

THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar



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Edited by
Thomas Lindemann and
Erik Ringmar



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*Cute cats can create outrageous miracles.
In recognition of my catwoman Catherine Small.*

Thomas Lindemann

*To Sandro, Professor Pizzorno,
who first made me recognize
the importance of recognition.*

Erik Ringmar

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Part I

Theoretical Preliminaries

Introduction

The International Politics of Recognition

Erik Ringmar

Identities matter to individuals and they matter to collective entities. In fact, few things matter more than the identities we put together for ourselves since, without an identity, we have no idea of who we are. Yet putting together an identity is often quite a struggle. We need to come up with an account that describes us, but in addition, we need to have this account accepted by people around us. We need to be *recognized*.¹ As the chapters in this book make clear, the logic of identity creation is relevant also to the entities that populate world politics—most notably to the state. States too are coming up with self-descriptions and struggling to have them recognized.² In fact, the struggle for recognition takes up much of a state's time and resources, and it makes states act and interact in specific ways. This is a logic of action and interaction, which has been largely ignored by traditional scholars of international relation.³ As a result, many international phenomena, including colonialism and armed conflicts, have been misinterpreted and badly explained.

The reason why previous generations of scholars have ignored questions of identities is simply that they did not come up. The state was the indisputable subject of a study of world politics and its existence was impossible to problematize. The question was always what the state did and why, and never what, or perhaps who, the state was. We are placed in a better position. In the twenty-first century, identity crises and identity makeovers are everywhere, and the position of the state in world politics is questioned like never before. Abandoning the old *Realpolitik* for a new

Identitätsproblematik, we need new intellectual tools. This book unapologetically assumes that world politics is a social system that can be analyzed with the help of the tools of sociology.⁴ More specifically, we believe that sociological insights into how identities are formed, maintained, and dissolved have much to teach a student of international relations. This introduction provides a first outline.

The Subjectivity of the State

There is a sense in which the state is a subject that can be compared to a person.⁵ Admittedly, this is a contested and an explicitly Eurocentric argument. It is Eurocentric since it most obviously applies to the international system that came into existence in Europe in the late Renaissance, and it does not necessarily apply elsewhere. The argument is contested since states clearly are not persons.⁶ States can be compared to persons to be sure but that does not make them into persons. Most obviously, a state has no unified consciousness, no single memory, and no subjective will. As a result, it is surely difficult to talk about the “identity” of a state and to assume that this identity is fashioned in the same way as the identities of individuals.

A person may not be what a state is, but this is nevertheless how states have been talked about at least for the last four hundred years. The European origins of this way of talking explain how subjectivity came to be attached to the state. In the Middle Ages, political relations, like all human associations, were understood through the metaphor of the *corpus*, the body.⁷ Guilds and fraternities were bodies but so were cities and kingdoms, and all bodies were ultimately incorporated into the universal body, which was the body of the Church. In early modern Europe, the sovereign state found it useful to adopt this body language and to use it for its own purposes.⁸ It was common to talk about the “body politic,” and to endow this body with “arms,” “legs,” a “stomach,” and a “heart.” Naturally, it was the king, or the “head of state,” who directed the state’s overall movements.

The states made up stories about themselves. States in early modern Europe were compulsive self-mythologizers, attaching their often quite undistinguished present to a past filled with classical or biblical references.⁹ The nationalists of the nineteenth century rearranged these accounts to include more references to “the people,” inventing traditions designed to bring legitimacy to their claims to national self-determination.¹⁰ Propagated through the new systems of public education, these stories were soon established as the official histories of the nation-state.¹¹ Most of us still believe in some versions of these semi-mythological accounts.

In early modern Europe, the world was often compared to a stage.¹² Sometimes, as in Shakespeare, the metaphor was used, slightly pathetically, to express the superficiality and vanity of human pretensions, but it soon became the standardized way in which international politics was discussed. The body-metaphor and the stage-metaphor were combined; that is, the body of the state was turned into an actor.

After the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the state became increasingly regarded as a sovereign, self-directing actor constrained only by the actions of other states.¹³ At the royal courts but also on more popular occasions, such as at country fairs, plays were performed that illustrated the political relations of the day.¹⁴ On the stage before them, the audience would literally see their state acting and interacting with other states.

The stage was a world and the world was a stage. Together the various states formed a theater company that regularly met for performances on the battlefields of Europe or in the conference halls where the peace treaties were signed. It was an illustrious troupe: the actors were civilized, they were Christian, they had an awesome military and political capability. It was in their company that lesser political units one day aspired to appear. And this is how we still think about international politics. Pick up any newspaper article on world affairs, and it will be replete with states "considering options," "acting aggressively," "signing agreements," or "threatening sanctions"—all before the critical or the approving eyes of world opinion.

