

# Still No Robust Evidence for World Polity Theory

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We do not think that the analysis offered by Li and Hicks (hereafter, LH) makes a convincing case for world polity theory. Theoretically, they effectively reduce the world polity argument to a weakened version that does not account for the *rise* of the nation-state to global hegemony but merely focuses on the *effects* of such hegemony. Moreover, the empirical analyses that support this weak version do not hold up to scrutiny; they are not robust to slightly different and substantially more meaningful model specifications and are sensitive to sample definition.

To summarize, LH make the following points, which we will address in order. First, they argue that historical institutionalism does not explain why the nation-state model—rather than city-states or empires—became dominant in the modern world, while world polity theory does. Second, they maintain that to test world polity theory in line with its own premises, we need to look at the postwar period, because it is only after World War II that the nation-state model became part of the hegemonic world culture propagated by international organizations such as the United Nations. Reducing the empirical universe to the years since 1945, LH find that the prospect of nation-state creation increases as the number of nation-states in the world increases (indexing how far the nation-state has already become part of world culture) and the more memberships in international government organizations (IGOs) the imperial center holds (indexing exposure to world cultural templates). Third, they point out that an additional factor should be considered in the empirical analysis, for which no data were available at the time the original article was written: the international nongovernmental

organizations (INGOs) that sow world political templates into local soils, helping the idea of national independence grow.

## STRONG AND WEAK WORLD POLITY THEORY

Before we address these points, an important theoretical issue needs to be discussed, that is, how to specify the empirical implications of world polity theory. We suggest distinguishing between a weak and a strong version. The strong version—as introduced in Meyer and colleagues' (1997) classical text—argues that from the early Renaissance onward, a world cultural model emerged, reinforced later on by the enlightenment, defining the guarantee of individual liberty, national independence, rational government, popular sovereignty, and equality before the law as templates for legitimate government. Originally limited to the West, this template assumed an independent causal force “since at least the 17th century” (Meyer et al. 1997:163, 173). It pressured, in other words, existing states of the Old World to conform to this template. After World War II, these cultural templates became truly global in reach and forced the rest of the world into its mold. To put it simply, world polity templates caused the creation of nation-states throughout

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modern history: first in the West, then in “the rest” (Meyer et al. 1997:147, 158, 159). The original article showed that there is no evidence for this strong version, appropriately tested with data for the entire world from 1816 onward. Model 1 of Table 1 restates this finding: increasing the number of nation-states in the world or the center’s memberships in international organizations does not make a transition to the nation-state more likely.

The weaker and less appealing version of the argument is that the nation-state model became globally dominant for some historically contingent reasons, that is, independent of world society pressures themselves. Once it achieved hegemonic status, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, epistemic communities of experts, and consultants further propagated the model. In this weak version, world culture does not explain the rise of the nation-state model, but merely its proliferation once it was adopted and propagated by the most powerful actors and the international institutions they created. One could fold this weak version, it should be noted, into a range of other theoretical traditions, including Gramscian hegemony theory, historical institutionalism, or diffusion theory, all of which argue that institutions, once established, contain self-reinforcing and self-propagating mechanisms.

LH effectively embrace and test this weak version of the argument, not the strong version. The strong version—world culture as a *cause* for the rise of the nation-state, including its institutional enshrinement in international organizations—obviously needs to be tested by including a much larger time span, as we did in the original article.

## WHY THE NATION-STATE?

This brings us to the first point raised by LH. They claim that historical institutionalism does not explain why the nation-state model became hegemonic—and not city-states, empires, European Union style supra-national polities, and so on—but world polity theory does. We like to submit that it is the opposite: the weak version of world polity theory, as embraced by

LH, quite obviously does not attempt to explain why the nation-state became the only game in the global town—it focuses entirely on its consequences. By reducing the time horizon to the postwar period, the question of why the nation-state model became globally hegemonic, enshrined in the UN Charter, and so on, vanishes from sight. Thus, the strong version of World Polity theory does offer an argument about why the nation-state rose to global hegemony, but it does not seem to work empirically. The weak version reduces its ambition from explaining the hegemonic rise of the nation-state to merely exploring its consequences.

