ANALYTICAL ESSAY

The Potential for Fundamental Change in World Politics

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Despite the Realist’s assertion that nothing fundamental changes in world politics, change is the norm in all life and all fields. World politics is no exception. Yes, there are continuities in world politics; they are the persistent, albeit themselves changing, mechanisms that foster fundamental change, the both large and small alterations in the nature of agents, structures, processes, and the content of arguments. Sometimes things change slowly, they evolve. And sometimes radical changes occur in a relatively short period of time; we might think of the latter as phase changes or radical ruptures at tipping points. But often those ruptures have been preceded by decades of slower work by advocates of change toiling in civil societies or specialized communities. Thus, a great deal of effort goes into not only making change but also resisting change.

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Introduction

In the 1980s, I was engaged in a movement that helped change the world; it is why I believe that change occurs and that the process of argument is almost always crucial in the process of making change. In that movement, I had a good friend, colleague, and mentor in Randy Forsberg, a scholar of nuclear weapons, war, and arms control. Randy authored the idea of the bilateral US-Soviet nuclear weapons “freeze,” which was the rallying cry of the antinuclear movement in the United States during the 1980s. For Randy, information was power—the power to open and change minds, the power to build a movement. Randy epitomized the practice of Habermasian discourse ethics, well before Habermas theorized it. She believed in evidence, the force of the better argument, in the use of reason in the search for truth. Randy practiced a form of argumentation that engaged the other respectfully and always used her brilliance honestly, without deception, meeting the claims of the other with better arguments. Randy also worked with many thousands of others to create a political movement that pushed the Reagan administration toward the negotiating table with the Soviet Union and Mikhail Gorbachev.\(^\text{1}\) At the same time, activists in Europe worked to end the arms race, promote human rights, and end the Cold War.

\(^\text{1}\) See Evangelista (1999), Kaldor (2003), and Wittner (2003).
Randy was a great admirer of the work of Norbert Elias. In 1968, Elias said, “change is a normal characteristic of society” (2000, 457). Elias was reacting against the then dominant view in sociology that change was a disruption of a normally functioning homeostatic system and that once change occurred, equilibrium would be established. Elias, a sociologist, did not study international relations, but I have to agree with him. Change is the normal condition of world politics, not the exception. World politics is not fundamentally a struggle for power, understood in its physically coercive sense, in an anarchic setting. World politics is a struggle over the content, contours, and process of change. This change is a process, in part, of negotiation through words and actions. Some change is driven by institutionalized processes; other change is driven by actors deploying arguments that can mobilize others to use force or to agree that force should be taken off the table.

Scholars have argued that international relations theory undertheorizes change (e.g., Gilpin 1981; Crawford 2002). Indeed, change was and is more than undertheorized—it is frequently dismissed as needing no theorization. Social scientists are supposed to be concerned with something more fundamental; we look for enduring laws and theories that explain those laws. Daily news journalism is about what is new, what changes. Most of us in the academy will certainly never be accused of being journalists. But when we fail to acknowledge change, even fundamental change—when we act as if everything is as it always was and will be—we might as well be daily news journalists summarizing what happened today, less concerned with why it happened. Elias (2000, xii) diagnoses the problem with scholarship that is not rooted in historical change as the consequence of a kind of artificial abstraction:

It may seem at first sight an unnecessary complication to investigate the genesis of each historical formation. But since every historical phenomenon, human attitudes as much as social institutions, did actually once “develop”, how can modes of thought prove either simple or adequate in explaining these phenomena if, by a kind of artificial abstraction, they isolate the phenomena from their natural historical flow, deprive them of their character as movement and process, and try to understand them as static formations without regard to the way in which they have come into being and change?

Elias (2000, xii) then suggests that we have a balancing act to perform:

It is not theoretical prejudice but experience itself which urges us to seek intellectual ways and means of steering a course between the Scylla of this “staticism” which tends to express all historical movement as something motionless and without evolution, and the Charybdis of the “historical relativism” which sees in history only constant transformation, without penetrating to the order underlying this transformation and to the laws governing the formation of historical structures.

If we believe too strongly in our ideal types, when we engage in a mode of thinking that is “a systematic reduction of social processes to social states” (2000, 455), we deprive ourselves of asking a multitude of questions, including how things became the way they are and how they might be different.

