Toward a Theory of Heteronomy

Abstract

It is thought that political order in premodern Europe was characterized by overlapping and cross-cutting forms of political authority. Scholars have called this heteronomy, arguing that it preceded and may follow the modern sovereign state system, and that it has characterized various historical locales around the world. We maintain that this conception has been under-examined, and we identity three different forms of heteronomy that existed historically. These include: (1) Interstitial heteronomy, where polities with limited capacity in sparsely populated regions experience zones of informal mixed rule on the frontier; (2) Functional heteronomy, where states in thickly populated systems develop complex patterns of functional differentiation; and (3) Personalistic heteronomy, where power that is invested in individuals rather than territorially-defined polities can produce patterns of dual vassalage. We develop a theory of heteronomy based on the density of the system (low, high) and the nature of political relations (territorial, personal), and using the resulting two-dimensional map we explore the form of heteronomy that existed and may exist in different systems across time and space. We conclude that when scholars envisage heteronomy in the modern system, it is mostly functional, and not interstitial or personalistic heteronomy, that they have in mind.

Introduction

There is a received wisdom that political order in premodern Europe, if not much of the world, was characterized by overlapping and cross-cutting forms of political authority. This is contrasted with the modern sovereign state system (what we will refer to as the *modern system*) that followed, in which political authority became invested in discrete, bounded, and non-overlapping states. Scholars have described this earlier period and form of political organization as heteronymous. Although there are numerous arguments for why that heteronomous system gave way to the modern system,[1] it is not clear how heteronomy worked and whether it varied in form.

We contend that a clear specification of heteronomy is lacking in the international relations (IR) literature, but would make a vital addition. Heteronomy is a contest concept, one that has become a residual category to describe political order other than the modern system. It is now applied to other historical non-European locales as an alternative form of international order.[2] Indeed, it is the prospect of the return of heteronomy that is often given as reason to understand the origins of the modern system.[3] Yet, there is considerable, often contradictory variation in how scholars conceive of heteronomy. And to our knowledge, no one (at least in the IR literature) has clearly defined it, specified its causes, and considered how it has varied globally. Indeed, it may be that heteronomy is itself quite heterogenous.

There are three parts to this theory note. First, we interrogate the concept of heteronomy through its general definition and by the way it is used in the IR literature. We differentiate between nested and cross-cutting forms of political organization, and develop the following definition of heteronomy for IR: *a relationship in which a polity (or actor) is subordinate to at least two polities (or actors) that are not themselves engaged in a nested,*

[1] Strayer 1970; Poggi 1978; Tilly 1992; Kratochwil 1986; Spruyt 1994; Ruggie 1998; Branch 2014.
[2] Phillips 2011; Phillips and Sharman 2015.
[3] Bull 1977; Spruyt 1994, 3.

hierarchical relationship. We claim that this is a stable and useful definition that captures the essential meaning that IR scholars have in mind when discussing heteronomy.

Second, we identify different forms of heteronomy that existed in various historical locales. These include: (1) Interstitial heteronomy, where polities with limited capacity in sparsely populated regions experience zones of informal mixed rule on the frontier; (2) Functional heteronomy, where states in thickly populated systems develop complex patterns of functional differentiation; and (3) Personalistic heteronomy, where power that is invested in individuals rather than territorially-defined polities can yield patterns of dual vassalage. Although we do not argue that our set is exhaustive, and that there may be other forms we have not identified, we do posit that these forms are the product of different structural logics and can exist independent of one another. By outlining the heterogeneity of heteronomy, we clarify what has thus far been treated as a residual category, and contribute to the literature on international order.