Historical institutionalism, on the other hand, does offer a diffusionist argument about why the nation-state model became the most attractive political organization in the modern world. As briefly mentioned in the original article and as one of us argued in detail elsewhere (Hiers and Wimmer 2013; Kroneberg and Wimmer 2012; Wimmer 2013), the first nation-states (e.g., Great Britain, France, and the United States) offered a new exchange relationship with the population: political participation for military support and taxes for public goods. The new relationship made these states more legitimate and more powerful than others because there was less resistance to raising taxes, the population had a stake in the political destiny of these states, and governments could mobilize the entire population for military service. Subsequently, nationalism spread around the world because ambitious political leaders sought to transform their own polities along this new model in order to one day preside over states as economically effective, politically legitimate, and militarily powerful as the first nation-states. The original article under discussion then identified the conditions under which these nationalists could overthrow or co-opt the ancien régime and create modern nation-states. Taken together, these different pieces of historical institutionalist scholarship offer a complete argument about the emergence of the nation-state, the reasons why it was so widely emulated by nationalists around the world, and the conditions enabling the transition to the nation-state beyond the first, paradigmatic cases.

**Table 1.** Logistic Regression on the Year of Nation-State Creation

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
	Full Time Range	Postwar with Splines on Year	Postwar with Calendar Year	Postwar with Decade Dummies	Postwar without French/British Africa	Post-1952 with INGOs
Total number of nations-states in world	-.009 (.009)	-.099** (.025)	-.094** (.019)	-.006 (.013)		
Number of IGO memberships of center	.007 (.005)				.014 (.009)	
Number of INGOs in territory						.251 (.163)
Number of nation-states created in the empire in the past five years	.114** (.038)	.149** (.041)	.149** (.041)	.051 (.045)	-.009 (.074)	.164** (.041)
Number of nation-states created in neighborhood in the past five years	.539** (.125)	1.007** (.201)	1.001** (.206)	.821** (.196)	.751** (.275)	.676* (.264)
Existence of national organization	.987** (.311)	1.379* (.637)	1.395* (.637)	1.359* (.647)	.976 (.733)	1.451+ (.856)
Years since first national organization	.008* (.004)	.009 (.007)	.008 (.007)	.012+ (.007)	.013* (.006)	-.009 (.010)
Center's share of global power	5.170+ (2.879)	86.081* (35.218)	87.647* (34.627)	74.717* (34.767)	122.388** (34.692)	101.351* (48.622)
Center's share of global power x dependency	-9.931** (3.011)	-81.936* (35.284)	-83.652* (34.596)	-70.272* (34.846)	-120.468** (34.931)	-102.980* (48.399)
Dependent territory	.204 (.326)	2.912** (.808)	2.969** (.783)	2.514** (.666)	3.616** (1.075)	3.559** (1.064)
Number of wars fought in the empire	.290** (.053)	.091 (.187)	.089 (.186)	.030 (.173)	-.405 (.358)	.389+ (.213)
Number of wars fought in the territory	.507** (.175)	-.516 (.588)	-.522 (.589)	-.256 (.429)	-.166 (.678)	-.100 (.596)

(continued)

**Table 1.** (continued)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
Variables	Full Time Range	Postwar with Splines on Year	Postwar with Calendar Year	Postwar with Decade Dummies	Postwar without French/ British Africa	Post-1952 with INGOs
Cubic spline on calendar year 1	-.016** (.006)	.288** (.067)			.007 (.026)	-.008 (.038)
Cubic spline on calendar year 2	.049** (.011)	-.019 (.050)			.136** (.040)	.161** (.052)
Year			.268** (.040)			
1946 to 1955				1.740** (.366)		
1956 to 1965				1.931** (.718)		
1966 to 1975				.484 (1.309)		
1976 to 1985				4.382** (.871)		
1986 to 1995				4.971** (1.460)		
Continent fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	16,488	2,442	2,442	2,442	1,956	1,768

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses.  
+p < .1; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01 (two-tailed tests).

## RETESTING THE WEAK VERSION OF WORLD POLITY THEORY

Let us now address the second point raised by LH—the appropriate time frame for evaluating the weak version of world polity theory. When do we assume that the nation-state model has already become hegemonic enough to subsequently influence the proliferation of nation-states? Is it in 1918, after Wilson's 14 points program declared the universal validity of the principle of self-determination, raising the hopes of nationalists around the world? Or is it 1945, as LH argue, when the UN was founded—a club of sovereign countries? Or is it 1960, as Strang (1990) maintained in a first test of world polity theory, when the UN adopted a declaration calling for decolonization? LH ask this important question but then circumvent a proper answer by simply taking the cutoff point that produces the empirical results most favorable to their argument. As they state in note 7, “a 1945 breakpoint differentiates WP effects better than a 1960 breakpoint.” Indeed, the number of nation-states in the world has no statistically significant effect on the likelihood of nation-state creation after 1960, as their own Appendix Table A3 shows. In Model 6 of that same table, the number of nation-states in the world even has a negative (and statistically significant) coefficient for years after 1960. How is this possible if world culture includes the nation-state model after 1945, as LH argue?

