

Theory Talks

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THEORY TALK #4

JOHN AGNEW ON GEOPOLITICS AND THE BORDERS OF POWER IN IR

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

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JOHN AGNEW ON GEOPOLITICS AND THE BORDERS OF POWER IN IR



John A. Agnew is best known for his re-invention of geopolitics from a critical perspective. Challenging classical notions of geopolitics, he has written widely on the views of international actors on place, borders and territory and the relationship of those concepts to political power. In this *Talk*, Agnew explains what's going on in Italy, how borders crumble and the contingency of the nation-state. He subsequently also questions the state-centric approach of Alexander Wendt ([Theory Talk #3](#)).

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR?

Whether to continue to regard the stereotypical "state" (that exists in minds more than in reality) as equivalent to a "person."

What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I think that this is totally wrong headed. But it is strongly endorsed by a wide range of IR types from realists to some constructivists.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I actually question the meaningfulness of "IR" itself. In other words, I reject the state-centric calculus upon which the field itself relies. I prefer to speak about world politics and the various agents, discourses, and forces involved in its constitution, including a variety of state-forms with various degrees of agency.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?

I am not the best person to ask this. I suppose a belief in states as the key if not the only actors in world politics but with service to US foreign policy as an important corollary.

Your work seems to emphasize the social construction of discourses (about the legitimate control over) space. Have you ever considered a marriage with social constructivism, and why (not)?

It all depends on what you mean by “social constructivism.” I certainly would not endorse the state-centric version associated with [Wendt](#) et al. But there are other versions emphasizing social action more broadly that would be eminently compatible. See, for example, the argument made in the book *Mastering Space* I wrote in 1995 with Corbridge and in my 2001 paper, *Disputing the Nature of the International*.

Geopolitics is very much alive – influential American authors such as Huntington, Fukuyama and Barnett offer concrete agenda’s based on their classification of the world, all based on modern state-centrism. You’ve touched on the contingency of this state centrism. What are the perspectives for postmodern or non-state-centrist approaches in IR? Do they increase with what is labeled ‘globalization’?

Globalization is certainly part of the alternative but it is not all. The argument is not that realism was OK until we had globalization and then everything changed. Rather, the emphasis is on the significance of hierarchy in world politics: who gets to write the script and how it then plays out in different places. If states and empires have also become less central to this, then they were never all there was to it in the first place.

You’ve convincingly showed the anomalies of and conflicts resulting from the current conception of spatiality, borders and discourses about power over territory. Can you indicate any tendencies towards change in this discourse?

I think that there has been a recent attempt at reinstating borders and trying to revive territorial constraints on movement so as to revivify national identities. But this all goes against the trend of breaking down borders because of the powers of transnational capitalism and demographic imbalances that mandate increased global mobility. At the same time there are many emerging global problems that suggest responses to which the state-form of political organization as we have known it is manifestly incapable of responding.

Much of the contemporary discourses about territory, borders and sovereignty do not seem to apply in Sub-Sahara Africa. But an alternative does not seem easily available. Isn’t the current ontology of the world politics in terms of nation-statehood simply the only option since there is no salient alternative available? In other words, how could we ameliorate the conception of borders?

Borders as inherited from European colonialism have never made much sense in Africa. Essentially tribal/ethnic divisions have come to dominate African “nation”-state politics in the absence of much in the way of national identities. Rent-seeking by dominant elites to favor their co-ethnics is the major dynamic of African politics with a dose of mobilization against the

continued presence of the colonial past, seen to great effect with Mugabe in Zimbabwe. But you are correct, what is the alternative to a maladapted so-called nation-state? That is the tragedy of the African state. Basil Davidson said all this much better in *The Black Man's Burden* many years ago.

What's going on in Italy? How can you explain that Berlusconi yet again comes to power?

I have a book on this co-authored with Michael Shin: *Berlusconi's Italy: Mapping Contemporary Italian Politics* (2008). Contrary to the conventional wisdom about media power, we argue that it is due to: (1) his ability to put together a more robust nationwide alliance with other parties on the right than the left has been capable of (at least until now); (2) his appeal to a myriad of often competing interests in different parts of Italy that see him as their defender against a more transparent state championed by the left; and (3) his capacity to appear as an "everyman" who has succeeded in life despite the best efforts of a Byzantine judiciary and over-active state to restrict him. This last factor is especially attractive to the huge number of people in Italy who are self-employed rather than salaried. Italy has far more of them as a percentage of the labor force than any other major industrialized country.

John Agnew is professor of Geography at the University of California, Los Angeles and currently President of the Association of American Geographers. Amongst his most known books are *Place and Politics* (1987) and *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics* (2003). In 2004, he won the Guggenheim Award for his work.

Related links:

- [John Agnew's faculty profile](#)
- Read the Introduction of his 2005 book *Hegemony* [here](#) (pdf)
- Read his 2007 article *No Borders, No Nations: Making Greece in Macedonia* [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Agnew's 2004 paper *Remaking Italy? Place and Italian Electoral Politics since 1992* [here](#) (pdf)