

11 Empowerment among nations

A sociological perspective

Erik Ringmar

The position of the USA in world politics is today quite ambiguous. The only superpower and arbiter of matters of war and peace around the globe, the country commands a position sometimes compared to that of the Romans at the height of their pre-eminence. On the other hand, American troops have been quite unable to stabilise Iraq – evoking memories of Vietnam where a peasant army defeated a nuclear power – and they have had little success on North Korea, Iran, or in catching Osama Bin Laden. For all its power, the USA seems oddly impotent. Something close to the opposite could be said about the European Union. The EU is invariably derided for its ‘weakness’ and for the ‘endless squabbles’ of its members. A political entity without a foreign policy and an army, it has, time and again, shown itself inept at dealing with the crises that land on its own doorsteps. And yet it is in many ways remarkable how much the Europeans have achieved. From being a continent constantly torn by wars, Europe has become a zone of peace. These are economically successful, decent societies, and, despite their interminable quarrels, they have reached agreement on difficult-to-agree-on issues such as a common currency and an ever-expanding body of Europe-wide legislation. Cross-national civil-society groups have often been misjudged in a similar way. Anti-globalisation protesters may be angry, vocal and, in some cases, armed, but they are also few in numbers, socially marginalised and their messages are far from coherent. Showing up at meetings of world leaders, they seem to make more enemies than friends and are subsequently quickly dismissed as utterly powerless. Yet they clearly do have a measure of influence. Their mere existence points to the possibility of there being alternative solutions to world problems and, as such, they are guaranteed a place both on the evening news and in academic discussions (see, however, Lipschutz, in this volume).

What these examples illustrate is a confusion regarding the meaning and nature of power in world politics – what it is, what it does and who has it. Clearly the powerful are often not as powerful as they appear to be and the powerless are not as powerless (cf. Havel 1986: 36–122). Yet this is surely a perverse conclusion. By any reasonable definition, surely the powerful should have power and the powerless should not. As long as this is not the

case, there must be something seriously wrong with the way the concept is defined. If the difficulties only were conceptual, little damage would ensue. The real problem is rather that the analytical confusion is reproduced among policy-makers, with far-reaching and often disastrous results. Believing themselves to be more powerful than they are, the Americans have overextended themselves and sought to dominate situations they clearly cannot control. Meanwhile, believing all the talk about powerlessness, many Europeans have said their respective *nons* to further and deeper collaboration. Something similar has happened to the ragtag band of anti-globalisation protesters. Concluding that their efforts are in vain, they have often abandoned their protests for other political, or utterly non-political, activities (cf. Hirschman 1985).

The aim of this chapter is to rethink the concept of power as it currently is used in international relations (IR). The basic strategy is to invoke the help of scholars writing in an adjacent field of social enquiry – sociology. Sociologists, on the whole, may not be smarter than IR scholars, but their definitions of power are certainly far richer. Studying power within societies rather than between them, they are, for example, less likely to be impressed with the sheer force of military hardware. Their definitions are also likely to be less politically pernicious. Anticipating the conclusion, what sociology can teach scholars of IR is that, more than anything, power is a matter of capabilities – what really matters is the ‘power to’ rather than the ‘power over’. How much power we have is not determined by the extent to which we can dominate others as much by what it is that we can get done. Instead of understanding power as a zero-sum game of control and counter-control, what we should study are the processes through which states and other international actors are empowered or disempowered.

IR scholars on power

IR scholars have a poor understanding of the concept of power. This is surprising given the centrality of the concept in studies of international affairs (Baldwin 2002; Barnett and Duvall 2005a; Guzzini 1993). As the Athenians already pointed out to the Melians in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, ‘the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept’ (Thucydides 1972: 402). Providing their respective versions of this basic insight, statesmen, diplomats, generals and scholars have endlessly repeated that ‘calculations about power lie at the heart of how states think about the world around them’ – and that we forget this basic truth only at our peril (Mearsheimer 2001: 12; cf. Carr 1964: vii). Yet this leaves the question open as to what exactly power is. At this juncture, students of world politics seem to rely mainly on their intuition; somehow or another, ‘we know what power is when we see it’. This is most obviously the case, we are told, at times of war – from the Peloponnesian War onwards – when strong states are able to force weak states

to concede to their demands. Power, that is, is known above all through its successful exercise; 'A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (Dahl 1957: 202). Conversely, if the exercise fails, it turns out that A was not as powerful as he/she/it initially had thought.

