Peacekeeping and the Politics of Postmodernity

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The flush of enthusiasm over the role and potentialities of the U.N. in the `New World Order' may have been tempered, if not tarnished, by the tribulations which the organization has encountered in Yugoslavia. And given that the general phenomena at work in Yugoslavia seem in form (if not precise content) to be emerging in many different parts of the world, the role for the U.N. might necessarily seem doubtful. But it is not simply the old and well-worn observation that the U.N. cannot force peace upon people who do not want it that is at stake in thinking about the organization's future in the area; that is an observation that is as uninteresting as it is unhelpful. Rather, if we are to understand the challenges which the U.N. will have to face in the realm of peacekeeping we must understand more clearly the dynamics behind these challenges, the ways in which previous understandings may constrain the organization's effectiveness, and the way in which insights into the contemporary situation may yield quite different suggestions for the future.

As a contribution toward this end, this paper attempts to explicate in a cursory fashion the ways in which theories of peacekeeping are embedded in a much broader set of assumptions about the nature of domestic politics and international relations. These assumptions are inextricably intertwined - both theoretically and practically - with their emergence in what is commonly now referred to as 'modernity'.

The theoretical and practical status, not to mention content, of modernity is itself a matter of no small debate. Whether we are now in, entering, or beyond a condition of modernity, high modernity, late modernity or post-modernity is a controversy creating an increasing amount of heat, if a depressingly small amount of light. Yet despite the excesses to which it often leads, the question is an important one since it goes to the very core of how we understand contemporary political life. Still, anyone who wants (is foolish enough?) to invoke such broad concepts faces a series of potential pitfalls. How, after all, does one give adequate concrete content to a concept as broad as 'modernity', let alone its purported successors?[1] Although this treatment will at one level be philosophically inclined, it will not take up directly the myriad controversies between modern and post-modern philosophies of knowledge, ethics or power.[2] Rather, it will seek to outline in general terms the ways in which modernity embodies a set of categories concerning time, space and (in this regard) their political corollary: sovereignty. The representations of these categories of experience specific to modernity are central in coming to terms with the theoretical and practical elements constitutive in the emergence of the modern state system and with the transformations currently underway within it.

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[1]   Nicholas Onuf's attempt is admirably clear, though it is indicative that it does not touch more than elliptically upon any of the themes I wish to stress. He writes: "Between 1600 and 1800, or thereabouts, the main features of modernity became clear. First and most important is the interpretation of the world - the world of meaning and the world of experience - as human-centred. Second is an emphasis on individuality, reason, and mastery over circumstance. Third is a preoccupation with method, the differentiation of tasks, and material prosperity, all in the name of progress." N. Onuf, "Sovereignty: Outline of a Conceptual History" *Alternatives* (Fall, 1991) pp.425-26.

[2]   It will, of course, thus be open to the charge of superficiality or disingenuousness for not doing so, but this is a charge with which I am quite willing to live in this context.

What does all this have to do with peacekeeping? It is my view that many of the categories that we use for thinking about contemporary peacekeeping emerge from precisely this heritage. This is hardly surprising since, after all, they also continue to represent the dominant categories of thinking about political sovereignty as a whole, and as such define most theories of international relations, theories which commonly represent little more than the alter-ego of those assumptions about sovereignty. Analyses of international relations, to put this another way, have largely been constructed from prior theories of domestic political life; they are fundamentally derivative in this sense.[3]

If, following Giddens, Bordieu and others, we conceive of social life as constituted through a reflexive process of self-monitoring practices, these categories of political representation become important in understanding current circumstances, including the dilemmas and challenges confronting contemporary peacekeeping.[4] Moreover, if these conventional modern categories of understanding political life are increasingly unhelpful in illuminating present events, then it follows that visions of the future of peacekeeping which rely upon them will also be increasingly suspect. Indeed, this may already be the case in one of the problematic areas of the United Nations' current involvements: the situation in what used to be Yugoslavia.