In fact, change is the norm in all life and all fields, and ours is no exception. Yes, there are continuities in world politics. However, that which does not change in world politics—the main continuity—is change. There are persistent, albeit themselves changing, mechanisms that foster fundamental change. By change I mean both large and small alterations in the nature of agents, structures, processes, and the content of arguments. Sometimes things change slowly, they evolve. And sometimes very big or radical changes occur in a relatively short period of time; we might think of the latter as phase changes or radical ruptures at tipping points. But often those ruptures have been preceded by decades of slower work by advocates of change toiling in civil societies or specialized communities. Thus, a great deal of effort goes into not only making change but also resisting change. Some
actors respond to changes with fear and hatred toward those who bring the change. They cling to what they perceive as the natural order. They are reactive.

**Change Deniers versus Change Chroniclers?**

For some reason, we social scientists who focus on war and international economics do not usually focus on change. We usually attend to continuity. Why is that? Quite simply, as a field, many of us who study world politics were educated to believe that there was no reason to suspect change in politics if our human nature did not change. As Morgenthau (1985, 4) said in *Politics Among Nations*, “Human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavored to discover these laws. Hence, novelty is not necessarily a virtue in political theory, nor is old age a defect.” Kenneth Waltz (1979, 66) doubled down on this view when he said:

> The texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly. The relations that prevail internationally seldom shift rapidly in type or in quality. They are marked instead by dismaying persistence, a persistence that one might expect so long as none of the competing units is able to convert the anarchic international realm into a hierarchic one. The enduring anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia, a statement that will meet with wide assent.

In sum, according to Realists, humans live in states that seek power and security. Period. Yet, despite the fact that they say as much, it would nevertheless be an exaggeration to suggest that Morgenthau, Waltz, and other Realists were denying the fact of change. They were simply saying that nothing **fundamental** changes; there is “striking sameness” in international politics because the “laws of politics” are enduring. Any dramatic changes could be explained away as superficial, short-lived, and demonstrative of the underlying and enduring “general laws” of world politics long ago revealed by earlier scholars or astute observers of “human nature.” In *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin (1981, 7) says, “the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia. International relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in state of anarchy. . . . Yet important changes have taken place. . . . Nevertheless, we contend that the fundamentals have not been altered.”

There are at least three problems with change denial as a position. On the one hand, it confuses a somehow-defined timeless human nature with social institutions, thus conflating levels of analysis. Too little differentiation means we cannot see what is changing, and the next questions that follow about process and cause are thus given short shrift. This leads to the second problem: a static view of history that minimizes human agency and reflectivity and suggests that we are helpless to change our fates (see Crawford 2009b and Crawford 2012). Third, it is a largely implicit endorsement of a sort of natural selection view where the “less skillful” who do not adapt “fall by the wayside” (Waltz 1979, 92, 118; also see Sterling-Folker 2001).

In short, Realists actually have a lot to say about change. Specifically, realists have thoroughly analyzed how the use of force leads to change. Realist analyses have centered prominently on the ways that a constant struggle for power affects power and eventually may cause a state to decline—the cycle of overextension and exhaustion that leads to shifts in great power status. Although the English school pays great attention to history and is less convinced that our human nature damns us, Martin Wight (1966, 26) said “international politics is the realm of recurrence and repetition.”

Besides the Realist school, which smuggles in theories of change, other major strands of international relations scholarship focus explicitly on change. First, the English school suggests a view of an expanding international society from Europe
to the rest of the world (see Bull and Watson 1984), while their intellectual heirs focus on the globalization of international society (see Linklater 2016; Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017). Second, many Constructivists, a rather diverse group, focus on normative change and, in particular, accounting for it through the process of argument or the spread, internalization, and institutionalization of ideas (e.g., Acharya 2004; Crawford 2002; Finnemore 2003; Sikkink 2011). Third, some scholars have embraced complexity theory from the natural sciences (see Harrison 2006 and Jervis 1997), which stresses interaction and feedback loops.

**What Is Changing? How?**

When scholars disagree about whether there is continuity or change in world politics, or how change occurs, we are often not really disagreeing but talking past each other. This is perhaps because we are looking at the same phenomena from different perspectives or looking at phenomena that are occurring at different rates or on different scales; one of us might be attending to agents while another is focusing on structures or processes. This last difference in perspective is fundamental: to identify change is to attend to the processes that shape institutions. For instance, we may be talking past each other when some are theorizing the proximate causes of radical ruptures in the hegemonic order—while others are looking at what might be called the more glacial or evolutionary processes that could eventually yield a radical rupture or lead to micro changes that look, from a distance, like a long-term evolutionary change.

