

**ACTION and REACTION**  
in the **WORLD SYSTEM**

**THE DYNAMICS OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL POWER**

Thierry de Montbrial



**UBC**Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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Praise for  
**ACTION and REACTION in the WORLD SYSTEM**

“Thierry de Montbrial has presented a great contribution in the universalist tradition of European thought, combining the methods and insights of various disciplines to provide a masterly analysis of our contemporary world and guidelines to deal with its problems.”

**KARL KAISER**, Adjunct Professor of Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School, and Director of the Program on Transatlantic Relations, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University

“Thierry de Montbrial is not afraid to challenge his readers to think in an impressively holistic way, truly following in the footsteps of Raymond Aron. At the same time he convincingly connects theory to current events in the world.”

**GORDON SMITH**, Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation and former Canadian Deputy Foreign Minister

“This is a serious and ambitious work. Thierry de Montbrial ranges over a host of scholarly disciplines to offer an intriguing synthesis about ‘global governance.’ De Montbrial explains the dynamic of sovereign states facing the new realities of globalization – through both theory and practice.”

**ROBERT B. ZOELLICK**, former President of the World Bank Group, US Trade Representative, and US Deputy Secretary of State

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## Preface to the English Edition

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The first French edition of this book was published in 2002, a few months after September 11, 2001. It was designed as a toolbox to facilitate the understanding of collective action in a complex environment, especially, but not exclusively, in the field of international relations. Its scope and ambition are comparable to Raymond Aron's *Peace and War among Nations*, first published in French in 1962 (and in the United States in 1966).<sup>1</sup> The basic concepts of the present work are flexible enough to be relevant in the new and highly volatile international system. These concepts include: active units and collective goods; political units and public goods; power, potential, and potency; praxeological, political, and international problems; and structural stability and governance. The structural instability of a system – meaning, its inability to sustain shocks that are more or less conceivable, is likely to provoke partial or total chaotic disintegration. It borrows from economics and political science but also from physics and biology, and even, implicitly, from mathematics.

A few short remarks about the basic concepts introduced in this book will help the reader. An “active unit” is a human group unified by a common Culture (capital letter C) and an Organization (capital letter O) which makes decisions for the sake of the group, such as defining its collective goods. Organizations may be more or less legitimate, efficient, and so forth. Active units can also be of varying strengths. The United States is strong

because both its Culture and Organization are strong. For the European Union, it is the opposite. Culture and Organization are both weak. In some cases, a weak Organization can be compensated by a strong Culture (think of Switzerland), but the opposite (weak Culture and strong Organization) is less likely to prove durable, which is the reason that all empires die sooner rather than later.

From a philosophical viewpoint, the only pure collective good attached to an active unit is that unit itself, i.e., considered as a being. All concrete collective goods are imperfect temporal translations of this only pure and atemporal collective good, very much like Plato's view that reality is a degraded manifestation of the realm of Ideas (capital letter I). Underneath this approach, there is an implicit Bergsonian philosophy of time. For Henry Bergson, time – or, better, duration – is the same as potential for creation, that is, substantial rather than mechanical change. A being, considered as an absolute entity, is timeless. In this book, a “political unit” is an active unit that (through its Organization) considers itself sovereign – that is, it does not recognize any superior authority on Earth. A State is a political unit, but so too is al Qaeda. In some contexts, it may be convenient to use the phrase “political unit” for other active units such as states within a federation. For a political unit, collective goods are usually called public goods.

The reader will also note that my concepts of power, potential, and potency do not coincide exactly with those commonly found in the literature, although my definition of power (the capacity of an Organization to mobilize resources in a desired direction) is rather classical. Here, the *potential* of an active unit is an estimate, in a specific context, of what that unit would be capable of achieving with its available power. In most cases, the potential is not measurable. The traditional approach of measuring the potential of a system of armed forces with a quantitative index that includes its manpower and weaponry is a fundamental error. The equivalent error in economics, for example, would be to mistake the factors of production for the output in a production function. While potential is virtual, *potency* relates to the actual use of resources to achieve the strategic objectives set by the Organization. Potency stems from the combination of potential and acting out. The distinction between potential and potency is also clearly related to time (in the sense of the ancient Greek concept of *kairos*, which is the art of identifying the right moment to act) and duration (meaning that action is not timeless and opens the way for creation – that is, for unplanned subactions, which can in turn be analyzed as sets of smaller such subactions, and so forth). This is why, in mathematics, game theory (although a very



useful set of models to foster clear thinking about strategic situations) cannot pretend to become the ultimate theoretical praxeological (from the Greek word *praxis*, meaning action) framework. Indeed, when game theory deals with time, it does so in the sense of *chronos* (time as it is apprehended in classical physics) not of *kairos* or of Bergsonian duration. A reason that this book gives much attention to the work of Carl von Clausewitz is his focus on the radical difference between virtuality and reality with regard to the phenomenon of war.

A “praxeological problem” refers to the interaction of active units in a specific rather than a generic framework. A “political problem” emerges when there is at least one dominant political unit. A way to think of a dominant unit is through the thought experiment of seeing that the problem is transformed radically if the unit in question is removed. A political problem becomes an “international problem” if there are at least two different political units, with at least one of them being dominant. With these definitions in hand, the phrase “international system” is a generic term for international problems. Indeed, there is no way to describe fully “the” international system independently of a specific perspective (such as nuclear proliferation, finance, trade, or some regional issue). In fact, it is the increasing variety of such perspectives that motivated the research that produced this volume.

The concept of structural stability or its opposite (i.e., structural instability) is associated with that of complexity, or non-linear relationships (i.e., non-proportionality of causes and effects) within a system. In a complex system, an infinitesimal shock can produce an unlimited transformation, which may lead to a totally new and unpredictable situation. Such possibilities have been popularized as “the butterfly effect.” Earthquakes or tsunamis illustrate the concept of structural instability in the following sense. The deep causes of earthquakes are the movements of tectonic plates, which are sufficiently well understood by geologists to allow them to predict accurately where earthquakes will take place. But the nature of the immediate causes of earthquakes is different and too complex to allow experts to date specifically any such event, at least with our current level of knowledge. Similar distinctions between fundamental and immediate causes are familiar in human affairs. Historians have resorted to them since Thucydides (namely, the Peloponnesian War). Alexis de Tocqueville did so too in his analysis of revolutions. The former bipolar system of the Cold War was structurally stable. It could absorb most shocks while preserving its basic structure. This does not mean that catastrophic bifurcations were

ruled out. On the contrary, the nightmare of a major nuclear war was at the forefront of strategic thinking at the time. But the subjective probability of such an event was perceived to be extremely low. In contrast, the new multipolar, heterogeneous, and global international system, which is gradually emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century, appears to be structurally unstable. The major source of this structural instability seems to be the speedy development of social networks and, more generally, the deepening of the information technologies revolution.

Two major developments, which have occurred since the first edition of this book, illustrate this point: the 2007 subprime crisis and the “Arab Spring.” Regarding the subprime crisis, we should have known from economic history that major financial imbalances always end badly.<sup>2</sup> But the immediate causes and consequences of the bursting of a particular bubble are unpredictable, even in a probabilistic sense. This confirms the relevance of unscientific prudential rules, such as putting a cap on public deficit or debt (e.g., the Maastricht criteria in the eurozone). However, when, year after year in a given context, breaching the rules seems to carry no unpleasant effects, letting it go is an inherent consequence of human nature. This has been the case for the US balance-of-payments deficits since the Second World War. When a crisis erupts, it therefore takes everyone by surprise. As for the 2007 crisis, the world came close to a situation comparable to the Great Depression, and the lack of innocuous remedies has aggravated the disequilibria, which implies that there remains strong potential for further upheavals. Since early 2010, the euro has been undermined by a major confidence crisis, such that the survival of the eurozone is at stake. The European Union is now facing two choices: move towards a kind of federalism, which is yet to be defined, or move towards disintegration. If it materializes, the first option would illustrate the brinkmanship principle, according to which great improvements are often (if not always) born from the pressure of immediate major threats. The alternative would produce a tidal wave with devastating consequences that could go as far as killing globalization and paving the way for major conflicts in the twenty-first century.