The shortcomings of this definition are obvious (Lukes 2005: 38–48; Nye 2004b: 2). One problem is how to demonstrate causation. Somehow we need a way to establish that an actor is able to make another actor do something that the latter would not otherwise have done. For this purpose, we need access to the intentions both of the person exercising power and of the person over whom power is exercised. In addition, we need to establish that the failure to carry out the intended action indeed was a result of the exercise of power and not due to some other extraneous event. In most real-life cases, gathering all this information is, of course, difficult if not outright impossible. Besides, it is surely too restrictive to look only at cases where the exercise of power is explicit. Clearly much power can be wielded in other ways, for example, through the control of an agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1963: 641–51; Lukes 2005: 20–5). Through such control, by making sure that certain issues never are raised in the first place, overt conflicts can be avoided. As a result, no arms need to be twisted, and consensus and social peace can appear to prevail. Meanwhile, beneath the surface social life, the exercise of power may only be too obvious. How to study these hidden non-cases is, however, far less clear.

Faced with such seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the time-honoured cop-out is to look not at actual exercises of power but instead at the kinds of resources which all exercises of power are thought to require. That is, instead of trying to solve the problems of intentionality and agenda-setting, the assumption is that there are resources that matter regardless of where and how the exercise of power takes place (Morgenthau 1948: 27; Waltz 1979: 131; Mearsheimer 2001: 55; Schmidt, this volume). Foremost among such resources – at least as far as IR are concerned – is military hardware, but indirectly also all resources that go into the production and use of military hardware. Thus, a country's level of economic development matters together with its natural-resource endowment, its industrial base, its territory, the size of its population and so on. Less directly, it is possible to include factors such as a country's leadership and its command and control structures, the morale of its people and the overall legitimacy of its regime. No one can be powerful in world politics, the argument goes, who lacks access to resources such as these.

The obvious problem here is the rate at which resources can be converted into actual political outcomes. There is, for example, hardly any doubt that weapons matter for warfare, but as the Soviet *débâcle* in Afghanistan and the American *débâcle* in Iraq have shown, military hardware does not always translate neatly into displays of power. This is, a fortiori, the case in situations that fall short of war, and, in an increasingly interdependent

world, such situations are arguably more common than ever previously (Nye 2004b: 18–21). The power of the USA is today largely disconnected from its nuclear arsenal; Russia and the UK have nuclear arsenals too, but it is far from clear what kind of power, if any, emanates from them.

The problems of the resource view has led some scholars to emphasise instead what has come to be known as ‘soft power’ (Nye 2004b; Nye, this volume). Soft power is exercised, above all, through persuasion and leadership; it is the power to convince rather than to coerce and to make others follow us through the attractiveness of our ideals and the example set by our actions. In today’s post-belligerent world, it is argued, this is a vastly more important kind of power than the old sabre-rattling. As long as we can seduce our opponents, we need neither sticks nor carrots. The real super-power is the country which people find the most attractive (Nye 2004b: 10–11). The idea of soft power is surely an important addition to the traditional accounts. As Ned Lebow argues in his chapter, there is indeed such a thing as the power of persuasion, and there is no doubt that it operates in world affairs. Yet the emphasis on soft power is best understood as an extension of the traditional model and not as a break with it. What matters are still resources, although the relevant resources are ideational – ‘culture’, ‘institutions’, ‘ideals’ – rather than material (see also, Bially Matern, this volume). Moreover, soft resources also have to be converted into successful exercises of power and, as Steven Lukes points out in his contribution to this volume, no such conversion is likely to be straightforward. Making oneself popular is hard work; it is easy to overdo it, and one’s best efforts are often counter-productive. Seeing power in terms of attractiveness turns world politics into a beauty contest in which real power rests not with the prospective beauty queens as much as with the people judging them. A state that derives its position from its attractiveness is effectively handing power over to the ever-shifting verdicts of a global public opinion.