Third, we build inductively toward a theory of heteronomy based on the density of the system (low, high) and the nature of political relations (territorial, personal). The resulting two-dimensional map is useful for locating different political systems across time and space with respect to patterns in heteronomy. It also sheds light on the relationship between heteronomy and the modern system, and whether heteronomy might once again, and in what form, become common. We find that while interstitial heteronomy was not unusual in various historical settings, it is unlikely to recur. Meanwhile, functional heteronomy is a feature of contemporary international life and ought to increase as the global density increases. Finally, although elements of personalistic heteronomy are present, they are not likely to increase unless international order begins to stress personal relations of authority in a way that challenges or supersedes that of the sovereign territorial state. We conclude that when

scholars envisage heteronomy in the modern system, it is mostly functional, and not interstitial or personalistic heteronomy, that they have in mind.

What is Heteronomy?

Heteronomy was introduced into the IR lexicon primarily by Ruggie when explaining the transition from the European medieval order to the modern system. Unlike the modern system with its linear boundaries and territorial exclusivity, the medieval system was a "heteronomous institutional framework," a patchwork of overlapping, crosscutting, and entangled forms of political authority.[4] One of Ruggie's aims when deploying the concept was to critique Waltz's neorealist framework for its inability to account for structural change in the international system.[5] Put simply, the medieval system was not anarchical, as Waltz imagined, but heteronomous. This move was picked up by other scholars like Spruyt, who began his landmark book by noting the "dramatic transformation…from the crosscutting jurisdictions of the feudal lords, emperors, kings, and popes…to territorially defined authorities."[6] Spruyt's description of this transition fits within a larger literature exploring the political order undergirding the modern system, and how it differs from other political orders and state systems that existed historically in diverse locales.[7] The term heteronomy is now familiar to a generation of academics who read the works of Ruggie and Spruyt as graduate students.[8]

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[4] Ruggie borrowed the term "heteronomous" from Meinecke 1957, who "spoke of the heteronomous shackles of the Middle Ages, referring to the lattice-like network of authority relations" (Ruggie 1986, 154).
[5] Waltz 1979.
[6] Spruyt 1994, 3.
[7] For related work see Strayer 1970; Bull 1977; Tilly 1992; Kratochwil 1986; Watson 1992; Lake 2009; Buzan and Little 2000; Herbst 2000; Hui 2005; Barkey 2008; Nexon 2009; Donnelly 2012; 2021; Kang 2010; Phillips 2011; Ringmar 2012; Branch 2014; Suzuki et al. 2014; Acharya 2014; Phillips and Sharman 2015; Butcher and Griffiths 2017; de Carvalho 2016; Spruyt 2020; Costa Lopez 2021.
[8] For example, Branch (2014, XIV), like us, was inspired to study the development of the state system after reading Spruyt (1994) as a PhD student.

Nevertheless, the exact meaning of heteronomy in IR is hard to pin down. It is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a "subjection to something else…especially: a lack of moral freedom or self-determination."[9] This corresponds to an older usage with Kantian roots, and here heteronomy is typically contrasted with autonomy when discussing the moral freedom of societies and/or individuals.[10] Understood in this way, the term could be applied quite broadly to the field of international relations. For example, the Catalans could argue that they seek self-determination because they reside in a state of heteronomy. Secessionist movements appeal to arguments that resonate with this conception of heteronomy, even if they do not deploy the term. However, there is an added layer to the way in which IR scholars conceive of heteronomy. When developing the concept, Ruggie borrowed language used by historians to describe European feudal order; it was "a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights"; "inextricably superimposed and tangled"; "geographically interwoven and stratified."[11] He says:

> To begin with, it was quite common for rulers in different territorial settings to be one another's feoffor and feoffee for different regions of their respective lands. The King of France, for example, "might send letters on the same day to the Count of Flanders, who was definitely his vassal, but a very independent and unruly one, to the Count of Luxembourg, who was a prince of the Empire but who held a money-fief (a regular, annual pension) of the King of France, and to the King of Sicily, who was certainly a ruler of a sovereign state but also a prince of a the French Royal House.