Financial and economic instabilities at the start of the century also teach us that, at a time of supposedly perfect information, public opinion and leading institutions seem to remain grossly misinformed (as they were, for example, about Greece’s real economic situation). The explanation of this apparent paradox is threefold: first, disinformation goes along with information; second, much like searching for a star in the sky the “telescope”

must be pointed in the right direction; and third, data are meaningless without a framework. In other words, information is not only about data, but also, and possibly primarily, about mindsets. Similarly, political decision making is not only about problem solving, as it is for experts or analysts, but also, and perhaps primarily, about taking in at a glance the combination of circumstances – including emotional – that will make an action feasible. To use Pascal's well-known distinction between *esprit de géométrie* and *esprit de finesse* in this context, the former is about problem solving or expertise, the latter about decision making and politics. The concept of *kairos* (i.e., the art of identifying the right moment) or the concept of intuition – a key feature of Bergson's philosophy and also of Clausewitz's reflections on war – obviously refer to the *esprit de finesse*.

A second major development in the last decade is the so-called Arab Spring. The fundamental cause of the collapse of a political regime is an unsustainable distance from its population in terms of identifiable criteria, such as demography, education, and/or unemployment. However, similar to those of earthquakes or economic bubbles, the immediate causes of a particular downfall are contingent. The shah of Iran was not bound to fall in 1979, and the Soviet Union could still exist today. Retrospective determinism does not make sense. For the Arab Spring, the sequence of events – which started with a poor man committing suicide in a Tunisian village, provoking the end of Ben Ali's, Mubarak's, and Gaddafi's rules and launching a civil war in Syria, and so on – was radically unforeseeable, as would be an incident that would soon trigger the explosion of Kim Jong-un's sect in North Korea. As this preface is written, North Africa and the Middle East remain open to a wide range of possible futures, including setbacks, as in Europe after 1848. These events may also affect the future of such countries as Russia or China in unpredictable ways.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is no problem more important than determining how to enforce the structural stability of our increasingly complex international system. Structural stability does not imply immobilism. It is not incompatible with structural evolution. In the absence of a benevolent and gentle invisible hand that would control the action and reaction mechanism – which is universal, even if it operates on various time scales – good governance should allow the structure of the international system to evolve smoothly in desirable directions while avoiding potentially catastrophic bifurcations. How can this be achieved through a combination of collective security mechanisms and global as well as regional balances of power?

One key aspect of the question is whether the international system can be prevented from collapsing due to an abrupt end to globalization or through a descent into anarchy. Although the United States will remain the preponderant power over the next two decades or longer, a new world order maintained by only one dominant power is no longer feasible. A new kind of “Concert of Nations” involving a small number of homogeneous powers, as in post-Napoleonic Europe, does not seem likely either. The current world is highly heterogeneous – that is, culturally diverse, volatile, and fragile.

Although states themselves have become more heterogeneous and weaker, partly as a consequence of globalization, they remain the basic political units of the international system. From a legal point of view, states are characterized by a territory, a population, and a government. More fundamentally, a sustainable state is based on a population unified by a common culture and organized around legitimate institutions (the “Organization”) whose role is to define and implement concrete public goods and, in general, to translate the collective reality into actions directed towards both the outside world and the domestic scene. As suggested above, the “abstract” public good from which the “concrete” public goods are derived is the political unit itself, in that it aims to preserve its existence. The important point is that any “concrete” public good is inseparable from the political unit to which it refers, and from its governance. That is why, strictly speaking, it is still meaningless to speak of “global public goods,” except in a very loose, non-operational, sense. Yet, the impact of globalization involves a major increase in the positive or negative “externalities” that affect various political units, which perceive them differently. In some areas, such as energy, climate, or health, this general interdependence may ultimately prevail over the purely internal realities. This dramatically reduces the room for manoeuvring by governments, whose legitimacy is therefore brought into question.

Under these conditions, the natural solution to the global governance problem is to resort to interstate cooperation (such as the G8 and the G20), to global international organizations (such as the United Nations or the IMF), or regional organizations (such as the Arab League). However, this mix does not work well in the current complex international system. Imbalances of potential or potency at the global and regional levels are one reason. Indeed, collective security is best thought of as the concerted implementation of some balance-of-power principle. Another reason is the efficiency-legitimacy dilemma. In order to be efficient, a group (G) of leading countries should have a small number of members, while legitimacy

tends to imply large numbers. The dilemma could be solved if the identified “leaders” were perceived as contributing resources not only for their own interest but also for the sake of others. Thus, the duties, not only the rights, of any leading G would have to be clearly stated. This is not typically the case of existing Gs, such as the G5 (permanent members of the Security Council), which does not seem to have a shared view of the “common good” (such as in Iran or Syria). Moreover, while “old” western powers have comparable historical experiences of leadership, this is clearly not the case for emerging powers, which tend to define their national interest in terms that are too narrow. India and China, for instance, do not even ask to be recognized as global leaders. This is the classical “free rider” problem.

Disagreements among members of a given G may stem from different understandings, often based on perceived interests, of the working of the international system (such is often the case in economics), and from conflicts of interests more or less narrowly defined, or both. At the state level, arbitration procedures allow for the making of decisions, even though in an imperfect environment. More often than not, a second best or even a bad decision is better than none. Because of the lack of institutions for arbitration at the international level, an enormous amount of energy is wasted during endless negotiations. Much time can be lost while crises develop, which makes their settlement increasingly difficult until a bifurcation point is reached. As a consequence of the very low efficiency of the global governance system, the credibility of local politicians is damaged. In some countries, democracy itself can be damaged.

The art of global governance must involve stakeholders other than states. Globalization has helped to increase the number of non-state active units with international reach (e.g., companies, NGOs, think tanks, etc.). Good governance should favour their initiatives with a view to achieving the common good and allowing closer cooperation between these newcomers, states, and international organizations structured according to the fields concerned (e.g., finance, energy, health, etc.). Here again, we clearly face the efficiency-legitimacy dilemma. If we are talking about energy, for instance, which companies should be part of a global decision-making process and how should the process be structured? The difficulty arises partly from the fact that truly global companies do not exist. IBM and Mercedes-Benz operate worldwide, but the former is clearly American and the latter German. This is more a matter of culture than of citizenship but, at the end of the day, when the president of the United States acts as a salesman for his country, he will likely spend more of his energy defending the interests

of IBM than those of Mercedes Benz. This leads to a fundamental point. A state, or most generally any political unit, is composed of groups of individuals and institutions immersed in a given culture, which helps to mould them and which, conversely, they can gradually modify. Now, globalization puts political units permanently in close contact with each other and brings about a gigantic intermingling of individuals and institutions of all nationalities on an unprecedented historical scale. As a result, cultures and civilizations influence each other as never before.

These considerations bring us back to the question of global public goods. It should be clear that no matter how rapidly this aspect of globalization is occurring, it will not lead to the emergence of a global political unit any time soon. Even the European Union remains a long way from becoming a well-rounded political unit. Hence, the importance of looking out for bottom-up initiatives that can further the objective of identifying some “goods” that would be recognized as global public goods by public opinions in different parts of the world, even though no legitimate decision-making process would have defined them. (Note that “global public opinion” exists no more than does a “global political unit.”) Such a bottom-up approach would increase the chances for good global governance. It certainly would take time, but less than the hypothetical emergence of a global political unit. Maybe a proper network of think tanks, such as the “Council of Councils” (launched in 2012 at the initiative of the US Council of Foreign Relations), could contribute to such bottom-up initiatives as part of the emergence of “global civil society.”