Time and Space, States and Sovereigns

In an influential analysis, Benedict Anderson has argued that modern nationalism is just that: particularly **modern**. In Anderson's view, nationalism must be seen in the context of the transition to modernity which provided the context within which these "communities" would (and could) be "imagined". Central to this context was a conception of time as at once abstract and yet, paradoxically, human and creative: history. The emergence of time as history allowed particular social groupings to imagine common origins - however problematic and obscure they might be in actuality - and with these origins, a common destiny uniting them all in a shared historical quest or journey of national becoming.

Equally essential in this emergence was the role of another specifically modern phenomena: capitalism. For Anderson it was the emergence of capitalism in the realm of publishing, what he calls "print-capitalism" which provided a crucial element in this transformation. At one level, the enormous spread of writing (and reading) which went along with this new phenomena fostered the solidification of vernaculars, and the erosion of Church authority through an ending of the essential monopoly of the Church hierarchy in matters of canonical interpretation. Equally, and perhaps even more importantly, the new medium made possible the broad vernacular

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[3]   The best single treatment of this issue is R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 1992).

[4]   In Giddens' words: "reflection on social processes (theories, and observations about them) continually enter into...the universe of events that they describe...Consider, for example, theories of sovereignty formulated by seventeenth century European thinkers. These were the result of reflection upon, and study of, social trends into which they in turn were fed back."Quoted in Onuf, *Op.Cit.* See A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* and *The Nation State and Violence* (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1985).

communication between spatially distant social groups. It thus became possible for these groups to "imagine" themselves as part of the same community with others whom they had never met and likely never would meet.

In a broad perspective, the new abstract conception of time as history (empty and thus waiting to be filled, as opposed to being already part of a divine order) and the rapid consolidation of vernaculars through the explosion of printing and reading associated with print-capitalism, result in a transformation in the understanding of space within early modernity, a transformation which continues - with very important implications - to characterize the world.[5] Both **time** and **space**, to use Giddens characterization of this transition, became increasingly separated from **place**.

In modernity, time becomes severed from space (place). With the spread of the mechanical clock, this empty or abstract time could (in addition to the metaphors of history and thus the nation which it made possible) be rendered uniform and universalized *across* different spaces. As Giddens notes, all premodern cultures had concepts of time and modes for calculating it. But these modes were inherently tied to place in ways torn apart in modernity:

> No one could tell the time without reference to other socio-spatial markers: 'when' was almost universally either connected with 'where' or identified by regular natural occurrences. The invention of the mechanical clock and its diffusion to virtually all members of the population (a phenomenon which dates at its earliest from the late eighteenth century) were of key significance in the separation of time from space. The clock expressed a uniform dimension of 'empty' time, quantified in such a way as to permit the precise designation of 'zones' of the day (eg. the 'working day')".[6]

Similarly, in modernity space became increasingly detached from place. Rather than being limited to a more or less circumscribed locale, the relevant spatial spheres of social life began to encompass ever more territorially distant realms. Again Gidden's summary of this process is admirably clear:

> The advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between 'absent' others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distinct from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the 'visible form' of the locales conceals the distanciated relations which determine its nature."[7]

It is this transition which was central in the emergence of modern states. The transformation of, to use Gidden's phrase, "time-space distanciation" allowed the state to exercise a far greater degree of control over a far greater expanse of territory than had ever been

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[5]   Something which Anderson does not dwell on is the fact that the transformation in the vision of language which he points out - from language as a unity of subject and object to a divide between the two - also places the grounds of unity solely within the subject, thus creating the very dilemma of sovereignty and political obligation so characteristic of modern political thought - as in Hobbes, par excellance. It is also interesting to note the importance of this new conception of time for Hobbes: indeed it would be no real exaggeration to claim that for Hobbes it is time which is the central category of political philosophy. More on this later.

