the distribution of economic opportunities and access to political power. The effects of societal multiplicity are not confined to international relations traditionally-conceived, as distributional inequalities between socially-bounded ethnic groups within a state can generate conflict. The discovery of natural resources can prompt marginalised groups to rebel against appropriation of ‘their’ resources (Hunziker & Cederman, 2017), as in the case of the Acehnese insurgency in Indonesia (Aspinall, 2007). Similar is the ‘sons of the soil’ phenomenon, where the resentment of a supposedly autochthonous people towards migrants from elsewhere in the nation generates conflict (Fearon & Laitin, 2011). In 2001 five hundred Indonesians died in violence between Madurese and Dayaks, the former having settled in Kalimantan as part of the state *transmigrasi* policy. The policies of the state may be perceived as a form of ‘internal colonialism’ (Hechter, 1975). Multiplicity is also relevant for the opportunities for ethnic rebellion. Lindemann and Wimmer (2018) identify the existence of a refuge beyond the control of the state, either across a border or within the state’s own territory, as a *necessary* condition for armed resistance by ethnic groups.

Perceptions of exploitation and opportunity hoarding by groups on different sides of a categorical boundary may lead to conflict. Civil wars arise from boundary-making and are boundary-making processes in their own right, deepening cleavages between peoples and leading to the formation of new states. Conflict between peoples is not inevitable, as power-sharing arrangements can reduce the risks of civil war (Cederman, Gleditsch, & Buhaug, 2013, p. 85). But when this does not occur, war may result in separatist enclaves or secession, deepening the separateness between peoples.

*Vertical Inequalities and Political Change*

Not all conflicts within a society tend towards the sundering of that society; some may lead towards its political transformation. Materialist approaches to comparative politics identify latent conflicts between classes as the underlying cause of the overthrow and replacement of political systems. The power relations between groups defined in terms of ownership and control of property determines, in the long run, the system of government. Democratisation can be viewed as part of the struggle over redistribution between different economic classes within a society. Working classes have been key protagonists in the struggle for democracy (Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens, & Stephens, 1992), perhaps because the vote might be used by the poorer majority to effect economic redistribution. Anticipating this, propertied classes might support authoritarian regimes that protect their interests. The parallels with preventative war between states are striking: the rich might stymie democratisation because they anticipate that the poor will use their newfound power to alter the status quo. In large parts of the world ‘[s]ystems of representative government were born under a mortal fear that participation by the broad masses of the population, a large part of whom were poor and illiterate, would threaten property’ (Przeworski, 2008, p. 310). The alternative to such concessions might be revolution and civil war on class lines.

Nonetheless, democratisation does not necessarily result in socialism. The urban working class has never made up an outright majority in any capitalist society. Its political representatives have had to form alliances with other social groups to gain office (Przeworski, 1985, p. 129). Thus, actually-existing democracy has represented a compromise that avoids rebellion of the disenfranchised, but protecting the core interests of dominant groups.

Even if propertied classes do not defect from the democratic compromise, they may still exert influence over political outcomes due to their structural power in a system of private ownership. If capitalists anticipate policies increasing the consumption of workers at the expense of capital, they might choose not to invest (Przeworski & Wallerstein, 1988). Anticipating this, an egalitarian party might rationally moderate its programme. The threat of such a ‘capital strike’ is magnified in a world where capitalists can divest and move their wealth to another society. Boix (2003) argues that the ability to avoid redistributive demands is what makes democracy tolerable to the propertied. When wealth is immobile it can easily be redistributed, making democracy dangerous for dominant classes in unequal agrarian and oil-producing societies. Soifer (2013) argues that, in unequal societies, democratic governments may be overthrown if the strength of the state rises and they gain the capacity to redistribute wealth. When inequality is less severe and wealth is mobile, as it is in commercial and industrial societies, the propertied have less to fear from the democratic state (Boix, 2003, p. 41). Democratisation occurs where its redistributive effects are likely to be moderate. Where inequality is severe, democracy is precarious and organised violence is a permanent possibility.