Good global governance does not imply the total homogenization of the political regimes of the states that comprise the international system, and even less any sort of cultural uniformity. However, it may require the identification of universal values that are truly shared by the members of what could then be really called the “international community” – with a universal declaration of values, for example, involving human rights but dealing also with human responsibilities. Such a declaration could pave the way for a more effective system of international law.

To conclude, good global governance is a survival issue and achieving it is a race against time. Returning to confrontation among blocks would impede economic development, increase the likelihood of major wars, and damage human rights. Anarchy could ensue and bad global governance could increase the risk of disintegration of some states, which is precisely what countries such as Russia or China fear most, and for good reasons. Ultimately, progress depends to a large extent on a less ideological approach,

particularly in the “West,” and a less cynical approach, particularly in the “East.” It also depends on a proper redefinition by the major world powers of their national interests, which would have to take better account of positive as well as negative externalities at different time scales. Such redefinition should be facilitated by bottom-up initiatives within and among them.

Thierry de Montbrial

March 4, 2012





## Acknowledgments

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The first edition of this work was published in France in 2002. The fourth edition was released in 2011 with a new preface and five additional appendices. The book has already been translated into six languages, including Russian and Chinese. It appears here for the first time in English, slightly adapted from the first French edition with an updated preface.

The present adaptation is the outcome of a long process. I am indebted to Jean Mulot who first invested deeply in this difficult task as a student at Harvard. We spent many hours discussing the substance together, and I was impressed by his dedication and enthusiasm. Additional thanks are also due to Kimberley Frank who reviewed some of the endnotes on my behalf.

I want to express my deep gratitude to Simon Serfaty, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair (Emeritus) in Global Security and Geostrategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC, and Professor of International Politics at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. Simon is a superb scholar with a deep understanding of American and French culture. He was convinced that this book ought to be made available to an English-speaking audience and spared no effort to that end. Not only did he spend time reviewing and improving Jean's translation in its entirety, he also expended a lot of energy identifying the most appropriate publisher. Simon also suggested the title, *Action and Reaction in the World System*, for the book.

The last round of preparation for the present publication was a dialogue with the University of British Columbia Press. The editor asked many relevant questions that I tried to answer as clearly as I could. In the end, I bear the responsibility for the text as it is presented here.

Finally, I wish to thank all those throughout the world who have shown their interest in the book and have encouraged me.

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PART ONE

# THEORY



# 1

## Active Units and Praxeological Problems

— An Introduction

This book considers praxeology and its effect on our world. Praxeology is defined as the science of organized human activities, studied from the angle of the use of power. Parties that exercise praxeology vary, but they are called “active units” in this book.<sup>1</sup> An active unit is a group of individuals who relate to each other through cultural and organizational means.

The first connective relationship between the members of an active unit is an established Culture, which is used in the broadest sense of the term. Culture refers to a stable system of practices, references, and beliefs, and it is written here with a capital letter in order to avoid any ambiguity with other usages of the word “culture” in the same context.<sup>2</sup> Tonnies and Max Weber make a significant distinction between cultural relationships that can be communal (*Gemeinschaft*), societal (*Gesellschaft*), or a combination of both. To explain this distinction more clearly, Emile Durkheim distinguishes between “mechanical” and “organic” cultural relationships. What is reported as mechanical is drawn out of interpersonal similarity, through a sharing of feelings or values. It is related to the idea of community. An organic solidarity expresses itself through an interdependence of different parts – the drawing together of different parts of a society.

The other connective relationship of an active unit is organizational. An Organization is governed (in a loose sense of the word) by procedures and rules that aim towards goals both inside and outside of the unit. Again, to avoid ambiguity, “Organization” is written with a capital letter so that it is

possible to speak of the “organization of the Organization.” According to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, an Organization appears when explicit procedures are established to coordinate the activities of a group in order to achieve specific objectives. However, the requirement for procedures to be “explicit” is too restrictive. Implicit or customary procedures such as routines could be sufficient, as in a household (in the economic sense of the term) or even in some States (such as the Westminster model of British government).

These groups must have resources at their disposal in order to act (see Chapter 2). Thus, the preceding definition can be modified to present an Organization as a set of human and material resources structured in order to clarify and pursue the objectives of a given group. The general objectives of a group (such as the survival of a State or the development of an enterprise) must be translated into, or focused on, specific, operational goals under given circumstances or within a given environment.<sup>3</sup> These two constitutive elements of the definition, which are expanded later, show that active units cannot be separated from their history, in the sense that their goals, decisions, and actions are products of both their past as well as their present circumstances.

Active units, like anything else, evolve over time under pressure from both internal and external forces. Like any human phenomenon, an active unit is part of its time period, during which changes perceived by successive group members and by the outside world show strong continuity.<sup>4</sup> The “identity” of an active unit rests on a shared feeling of adequate compatibility between what it is now and what it has been in the past. The identity is a structured “set” that is partly shaped by psychological “constants.” The basic idea is commonly seen in mathematics. For example, the so-called topological properties of a manifold are the “constants” in the group of continuous transformations. For a topologist or a psychologist who is observing the *Gestalttheorie*, a sphere has the same “identity” as a cube, a tire has the same “identity” as a cup with a handle, but a sphere and a tire have two different “identities.”

The question of identity typically arises in the case of Nation-States. Thus, France in the year 2000 was in many regards a very different thing from what it was in 1789. However, the Culture and Organization (namely, the State) that link the French people are still influenced by the France of 1789.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, France in 1789 was in many ways a product of its earlier history. The periodic recasting of an identity is driven by the fluctuations of

historiography. The shared feeling of continuity between the past and the present can, however, be altered or disrupted. After 1871, a France deprived of Alsace-Lorraine was perceived by the vast majority of the French people as amputated. Occupied France in June 1940 was deemed to be no longer “itself” (which added to the strength of the myth embodied by General de Gaulle during and after the Second World War).

A single individual is generally a member of many active units at once and can, therefore, experience contradictions or even rupture. Every active unit has resources, or assets, at its disposal. These include, at least, the human capital of the members of the group insofar as they are, to an extent, interdependent.<sup>6</sup>

A company, association, trade union, church, political party, university, mafia, or terrorist organization (like al Qaeda), to name a few, are some examples of active units. A so-called “primitive” tribe, the Roman Empire, a monarchy, and a contemporary State are examples of active units of a specific kind, to the extent that each of these claims a certain form of sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> Thus, they recognize no entity as having a general or atemporal authority over them.<sup>8</sup> This characteristic is not incompatible with the recognition of decisions made by international courts or other bodies. These specific active units are called “political units.” For the purposes of this book, active units such as States in a federation (e.g., the German “Länder”), as well as revolutionary or liberation movements that arise from the break-up of fragile States, are also called “political units.”

International organizations that are created from the cooperation between states, such as the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the European Union (EU), do not constitute a priori a political unit under the conditions laid out above. Most citizens of the various member States do not share a feeling or identity with the organization and what it does or might represent. By extension or by extrapolation, however, such an organization can at times be considered a political unit for the purpose of some praxeological discussions.<sup>9</sup>

Families, ethnic groups, or nations constitute active units only if they are organized in a way that satisfies our initial criteria. Thus, the Kurdish Workers Party or the Corsican National Liberation Front is an active unit. But the “Kurdish people” or the “Corsican people” are not (or at least not yet) – and neither are the “Arab nation” and the “German nation.” However, all of these entities exist as socially constructed objects that do influence the actions within certain types of active units. As is seen below, they are

part of a larger “environment.” “Humankind” (inclusive of all human beings) is not – (or at least not yet) – an active unit since neither of our initial criteria (Culture and Organization) are met.

The integration of a person into such a network of practices and references can result from an inherently passive situation. This is the case for most citizens’ relations with their native country. Such integration can result from carefully planned actions, as in the case of an immigrant who becomes a citizen of a new country or employees of an enterprise whose fate is partially determined by the company. An active integration can result from passion in the form of extreme forms of patriotism and/or nationalism. The richer a culture is and the more firmly rooted it is in the past (especially with regard to its myths of origin and endogamy), the stronger the ties will be between an individual and a political unit.