[6]   Anthony Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1990) p.17. On the transformative nature and role of the clock, see David Landes masterful work *Revolutions in Time: Clocks in the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, Mass.; Belknap, 1988).

[7]   *Consequences of Modernity* pp.18-19.

possible before. The ability to exercise 'surveillance', to have the knowledge and the ability to administer and control territory in newly comprehensive ways, marked a key passage in the evolution of the modern state.[8]

But the transition to modernity also involved another form of transformation in the conceptualization of space, a conceptualization which has been particularly important in the constitution of International Relations as an intellectual discipline. To simplify somewhat, the representation of space shifts from a personalized, localized rendering (as in, for example, early medieval maps), to being represented as if from above - looked down upon as a horizontal plane from a bird's eye view.[9] This shift also allowed the political realm to be imagined in radically different ways - as, for example, the spatial representation of the boundaries of the community in nationalist thought and in many conceptions of modern sovereignty and, more directly, as **geo**-politics within theories of international relations.[10]

These new representations of space, and the practical capabilities for extending control over space time through administrative and surveillance capacities, went hand in hand with the problematic meaning of sovereignty in its relation to time in the early modern era. Perhaps the clearest expression of this is found in a theorist rhetorically invoked with remarkable consistency by contemporary theories of international relations: Thomas Hobbes.[11] With the emergence of time as a political category, one which is coincident with the decline of medievalism and the growth of dynastic states, it is possible to perceive one of the roots of the crisis of dynastic political orders. For if time is now a political category, it becomes a political problem as well. If dynastic legitimacy relies on a claim about *divine* right, then what is the link? To claim that One *is* God, is heresy. To claim that One represents God, not only opens the claim to dispute but also, importantly, to the vicissitudes of time. For what happens when the Sovereign **dies**?

This is a deep source of crises of succession in dynastic politics, for it is here that time (the dynast's life) and eternity (the **right** to rule) clash.[12] And it is this problem which is at the heart of much of early modern political theory, most clearly in the case of Hobbes who, in his proposed creation of the Leviathan as a "Mortall God", attempts to solve the riddle of time. But Hobbes is successful in his attempt only so long as he can locate this resolution to the problem of temporality within a particular political space. Thus, again, the importance of **borders** comes to the fore. The spatio-temporal resolution to the dilemmas of modern political order simultaneously yield the defining categories of thinking about international relations; indeed, they represent the **creation** of international relations.

Through a series of conceptual convergences, of time and space, and of the relation of sovereignty to each, the spatial metaphors which characterize thinking about international relations within most of the discipline are grounded in characteristic categories of modernity itself. The most prominent outcome of this, at least for our purposes here, is the centrality of **borders** for contemporary theories of international relations. As Giddens and Anderson both stress, borders are a particularly modern phenomenon. Traditional political

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[8]   See also here Anderson's observations on the importance of vernacular "administrative languages" in this process. *Imagined Communities* p.41, passim.

[9]   In the latest edition of *Imagined Communities*, Anderson acknowledges that this shift in spatial representation was as vital to the emergence of modern nationalism as his earlier concentration on time and print-capitalism. A good brief summary of the transformation can be found in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Oxford; Basil Blackwell, 1989) Ch.15 especially. A more extended and classic treatment is Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford; Basil Blackwell, 1991).

[10] What, after all, is geo-politics other than the attempt to present politics in purely spatial terms? On this theme see R.B.J. Walker, "Realism, Change and International Relations Theory" *International Studies Quarterly*, (March, 1987).

[11] There is obviously much more to Hobbes than this treatment can do justice to.