The fundamental problem of all traditional accounts – be they hard or soft – is that far too much attention is paid to the power that individual actors exercise over other individual actors. What is ignored is, above all, what we could refer to as ‘structural factors’. After all, power can be exercised anonymously, and we can be manipulated by processes and institutions just as much as by individuals or by states. Often, in fact, such structural power is the most pervasive form of power, and it clearly operates also in IR. So far, however, scholars of IR have paid structural factors only scant attention (Guzzini 1993). For a proper discussion of these factors we need help from sociologists.¹

Structural power

Sociologists have a richer understanding of power since their descriptions of domestic society are richer than the descriptions most scholars have of international society (cf. Wendt and Duvall 1989). Sociologists pay proper

attention to the relationships of power obtaining between social groups, movements and classes and to the power exercised by the economic system, by institutions, the media, religion and the family. This allows them to talk about forms of power which are anonymous, impersonal and unintended and to talk about power which is structural in nature.

Take a basic social mechanism such as the division of labour (cf. Lindblom 1976; Ringmar 2005). As a result of the expansion of markets, people are forced to specialise on their comparative advantages and to live and work under conditions which are not of their own choosing. In this way, the traditional fabric of social life is undermined, together with traditional social positions and identities; people can no longer be who they were and live the way they used to live. This is an exercise of power to be sure, yet it is not the kind of power one individual exercises over another. Instead, it is best described as the power of a structure – as structural power. The same mechanism operates also in relations between states, distributing and redistributing power between them. The division of labour forces countries to focus on the production of particular goods and services and, in the process, it rearranges patterns of income and wealth as well as trade patterns and alliances. Ultimately, the division of labour may undermine the position of the state itself and its ability to defend itself against enemies. Again, this is power exercised by a structure rather than by individuals, groups or states.

As a sociologist might go on to argue, structural power shapes not only what we do but also what we want (Lukes 2005: 38–48). Growing up in a certain society, we are socialised into accepting its basic norms and prejudices. This process of socialisation is empowering since it provides us with the means of asserting ourselves as social beings, but it is also constraining in that it compels us to think in certain ways rather than in others. For example, in many societies, women have been socialised into accepting roles that are inferior to those of men, and, in many societies, religion is used to justify social inequalities (cf. Bordo 2003: 99–138, 245–75). As a result, people ask for less than what could be considered their fair and proper share. Similar processes of socialisation operate in relations between states. Compare, for example, the notion of a ‘national interest’ (Hirschman 1977). When first learning about world politics, we learn that the world is divided into discreet entities with borders between them and that each entity has a set of interests which it is the duty of decision-makers as well as ordinary citizens to defend. In the pursuit of a national interest, a state will undertake certain actions while disregarding others; typically, states will arm themselves and prepare for war. Yet there is nothing inevitable about such a conclusion, and the reason why people reach it is that they have been socialised into accepting certain international norms (Wendt 1992: 391–425). That is, structural power has been exercised over them.

Although the existence of such thought-moulding power hardly is in doubt, it is a kind of power which is devilishly difficult to study. It is next to impossible, after all, to identify the preconditions of our thoughts – like our

eyes, our presumptions are themselves not directly available for inspection. Exercises of structural power are, for that reason, not necessarily recognised as such. Often, people who ostensibly are ‘oppressed’ – women in patriarchal societies and so on – profess themselves to be quite content with their lot. From the point of view of an outside observer, people like this seem not to be the best judges of their own predicament (Connolly 1974). The IR equivalent readily suggests itself: traditional definitions of a national interest constitute a form of oppression which we perpetuate by denying the existence of. Yet such conclusions are problematic. Who are we, as outside observers, to say that people misunderstand themselves and that we know their interests better than they do? And how can we say that a state’s official interests are different from its true interests? The only way to defend such conclusions is to have some alternative standard that tells us what a human being, or a state, is and might be. Yet such a standard may, of course, never be more than an expression of the particular prejudices of the outside observers themselves and of the structural power exercised *on them*. Outsiders may indeed have a privileged perspective but they may also be far too removed to see what is going on. Twentieth-century history was replete with examples of such ‘experts’ who mistook their ignorance for superior wisdom (Scott 1998: 103–306; Siniavski 1988: 47–76).

A way around this problem is to look not at the content of the decisions but rather at the character of the process through which the decisions was reached (Lukes 2005: 48–58). Thus, one could, for example, demand that the individual concerned has thought long and hard about which actions are in his or her best interest to pursue. If such deliberation has taken place, we would have to argue that the conclusions reached indeed are genuine. And, conversely, in the absence of evidence of such deliberation, we could conclude that the person has been manipulated. That is, that power has been exercised over him or her. A woman who carefully considers her options before she subjects herself to the rules of a patriarchal society is free in a sense that the eventual choice itself does not reveal (Connolly 1974).² She is also in a better position to silence critical outside observers.