A stronger association makes separation more difficult.<sup>10</sup> Time-honoured nations like Britain, France, or Japan are examples of this correlation. The existence of a stable set of practices, references, and beliefs creates a social pressure inside the group that becomes natural for its members to incorporate. This pressure contributes to the creation of the “habitus,” or the primary reaction of an individual to a certain situation. It limits the number of deviations in decision making and helps define more clearly the difference between group members and “the others.”

The existence of a stable set of practices, references, and beliefs is not enough to form an active unit. It is also necessary to have an Organization that effectively reaches the entire group and operates under three conditions. First, the Organization must strengthen cohesion and thus reinforce the existence of the unit. Second, it must facilitate adaptation in the face of changes in circumstances without sacrificing the identity of the unit. Finally, it must broadly define the collective action of the unit, make its goals known to both the inside and outside world, and take the necessary measures to accomplish them.

In order to achieve these goals, the Organization needs to tap into the resources of its community – for example, through taxes in the case of the State. It utilizes its resources both inside the group as well as outside of it. Inside the group, the Organization combines persuasion (by appealing to the people’s common respect for contracts and rules) and coercion (according to Max Weber’s classical proposition that the State has a monopoly over legitimate means of constraint and violence). This combination can be directed both towards its individual members who act separately (or, on occasion, spontaneously together) and towards active subunits that are too



weak to be a real challenge to the greater active unit. With regard to other active units (both internal and external), the action has a strategic nature; that is, it implies a clash of opposed wills with uncertain and undetermined outcomes. A State's fight against organized crime is an example of this internal action.

As a general rule, active units are not limited to a homogeneous aggregation of individuals. They contain distinct, active subunits that have identities of their own and that can be linked directly to the larger Organization. Some of these subgroups are organized in order to defend their own interests, such as civil servants, member states of a federation, cities and other forms of local government, as well as institutions and corporations within a State. Some subunits are transient in nature, while others are deeply rooted in the history of the principal active unit and participate and contribute significantly to its identity.<sup>11</sup>

An active unit is considered "unstable" when it contains at least one active subunit potentially capable of establishing itself as an independent unit or joining another external active unit.<sup>12</sup> Following this logic, increasing the number of line activities within a private enterprise increases the probability of its future split (whether voluntary or not). Multi-ethnic States are inherently unstable. However, instability is a matter of degree, and whether the "dissociation potential" of an active unit is realized depends on external circumstances. Thus, the breakup of Yugoslavia was facilitated by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Failed States owe much of their status to the indulgence of the international community and have a very high dissociation potential: Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo, is a case in point. But the actual breakup of these units depends on what Clausewitz calls *die Lage* (or historical context). When the dissociation potential of a State is low, it will be more difficult for it to be dominated by external units, either partially or completely, as was the case of Alsace-Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian War in 1870.

An active unit can often conflict with some of its subunits through their respective Organizations. In most cases, the practices, references, and beliefs of the primary unit are not challenged. Such conflicts occur frequently in the United States (US) and in Germany between the federal government and the states or *Länders*, respectively. In extreme cases, social conflicts that take place within States can be so severe as to prompt revolutionary actions. Often these conflicts are fundamentally related to social inequalities (distribution of power and wealth) as well as ethnic, religious, or cultural divisions. These conflicts can temporarily or permanently weaken the

affected States by draining their resources or capital but do not necessarily lead to the breakup of the State.

Civil wars and wars of secession need to be clearly distinguished. In civil wars, active subunits fight to change or maintain the political and social order. Civil wars do not necessarily lead to, or aim at, the breakup of the political unit they seek to influence. Examples of civil wars include the French Revolution in 1789, the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, and the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Coups d'états are similar to civil wars in that an active subunit imposes its Organization on the entire political unit – as the Syrian government has been doing via the Alawite minority. In the case of a secession war, the sheer existence of the principal unit is at stake. Examples of secession wars include the American Civil War that was waged from 1861 to 1865 and the civil war in Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1992.

Active subunits themselves contain smaller subunits, all the way down to the level of the individual. A person can be considered an extreme and indivisible type of active unit – with its own “self” to protect and the ability to act rationally on its own behalf. Our original requirements of an active unit can be expanded to fit these sublevels. We can thus say that an active unit, at any point in time, is a structured network that consists of all of its past and present subunits and their achievements. In this sense, the “Revolutionary Tribunal” is an “element” of the active unit known as “France.” This formulation is not required to define France as an active unit since France can be so defined with much less specific information; rather, this is an example of “pattern recognition” that refers to the real or virtual ties between subunits and their principals. An active unit cannot be a subunit of itself since, by nature, it must be different from the elements that compose it. To use its parallel in mathematics, there is no “set of all sets.”<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned earlier, an active subunit, just like an individual, can belong to many active units as well as be influenced by other active units outside of its principal unit. Globalization is expanding these interactions. A corporation located in France is an active subunit of the unit “France.” But if much of its assets are held by US pension funds or if a significant portion of its personnel are US citizens, then it is intertwined with the practices, references, and beliefs that make up the United States. The same overlaps occur with mosques (and their attached communities) in a Christian country or inversely, as was seen especially during past colonial periods.

How much of this overlap and external influence can take place without doing away with the identity of the unit? This question is particularly important in the current context of globalization. It is certainly possible that

a series of institutional modifications, which may go unnoticed one at a time, may lead to radical transformation over time. The following experiment illustrates this point: a sequence of twenty slides is shown to an unprepared audience; the first slide represents a cat, which is slightly altered in each slide until the twentieth slide clearly displays a dog. In this experiment, the audience will claim to “see” a cat until about slide sixteen. The analogy can be misleading, however, and the topological case of a sphere that is being increasingly pierced through its diameter may help clarify the issue. Until the needle finally breaks through to the other side, the object is, topologically speaking, still a sphere. When the needle at last breaks through, a “transformation” occurs – which is to say that the sphere has now become a “tire” or any other identity it resembles. These analogies relate to the distinction between weak and strong forms of continuity. Weak continuity alters identity over time; strong continuity preserves it. As is shown in these two examples, the distinction is difficult to make when the complexity of the examples is increased. For example, the effect of immigration or foreign direct investment on national identity is a contentious debate that complicates the concept of identity of States over time (see Chapter 5).

Every active unit will have collective goods at its disposal or discretion. Collective goods can be defined here as non-rival, non-exclusive goods (understood in the broadest sense as material or immaterial things that can be transformed or destroyed).<sup>14</sup> Non-rival goods benefit all members of the group from the moment they benefit any one of them. Thus, there is no competition over them as there is with private goods, and the benefactor is irrelevant. Non-exclusive goods are those from which individual group members cannot be excluded. This concept is borrowed from economics and seems fairly straightforward. However, in practical terms, such as a State’s education and health services, it is impossible to determine unambiguously the status of pure collective goods.

“Pure collective goods” go to the very identity of the group and its security in the broadest sense. From the point of view of the active unit, the only true collective good is the unit itself. The problem is to make this concept operational. Notions like “public interest” within a State and “national interest” outside the active unit are difficult to define. Contrary to the common practice of economists, pure collective goods are not measurable or quantifiable.<sup>15</sup> “National defence” is a case in point. The idea of some quantity of national defence does not make sense. The good itself, in this case the ability to deny or resist aggression, is often mistakenly equated with the

means used to provide it (e.g., number of soldiers or firepower). This mistake is commonly made in economics – a confusion between value produced and the value of the production factors.<sup>16</sup>

The Organization, as part of its definition, translates collective goods into operationally specific decisions and implements them. For example, in a modern State such as the United States, the three branches of government cooperate to operationalize the collective good (in this case the public good), and these decisions are then carried out by the executive branch.<sup>17</sup>

The mere existence of an Organization is not the foundation of its legitimacy. Legitimacy for an Organization means that members of the group, statistically speaking, recognize that the Organization speaks and acts in the name of their active unit. The fact that this recognition is qualified with the condition “statistically speaking” implies that a small percentage of members may object. As long as this small percentage cannot organize itself into an active subunit powerful enough to significantly disturb the unit, they can be ignored. For example, in the France of 2000, the republican form of government was considered completely legitimate, whereas this was still not the case in 1958. It is impossible to determine the precise time of the critical threshold since the primary factor is the “deviants” ability to organize themselves. Suffice it to note that, generally, events with a statistical probability smaller than 5 percent are considered negligible.