This image of tangled political authority has been utilized by others, from Spruyt's "crosscutting jurisdictions of feudal lords" to Branch's "vague jurisdictional frontiers and complex feudal networks."[12]

We argue that heteronomy as used in IR is an ambiguous and contested concept. How does the usage differ from the traditional Kantian understanding? What exactly counts as

[9] www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heteronomy (accessed May 30, 2020).
[10] Kant 2018, 45; Cost Lopez 2020, 224.
[11] Ruggie 1998, 146.
[12] Spruyt 1994, 3; Branch 2014, 25; Phillips and Sharman 2015, 15.

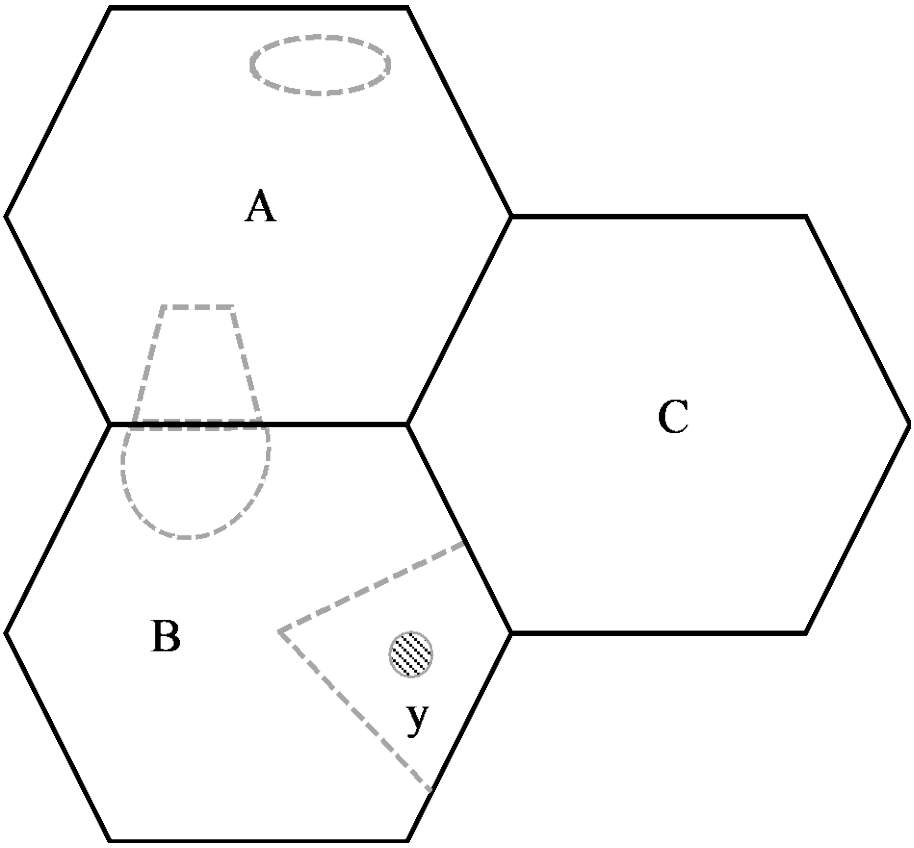
cross-cutting authority? Why do some scholars deploy heteronomy as a description of variation in the political units, and how does that variation relate, if at all, to overlapping forms of political order? The problem is that heteronomy is typically conceived in opposition to sovereignty, as conditions that appear non-sovereign, a kind of residual category. But as Costa Lopez writes, this "definition by opposition has allowed authors in this tradition to highlight radically different – and sometimes contradictory – aspects."[13] Although its exact meaning in IR remains undefined, heteronomy is now being used to describe political order in pre-modern, non-Western systems,[14] and is held up as an ordering principle alongside anarchy and hierarchy.[15] But how can heteronomy be used if we lack a clear and stable definition for what it means? How can we discuss an increasingly heteronomous international order if we do not have an explicit understanding of what that is? In order to use this concept consistently, scholars need a clear and stable definition.