[12] On the general theme see also: John Gunnell, *Political Philosophy and Time* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1987).

entities undoubtedly had **boundaries**, but the distinctive boundedness of the nation-state emerged from its ability to administer territory over previously unheard of stretches of time-space (not to mention the intensity with which it could do so) as well as its ability to determine precisely **who** belonged within it via the mediation of modern conceptions of sovereignty.[13]

The reliance on spatial conceptions and representations of political order which has so long been central to thinking about international relations has also found a place in thinking in international organizations. This is expressed in the provisions of the U.N. Charter: the principles of sovereign self-determination and non-interference represent a broad underlying vision of the nature of the political world, both domestic and international. The preeminence of territorial sovereignty - of boundary definition and maintenance - constitute the crucial criteria of transgression, even if they frequently find themselves at odds with the more universalist elements of the Charter. And these are precisely the categories through which peacekeeping has commonly been conceived.

Peacekeeping, to put this another way, has been seen in terms of the spatial metaphor of interposition or separation; it involves the insertion of an external force between sovereign entities. The conceptual problem of peacekeeping becomes 'finding' the appropriate boundary; the practical problem, one of subjecting this boundary to adequate surveillance and control.[14]

In many cases such an approach has been, and may continue to be, quite successful. But just like categories of thought concerning international relations which underlie it, this approach is increasingly confronted with dynamics which emerge from transformative tendencies within modernity itself. Central here are numerous factors which have received increasing attention: within international political economy, the breakdown of the Fordist-Keynesian model of national political economies in the face of the transnationalization of monetary and productive relations has become a prominent focus; similarly, the emergence of transnational 'threats' such as environmental degradation has begun to penetrate thinking about 'security'. These are only two of the most obvious representatives of this shift. What each represents at the broader level with which we are concerned here, is an intensification of the dynamics of modernity itself, specifically the way in which political space is no longer conceivable exclusively within national boundaries.[15]

More to the point is the way in which time has increasingly come to prevail over space in the construction of political relations. Contemporary communications have resulted not only in almost instantaneous information (and misinformation) but also in a "disembedding" of political events from their territorial locus. Not only do events far distant now play an increasingly important role on the politics of particular places, but the knowledge of these events provided by contemporary structures has itself to be seen as an increasingly important part of the reflexive nature of social action. Giddens expresses this point very clearly:

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[13]   This observation is strengthened rather than weakened by the counterpoint that often such state structures have been subject to fragmentation, especially on nationalist grounds, for the categories of modern nationalism reflect precisely these categories of understanding and ability, and seek simply to cast them within a different spatial locus. They do not in any way resist their dictates. Nor was, and is, this process by any means an unambiguous blessing. For a particularly powerful evaluation of the dark side of modernity, the state and boundaries, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Oxford; Polity Press, 1989).

[14]   For a clear example of this kind of thinking see Indar Jit Rikhye, *The Theory and Practice of Peacekeeping* (London; Hurst, 1984)

[15]   What is key here is not that such connections have not long existed, but that their contemporary intensity marks a qualitative shift in political life. See David Held, "Democracy and Globalization" *Alternatives* (Spring, 1991). Conversely, it does not imply that intercommunal conflicts have not long existed; it is their new characteristics which are of interest.

A feature of displacement is our insertion into globalized cultural and information settings, which means that familiarity and place are much less consistently connected than hitherto. This is less a phenomena of estrangement from the local than one of integration within globalized 'communities of shared experience'. The boundaries of concealment and disclosure become altered, since many erstwhile quite distinct activities are juxtaposed in unitary public domains.[16]

But this process of disembedding is not simply a one-way event, a flow from the particular into some global melting pot. Rather, these structures also allow a simultaneous process of reimbedding as the globalized attributes become appropriated into local territorialities. In the context of the globalization of the economy this is all perhaps familiar enough. The ability of international capital to circle the globe in search of opportunities for investment is a constant factor in everyday economic relations. In other realms of international politics, however, the connection is often not so clear, and yet it is an impact which needs to be seen clearly.