Legitimacy rests most often on a specific type of rationality, which Herbert Simon refers to as “procedural rationality.” Such rationality provides the foundation for the definition of the Organization itself. Examples might include the choice of the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire by the seven electors of the electoral college, the election of the pope by conclave, the order of succession “from male to male according to primogeniture” and coronations in the French monarchy, direct elections in modern democracies, business law for the governance of for-profit companies, and, more broadly, the rules of law (respect for customs and constitutions). All of these “procedures” constrain decision making. They each contribute to the “network of stable practices, references, and beliefs,” namely, the Culture of the active unit. Like all parts of this network, they evolve over time. In the case of States, in the modern sense, the procedures regulating the designation and function of the government carry extreme importance because international institutions like the United Nations (UN) still have very limited control over governments. The example of corporations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is radically different because

these are subject to the law and jurisdiction of the States. Therefore, the choice of their management and the basic rules regulating their modes of action are not only the byproduct of their history but are also affected (and in many ways dictated) by their principal active unit.

“Constitutional procedures” are intellectualized and, at times, socially constructed objects. As a result, they are perceived (as is the case in the US) by the majority of citizens as being inevitable or even sacred. The role of critical observers or actors is to expose what may be hidden behind entrenched practices and to organize themselves into an effective active sub-unit to modify the established order either within the framework of the current unit (reform) or outside of it (revolution). The entrenched practices referred to here can hide, for example, the perpetuation of certain inequalities or certain types of inefficiencies.

The legitimacy of organizations is not always rooted in procedural rationality. Entrepreneurs or founders of institutions can enjoy an authority that transcends established rules and ultimately becomes part of founding myths. Under exceptional circumstances, this can take place in the life of States, as occurred, say, with Charles de Gaulle and Mao Zedong.

Herbert Simon explains procedural rationality as the logical consequence of complexity and uncertainty. These factors make it practically impossible to base decisions on the exhaustive analysis of their consequences under all possible situations, as “instrumental rationality” would require, which would be the preferred approach of neoclassical economists and statistical decision theorists. The most outstanding leaders, if left alone and unchecked, can make major mistakes and even commit crimes. The concept of a perfect strategist is just an abstract construct. Likewise, assemblies left alone and unchecked can also lead a unit anywhere.

From the perspective of procedural rationality, the ends do not necessarily justify the means. Thus, it is necessary to constrain decision makers in order to avoid the uncertainties of unchecked leadership. This leads to the creation of “decision-making systems,” which can be very complex, as we see in modern States (or systems of States like the EU) as well as in the armed forces. However, the notion of procedural rationality does not exclude that of instrumental rationality, and therefore of efficiency.

The art of concrete decision making lies in reducing the difference between the two rationalities. Indeed, the competitiveness of an active unit in its field of operation depends greatly on such ability. While the notion of competitiveness often invokes the competition of corporations, it also

applies to States. The Soviet Union collapsed under the weight of both the sins of its founding ideology and an Organization that grew increasingly inefficient over time, in part because of that ideology. In the present context of globalization, States compete in the sense that the organization of the public sector (broadly speaking) affects the competitiveness of the whole economy.

In addition to procedural and instrumental rationalities, there is also “expressive” rationality.<sup>18</sup> Some decisions that are “rationally” motivated can appear erroneous considering their predictable consequences. This can occur because, from the perspective of the decision-making body, the important aspect is the demonstration effect or the image linked to the decision. George H.W. Bush’s decision to send troops to Somalia in July 1992 can be so interpreted. The operation, dubbed Operation Restore Hope, was vaguely conceived as a humanitarian operation that made little strategic sense within the broader context of the Horn of Africa. Domestic political concerns seemed to guide the implementation of the operation, including the retreat that took place a mere eighteen months later. Three months before the presidential elections, President Bush wanted to appear as a man of peace in order to compete with the more compassionate image of Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton. Shortly after Operation Desert Storm in Iraq, the Pentagon, which had initially objected to any military action in Somalia, now saw a short-term intervention in that country as an opportunity to shift public opinion and gain the support of the potential future Democratic president who had announced his intention to cut the Department of Defense budget by as much as 30 percent. In addition, Operation Restore Hope would demonstrate to the United States and to the outside world that such interventions were designed to serve not only the national interest but also the interests of the world at large, including those Frantz Fanon refers to as the “wretched of the Earth.”<sup>19</sup> Washington’s calculation was rational, though admittedly cynical, in believing that, as public attention decreased, troops would pull out unnoticed. In this case, the concept of instrumental rationality closely borders that of expressive rationality. A decision considered to be rational from a declaratory perspective is also rational from an instrumental perspective. This is provided that the set of consequences is adequately seen and understood and that its hidden dimensions are accounted for.

Praxeological problems are defined as problems relating to interactions of members of a class of active units either among themselves or with their environment. Isolating a praxeological problem requires, first, the identifi-

cation of the active units that are relevant to the problem under scrutiny; second, the identification of the environment that is an intrinsic part of the problem or that is affecting it in some way; and, third, the identification of the nature of the interactions in question. References to the “environment” address natural phenomena as well as groups of human beings, whether organized or disorganized, who do not engage strategically with the active units relevant to the targeted problem.

The issue of the birth, life, and disappearance of an active unit is a praxeological problem. For example, the creation of an enterprise within a country results from the action or actions of one or more active units (in extreme cases, that of a single Schumpeterian entrepreneur) that are located both in a general environment (including the country’s Culture and possibly the regional or international environment) and a particular environment (including the legal framework, the labour market, tax regulations, and laws). If the entrepreneur is powerful enough, he can develop strategic relationships with some public authorities. The latter should not be considered as an “environment” but, rather, as an active unit to be included in the analysis of the praxeological problem at hand. Analyzing the existence of an enterprise, and especially its internal and external growth, must take into account the general framework in which it exists (it is a subunit of broader active units like the country or countries within which it exists). As mentioned earlier with regard to relationships with public authorities, the analysis must also distinguish between active units that are part of the environment and those units with which it interacts strategically. The former typically relates to the economic cycle, social changes, and weather conditions (if applicable); the latter includes competitors, trade unions, large customers, and others.

Finally, an enterprise, like an active unit, can disappear in many ways. It can be broken up, merged, absorbed, or completely dismantled. In all cases, many active units and a diversified environment are intricately involved in the disappearance process.

Issues of birth, life, and disappearance are often more complex for political units than for other active units. This is due to the non-permanence of political entities and the related natural chaos, which can alter memories of the past without abolishing it but, instead, constantly revising it. Contrary to Marxist-Leninist views, the past is never fully erased.

There are many reasons why, over the forty thousand years of human history, human settlements were organized into clearly distinct ethnic groups, each with its own customs. These customs became more deeply

entrenched because the slow pace of evolution allowed every generation to believe that all existing things either remained unchanged or were cyclical. Factors that play into this separation include physical dangers of all kinds, different technical levels of knowledge, psychological attitudes towards both the Earth and the cosmos, and demographic differences (including limited population size, which amounted to barely 10 million at the end of the upper Paleolithic period).