As a starting point for clarification, it is useful to differentiate *nested* from *cross-cutting* forms of political order. Figure 1 is an illustration of nested political order. Here, there are three polities (or states): A, B, and C. Their territories are mutually exclusive and their boundaries, where they meet, are coterminous. Their configuration is consistent with the standard sovereign state territorial map. Now consider the shapes inside the polities with the dotted line boundaries. These are meant to be internal political units that are part of, and subordinate to, the 1st order polities A, B, and C. These could be thought of as federal states, provinces, satrapies, federacies, even colonies. Note that the 2nd order political unit, y, has a smaller 3rd order unit embedded in it. In all, this is a nested conception of political organization. If heteronomy is understood in this way – without the added cross-cutting layer – then it ought to be quite common. It will hold wherever a polity perceives that it is

[13] Costa Lopez 2020, 224.
[14] Phillips 2011; Phillips and Sharman 2015, 15.
[15] Kang 2010; Phillips 2011; Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Lee 2016; Zarakol 2017; Spruyt 2020.

subordinate to an outside authority. Examples include strident advocates of states' rights in the United States and other federal systems. But that is not the kind of heteronomy envisaged by Ruggie, Spruyt, and other IR scholars who deploy the concept. Defined in this less restrictive way, heteronomy would be a regular feature of international life, and not a particularly useful concept for appreciating forms of order that are fundamentally different from the modern system.

