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Beyond the Nation-State

Sovereign states have been mythologized as the natural unit of political order. History shows how new they are—and how we can think beyond them.

One of the most commonly encountered claims about international politics today concerns the transition from a “Westphalian” to a “post-Westphalian” era. Writers across a wide range of media and academic sources use this framing to ask crucial questions about the way forward: What are the human rights responsibilities of transnational corporations? How will warfare unfold in the twenty-first century? Are international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union becoming increasingly authoritarian?

The Westphalian order refers to the conception of global politics as a system of independent sovereign states, all of which are equal to each other under law. The most popular story about this political system traces its birth to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, follows its strengthening in Europe and gradual expansion worldwide, and finally, near the end of the twentieth century, begins to identify signs of its imminent decline. On this view, much of the power that states once possessed has been redistributed to a variety of non-state institutions and organizations—from well-known international organizations such as the UN, the EU, and the African Union to violent non-state actors such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and the Taliban along with corporations with global economic influence such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon. This situation, the story often goes, will result in an international political order that resembles medieval Europe more than the global political system of the twentieth century.

Commentators disagree about the significance of this “post-Westphalian” order, and whether it is desirable for international organizations to intervene in states’ affairs is on its own a great source of debate. Yet there is widespread agreement about the events of the story that have taken us to the present moment. The Westphalian conceit, in short, forms the descriptive foundation of dominant analyses of global politics.

The problem with this story is that a lot of it is spectacularly wrong. Over the last two decades, scholars working on the history of the global order have painstakingly shown the complete mismatch between the story of Westphalia and the historical evidence. The nation-state is not so old as we are often told, nor has it come to be quite so naturally. Getting this history right means telling a different story about where our international political order has come from—which in turn points the way to an alternative future.

These issues are especially urgent today. The post–Cold War period has indeed seen the growth of non-state organizations, but in more recent years a range of right-wing leaders has only buttressed the influence of the nation-state. The spectacular resurgence of nationalism—from Brexit and Donald Trump to the ascendence of Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, and Viktor Orbán—has led some to speculate that the hour of the Westphalian order may not have passed after all, while others stick to their guns and suggest that this phenomenon is a mere spasm of a dying system. Getting the history of the states-system right has critical implications for both of these positions.

Essays From Beyond The Nation State

DJ Losen



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