But even when accepting a 1945 cutoff point to test the weak version of world polity theory, the results are not robust to different model specifications. An important consideration (both substantive and technical) is how to deal with unobserved changes of the baseline likelihood of transitioning from empire to nation-state. Quite obviously, many things are changing over time that might influence this likelihood—besides the increasing global hegemony of the nation-state model. Global development altered the social composition of dependent territories, increasing the size of middle-classes pressuring for independence;

population growth and urbanization made national sovereignty feasible for more dependencies; communism, on the other hand, became an attractive counter-model to national independence during some decades, and so forth. These unmeasured trends and historical contingencies—many of which are unknown—need to be accounted for statistically.

In the original article, we adopted a wide range of ways to do so, including through a simple year count (for linear trends such as population size), a quadratic function of calendar year (for possible U-shaped relationships such as the rise and fall of communism), decade dummies (for historically contingent developments), and natural cubic splines—which allow us to capture linear as well as nonlinear trends and are therefore the most flexible and effective technique. As noted in the original article, we only relied on results that held up with all three time specifications.

LH model time differently—a fact mentioned in their note 2. They use cubic splines on the number of years elapsed since the last nation-state formation in the world. This creates two problems. First, the technique of using splines on years since last event was developed for repeated events on the same unit of observation, for example, for understanding civil wars in a country series (Beck, Katz, and Tucket 1998, which LH cite in note 2 as their inspiration). Because most territories transition only once to the nation-state, there is no time “since the last event” to be counted on the actual units of observation in this dataset (which are territories). LH therefore had to shift to a higher, global level of observation to measure “time since last event.” It is unclear if this re-interpretation of the repeated events model is statistically appropriate.

Second and more importantly, this re-interpretation of the event history model cannot capture slow moving, unobserved trends—beyond those captured by the world polity variables in the model. To illustrate, LH's technique assumes that the basic likelihood of nation-state creation in 1828, 1920, and 1970 is the same, because in all three years there

were gaps of two years since the last nation-state had formed somewhere in the world (i.e., in 1825, 1917, and 1967). Unobserved changes over time in the baseline hazard rate are therefore picked up by, and thus misattributed to, the number of nation-states variable, which is highly correlated with time, as LH's figures illustrate.

When properly taking changes in the baseline hazard into account, however, the subsample analysis of post-1945 yields entirely different results. Model 2 in Table 1 uses natural cubic splines on calendar years since 1946, which is appropriate to capture both linear and nonlinear trends in the baseline hazard rate. Model 3 uses a simple year count, which can represent positive or negative linear trends. Model 4 uses decade dummies, which are best suited for analyzing nonlinear changes in the baseline hazard due to particular historical configurations. In none of these models is the total number of nation-states in the world positive and statistically significant. The sign of the coefficient is always negative in Models 2 to 4, and in two specifications it even reaches conventional levels of statistical significance—the opposite of what world polity theory would expect.

But what about the second variable used in the original article and LH's models to test world polity theory: the center's number of memberships in international organizations? LH again find a positive relationship for their subsample of post-1945 years, in contrast to the findings of the original article, which found no effect for the total sample of years from 1816 to 2001 (see Model 1 in Table 1). Here, the specification of time does not matter and we can replicate LH's results with cubic splines on calendar year as well. As we did in the original article, and because we think it is good practice in quantitative historical research, we then examined which cases underlie the statistical association. The result entirely depends on the African colonies of France and Great Britain—both countries with a very high number of memberships in IGOs when compared to the other political centers with many dependencies in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Yugoslavia and the

Soviet Union. French and British Africa decolonized from the mid-1950s onward, whereas the Soviet republics and the Yugoslavian provinces became independent nation-states three decades later. Removing French and British Africa from the sample, as we do in Model 5 of Table 1, makes the coefficient for the count of IGO memberships statistically insignificant.