It would be wrong to think of this only as an intellectual process. Often it is, instead, some unexpected empirical event that suddenly forces us to reconsider our options. The definition of a national interest provides a good illustration. A state may go into a war with one definition of its national interest but come out of the war with a very different definition (cf. Skocpol 1979). No longer able to defend our collective self-conceptions, we are forced to reformulate them. The aim of such reformulations is typically to bring about a closer match between what we are and what we can be or between what we have and what we can have. As such, they are effectively empowering. Thus, the UK became more powerful, not less, when it decided to withdraw its troops east of Suez in 1968. Similarly, it could be argued that the USA is less powerful as today’s single world hegemon than it was during the Cold War as one of two ferociously competing super-powers.

Power and potentiality

These sociological insights are helpful, but they need to be further developed. A proper understanding of power, we said, requires knowledge of counterfactuals, of how life would be if the relevant social structures only were differently configured. What needs to be investigated here are the potentialities inherent in social life; not how things *are* but how they *could be*. In order to pursue such an investigation, we need some way of reflecting on ourselves and the options open to us. We will understand the power exercised by existing social structures only once we have learnt to imagine alternatives to them. Reflection thus understood is empowering. Yet the kind of power that empowers is quite different from the kind of power we discussed above. What matters here is not ‘power over’ but instead ‘power to’ (Mann 1986: 6; Giddens 1987: 7; Morriss 2002). ‘Power over’ is what historical sociologists have discussed as *Herrschaft*, domination, or what in the Middle Ages was known as *potestas* (Lukes 2005: 74–85; cf. Bendix 1960: 290–300). The contrasting term – ‘power to’ – is instead referred to as *Macht* or *potentia*. As the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza explained, *potentia* signifies ‘the power of things in nature, including persons, to exist and act’, whereas *potestas* is used ‘when speaking of being in the power of another’ (Spinoza, quoted in Lukes 2005: 73).

Power defined as *potentia* is best understood as a capability or a faculty. It is the kind of power we exercise when we rely on our ‘power of speech’, ‘power of reason’ or the ‘power of flight’. Differently put, power defined as *potentia* is the ability to transform something potential into something actual (von Wright 1971: 44–9). What matters here is not how we allocate the stuff which makes up the existing world but rather how we allocate the stuff which makes up the possible world; power is exercised over what could be rather than over what is. Power understood as *potentia* is a sort of gatekeeper that regulates the relationship between the actually existing and the potentially existing. *Potentia* guards this gate, letting some things slip through into actuality while keeping other things waiting *in spe*. While *potestas* is the power through which the world is governed, *potentia* is the power through which the world is made.

This world-making power has its origins in magic and religion (Caillois 1939/2001: 87–96). It is the *potentia* of the religious doctrine which commands our allegiance and the *potentia* of its messengers which proves their official, authorised status. A magus waves his wand and things appear out of thin air, a shaman is transported from one place to another, the sick are healed and the dead are awoken. In monotheistic religions, such powers can always be traced back to an almighty god who is the final arbiter between that which exists and that which does not exist (Kantorowitz 1957: 42–86). The *potentia* of all human beings – including the power of secular rulers – are ultimately derived from this supreme source. Or, to be more precise, power is never permanently received but only temporarily borrowed. The

debt has constantly to be remembered, the source of one's abilities acknowledged, and, in the end, all one's powers have to be returned to one's maker. As gatekeepers and arbiters, monotheistic gods are characterised by two exceptional qualities: their omniscience and their omnipotence. There is nothing they do not know and nothing they cannot do. The *potentia* which humans borrow never give them anything like the same powers, yet the more godlike they become, the more powerful they are. The more human beings know, the better they understand the potentialities inherent in their lives and their societies; the more they can do, the better they are at actualising these potentialities. Expressed in more secular language, *potentia*, the 'power to', entails both to the ability to reflect and the ability to act. It is through reflection that new potentialities come to be discovered, and it is through action that they are actualised.