This is how the subjectivity of the state originally came to be established. This metaphorical cluster and its associated performative practices were eagerly adopted by absolutist rulers for whom they seemed ideally suited. The *l'état c'est moi* of Louis XIV was not an egocentric indulgence as much as an expression of the official French theory of sovereignty.¹⁵ But the subjectivity of the state was equally useful to republics and later to the needs of democratic governments. Both citizens and leaders identify themselves with their states; the state is the protector of our national culture and our status in the world. We tie our hopes to our states and make careers in their institutions; we celebrate their successes and lament their defeats. Funnily enough, such *étatisme* is often strongest in places where state institutions are least appreciated. *L'état*, even Americans agree, *c'est nous*.¹⁶

In international law, the subjectivity of the state is a well-established commonplace. The state is the *persona* of international law in much the same way as individuals are the *persona* of civil law and corporations the *persona* of commercial law.¹⁷ In international law, a state is a subject endowed with rights and obligations, and it is an actor who can think rationally and be held responsible for the consequences of its actions. In fact, in legal treatises the state has usually attained nothing short of a transcendental status.¹⁸ The state remains the same even as it changes its rulers, its citizens, and its political system, or as territory is added to or subtracted from it. It is only if the state is completely divided up by others that its subjectivity comes to an end.

We may perhaps object that this language is metaphorical through and through and that the subjectivity of the state for that reason is a matter of language rather than any real, observable facts. Perhaps it is nothing more than a hermeneutic device—a way to illustrate and explain things; a way to show how international politics works. And admittedly, beyond this metaphorical language, there can be no additional proof of the state's subjectivity. But much the same can be said about the subjectivity of individuals.¹⁹ If we probe our brains for evidence of our identities, we will necessarily be disappointed. Brain states, after all, are not what we are. Identities are social facts created through social interaction, and what is true for the identities of individuals

is true for the identities of states.²⁰ We are not in the realm of reality; we are in the realm of interpretation.

Recognition and Its Denial

If there is a sense in which states can be thought of as persons, it should be possible to understand the formation of state identities with the help of the same intellectual tools we use for understanding the identities of individuals. Relying heavily on Hegel's celebrated account in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we can understand this process first as a question of the stories that individuals tell about themselves.²¹ We make up an account, or we make up many, which describe ourselves to ourselves. The problem with these self-descriptions is that they often are faulty. Unfettered in our fantasies, we are wont to exaggerate our importance and our prospects or, alternatively, we are only too ready to accept the accounts, handed down to us by society and by tradition, of what a person like ourselves is supposed to be. In either case, we will be mistaken about ourselves.

And even if we somehow manage to describe ourselves in a reasonably realistic fashion, there are still many things about us that we simply do not know. Locating ourselves inside our bodies, we believe we have privileged access to our mental states—indeed we may believe that we *are* our mental states—but this privileged perspective is also quite limiting. Above all, since we never can see ourselves except awkwardly and in fleeting moments in a mirror, we have only limited knowledge of what we look like while interacting with others.²² Other people, by contrast, are wont to describe us far more realistically. They are unlikely to exaggerate our importance or our looks, but equally, they may be able to see potentials in us that we have ignored. After all, other people have a privileged perspective, too: seeing us from the outside, they know far better what we are like as *social* beings. In the end, identities are created through an interplay of these two alternative perspectives. We start by telling stories about ourselves, which we go on to test on people around us. We let other people know who we believe we are, and they let us know whether or not our account is reasonable. In this way, our stories about ourselves are, or are not, recognized.

Stories are told about states in much the same fashion. A community of storytellers could be referred to as a "nation."²³ A nation consists of people who mutually recognize each other as belonging to the same imagined community. The stories locate the national self in space and time; they provide the nation with a past and a future, a "national character," certain traditions, ways of behaving, and long lists of things that people like ourselves are likely to think, do, and eat. The stories are expressed in our particular vernacular and disseminated through national printing presses and electronic media. Reading, hearing, or watching these accounts, we know where we belong. The state can be understood as the political guardian of this story-telling community. For that reason, it is important—important to nationalists—that each nation should have a state, and each state only one nation.

This story-telling capacity is acknowledged by international law. Each state has the right to “national self-determination,” meaning not only a right to independence, but a right to determine the character of its own collective self.²⁴ This right has been protected at least since the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, where the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* stipulated that the religion of a country should follow the religion of its ruler. In 1970, the United Nations similarly affirmed that all peoples have the right to freely determine, without external interference, their political status.²⁵

Many of the stories concern the role of the state in world politics. Some states see themselves as superpowers, others as great powers, as revisionists, revolutionaries, or as neutrals. These stories are not necessarily generally shared, and different stories often contradict each other, yet through public discussions and obfuscations, some dominant accounts usually emerge. This is not necessarily a democratic process. Rather, debates about national roles and purposes are usually dominated by traditional accounts, uncritically accepted, or by groups that yield disproportionate economic or political power—and in some societies, public discussions are of course far from free. Yet stories are still told about states, and most people still believe in them.