A good way to do this, as so often is the case, is to return to Giddens. He correctly focuses our attention on the fact that the process of disembedding does not involve a simple shattering of all forms of communal life, the creation of a global but essentially uniform and sterile culture. On the contrary, he argues:

> The disembedding mechanisms lift social relations and the exchange of information out of specific time-space contexts, but at the same time provide new opportunities for their reinsertion. This is another reason why it is mistake to see the modern world as one in which large, impersonal systems increasingly swallow up most of personal life...[it also allows, for example] the recreation of places of relative smallness and informality. The very means of transformation which help to dissolve the connection between locality and kinship provide the possibility for reimbedding, by making it easy to visit 'close' relatives who are far away.[17]

There is a great deal of truth in this, as picking up the phone or driving to the airport readily attests. But placed in the context of the problems of contemporary international relations, it appears a bit one-sided. For the very fragmentation of time and space characteristic of the contemporary world is also central to the fragmentation which so obviously marks that world. Contemporary nationalism, and the conflicts to which it is often leading, needs in part to be seen in this light.

Increasingly, the structures which constituted the modern state are coming under strain. The cracks in the Fordist-Keynesian edifice are only one element at work in this process. As the cultural and communications dynamics of (what I will call) late modernity become increasingly prevalent, a dual process is underway. On the one hand, this involves increasing globalization in almost every realm of life. On the other, this very globalization both engenders and facilitates reactions against its impact. The very process of process of globalization breeds a reaction against it, a reaction which is facilitated by the dynamics of a global economy (the decreased importance and especially capabilities of large national states in a world economy) and the means of cultural and political association, through technology, in reaction both to globalization and to the existing political order.[18]

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[16]   Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity* p.141. For another series of attempts to think through these phenomena see: M. Featherstone, (ed), *Global Culture* (London; Sage, 1990).

[17]   *Consequences of Modernity* p.142.

[18]   See Benjamin Barber, "McWorld versus Jihad" *The Atlantic Monthly* (March, 1992).

Centrally, then, self-identifying groups are neither so tightly bound by the structures of the traditional territorial state, nor are they so tightly bound in their associations by territoriality in the traditional sense. In other words, the relationship of self-identifying groups is increasingly no longer bound in spatial terms as it was in traditional nationalist conflicts.

This means that the spatial locus of conflict can no longer be clearly located. The capacity of social groups to identify (imagine a community) with other groups spatially distant from them, and to communicate with them (and coordinate actions) with relatively little difficulty is a phenomenon which while not historically unique is changing its character and intensity as a result of the dynamics of late modernity itself.

It is precisely this process, I submit, that has been underway in the former Yugoslavia; and it is precisely this (among other factors) which has made that situation such a difficult one for the U.N. The communities made possible by the compression of space-time, most especially in terms of modern communication, change the reflexive nature of these conflicts. The Serbian government in Belgrade and Serbian paramilitary groups in other territories, for example, are able to act with considerable coordination despite often lacking territorial contiguity. What is more, the actions of each, and those parties with whom they are in conflict are reflexively monitored through the same processes, a phenomena shared by actors in other parts of the world. Finally, any entry by an 'outside' actor (for example the U.N.) becomes part of this reflexive process.

The identity between territoriality and sovereignty which underlies much of the theory of peacekeeping is increasingly filled with tension. Again, Yugoslavia may be illustrative: The difficulty of keeping the peace when finding the boundaries between conflicting groups is an almost impossible task, is extreme. Moreover, if the identity of territoriality and sovereignty is central to successful peacekeeping (it allows one to find the boundary and insert a force within it) then the attempts of these territorially disparate groups to create that identity is something about which the U.N. can do little. In effect, to stay with the example of Yugoslavia, this makes the heinous process of 'ethnic cleansing' a precondition for successful peacekeeping, not an occurrence to prevent.[19] It is not too difficult to think of numerous other areas, particularly in the ex-Soviet Union where such a situation might (may already be beginning to) pertain. This is not a pleasant conclusion.