To develop one's powers of reflection and one's powers of action is to become empowered. Reflection, we said above, is empowering, and so is the ability to act. Understood in this fashion, the exercise of power is not necessarily a zero-sum game. You can have a faculty without ever using it, and several social actors can simultaneously reflect or act without one's increase in power necessarily detracting from another's. For the same reason, empowerment does not necessarily mean that one is able to achieve one's goals. You can develop a faculty, you can exercise it and yet fail to get your way. To what extent you are successful depends on how hard you try, on the situation you are in, on how other social actors act and react. Thus 'power to' is best understood as a precondition for 'power over' – *potestas* requires *potentia* – no one can be powerful who is not first empowered. Yet the opposite is not the case: *potentia* does not require *potestas*. You can have the power to do something without necessarily having power over others.

Structural empowerment

All definitions of power require a social ontology of some kind, a basic model which tells us what the components of society are and how they are put together (Ringmar 2007a). Power defined as *potestas*, the 'power over', requires an ontology made up of actors – individuals, groups and states – whose relationships are determined by the power they have over each other. Here powerful actors do what they like and powerless actors suffer what they must. This is most obviously the case in hierarchical social systems such as feudal societies or totalitarian regimes, but it is true also of systems – such as economic markets – where actors formally are both equal and independent of each other. Markets are self-equilibrating devices where order is assured through the interrelationship of supply and demand, that is, through the relative market power of each actor.

By contrast, power understood as *potentia* implies a constructivist ontology of society (Ringmar 2007a). This metaphor takes society to be a building which human beings construct and reconstruct according to whatever

plans they draw up (Scott 1998; cf. Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 46). Constructivism is a reformist faith, a belief that human beings can understand the world since they have made it and make it since they understand it (Vico 1986: § 331, p. 96; Tully 1980: 22–3). The most important relationships here are not those obtaining between social actors but instead between social actors and the projects they share. You need *potentia* in order to get things done; above all, you need the power to draw up the best possible plans and the power to actualise them. The more social actors are empowered, the more successfully they can achieve their goals.

In the study of international politics, these two ontologies correspond reasonably well to the time-honoured distinction between realism and idealism.³ Realists define power as *potestas*, and their world is made up of actors whose relationships are determined by the power each has over the other. Just as in an economic market, world politics is regarded as a self-equilibrating system where a change in the balance of power triggers countervailing forces which restore order (Hirschman 1977; Mayr 1986: 148–54; Waltz 1979: 115–29). Idealists, for their part, define power as *potentia* and see world politics in terms of challenges that must be overcome and projects that much be achieved – peace, prosperity, democracy and development. The way to reach these goals, idealists insist, is to empower individuals, groups and states.

During the past couple of decades, there has been a general move away from constructivist ontologies towards self-organising ones (Hayek 1988: 83–8; Scott 1998: 316–19; cf. Ringmar 2007a). The most ambitious constructivist projects – the great revolutions, the leaps forward, the modernisation schemes – all failed, in some cases spectacularly so. At its best, constructivism equalled liberal do-goodery, but at its worst, it equalled totalitarian dictatorship. By contrast, self-organisation seems less fraught with danger: no common plans have to be made and no common decisions taken; decentralised decisions leave freedom to individuals to work out their differences between themselves. This is, of course, the same lesson which scholars of international politics have taught for years: it is so much safer to organise social interaction on the basis on *potestas* than on the basis of *potentia*.

But let us not give up on empowerment too quickly. Common problems cannot always be solved through decentralised decisions and ‘power over’ cannot substitute for ‘power to’. Broadly speaking, empowerment is surely a good idea. The problem with the constructivist ontology is rather its simplistic faith in plans, central directives and in goal-oriented rationality (Scott 1998: 339–41). Society is clearly not a building which we can construct and reconstruct according to our fancy. Somehow or another, we need to rescue the idea of *potentia* from the clutches of the constructivist metaphor. Let us instead think of empowerment as a structural feature of society. Some societies seem to be far more empowering than others. In some societies, it is much easier to imagine alternatives to the present social

order and easier to act on these alternatives – people are better at reflecting on potentialities and better at actualising them. Clearly this has little to do with the personal qualities of the individuals concerned, and, instead, everything to do with the presence or absence of certain kinds of institutions. It is institutions in the end that determine the degree to which social actors are empowered (Ringmar 2007b).

