

## Forum Introduction

# Is the state a person? Why should we care?

PATRICK THADDEUS JACKSON\*

In 1959, Arnold Wolfers published an essay entitled ‘The Actors In World Politics’ in which he suggested that the importance of the state as an actor, although undeniable, needed to be submitted to ‘empirical analysis’ and clearer theorisation if its precise role was to be ascertained.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, almost no one seems to have heeded his advice, and the question about what we might call the person-hood of the state virtually vanished from the agenda of mainstream International Relations (IR) theory.<sup>2</sup> Realists, neorealists, neoliberal institutionalists, theorists of international society, and even many Marxists were content to treat states as, in effect, big people, endowed with perceptions, desires, emotions, and the other attributes of personhood. Significantly, they persisted in these practices even though they often admitted that – in Robert Gilpin’s words – ‘strictly speaking . . . only individuals and individuals joined together into various types of coalitions can be said to have interests’ and therefore really be actors.<sup>3</sup>

The situation was significantly altered by Alexander Wendt’s explicit introduction of the agent-structure problem into IR theory. Wendt suggested that ‘scientists need theories of their primitive units’ instead of simply relying on *ad hoc* ‘as-if’ assumptions, and called for ‘a social theory of the state’ as a way to address this lacuna in IR theory.<sup>4</sup> The theoretical gap was not addressed by the increasingly sophisticated liberal accounts of how domestic political interactions influenced state action, as they tended to simply assume that states were actors, albeit actors without much agency of their own.<sup>5</sup> Nor was it addressed by neo-Marxist and Gramscian accounts

\* The essays included in this symposium were originally presented as part of a roundtable at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association in New Orleans, LA, USA. For comments, feedback, and discussion, we would like to thank Heikki Patomäki and Cynthia Weber (participants in the original roundtable), as well as the lively panel audience.

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Wolfers, ‘The Actors in International Politics’, in *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962 [1959]), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> There are partial exceptions, such as Richard Mansbach and John A. Vasquez, *In Search of Theory: A New Paradigm for Global Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). See also Lars-Erik Cederman, *Emergent Actors in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Wendt, ‘The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory’, *International Organization*, 41 (1987), pp. 349, 343.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Nordlinger, *On the Autonomy of the Democratic State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Andrew Moravcsik, ‘Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics’, *International Organization*, 51 (1997), pp. 513–53.

of class hegemony, which tended to dissolve the state into a set of institutional responses to global economic flows and relations of production, and thus replace the question of the person-hood of the state with the question of the relative autonomy of particular social institutions.<sup>6</sup> The movement to 'bring the state back in' in comparative politics had also failed to provide the requisite theory of the state, inasmuch as it too presumed the person-hood of the state and inquired into the relative influence that this institutional person played in concrete political struggles.<sup>7</sup>

Even 'constructivists' in IR, whose theoretical agenda took the agent-structure problem as their starting-point, have not provided such a theoretical account. Instead, constructivists have tended to either displace the state in favour of other actors, such as 'international organizations' or 'transnational activist networks', themselves implicitly conceived as persons unproblematically capable of social action;<sup>8</sup> or they have confined their analyses to a consideration of how state identity affects state action, thereby implicitly assuming the state's person-hood every bit as much as neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists do.<sup>9</sup> Even with so much constructivist work in circulation, IR largely remains a field marked by an absence of theorising about its basic object of analysis.

The publication of Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* marks a watershed in this respect, as Wendt proffers the first systematic account of states *as actors* that the field has seen in many years. Wendt suggests that 'states are real actors to which we can legitimately attribute anthropomorphic qualities like desires, beliefs, and intentionality', a position that he derives from a broad survey of state theory in sociology and political science.<sup>10</sup> He also suggests that 'we can theorize about processes of social construction *at the level of the states system* only if such processes have exogenously given, relatively stable platforms', thereby tossing out a challenge to those who would simply deny that the state is any sort of person to clarify their relationship to the project of state-systemic theory and respond to the charge of reductionism.<sup>11</sup>

These are bold claims, with profound implications for the study and practice of world politics. In response to them, this symposium gathers responses from scholars operating in a number of intellectual traditions discussing Wendt's claims about state person-hood. Each of the contributions to this symposium uses Wendt's argument as a starting point for reflections on the issue in its broadest sense, and thus contributes to fleshing out the contours of possible theories of the state and

<sup>6</sup> Robert Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Stephen Gill (ed.), *Historical Materialism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Peter B. Evans, et al. (eds.), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Legro, 'Culture and Preference in the International Cooperation Two-Step', *American Political Science Review*, 90 (1996), pp. 118–37; Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, 'A Framework for the Study of Security Communities', in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds.), *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 29–65.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 197.