These stories, much as the stories we tell about our individual selves, must be recognized before they can come to constitute a reasonable account of our national selves. The stories we tell make four separate claims on their listeners.²⁶ On the most basic level, we demand attention from an audience. We want to be recognized in the sense of being noticed. But our stories also ask for respect. That is, we insist that our audiences treat us as equal to others and endowed with the same rights as everyone else. In addition to being equal to others, however, we also want to be different from others. We ask our listeners to recognize us as a clearly identifiable someone with a life that is uniquely our own. Finally, our stories make statements about our affiliations—they place us in an affective field made up of friends and enemies. From our friends we ask support, and from our enemies we ask enmity.²⁷ Stacked inside each other, all stories about ourselves simultaneously make these four demands: (1) we want our existence to be acknowledged, (2) we want respect, (3) we want individuality, and (4) we want an affiliation.

These demands turn identity-creation into a profoundly theatrical process.²⁸ Compare the Latin word *persona*, derived from the masks carried by actors in the Roman theater. “The word Person is latine,” as Thomas Hobbes pointed out, and it “signifies the disguise, or outward appearance of a man, counterfeited on the Stage; and sometimes more particularly that part of it, which disguiseth the face, as a Mask or a Visard.”²⁹ Like a Hobbesian actor, we carry our identities as masks before the audiences we address. If the audiences recognize us, we have an identity which we, increasingly self-confidently, can go on to use, and the *persona* will be attached evermore securely to our face. However, if the audience boos and hisses—if we are denied recognition—we have a problem. To be denied recognition is a traumatic experience. We feel slighted, insulted, and brought low; our pride is injured, we have lost our status and our face. This is the case for individuals but also for states. To the extent that people identify with their states—and they do—they will demand redress. Doing

nothing is not an option: we cannot be without being described, and unless we are recognized, we have no social identity.

When faced with a denial of recognition, we basically have three options. The most obvious alternative is to give up; to accept that others are right about us and that we cannot be the person we thought we were. Our stories, clearly, do not apply to someone such as ourselves. This is the situation a state faces in the wake of a loss in a war or some similar calamity.³⁰ As a result it is, for example, no longer possible to lay claim to a status as a “super,” “great,” or a “colonial” power. Instead the state in question has to come up with an alternative self-description and re-brand itself as something else. Such a reconsideration of one’s role is often a long and painful exercise, and there is of course no guarantee that the new identity we come up with will be recognized either.

A second option is to accept the verdict of the audience but to stick to our stories and insist that we can live up to the self-descriptions they contain. This means embarking on a program of self-reformation.³¹ The offended state will have to do whatever it takes to be accepted on its preferred terms—develop itself economically, adopt the required political institutions, improve its educational system, and so on. Once this task is completed, the ugly duckling can go back to its detractors as a beautiful swan, hoping to finally be recognized as the state it always presumed to be.

A third option is to stand by our stories without reform and instead to fight for the self-descriptions they contain. The task here is to convince our detractors that they are mistaken about us and to force them to change their minds. Violence may work badly in interpersonal relations, since you cannot force someone to respect or love you. In international relations, however, the use of force has greater use and similar threats are often successful. A state that is not taken seriously can go to war to prove its importance, and for a group fighting for its “national independence,” violence is often the only available option.³² If our claims are rejected, we try to bomb our way to respectability. Experts in international law have long recognized the right of such groups to be considered as belligerents rather than as simple criminals, provided that they espouse political goals and are organized into regular armies.³³

An identity gives a measure of coherence to the ever-shifting events, memories, and projects that appear in our public sphere; they are attached to a particular subject; they become *ours*. It is only as recognized that our identities will come to have continuity over time and space.³⁴ To the extent that we are able to achieve recognition for our performance and to the extent that our audience remains loyal, we are able to increasingly take our identities for granted. In the end, we will even forget that we are play acting and that our identity originally was nothing but a make-believe.

Recognition in International Law and Diplomacy

Recognition, we said, is an important concern of international lawyers.³⁵ Since the state is taken as the subject of international law, jurists need to decide which entities

belong to this class. It is the same in all membership clubs: we must establish some criteria by which members can be selected, non-members excluded, and the relations between members and non-members regulated.³⁶ In addition, and far more fundamentally, recognition plays a role in establishing the conditions that make international law possible in the first place. A world of sovereign states, critics have insisted, is not an environment in which law can have much force.³⁷ To be "sovereign," after all, means that no other institution or power is in a position to restrain our actions, but restrain our actions is exactly what the law does.³⁸ If it is law, in other words, it is not international, and if it is international, it is not law. This is the problem that recognition addresses.