Consider, for example, the many institutions that help us reflect on ourselves and on the societies in which we live – including media and the press, universities, scientific academies, even religious institutions and the arts. Or consider the many institutions that facilitate action – including banks and stock markets that provide funding, property right and commercial law that protect investments, or the political framework of the state that guarantees the peace and security which all ventures require. Once institutions like these are in place – and many others could be mentioned – it is a lot easier for individuals both to reflect creatively and to act decisively. Empowerment is a consequence of institutions such as these. Conversely, disempowerment is a consequence of the lack of such institutions.

Taken together, institutions that enable both reflection and action constitute an empowering structure. No matter who we are and what we want, the institutions are there to support us. A society where such institutions are strong is more creative, dynamic, and its inhabitants are more likely to fully develop their various skills and faculties. An empowering structure thus understood could perhaps be compared to a ‘field’ such as the electromagnetic or gravitational fields discussed by physicists. Social potentialities placed within this field become charged, as it were, and, as a result, they are able to make the transition into actuality; they flip, much as bundles of energy flip from a status as light to a status as matter. This is not a causal process to be sure and no outcomes are inevitable. Rather, the empowering structure is a condition of possibility of many alternative realities becoming actualised, none of them determined by the structure itself but by the human ability to imagine and make things happen one way or another.

To be sure, being structurally empowered does not necessarily mean that you are able to achieve all your goals. The reason is that social actors interact with other social actors who also want to achieve their goals. Reflection and action are both bound to produce conflict among actors (be they individuals or groups). Reflection is a critical activity and, as such, often subversive, and since resources always are limited, not all plans can simultaneously be actualised. As a result, there will always be competition over who gets what and on what terms. For this reason, empowering structures must be combined with institutions that are able to resolve conflicts peacefully. Nothing accomplished by reflection or entrepreneurship will last unless a way is found of allowing for the coexistence of different, perhaps contradictory, projects, entities, beliefs and ways of life. There are various examples of such institutions, but, in contemporary society, the economic, the political and the judicial systems play this conflict-resolving role.

This is, thus, how individuals and societies come to avail themselves of *potentia*, the Spinozian power ‘of things in nature, including persons, to exist and act’. We reflect in order to discover the potential which exists in the actual; we act in order to put these discoveries into practice; we eventually find ways of integrating our ideas and our project with those of others. Yet none of this is down to individuals and all of it is down to institutions. By moving the boundary between the potential and the actual, institutions are empowering.

The empowerment of nations

This argument has implications for how we understand power in international affairs, and it can be illustrated by understanding the evolution of the sovereign state as a process of empowerment. The modern international order – the ‘Westphalian system’ – is usually described as decentralised and anarchic. Lacking a central authority which can keep peace among its constituent units, wars are a perennial threat (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). Not surprisingly, power is here equated with ‘power over’ – it is power over others which guarantees security and peace. Yet this is an exceedingly poor and partial picture. What is ignored is, above all, ‘power to’ and the fact that the Westphalian system, since its very inception, has operated to empower and disempower social actors (Ringmar 2007b). While ‘power over’ determines how the world is governed, ‘power to’ determines how the world is made.

The most obvious flip from potentiality into actuality happened through the creation of the state in the Renaissance (Skinner 1989: 90–131). There were no states, properly speaking, in the European Middle Ages, and the state had to be imagined before it could come to exist. There were many institutions which facilitated such reflection. The feudal system, with its decentralised authority structure, provided one source of imagination, but so did reflections on *dominatio* and *imperium* inspired by canon law and investigated by scholars working under the auspices of the church (Pagden 1987). Such reflections were also greatly enhanced by the rediscovery of the political writings of classical antiquity (Hale 1977: 304–6). In addition, the institutional structures of medieval society – in particular, the division between secular and religious authorities – helped facilitate political action. The best examples of political entrepreneurs are perhaps the *condottieri*, the mercenary soldiers who found themselves thrust into positions of power in various cities in northern Italy from the thirteenth century onward (Bozeman 1960). In this part of Europe, the authority of the pope overlapped with the authority of the emperor, but, often enough, the *condottieri* were able to play the one against the other and make themselves independent of both (Mattingly 1955: 78–86). From the end of the fifteenth century, these new rulers began to claim ‘sovereignty’ over the territories they controlled.