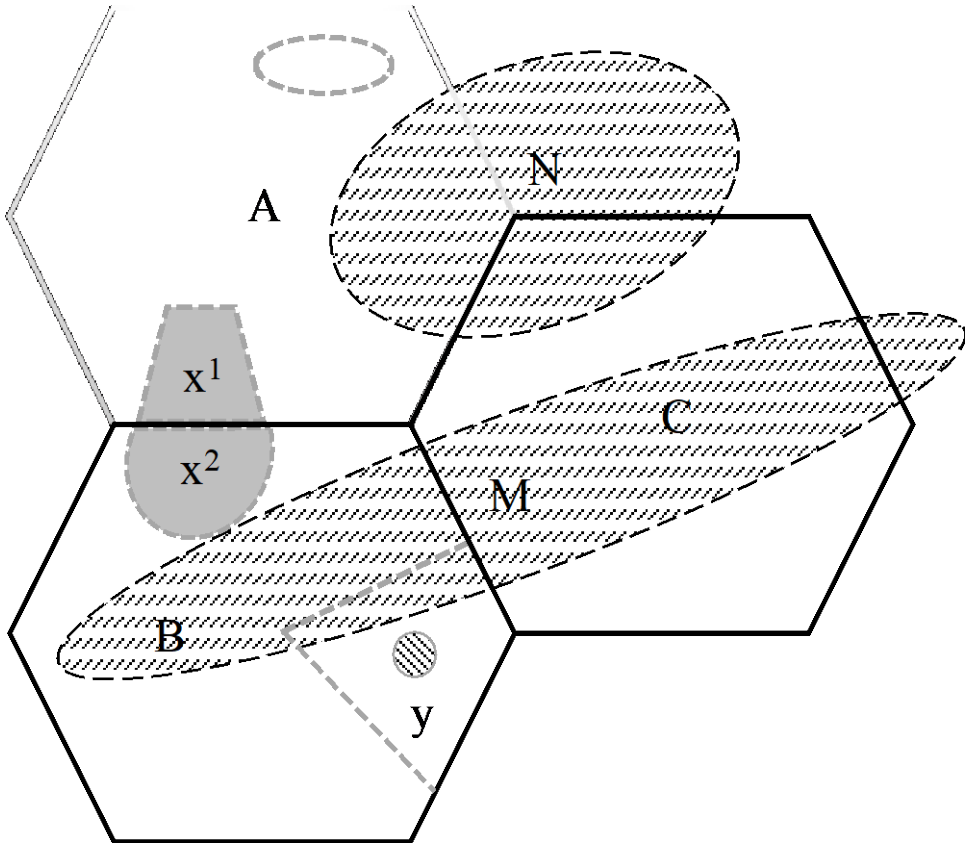
Figure 1: Nested Political Organization



Let us now complicate the picture by bringing in the cross-cutting notions of heteronomy discussed by IR scholars. Figure 2 depicts the mode of feudal organization that Ruggie describes. Although there are polities that may have partially agreed-upon borders (A, B, and C), there are also socio-political organizations that cut across them, like M and N. These do not fit neatly into the nested map of Figure 1, and, indeed, they represent alternative

authority agents that operate independently of A, B, and C. There may be political entities, like x^1 and x^2, that overlap the borders of larger polities. Finally, the boundaries of polities may become increasingly vague, undefined, and frontier-like, as depicted by the northern reaches of polity A. It is this latter conception that IR scholars typically have in mind when they discuss heteronomy, and contrast it with the concentric and rather stylized states-under-anarchy vision of the modern system.

Figure 2: Cross-cutting Political Organization



The key feature of cross-cutting heteronomy is that a polity (or actor) is subordinate to at least two dominant polities (or actors) that are not themselves engaged in a nested, hierarchical relationship. For example, elements of polity Y in Figure 2 are subordinated to both B and M, two entities that are not nested hierarchically. Lake defines hierarchy as a contractual relationship whereby one polity (or actor) cedes control over some aspect of its

authority (or sovereignty) to another polity such that it is obliged to obey commands from the dominant polity (or actor).[16] Typically, in the modern system this is a nested relationship, and there may be levels of hierarchic organization. However, in conditions of heteronomy these relations of subordination are split, cross-cutting, and fundamentally different. Boiled down, this is the core feature of heteronomy as conceived in IR.

Importantly, cross-cutting heteronomy is often the product of, or is co-constituted by, variation in the political units. On this point we see further ambiguity in the literature – all the more reason to interrogate the concept – because sometimes heteronomy is meant primarily to denote unit variation rather than cross-cutting order.[17] However, these are distinct phenomena that can occur independent of one another; systems composed of different types of units do not have to yield cross-cutting political organization just as cross-cutting organization does not presuppose diversity in the units. It is just that the two phenomena often go together, and did in the European medieval system upon which the concept of heteronomy was developed. We trace the origin of this confusion back to Ruggie who was challenging Waltz's notions of the ordering principle and the differentiation of the units.[18] Contra Waltz, Ruggie argued that political order was not simply hierarchic or anarchic – it was heteronomous – and that there was variation in the units (e.g. empires, states, the Church). But he clearly assigned a determinative role to the ordering principle,[19] and was using the language of heteronomy to describe cross-cutting European medieval order. Unit variation is not a necessary feature of heteronomy, although, as we show, units sometimes vary in heteronomous settings.

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[16] Lake 2009, 8-10.

[17] For example, Phillips (2017, 55) described the early modern Islamic international order as heteronomous because the "units varied in their individual forms, and often territorially overlapped." Similarly, he characterized the international order of Latin Christendom during the same time period as a heteronomous diarchy given that two different types of units – the Holy Roman Empire and the Church – exerted overlapping forms of authority.

[18] Waltz 1979.

[19] Ruggie 1986, 135-136. Ruggie argued that, in relation to the differentiation of the units and the distribution of capabilities, the ordering principle was the deepest causal depth level.

In light of our analysis, we now offer a definition of heteronomy that captures its essential meaning in the IR scholarship. Heteronomy is a relationship in which a polity (or actor) is subordinate to at least two polities (or actors) that are not themselves engaged in a nested, hierarchical relationship. As we discuss below, that political relationship can be formal or informal, and the subjects can be polities or individual actors. Political relations such as these are necessarily cross-cutting, and, as Ruggie and Spruyt argued, they are inconsistent with the vision of political order that undergirds the modern system.