To use a politically loaded analogy of some—though limited—utility, we can think of change in weather, seasonal patterns, and climate. During any given day or week, a relatively short period of time, the atmosphere close to the earth may change from sunny to cloudy to rainy or snowy or any number of other conditions. There are seasonal changes, and the climate, the long-term condition of the atmosphere, may also vary. As I write this article, it is a beautiful sunny day in New England, neither too warm nor too cool; on the other hand, most scientists agree that the climate is changing, getting warmer, with global average temperatures rising steadily, and they also agree about the cause. We need a similar vocabulary and indicators. Our field already has candidate typologies and indicators; for example: international system (anarchy, hierarchy, society); structure (bipolarity, multipolarity); regimes (normative, security); and so on. These indicators are largely fixed to a modern sensibility where states are the dominant agents. But the states system itself arose over hundreds of years (a climate change of sorts) and may give way to something else. Other candidate indicators (which are admittedly also fixed to a modern sensibility) are: the degree and type of intergroup violence, the prevailing understanding of human rights, modes of production and exchange, and mechanisms for dispute resolution.

Our challenge is to identify: the agents, structures, and processes that are fundamental and persistent (albeit, likely themselves gradually changing); what changes; and how change occurs (by what processes are norms and institutions maintained and altered). Once we agree that there has been a change, we can start to ask why.

We understand some proximate causes of some radical change quite well—these include the violent ways agents and structures might change, such as war, revolution, and technological innovation. For example, we have good theories, such as imperial overreach, which capture how state overspending on the military and overcommitment to wars of occupation drains its “treasure” and increases both the domestic and international resistance to hegemonic aspirations. War is a huge engine of change in the international system of states, and it is also a consequence of other changes.

Yet, in our attention to the violent levers of change or the changes that result from violence, we have tended to discount the nonviolent levers of change and, with notable exceptions (including Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), we have not theorized
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the deeper sources of change. By this I mean the forces that bring about the proximate causes of change—the evolution underneath the revolution. In other words, these are forces—that is, the ideas and processes—that work over the longue durée. These ideas and processes cause alterations in the underlying conditions of politics, shifting the prevailing winds of politics; they are the force behind the change and, like the wind, it is sometimes easier to see the effects of the movement than the movement itself. Rapid, revolutionary changes, such as large-scale war, are the consequence of a series of fundamental evolutionary processes. The change underneath the proximate or large-scale change may be cultural or ideational, such as the Protestant Reformation, the rise of a scientific and Cartesian world view, or the humanization of distant others that led to the development of human rights and their gradual extension. There are also deep economic processes, such as the rise of wage labor and capitalism, and the environmental damage caused by the overuse of resources.

There has, arguably, been a change over a long period of time (the last six hundred years) in the level of brute-force coercive violence in the world. Intergroup violence could increase in the next one hundred years, but it has declined (see Goldstein 2011; Pinker 2011) over the long-run, and both the agents who make war and the issues that political groups fight about have also changed (see Luard 1987 and Finnemore 2003). Why? Mary Kaldor (2003) has pointed to the rise of a global civil society, which often offers another way to resolve disputes. Arguably, the decrease in violence has also been, at least in part, a consequence of the growth in zones of peace (inside states), which is itself partly a consequence of the growth of the rule of law and democratic institutions (see Forsberg 1997). The decrease in violence is also due in part to normative changes that emphasize restraint in the use of force (see Luard 1987; Finnemore 2003; Elias 2000; and Linklater 2016) and in part to the development of institutions that facilitate nonviolent conflict resolution.

Andrew Linklater (2016), building on Elias’ ideas about increasing self-restraint within societies and Wight’s exploration of the concept of international society, put the gradual decline of the use of force down to the gradual civilization of international society. And, like Linklater (2011), I would also say that we argue more and fight less. The growth of the effectiveness of international law both depends on and facilitates the reduction of violence (e.g., see Koskenniemi 2001). Humans have (largely) agreed that it is better to resolve our disputes through arguments than through brute force, and we have agreed on the (gradually decreasing number of) issue areas where it is still acceptable, albeit regrettable, to use force. As war declines as a proximate cause of change, other factors will dominate as proximate causes of change.