The numerous ethnic groups of modern times have been too affected by past and present neighbouring civilizations to trace an accurate path through their human origins. Archaeologists and linguists try to find and interpret very tiny traces of the origin of ethnicities. They discuss the origins of European populations, Indo-Europeans, Celts, Ligurians, Italiotes, Umbrians, Etruscans, Germans, Slavs, and their possible or probable subdivisions. But how could they pinpoint the origins of any of these? Over time, a connection between people and territories developed, in large part due to the accumulation of knowledge, technical progress (especially the discovery of agriculture and livestock farming), settlements, and the appearance of cities. Once this connection between people and land was established, the conquest of territories and the subjection of their populations as war objectives became possible. New forms of political units emerged in conditions about which we know very little. Even a historically recent phenomenon like the “birth of Rome” is still contested. New information on Rome’s founding would not necessarily modify our understanding of Roman history. As royal Rome evolved, its history was recast in the legend told in the *Aeneid*. Following Titus-Livius’s argument, antiquity called on divinities as the founders of cities to give them a more noble character. Surely, this is not the privilege of antiquity only.

The mythical construction of the past is a feature of human groups produced by the mills of history, which we call “nations.” Even though such noted historians as Michelet, Mathiez, and Bainville relied on the same material, they did not portray historical events in the same way. Thus, human groups are the product of several histories: a real history that is partially inaccessible to humans as well as one or several cultural or ideological constructions of history that are made possible by humans. In 1914, the “French nation” and the “German nation” were historical realities, but the concept of nation itself corresponds better to what we understand as a “socially constructed object.” On the other hand, the characteristics that defined the two nations in 1914 corresponded in large part to ideological discourses



that contributed to Europe's path towards destruction. In the end, political units can be born many times. They can be created once in a praxeological context simultaneously real and impossible to retrieve and, second (if not many more times), in collectively approved reinventions of the past.

The life of political units raises a series of praxeological problems that can be analyzed both internally and externally. Internally, the analysis can consider active units as subunits of a principal unit, which are selected for analysis as part of a specific problem along with the external units that are strategically involved. For example, social issues in France during the interwar period constituted a specific problem and were affected by external units such as the Socialist International and the Soviet Communist Party. The external analysis of a praxeological problem takes place on a different level and crosses the field of international relations. It deals primarily with political units but also with other units that are eventually subunits of those, depending on the issue at hand.

Understanding the disappearance of political units is as difficult as is understanding their birth. Machiavelli states that the easier it is to conquer power, the more difficult it is to keep it, and vice versa. Adapting this concept, the more deeply rooted a political unit is in its past, the smaller the risk of its disappearing easily, and vice versa. There are many examples of this condition in Europe. The short-lived Austro-Hungarian Empire (or Dual Monarchy); Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (both constructs of the Versailles Treaty); and the collapse of the Soviet Union (which triggered the fall of the Russian Empire). All these units lasted less than a century. On the other hand, time and time again the old European nations have demonstrated their ability to overcome the deepest traumas and even temporary disappearances (e.g., think of Poland). Political units (and parts of their Culture, such as their language) can be born several times, as was the case with Israel and the Hebrew language.<sup>20</sup> How the political units engaged in the European construction process will "survive," or preserve their identity, raises issues that are naturally ideological and geopolitical, as is discussed throughout this volume. The question will only be resolved over time since the European construction process is extremely young compared to the continent's history.

A "political problem" is defined as any praxeological problem whose main actors include a dominant political unit, considered as such (or practically) through its Organization. In the case of a State, its Organization refers to the three branches of government and their related systems of

institutions. Every problem related to this Organization, whether theoretical or practical, is a political problem. "Political science" deals mostly with these kinds of problems. Every praxeological problem that involves a dominant political unit and some of its active subunits or other external units is a political problem.

Most common political problems fall into this category. However, when some actors are external, and if one or more of these external units becomes significantly involved, the problem becomes international. Most problems are *ordinary*: millions of them take place every day between natural persons and the administration or legal system of a State. A political problem is *particular* when it is of enough significance to interest the public and to eventually influence actions at the higher levels of the Organization. This distinction, like all classifications, is not absolute and can be blurred at times. Some ordinary issues can turn into particular political problems depending on the circumstances. In 2003 in the United States, a criminal investigation of allegations that the president's closest political advisor had leaked the name of a CIA agent in order to suppress criticism of the administration's Iraq policy quickly turned ordinary issues into particular political problems.

The distinction between political and international problems can be very troublesome. In 1986, the very particular political issue of the fate of the Iranian terrorist Gordji, who was responsible for a fatal terrorist act in Paris, was clearly an international problem. Most praxeological problems related to terrorism are international. From the perspective of States' governments (their executive branches), there are significant grey areas regarding the margins of particular and international problems, where making decisions requires a great many contradictions and trade-offs. This is where *raison d'état* and basic utilitarian calculations that resist delimitation in absolute terms come into play. Despite a broadly shared naive belief, this dilemma is not likely to disappear, even in the most democratic countries, in the near future. Late in the twentieth century, the Irish problem qualified as a political problem for Britain (like, say, the Corsican problem for France) despite the United States's role as an occasional mediator.

There are other cases, like the Chechen issue, that are more difficult to classify neatly. But, at least from my point of view, it is a political problem of the Russian Federation so long as that Federation remains significantly more involved than any other political unit that makes up the international community. Admittedly, the Federation is not the only actor concerned with the Chechen issue. Some other States can make strategic calculations

about Chechnya, and there can be initiatives on the part of active units dedicated to human rights. In the 1990s, the Algerian civil war was mostly a political problem of the political unit known as “Algeria” since no external State significantly and openly stepped in. Yet, the effects of this situation were felt sharply in a country like France (the methods I discuss in this book explain what motivated France’s apparent inaction at the time). On the other hand, the Israeli-Palestinian problem is clearly international because numerous external States are critically involved.

We could expand the set of definitions to consider all praxeological problems whose main actors include *at least one political unit* as political problems. International problems would then appear to be just a sub-category of political problems. However, the specificity and importance of international problems as well as the wealth of methods developed to deal with them justify our preference for giving them special status while remaining aware of the increasing importance of globalization and thus of new breeds of “mixed” problems.

A praxeological problem is referred to as an “international problem” when its principal actors count at least *two distinct dominant political units*. In the contemporary world, the main political units are the States. But there are other units, such as international organizations or active sub-units of States that seek secession or revolution that can also come to be dominant political units in their own right.<sup>21</sup>

We have defined international problems more comprehensively than realists or neorealists (such as Raymond Aron or Kenneth Waltz) and more precisely than the “new international relations” theorists who consider the discipline as a kind of global sociology. According to the realists, “States are the units whose interactions form the structure of the international-political system.”<sup>22</sup> This statement is generally understood as referring to interactions between governments as a whole. This led to criticism of the “holism” that Raymond Aron tried to address in the last French edition of his voluminous *Peace and War among Nations*, released in 1984. If we look at States as active units with two basic components, Culture and Organization,<sup>23</sup> the realist’s vision is strengthened significantly. We can go beyond traditional fields of diplomacy and war that arise from interactions between governments. Indeed, we can include some aspects of interaction between societies, such as the spread of ideologies. When we need to be more precise, my proposed definition of international problems also has the advantage of stressing the identification of categories of problems rather than having to rely on the vague expression “international system.” Indeed, the

notion of an international system is rigorous only if Waltz's (or Aron's) formulation is understood in a very narrow sense, which proves extremely restricting in modern times. Describing all the actors, their environments, and their interactions completely would be impossible. This is the trade-off of complexity.

On the other hand, any attempt to fully describe all actors, their environments, and their interactions would prove unnecessary. Most concrete international problems concern directly or significantly only a limited set of actors and only a part of their environment. Nonetheless, the concept of an "international system" is still convenient to refer to international relations in general when the problem at hand cannot or should not be exactly specified. Similarly, the "international community" has no more existence than does an active unit called "humankind."