To conclude, heteronomy has been treated as a residual category in the IR literature, and is often used to describe systems of order *other* than the modern system. That makes sense as a matter of conceptual genealogy because the concept developed as a way to critique and describe the origins of the modern system. But that approach has distracted IR scholars from generating a clear and stable definition, and potentially blinded them to the notion that heteronomy may be quite heterogenous. In Spruyt's language, there is a tendency to adopt a unilinear understanding of the relationship between heteronomy and sovereignty; the latter developed from the former.[20] What's missed in all of this is the potential for variation in heteronomy.

Different Forms of Heteronomy

We contend that there are at least three different forms of heteronomy that existed historically: interstitial heteronomy, functional heteronomy, and personalistic heteronomy. These forms were developed inductively and categorised based on similarities in the types of authority relations that heteronomy entailed and the situations in which they arise. Each form has a structural logic that creates conditions of heteronomy, and none of them depend on the others. That is, all three can exist on their own in the absence of the conditions that creates

[20] Spruyt 1994, 22.

the others. Rather than use the language of types, which are meant to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive, we use the less constraining term "form." As we discuss below, there can be overlap between these forms – and between them and the modern system – and the set may not be exhaustive.

Interstitial Heteronomy

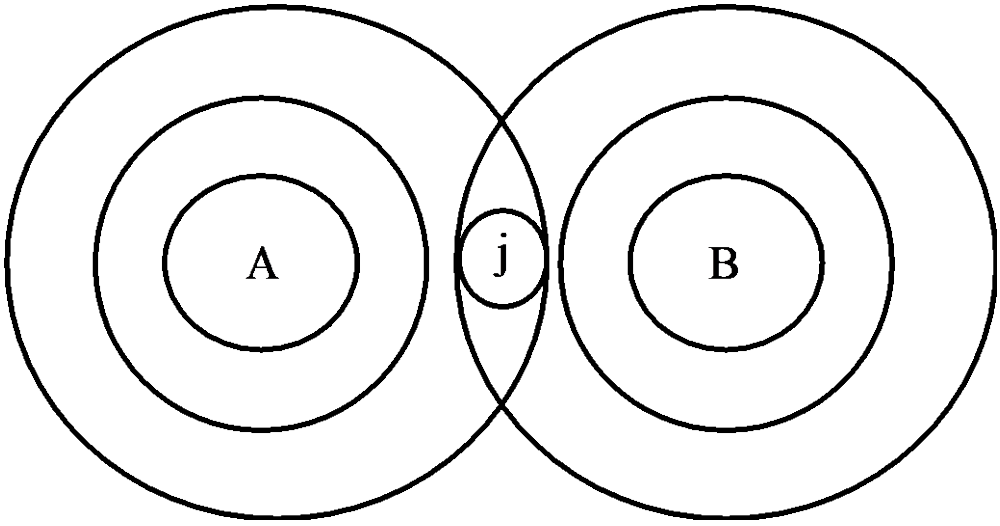
Historically, heteronomy often occurred in contexts of limited state reach. In his account of upland Southeast Asia, Scott provides a detailed description of what we call interstitial heteronomy.[21] The rugged hill country, sparse population, and preindustrial forms of transportation limited the ability of states like Siam and Burma to project power over distance and created centers of power with dissipating orbits of control. The innermost ring constitutes a zone of direct rule because it is within sufficient distance of the capital. But in the years prior to rail travel, the automobile, and electronic communication, one did not have to travel far before requiring a journey of weeks, if not months, to reach (or be reached by) the center. Travel times could be reduced by waterways and sea routes, as well as roads, and worsened by rough geography like the dense hill country of Southeast Asia. To mitigate the problem of governance-over-distance, large expansive states and empires would often resort to patterns of indirect rule.[22]