<sup>11</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 198.

setting an agenda for future research and theorising. The symposium as a whole thus serves to foreground an issue that has remained in the background of IR debates for many years.

There are a number of reasons why the question of state person-hood should be an important issue for IR theorists:

*IR Theoretical.* Much of IR theory has been articulated within and focuses on activities taking place within an ‘international system’, shaped and structured by a notion of states as actors.<sup>12</sup> This is a principal axis of debate between neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists on the one hand, and domestic-politics liberals and many constructivists on the other, and is reflected in disputes about what the primary actors in world politics are and how they should be identified. Also, recent debates in the field about ‘globalisation’ have largely revolved around the question of whether the state is fading away or merely retrenching. The vast majority of these debates have unfolded without any systematic effort to theorise what it *means* for something like the state to be an actor or a person, and thus display a lack of clarity on the question of how we would know whether (for example) the state were fading away or not. Systematic reflection on the issues raised in this symposium can only be helpful to these discussions.

*Social Theoretical.* A major debate in social theory for many years has involved the question of agency, and whether agency can be meaningfully located anywhere other than in constitutively independent human individuals. ‘Individualism’ and ‘holism’ may mark the extremes of this debate,<sup>13</sup> but a number of intermediate positions also exist, ranging from Margaret Archer’s ‘morphogenetic’ approach, to Anthony Giddens’ ‘structuration’, to Rom Harré’s notion of the ‘causal powers’ of agents.<sup>14</sup> Agency is a central concern for any theory purporting to deal with social action, and the issue of whether the state is or can be meaningfully regarded as a person has implications for how we think about agents and agency in world politics.

*Philosophical.* Whether or not the state is a person is ultimately a question about what Erik Ringmar has called ‘the ontological status of the state’.<sup>15</sup> As such, the discussion necessarily touches on issues of both ‘philosophical’ and ‘scientific’ or practical ontology, where the former deals with the way in which entities are considered to exist in the first place and the latter details the kinds of things that exist in the world demarcated by a particular theoretical approach.<sup>16</sup> If states are

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); J. David Singer, ‘The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations’, in Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba (eds.), *The International System: Theoretical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 77–92.

<sup>13</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory*, pp. 26–9.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Archer, *Culture and Agency*, revised edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); Rom Harré, *Social Being*, 2nd edn. (London: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Erik Ringmar, ‘On the Ontological Status of the State’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 2 (1996), pp. 439–66.

<sup>16</sup> Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight, ‘After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 44 (2000), p. 215.

persons, and the principal persons in world politics, then elements of world politics not having to do with states and state action are necessarily backgrounded; likewise, if the state is not a person, or not the principal person in world politics, other actors or forces may emerge as more prominent factors. Thus, this symposium may be regarded as an example of ‘applied ontology’, in which the practical implications of philosophical debates are clearly illustrated.

*Ethical.* Whether or not the state is a person also has profound moral and ethical consequences, with immediate implications for debates about collective guilt and corporate responsibility. Person-hood is an inescapable component of debates about responsibility, and as can be clearly seen in international legal discussions from at least the Nuremberg Trials to the present. If the state is a person, does it follow that only the state as a whole can be held responsible for ‘crimes against humanity’ perpetrated by its representatives? Or do only individuals bear responsibility for such actions? Is there a difference between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ persons, and if so, what implications does this difference have?<sup>17</sup>

Only a sustained discussion of whether and to what extent states are persons can shed light on these issues. This symposium does not hope to achieve consensus, but rather to illustrate the diversity of positions and perspectives on the issue in the hopes of sustaining and furthering an emergent conversation. In this way, we aim to focus the field’s attention on this often-neglected issue and spur further debate about it.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of some of these issues, see Chris Brown, ‘Moral Agency and International Society’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 15 (2001), pp. 87–98.