Classical political problems like war and peace will always keep their importance and primacy, despite periodic claims of "the end of war." War is the greatest challenge to human conscience, more than any other human tragedy, because it implies killing rationally. Raymond Aron calls "an international system the ensemble constituted by political units that maintain regular relations with each other and that are all capable of being implicated in a generalized war."<sup>24</sup> In this case, Aron uses "political unit" broadly. According to Furet, the origins of the First World War are virtually incomprehensible without taking into account the strength of nationalist ideologies and their interactions. Closer to us, the outcome of East-West conflict cannot be understood without recognizing why the ideological cement of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) cracked in the face of Western liberalism.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the need to better understand conflicts involving political units under pressure from Islamic movements required us to further analyze not only the fragility of some States threatened by a revolutionary ferment but also the ideologies upon which this ferment developed (or might develop). However, such analysis does not require a Marxist vision, in which actions of governments are reduced to mere byproducts of economic and social forces: the peace treaties in 1919-20 or the European construction of recent times illustrate this point.

The organization of monetary relations and of international trade relations raises issues that are obviously international problems. With few exceptions (although some, like oil, are quite important), they have gradually become more and more separate from classical political problems. This

evolution is a sign of an increase in global security and, thus, the progress of the international system and of humankind as a whole.<sup>25</sup> During the second half of the twentieth century, these new relations were built around States and ad hoc organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and, later, the World Trade Organization (WTO). By the end of the century, NGOs from the civil society had appeared as new actors of influence – as shown convincingly during the failed WTO negotiations in Seattle in September 1999. But analysis of these new factors must be conducted cautiously. Considering NGOs at the same level as States would mean equating trade unions such as the AFL-CIO or business associations such as the United States Council for International Business with the federal government.

Relations developed among corporations through globalization do not directly constitute an international problem in our conception. From the perspective of industrial economics, the actions of States and the results of their cooperation with corporations are generally measured as data. Globalization has its own technological and economic determinants that lead to a wide range of international problems. Some of these are classical, like monetary or trade cooperation and collaboration, while others are relatively new, like food security or the internationalization of organized crime and terrorism.

States are now competing to attract individuals and investments. There is also the matter of how globalization affects the very identity of political units, as mentioned earlier. There is a host of new international problems that appeared at the end of the twentieth century, including the issue of climate change due to chlorofluorocarbons and global warming, which has incited the emergence of new levels of cooperation and association.

Many international problems are regionally focused, which means that they are limited to a territory in which a sense of connection has been nurtured by history and geography. During the era of the bipolar system, most regional conflicts were strongly influenced by the East-West confrontation. This meant that the United States and the Soviet Union (and many of their respective allies) were systematically major actors almost anywhere on the planet. However, much has changed since the fall of the Soviet Union. The nature of external influences and actors has evolved, as can be seen, for example, in Southern Africa, where non-political units such as corporations that produce raw materials have emerged as principal actors. Navigation on the Danube, water in the Middle East, or even the external effects of

the Chernobyl power plant are all international problems, with geography as the main factor that determines the degree of attention given by various States to these issues. Again, the analysis must be cautious since the way in which those issues are addressed can often influence other situations and interacts critically with international law. The expansion and effectiveness of international law are also international problems of a particular type. With regard to territorial questions, the increasing ties and regional integration processes that have developed since the second half of the twentieth century cover a particularly important category of international problems.

With praxeology redefined as the analysis of praxeological problems (which are, in particular, political and international), the results are of interest to us for three main reasons. First, knowledge can generally be considered an end in itself; second, praxeology allows us to bring to the forefront of a conflict “facts” that may have been otherwise hidden; finally, and perhaps most important, it is exceedingly useful.

The first point is a matter of philosophy, and it is not explored here. The second point corresponds to the Marxist perspective, which, along with psychoanalysis, extends a revolutionary tradition of human sciences that continues to be relevant in some Western countries. The third point relates to the perspective of the main actors who confront concrete problems (just as would economists or engineers) and often develop strategies accordingly – strategies that pretend to “change the world.” Whatever the skill level of these analysts, their contribution can have real effects, even if these effects do not end up being what was originally intended. Thus, the simplistic Leninist theory that the “bourgeoisie” was responsible for the First World War and that “imperialism” was the “ultimate stage of capitalism” has now been largely discredited. But in the specific context of 1917, it was essential to find a guilty party. Bolshevism relied heavily upon “scientific certainties” drawn from *Das Kapital* and from its “ideological arsenal,” which was a substitute for religion, which “was so sorely lacking in late eighteenth-century France.”<sup>26</sup> This theoretical and ideological foundation contributed to the establishment of a dictatorship in Russia, and the theory helped it benefit from the endorsement of countless intellectuals worldwide for almost seventy-five years. This analytical perspective is modest but it is not without importance. Analyzing the international system no longer emphasizes or demands a broad philosophy of history; rather, it helps us to understand well-defined and concrete problems in order to act on conflicts or events and to influence the course of interactions. The need to act

on conflicts or events relates to “decision-making factories” that have become the responsibility of the States. “Influencing the course of interactions” relates to the role of more or less “independent” commentators in democratic (or otherwise) public debates.

The paradoxes of rationality and logic in the 1992 Somalia intervention bring praxeology to the centre of how the democratic idea is being implemented. George H.W. Bush defended a humanitarian cause in the midst of a presidential election for the political gains it might generate, notably in the African-American community, which had expressed support for intervention. President Bush’s decision to send some US forces to Somalia thus catered to public opinion and responded to some media pressure.<sup>27</sup> But, as we have seen, Bush knew the operation had no future because, notwithstanding the public’s call for intervention, there was no will to pay the high price of attempting to pacify the Horn of Africa. As a result, Bush sought minimal risk with a minimal air bridge from Kenya. Only after Governor Clinton’s election in November 1992 did the US president launch a full-scale intervention that might enable him to restore his image, again at small risk since he was about to leave the White House and thus would not have to face the consequences of his decision. The United States had adopted and implemented a policy in Somalia based mainly on day-to-day domestic politics. Whether President Bush was acting democratically or cynically when he speculated about the volatility of public opinion is moot. In fact, he was probably doing both.

Similarly, but with heavier consequences, Charles de Gaulle supposedly returned to power in May 1958 in the name of “French Algeria.” Four years later, he became the architect of the Evian Agreements, which recognized the independence of Algeria from France. In retrospect, should he have been denounced as a “traitor” or applauded as a “statesman”? “Positive praxeology” does not depend on analysis that demands an equally and perfectly informed citizenship: this would require absolute transparency and would obey a single ethical consideration. Positive praxeology is, in the philosophical sense, knowledge imposed on one’s mind through experience. This is not meant, however, to reduce the importance of normative praxeology, which is critical for debates on ethics or the foundation of law.<sup>28</sup>

These research activities, like all human experiences and accounts, can contribute to improving the international system’s construction and progress. The evolution of democratic States is aided as they become progressively more integrated with other active units through, say, international scientific

cooperation. For example, scientific research institutions have played a useful role in the policies of arms control since the 1950s.

In the 1880s, French scientist Henry Le Chatelier postulated, with regard to chemical systems: "If an external action tends to alter an equilibrium, the system reacts in a sense contradicting this action." This principle, which can also be called the "principle of action and reaction," is related to Newton's Third Law, according to which two bodies will always exert actions (or forces) on each other of equal intensity but in opposite directions. While Newton's Third Law is specific and quantitative, the principle of action and reaction is general and qualitative. For Le Chatelier, when a chemical system is in equilibrium and the pressure is altered at a constant temperature, the system will undergo a reaction that causes a change in volume. The notions of system and equilibrium generally apply to praxeological problems and are consistent themes throughout this book.