As legal scholars have pointed out, there are other sources of law than sovereign command.³⁹ When states act and interact with each other over time, a standard gradually comes to be established regarding accepted and acceptable conduct. The norms that develop in this way constitute a body of customary law, which is no less powerful than laws promulgated through sovereign fiat. The codification of these norms was the task of the new discipline of positive international law as it came to be developed from the middle of the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ Yet if international society is the source of the law that governs the conduct of states, the question becomes who belongs to this society. As the first generation of international jurists concluded, not all political units can be included. In the end, only "civilized" states qualified; that is, only European states.⁴¹ Only European states—and a couple of extra-European settler colonies—were regarded as similar enough to form a proper society. That is, only they could be counted on to recognize each other—to acknowledge each other's sovereignty and to behave reciprocally. Without such recognition, there can be no international society, and without an international society, there can be no international law.

All European states were regarded as subjects of international law and as equal before it; there was no ranking between them and they enjoyed the same rights and responsibilities. What these rights were was a matter of some dispute, but the list commonly included items such as "the right of existence, of self-preservation, of equality, of independence, of territorial supremacy, of holding and acquiring territory, of intercourse, and of good name and reputation."⁴² European states had complete sovereignty; in other words, the right to territorial integrity, and they could act as they saw fit—enter into treaties, make alliances, and go to war. As for responsibilities, they were above all supposed to honor their obligations and to respect the laws of civilized warfare. New countries in Eastern Europe, like Romania, were somewhat problematic cases, but when questions about their status arose, the Europeans usually discussed the matter amongst themselves and decided on a shared course of action. In this way, Turkey was formally admitted into international society in 1856.⁴³

In addition, European states recognized each other diplomatically. They had diplomats stationed at each other's courts, and they had the right to participate in the diplomatic conferences, which since the late Middle Ages, were regularly convened to discuss common affairs, particularly at the conclusion of major wars.⁴⁴ On these

occasions, seating arrangements and rules of precedence and address were designed to assure that all participants were treated with respect and that they were treated equally.⁴⁵ Since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the practice has been for states to seat themselves in alphabetical order around a conference table; for the doyen—the most senior diplomat in a capital—to enter an audience chamber ahead of his peers; and for states to sign copies of treaties in alternative order, usually starting with themselves.⁴⁶

In discussions of international law, a distinction is sometimes made between a “declarative” and a “constitutive” conception of statehood.⁴⁷ According to the declarative view, a state is a state as long as it fulfills a few minimal requirements. It must have a permanent population; a clearly defined territory; and a government with the ability to govern itself, to defend itself, and to enter into relations with the other states.⁴⁸ As the constitutive view would have it, however, statehood depends instead on recognition. A state that is not recognized may exist in itself but never for itself; that is, it has no status as a subject of international law and diplomacy.⁴⁹ Again there is a close parallel here to individual human beings. A human being is surely a human being even if unrecognized by others, yet it is only through recognition that she becomes a person in Hobbes’s sense, that is, an actor with an identity.

As a practical matter, however, the distinction between declarative and constitutive conceptions of statehood was always far less important than the distinction between civilized and uncivilized states.⁵⁰ And the declarative and the constitutive views were one when it came to excluding non-Europeans from full membership in international society. Non-Europeans simply lacked the required attributes. Their populations were often nomadic, their territories were badly demarcated; sometimes they had no proper government and no formal means of defending themselves. If entities such as these were included, international society would no longer be a society, and international law would no longer be law. For this reason, excluding outsiders and defining non-Europeans as uncivilized became crucially important.⁵¹ In fact, the more important you took international law to be, the more sharply, indeed aggressively, you were likely to draw the line between the civilized and the uncivilized.

Yet non-Europeans were clearly not all the same. There was a considerable difference between, say, the unclothed inhabitants of the Australian bush and the cultivated peoples of East Asia. To accommodate such differences, Europeans came up with a distinction between “savages” and “barbarians.”⁵² Savages were itinerant peoples without a fixed territory and without political institutions. Barbarians were countries who had a territory, a fixed population and political institutions, and who for that reason in many ways resembled European states. Yet their culture, their history, and their alien ways immediately defined them as strange. Since there could be no such thing as a non-European European, countries like Persia, Siam, Japan, and China could at best be “semi-barbarian” or possibly “semi-civilized.”

The two groups were recognized in quite different ways. Savages had no international status and enjoyed no sovereign rights and could instead only count on the benevolence that all human beings owe each other. Like the mentally retarded, savages needed constant help and protection.⁵³ Barbarian states, on the other hand, did have