A Theory of Nonviolent Change

One of the main nonviolent engines of change in world politics is the process of making arguments about what is good, useful, and right to do. We also make arguments about the right way to argue and make decisions. Advocates of fundamental change typically engage in arguments that include repeated rounds of several types of claims: arguments that denormalize and delegitimize a dominant institution’s constitutive beliefs and practices, they offer alternatives that may be better on some grounds—for example, more economically efficient or morally right—and then activists work to change the balance of political power and the operation of institutions by mobilizing political power and changing the constitutive practices that structure social life. The process of change is iterative and recursive, taking decades to gradually denormalize dominant practices. As new beliefs are adopted and institutionalized, advocates of normative change build on those new institutions with new arguments. There are occasional setbacks. Yet the process of normative and institutional change can be both continuous and recursive with gain building upon gain, institutional change creating more space for fundamental change.
Taking a long-term perspective in Argument and Change in World Politics (2002), I demonstrated that there had been major changes in important institutions and dominant practices of world politics. Namely, I argued that the international slave trade, slavery, and overseas colonialism—dominant and taken for granted for thousands of years of human history as normal and legal practices—were challenged and gradually ended over the course of several hundred years by social movement actors and other agents who deployed practical, scientific, identity, and normative arguments. I also argued that, at the same time, there were some processes that were relatively constant and which could indeed explain the changes. But for me, that book was as much about the process of normative change as it was about the particular institutions and institutional changes I wanted to understand.

The process of political argumentation, which is linked to other processes of contestation, does not always tend in a direction that turns out to be “progressive.” Arguments do not always lead to what we would consider to be positive results. People may argue that it is “good” and justified to kill people and take their possessions. This is the argument for colonialism, imperialism, and genocide. To some extent, it is the argument for some forms of militarized capitalism.

In sum, people make arguments at all levels, deploying reasons that may be rational and/or emotional, trying to persuade others and then trying to build new institutions or bend existing ones. The constant in world politics is the practice of argument and the process of persuasion, deployed at all levels, by all sorts of political actors. The arguments that a large number of people come to agree with and which are institutionalized become the principles that shape structures, the content of the identities of agents, and the intentions of the practices that shape everyday life. The persuasive arguments are what make us believe in the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the use of force.

We will understand world politics much better if we attend to the process of political argument and attend to the action at the level of the nonviolent levers of cultural, environmental, economic, and normative forces. Argument is only absent at the extremes of pure communication or pure violence (Crawford 2009a). These arguments are both rational and emotional; global civil society actors are deploying reasoned arguments that include facts, but they are also deploying narratives that come from and mobilize hope and love as against fear and hate or vice versa.

Conclusions: Change Does Not Equal Progress

I conclude with some clarification and caveats. First, I am not arguing that the only options are stasis or change. I do not think anyone argues that. Second, I do not want to suggest that material forces are irrelevant. We are blind, and perhaps suicidal, if we do not attend to the anthropogenic material aspects of environmental change with greater urgency. And force has not been eliminated from world politics in favor of political argument and the rule of law. The continued existence and modernization of nuclear weapons which would, if widely used, destroy life on earth as we know it, is a testament to the fear that keeps us armed and the persistent belief in the utility of force or its threats. Third, as much as our intentions matter, not everything happens as intended. Moreover, none of the changes in the use of force or democratization over the longue durée are inevitable. I am not arguing for Whiggish history, Hegelian telos, or a Fukuyama-esque “end of history.” World politics is an emergent, complex, adaptive system of multiple interacting systems of production, exchange, representation, and discourse.

To focus on change is to bring both institutional and individual human agency to the fore. Human beings, through organization, activism, construction, and revision of their relationships and institutions, reflect upon and change their world. Sometimes we get what we do not expect or want. Nevertheless, elements of world politics are driven by intentional human agents acting reflexively, and this can be
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a source of reasoned hope in our capacity to make a better world. Reflective and reflexive human beings engage novel social problems within evolving social institutions; they learn from their social interactions and, within institutions, are shaped by them. Through organization, activism, construction, and revision of their relationships and institutions, they reflect upon and change their world in light of their revisable understanding of the past and present and in line with their intentions to create a desired future.

References