In 1833, Russian physicist Emil Lenz, too, illustrated the principle of action and reaction when he demonstrated that the current created by placing a closed circuit into a magnetic field will be inversely related to the current creating the flux. Another "law" – this time attributed to Dutch Nobel Prize winner Jacobus Henricus van't Hoff – considers a chemical system in equilibrium when the temperature in the room is raised under constant pressure: the system will undergo a modification (rupture or displacement of the equilibrium) through an endothermic reaction that absorbs heat; if the temperature is lowered, the system will evolve through an exothermic reaction that produces heat.

If we compare van't Hoff and Le Chatelier's "laws" with the general "principle of action and reaction," we will find that the endothermic reaction will try to "hinder" a temperature increase and an exothermic reaction will try to hinder a temperature decrease. In the second example, a reaction that is followed by volume reduction will hinder a pressure increase; the same is true in the case of a pressure decrease. These phenomena show that, in order to apply the principle of action and reaction, we must specify the system at hand and the external conditions under which it operates. In the case of van't Hoff's law, the "external condition" is the constant pressure; in the case of Le Chatelier, it is constant temperature.

These principles of action and reaction, designed for physical and chemical systems, apply remarkably well to biological systems. Living beings are highly organized to defend themselves against external disturbances, especially those created by organisms that are foreign or unfamiliar to them,



such as pathogenic agents that cause disease. Some defence mechanisms of organisms are non-specific, like skin. An organism's skin provides the first level of defence against bacterial invasions – normal flora on the surface of tissues, some enzymes, phagocytes, and others. Other defence mechanisms are more specific and make up the immune system, which intervenes when the first lines of defence have been breached. The idea of an immune system is relatively new: it first appeared in 1960.<sup>29</sup>

The immune system eliminates foreign agents selectively and remembers them. This extraordinarily sophisticated activity actually seems to provide an application for concepts developed for conscious strategies of human societies. It is remarkable that our immune systems have developed unconsciously as the outcome of an evolutionary process that has extended over cosmic time scales. This is part of the greater context of natural selection, which has enabled populations as a whole, though not individuals, to adapt to their environment. The interactions of various populations of living species constitute a system that is also pursuant to the principle of action and reaction.

Five examples can help us view the relevance of this principle of action and reaction to praxeological problems. The first concerns the security of active units. Security is organized through the "Direction" of the unit. It uses a certain amount of resources in order to hinder external disturbances or aggressions, especially when a certain threat has already been recognized and memorized. The external characters of these disturbances can be overt or covert to varying degrees. It is obvious in the extreme case of one State overtly attacking another, as with Iraq and Kuwait in 1990. Sometimes that threat can come from within the active unit, when an active sub-unit of a State desires either to secede or, occasionally, to perpetrate terrorist actions. In this case, the disturbance is still considered external since the subunit defines itself as not belonging to the "self" unit, from which it actually originated. Students of thermodynamics know that differentiating between the interior and exterior of a physic-chemical system can often be a challenge. Returning to political units, the extreme form of reaction to a disturbance is war (see Chapter 3). The same concept applies when a territory has been invaded and occupied by a foreign population and resistance is being organized by all possible means, including terrorism.

A second example is the issue of terrorism in general. Terrorism is combat that is conducted according to rules that are not recognized by the "international community." When resisting territorial occupation, terrorism is a

defensive strategy. The attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States showed an offensive strategy at an unprecedented scale from one or more revolutionary groups (in the broadest sense of the term). Although the possibility of airplanes hitting the World Trade Center in New York City had been entertained and discussed before, along with other potential actions of the same kind (including the explosion of a ship loaded with chemical weapons in a major port), the entire American security system was dramatically outwitted. This is related to the issue of discontinuity and “acting out,” which I address next.<sup>30</sup> Human beings naturally prefer to cure rather than to prevent. As has been shown everywhere and repeatedly, the attacks of September 11th induced a series of reactions in the fields of civil rights, security organization, judicial cooperation, and international policy, all of which attempt to reduce the terrorist potential in the mid- to long term.

The third example refers to the creation and development of active units. Experience shows that the very fact of an active unit’s being created or developing itself will give rise to “counter-variant active units” within its environment – and eventually within itself.<sup>31</sup> Two active units are thought of as being “co-variant” if their objectives coincide and “counter-variant” if they contradict. The absolute covariance of two active units would theoretically combine the identity of the two units and then constitute one only. Absolute counter-variance is foreign to reality as well since it implies that every single unit defines itself strictly in opposition to its counterpart. Covariance and counter-variance are more issues of degree and circumstances than of nature. The concept is that every unit, by means of its very existence, gives rise to the appearance of counter-variance units, which means that these new units create obstacles to the achievement of the initial unit’s objectives. Thus, the unit sees itself confronted with strategic situations (see Chapter 4).

These remarks typically apply to the various situations of competition, especially in economics. An enterprise (a primitive one in this case) can be born out of the creative genius of a person or team, which invents a product or new technique. But the monopoly that arises from this situation is always temporary.<sup>32</sup> New enterprises, which I call “derived enterprises,” will at some point appear on the new market. In the international system, even before an ascending power manifests itself aggressively, preventive reactions will rise with the goal of reducing its breadth and scope of capability.<sup>33</sup> These reactions can take the form of alliances, coalitions, and so on. The

phenomenon of counter-variance continuously modifies the structure of systems of active units and the systems themselves: they are always fluid.

Our fourth example deals with the exercise of power within active units. Every power situation sparks off counter-variant reactions, which can often be studied in terms of competition. With regard to political units in particular, the use of power, whatever the quality of their governments, will cause one or several oppositions – which will take on various legal or illegal forms depending on the prevailing legal system. In the communist countries of the twentieth century, opposition movements (referred to as dissidents) were obviously illegal. An essential aspect of democracy is the existence of “legitimate” procedures that allow oppositions to express themselves and peaceful transitions of power to potentially occur. The existence of these means is not always self-evident and, as the product of a concrete historical process, can be more or less fragile.

Finally, our last example is the dynamics of the so-called “march of ideas and events in history.”<sup>34</sup> Every current of ideas (especially ideologies) that is supported by significant active units will naturally spark off the birth of counter-variant ideas and active units. The “events”<sup>35</sup> that occur as a result of the conflict between counter-variant active units (at least when they affect the population in a statistically significant manner) generate currents of new ideas and active units. As a result, there is a dialectical march that conforms to the principle of action and reaction that allows us a glimpse into the engine of history. This march is random because the exact form of active units as well as their power and their workings are never predetermined.

This march is also paradoxical because reactions often lead to situations in which “victories” and “defeats” are easily reversed – what the American strategist Edward Luttwak has called the “paradoxical logic of strategy.” For example, the Taliban would not have risen to power without the (at least tacit) acquiescence of the United States after the Russian defeat in Afghanistan. Human liberty is the ultimate impulse. Philosophies that pretend to establish a convergence towards an ideal end state as the “end of history” are arbitrary and dangerous: arbitrary because they are not supported by any empirical basis, dangerous because they can generate perverse ideologies in which a hypothetical end justifies the use of immoral means in order to reach it faster. Indeed, the entire history of the twentieth century illustrates these observations. It illustrates the fact that, in accordance with the principle of action and reaction, no ideology is ultimate and no intellectual system can pretend to have absolute closure.

These five examples also show that, in the world of praxeology, time scales of reaction vary significantly (although obviously to a much lesser degree than in biology). It takes a few years or decades to tear down a monopoly or to oust an occupying force or to eradicate a terrorist network. It takes a few decades or a few centuries to ruin an empire.

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Originally published as *L'action et le système du monde*

© Presses Universitaires de France 2002

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**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Montbrial, Thierry de

Action and reaction in the world system [electronic resource]: the dynamics of economic and political power / Thierry de Montbrial.

Originally published under the title: *L'action et le système du monde*.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Electronic monograph. Issued also in print format.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2474-3 (PDF).—ISBN 978-0-7748-2475-0 (EPUB)

1. International economic relations. 2. Praxeology. 3. Power (Social sciences).

I. Title.

HF1359.M6813 2012

337

C2012-906292-8

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Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

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