The transformation from a feudal to a state-based international order was surprisingly smooth. Again, the reason was institutional. Medieval

society had multiple sources of authority – the whole feudal network of overlapping loyalties and obligations – yet they were all incorporated into one pan-European and Church-led authority structure. Medieval Europe was at the same time one and infinitely many (Ringmar 2007b). When the states declared themselves sovereign they became parts of a similar set-up. The Westphalian order was held together through the interaction of its constituent units, and sovereignty coexisted with participation in an international system of states. Medieval Europe and Westphalian Europe were both extremely violent to be sure, yet the transition between them was not particularly traumatic. The pan-European institutions of the Middle Ages were reformulated rather than replaced.

The state, once firmly established, can be described as network of empowering institutions that facilitated reflection and action and also helped solve conflicts. Reflection took institutional form in state-sponsored universities and scientific academies but, above all, by means of the newspapers, journals and books which the newly invented printing press made possible (Eisenstein 1983: 148–86). Soon a ‘public opinion’ came to be formed, constituting a collective reflective faculty which took the state as one of its main subjects (Baker 1990: 167–79; Koselleck 1988: 62–75). The state also empowered new actors. The existence of parliaments and parties made a great difference to political entrepreneurs, and economic action was facilitated by state-supplied institutions which organised and regulated markets (Polanyi 1944). Religious entrepreneurs typically found sovereign princes a more receptive audience than the feudal princes of the pre-state era.

The result of this outburst of reflective and entrepreneurial activity was conflict, and soon the newly independent states were riven by civil wars (Toulmin 1990: 46–62). The initial reaction on the part of state officials was to restrict the range of allowed opinions and to crack down on dissent. Peace was restored à la Thomas Hobbes and Jean Bodin, through the dictates of absolutist rulers. Gradually, however, more sophisticated means of resolving conflicts were developed. In the course of the eighteenth century, civil society reasserted itself, and self-regulatory devices such as Adam Smith’s ‘hidden hand’ became more prominent (Mayr 1986: 102–14; Hofstadter 1969: 40–73). Conflicts, it was discovered, could often be avoided through political debate and by allowing economic agents and political parties to compete with each other for the favours of the public at large (Ringmar 2007b).

Yet the state was not only an empowering structure but also a subject in its own right. As such, it acted and interacted with other states in an international system which empowered and disempowered its constituent units. On the international level, too, there were institutional structures that facilitated reflection, action and helped solve conflict. These institutions were typically European in origin, dominated by European concerns, and European statesmen, corporations, scientists and preachers were their main beneficiaries. Although many non-Europeans benefited too, the losers were more than anything the traditional authorities, ways of knowing and ways

of living of non-European societies. Consider, for example, the gradual universalisation of European ideas regarding science, economic rationality and human rights during the course of the nineteenth century. Once a scientific attitude came to be adopted, the Europeans had a powerful new way of making sense of overseas discoveries; and once economic rationality came to dominate their outlook, the Europeans knew what to do with the things they discovered. Ideas regarding human rights set limits to the way they could treat their new subjects, or at least they were forced to come up with arguments why human rights had to be set aside. For the colonised peoples, the spread of these European notions provided powerful new ways of reflecting both on their own traditional societies and on the actions of the Europeans. The outcome was simultaneously both empowering and disempowering.

In addition, the international system of the nineteenth century provided institutions that facilitated action. Ideas regarding economic rationality were complemented with institutions that encouraged international trade, investments and the use of foreign natural resources. An international capital market was created together with an international currency, and agreements were signed – in many cases far from voluntarily – regarding open markets and free trade (Ferguson 2001). The European-dominated world system facilitated other forms of action as well – the work of statesmen, soldiers, scientists, missionaries, adventurers and thieves. As for conflict resolution, the colonial wars abated once the Europeans were firmly in control, and in Europe itself the nineteenth century was unusually peaceful. As the twentieth century was to show, however, conflicts were not really solved, only postponed.

Today's world is characterised by the same empowering and disempowering structures. The universalisation of European ideas has continued; reflection discovers new opportunities; old authorities are undermined and new ones supported. Today, reflection is, more than anything, sponsored by commercial enterprises, by development agencies, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and by great European and North American universities. In an increasingly globalised world, where sovereignty means less and less, economic action is easier than ever and political action is increasingly in the hands of a few dominant actors. There are new twenty-first-century versions of the nineteenth-century missionaries, adventurers and thieves. Conflicts between states are not resolved through wars as much as through the imposition of norms regarding democracy, human rights and economic rationality. New actors dominate a world which continuously is being reconfigured.