The implications of this situation for the future of peacekeeping are as complex as the dynamics from which the situation emerges. The clearest seems to be that if the U.N. remains within the traditional (spatio-temporal) conception of sovereignty bequeathed to it by modernist conceptions of political life it will be continually unable to deal with this 'post-modern' form of political conflict. To be able to do so would require a substantial shift on the accepted conceptions of sovereignty, and with it the strictures on non-interference and the like. This conclusion, of course, runs headlong into all the traditional arguments against intervention. But it is a question at least worth asking whether or not those strictures (which are clearly modernist in their origins and formulation) are as challenged by the dynamics of late modernity as the traditional understanding of the state itself. If living in globalizing late modernity requires that we fundamentally "rethink" political theory as it relates to democracy, the state and other concepts central to the Western political

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[19]   This draws on elements of modernity far beyond the concentration on time and space which I have adopted here. Again see Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* for a superb analysis of this dynamic within modernity.

tradition,[20] then International Relations - and especially its most cosmopolitan arena, the field of International Organization - can hardly expect to hold itself aloof.

To take this argument in a different direction, it might be argued that while the dynamics of late modernity provide serious difficulties for the U.N., they also may provide new opportunities. If the disembedding\reimbedding dynamics of late modernity provide for new dynamics of conflict, they may also provide for new dynamics of peace.

The first opening here lies in the opportunity for 'outside' forces to play a role of increased prominence in 'internal' politics. In the case of the U.N., its central place in the reflexive processes of conflict makes a clear statement of its views on conflict issues an element in those conflicts. Yet this is obviously not in itself a consistently powerful or effective mechanism. Although the international community could undoubtedly have been clearer and more emphatic in its stance toward the Yugoslavian situation, for example, the efficacy of such tactics will often remain highly limited, no matter how strong a concept of the intersubjectivity of action one wishes to invoke.[21]

A way of giving greater practical effect to this goal may be to utilise opportunities made possible by the structures of late modernity. I am thinking here most particularly of the impacts of social movements on political action. For just as the dynamics of late modernity provide for the possibility of distinctly new forms of conflict, so too they provide the opportunity for different attempts at it prevention. Disembedding and reimbedding structures might also be turned to the fostering of peaceable relations. Transnational social movements may be able to bypass obstructive governmental organizations in ways that more formal institutions cannot. Moreover, in linking with like-minded groups **within** the polities under consideration they can provide a source of political movement which cannot be achieved solely by 'external' pressure through economic or military sanctions.

It could be argued that one of the greatest missed opportunities in the Yugoslavian situation has been the failure of the international community to take advantage of the considerable anti-war sentiment within Serbia. The question of why this is the case would require detailed analysis, but I would venture two possible reasons. The first revolves once again around the principle of non-interference. The second might involve the lack of any concrete channels through which alliances of common purpose and strategy could be made. In both cases, the U.N. could have a role to play in fostering such connections. On the one hand, as argued earlier, the principle of non-interference needs to be given serious reconsideration. Secondly, at a more practical level, the U.N. could seek to foster and facilitate contacts between transnational social movements and to support their efforts toward peaceful relations.

This proposal might itself encounter difficulties depending on the autonomy of the U.N. and the extent to which states view it solely as their instrument and resist involvements of this kind. Conversely, different social movements might see too close an involvement with the U.N. as potentially compromising their autonomy, flexibility and credibility. The relationship would thus in no way be an unproblematic one to develop.

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[20]   For a good survey of these issues see, David Held, (ed.) *Political Theory Today*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
[21]   This is not simply to endorse Hobbes' maxim that "Covenants without the sword are but words", but his challenge must always be taken seriously.

None of this should be taken to imply that such efforts will necessarily meet with great success. Indeed it is quite possible that the future situation will be extremely difficult. But this should not preclude efforts to ameliorate it in new and perhaps promising ways. Peacekeeping, after all, has always been an endeavour fraught with challenges. That fact, however, by no means lessens its importance either historically or in the future.