Redistributive approaches to the political economy of democracy imply that political multiplicity is central to struggles over political change. Boix hypothesises that global economic integration has been a double-edged sword: in enabling greater asset mobility it has made democracy more acceptable to those with the power to overthrow it, yet made redistributive demands of voters more difficult to meet (Boix, 2003, p. 42). This suggests that the contemporary triumph and crisis of democracy are structurally linked. Redistributivist research on democracy corroborates Arrighi and Silver’s argument that ‘competition for mobile capital’ has been a fundamental process in shaping world politics (Arrighi, Silver, & Ahmed, 1999, p. 38). The condition of multiplicity confers ‘structural power’ on those that own capital, changing the balance of forces within states and giving rise to different political possibilities.

Boundary-making and re-ordering conflicts that take place within states, therefore, are greatly influenced by the condition of external multiplicity. Consideration of contemporary ethnic civil wars demonstrates that multiplicity exists within states, in the form of politically-relevant categorical boundaries between groups. These boundaries are both the product of states, through discriminatory policies and the distribution of resources, and the motive to establish new states in accordance with the nationalist principle that like should rule over like. The dynamics of ethnic civil war are themselves shaped by the existence of a multiplicity of territorial states. The struggles over the distribution of a society’s resources are likewise influenced by the fact of multiplicity, as those with mobile resources gain leverage through the threat of exit. World politics takes place in the shadow of power and in the context of multiplicity.

**Conclusion**

This investigation began with a critique of the argument that insecurity and conflict result from nothing more than the situation of anarchy, the lack of common authority among political actors. There is no ‘logic of anarchy’ separable from the character and interests of political actors, grounded in particular social and economic relations.

If it is accepted that incompatible interests among groups are the underlying cause of conflict, does multiplicity contribute at all to an understanding of those conflicts? The analysis presented here suggests that it does. Many of the most important conflicts in international relations concern the negotiation and renegotiation of social boundaries. Conflicts over the re-ordering of societies are also influenced by the existence of other societies. This is why the internal organisation of states has always been a matter of concern for external actors, despite the institutionalisation of the separateness of societies through the nation-state system.

Evidence from the civil war and democratisation literatures suggests that there is only so much horizontal inequality that a state can contain without sparking secessionist conflict, and only so much redistribution that can be achieved within a capitalist democracy. Yet whereas inequalities within a territorial state can be dangerous or destabilising, inequalities between nations within international society do not seem to have the same explosive potential. Colonialism has largely been overthrown, but the unsuccessful demand by states of the global South for a New International Economic Order in the 1970s has not been repeated. Borders are a very effective barrier to redistribution. A world of ‘open doors, closed frontiers’ (Colás, 2008) allows multi-national corporations to take advantage of differences in labour-costs in different regions of the world (Kaplinsky, 2005). The functionalist argument that the nation-state exists because it stabilises global capitalism is not convincing (Callinicos, 2007, pp. 238-9), but the state-system nonetheless seems to domesticate redistributive struggles and limit their intensity.

The concept of multiplicity, understood in terms of the relationship among *conflict groups* within and between societies, enables us to ask a richer set of questions about the structural basis for insecurity in world politics than anarchy. It allows us to draw on the insights of rational choice approaches whilst acknowledging the inherently political character of conflict. It focuses our attention on the distribution of resources, relations of exploitation and the boundaries between groups as the most enduring sources of political disputes. It helps us reintegrate our account of conflict within, across and between societies. Yet developing this conception of multiplicity and evaluating its implications requires International Relations to remain in close conversation with the wider discipline of Political Science, investigating who gets what, why, how — and with what consequences for others.

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1. This differs from the security dilemma, which arises from uncertainty about whether a state has revisionist motivations or might develop revisionist motivations in the future. This situation arises because of *confidence* about the motivations of a state that is unable to commit itself to respecting the status quo in future. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Additionally, according to the conventional rational choice account, war requires one or more of the following conditions: uncertainty over the relative threat advantage of actors; inability to make credible commitments; indivisible goods under dispute (Fearon J. D., 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Unless terms are defined tautologically so that every situation of civil conflict is anarchic by stipulation. But then anarchy cannot explain civil conflict without circular reasoning. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)