Conclusion

Accepting these sociological insights, we can briefly summarise the conclusions as far as the study of international politics is concerned. The main

conclusion is surely that power needs to be more broadly defined than traditionally has been the case. If the study of international politics is the study of how actors define and achieve their aims, what matters is *potentia* rather than *potestas*. While *potestas* is the power through which the world is governed, *potentia* is the power through which the world, any world, is made. We need to study the ways in which actors are empowered and disempowered and, thus, which institutions enable or disable reflection, action and compromise. A second conclusion is that the concept of ‘the political’ itself is far too narrowly defined. Politics, in Harold Lasswell’s classical formulation, has usually been understood as a matter of ‘who gets what, when, how’ (Lasswell 1936). The image here is that of politics as an antagonistic struggle between actors who meet each other head-on as though on a metaphorical battlefield (Jullien 2000: 35–53). And while there is no denying that such clashes do take place – indeed actual battlefields have not yet disappeared – a sociological understanding of power reminds us that this is a very partial view of what politics is all about. Before overt clashes can be staged, power has been exercised in forming the actors, their identities, outlooks on life and the definition of their interests.

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that the stakes in these definitional debates are not scholarly reputations as much as real-life outcomes. Mistakes about power get people killed. Consider again the three examples briefly discussed in the introduction. The USA is generally considered the most powerful country in the world, an empire even, yet it seems strangely powerless when dealing with a number of contemporary challenges including Iraqi insurgents, fugitive terrorists and North Korean bombs. I would suggest the reason is that the USA, in its foreign policy in recent years, has prioritised the pursuit of *potestas* at the expense of *potentia*; what the USA can do to others has mattered far more than what it can get done together with others. Above all, it has neglected to systematically sustain the kinds of international institutions which empower its friends and disempower its enemies. Ironically, this has made the USA far less powerful than it could have been.

As for the EU, it has, largely despite itself, pursued the opposite policy. From the time of the Coal and Steel Union in the 1950s, the EU’s emphasis has consistently been on the administrative and managerial aspects of European integration – on ‘peace by pieces’ and the profoundly unglamorous job of building pan-European institutional structures (cf. Mitrany 1943). As a result, the EU has next to no ‘power over’ anything at all – not even, in fact, proper power over its own constituent units – yet it evidently has a considerable amount of ‘power to’. This is why the Union has achieved some remarkable feats of social engineering while getting next to no credit for it with European electorates. Clearly, the exercise of *potentia* is less attention-grabbing than the exercise of *potestas*.

As far as the ragtag bands of anti-globalisation protesters are concerned, they are surely by all accounts next to completely powerless. What they do

have, however, and here I am slightly more optimistic than Lipschutz in his contribution to this volume, is the ability to present the rest of us with alternative images of who we are and what our future is likely to be. Above, this was referred to as the power of reflection, and it is through reflection that we come to discover the potentialities that exist in our societies and in our lives. The point is not that the anti-globalisation protesters necessarily are correct, or that we have to listen to them, but instead that the future of our societies requires the constant consideration of alternatives to the existing order of things. The self-confident hubris of the most ardent globalisers is, in the end, undermining their own power. The day dissenting groups become convinced of their own powerlessness and abandon their quixotic quests, we will all be worse off.

Notes

- 1 When Joseph S. Nye asked Donald Rumsfeld about the concept of 'soft power', Rumsfeld replied 'I don't know what "soft power" is.' (Nye 2004b: ix). When Joseph S. Nye was asked what he thought of Steven Lukes's concept of power, he replied, 'I was not aware of it when I conceived of soft power in 1989', Joseph S. Nye, email to Tim Mackey, 5 May 2005.
- 2 Although the logic of this argument is not in doubt, one may wonder how important such outcomes are as an empirical category. The deliberative process is rarely independent from the substantive choices one reaches. It seems unlikely that one would make a fully considered choice to subject oneself to a superstitious faith, yet cases of this kind are not unknown.
- 3 Or realism and 'liberalism' or 'reformism' or some similar distinction. Note that 'constructivism' here denotes a social ontology and not, as in recent IR literature, a position in a debate regarding theories of knowledge.