One could thus argue that the disconnect of the Soviet Union from dominant world cultural templates—measured by Moscow's number of memberships in IGOs compared to France and the United Kingdom—explains why nationalism stayed dormant in Soviet domains for much longer. We thus concede to LH that world cultural templates—as transmitted in international institutions—might have had an effect on French and British decolonization of Africa, but not in the rest of the world. How important was this world polity influence in historical reality? Only a detailed process tracing could answer the question. Focusing on the French case, it suffices to say here that the decolonization of French West Africa owes much to the pressure of nationalist movements elsewhere in the empire—the defeat in Indochina in 1954, the violent nationalist struggle in Algeria, and the massive violence necessary to suppress an earlier Madagascar uprising against colonial rule. All of this is quite in line with the historical institutionalist argument about the specific configurations of power that make the creation of nation-states possible (for details, see Hiers and Wimmer 2013). Compared to these historical developments, the influence of discussions in UN committees, the International Postal Union, or the Afro-Malagasy Industrial Property Office (to cite just three of the IGOs considered in the corresponding dataset) must have been rather subtle indeed.<sup>1</sup>

## BRINGING INGOS INTO THE PICTURE

The third and related point concerns the influence of nongovernmental international organizations (INGOs), on which much of the quantitative empirical analyses of world polity

scholars rely. We are grateful to LH for having raised this point and for bringing in an important data source that was not yet available when we wrote the original article. This data source (Smith and West 2012) contains information on where individual INGOs (e.g., the Universal Esperanto Association or the International Cooperative Women's Guild) had chapters from 1953 onward. These data include colonial dependencies and other territorial entities (e.g., Latvia) that were not independent in 1953—which makes them well suited for testing the weak version of world polity theory.

To replicate LH's findings, we used this same data source, interpolated between years, took the natural log of the INGO count variable, and lagged the variable for one year to minimize reverse causation problems (as we do in all models). To check for the robustness of LH's results when using a time specification that can take slow moving, unobserved trends into account, we again used cubic splines on calendar year. As Model 6 in Table 1 shows, there is no statistically significant association between the likelihood of transitioning into the nation-state and the number of INGOs present in a territory as soon as we take other, unobserved time trends into account in an appropriate way. As in the models with the number of nation-states in the world discussed earlier, LH's results do not hold up to a different, and substantively more meaningful, specification of the passing of time and the trends this might capture. We note that the same results—no statistically significant association between INGOs and nation-state creation—are obtained when using calendar year or decade dummies as time specification.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we do not find consistent and robust evidence for even the weak version of world polity theory, according to which once the nation-state became part of the global canon of cultural templates, world society pressures further promulgated the diffusion of nation-states. As soon as we take unobserved trends into account that are not related to the

spread and deepening of world culture, an increased number of nation-states in the world or INGOs in a territory do not foster nation-state creation. There is not much empirical support, in other words, for global diffusion or local emulation effects on which world polity theory relies. On the other hand, we found some evidence, in line with LH's arguments, that pressure to conform to the global template increases when the political center holds many memberships in IGOs. But this only accounts for decolonization in French and British Africa—not the rest of the world.

This is *not*, to be sure, a critique of world polity theory as a whole. There is plenty of evidence in the world polity literature of how organizational templates (e.g., school curricula) diffuse at the global level. Such diffusion occurs between political entities that are already structured along similar ways, that is, between nation-states, a point repeatedly made in Meyer and colleagues' (1997) original piece as well as elsewhere (Strang and Meyer 1993).

It seems, however, that the global rise of the nation-state *itself* needs to be understood in different terms. As we showed in the original article, diffusion certainly plays an important role in this process. However, the theater of diffusion is regional (within imperial domains) or local (between neighboring territories) rather than global. Diffusion works through empowering nationalists by weakening the imperial center and at the same time providing a model showing that breaking away from that center is politically feasible. Together with other factors that weaken the imperial center and empower and embolden nationalist contenders, the repetition of such regional processes finally leads, on the aggregate, global level, to the worldwide hegemony of the nation-state model—which world polity theory then describes in such engaging and convincing terms.

## Note

1. Comparing effects sizes also supports this conclusion. Semi-standardizing the coefficients of the two variables in LH's Model 3 of Table 1, we find that for one standard deviation increase in number of IGO memberships, the log-odds for a new nation-state creation increases by a mere .0012, and for the

number of nation-states it is .0015. By comparison, the semi-standardized coefficient for the number of nation-states in the neighborhood in the past five years is 1.406. The small effect sizes also explain why the WP variables are so sensitive to model specification.

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