Here, heteronomy arises because of the uncertainty regarding political control on the outer and intersecting rings of two or more political centers. Local groups on the edge of these dissipating orbits of power often find themselves in a tug-of-war between two states, and they can exploit the distance to create a form of dual sovereignty. As Scott writes: "Chiang Khaeng…was tributary to Chiang Mai and Nan (in turn, tributary to Siam) and to

[21] Scott 2009.
[22] Doyle 1986; Spruyt 1994; Tilly 1992; Adelman and Aron 1999; Barkey 1994; 2008; Nexon 2009; Pitts 2010; Phillips and Sharman 2015; Welsh 2017.

Chiang Tung / Keng Tung (in turn, tributary to Burma)."[23] Often called two-headed birds, small kingdoms like Chiang Khaeng could manipulate the situation by sending tribute to both distant political centers simultaneously, knowing that neither had the reach and ability to ensure that their sovereign control was unequivocal. Interstitial heteronomy is often characterised by vague relations of vassalage or suzerainty that do not clearly define the sovereign functions over which the dominant states claim authority. Polity j in Figure 3 illustrates this sort of two-headed bird that straddles the outer orbits of control between larger polities A and B. This would be a cross-cutting form of heteronomy, one that is informally derived because A and B have not agreed on the terms. Here, heteronomy is made possible by low-density conditions and established informally by the peripheral unit, j.

Figure 3: Interstitial Heteronomy



This form of heteronomy exists where boundaries are vague and disputed. It existed historically in regions and systems that emphasized centers of power more than the boundaries between states. Instead of sovereign borders as we know them today, these regions were characterized by frontiers, especially when there existed wilderness into which

[23] Scott 2009, 61.

dissatisfied populations could retire.[24] This was a common pattern from the desert frontier of the northern Sahara to the hill tracts of Southeast Asia.[25] It quite often occurred on the edge of empire.[26]

Prior to colonialism, states in sub-Saharan Africa had limited reach and therefore tended to allocate significant political functions to outlying groups.[27] The result was a "vast pointillist landscape" of scattered independent states, where the authority of the ruler tended to dissipate as a function of the distance from the center.[28] Oliver and Atmore characterize these patterns of paramountcy and vassalage as a "typically medieval scene."[29] Several examples from 19th century West Africa illustrate the point. Bargirmi was a state nestled between the Kanem-Bornu empire and Wadai. Coqery-Vidrovitch writes that "at the time [around 1886], Bargirmi was a sultanate in full decline, sometimes under Wadai control, sometimes under Bornu control and sometimes even paying tribute [mainly in slaves] to both."[30] Trading towns in eastern Gonja were subject to both the Asante empire and the Gonja kingdom.[31] Likewise, Little describes the intermixing of nested order and heteronomy on the fringes of the Mande polities:

> It was quite possible for a tributary state situated geographically on the borders of the confederacy to undertake military conquests of its own. This would give rise to an additional pattern of overlordship, but without altering the original relationship of the chiefdom connected to its own high chief. Finally, a tributary member of the second hegemony might, in its turn, carve out yet a further "empire", while continuing fealty to its own overlord. It was also possible for a given people to pay homage to more than one high chief at the same time.

[24] Adelman and Aron 1999.
[25] Oliver and Atmore 2001, 37; Tambiah 1977; Geertz 1980; Scott 2009; Spruyt 2020.
[26] Pitts 2010.
[27] Bates (1983, 35) notes the relationship between population density and political centralization in Africa.
[28] Herbst 2000, 44.
[29] Oliver and Atmore 2001, 9.
[30] Coquery-Vidrovitch and Baker 2009, 100.
[31] Goody 1967.

We also observe interstitial heteronomy in the wake of collapsing empires, where the interstices are in flux. As the Mughal empire contracted around Delhi in the late 18th and 19th centuries, Rajput states like Khairpur and Udaipur were simultaneously vassals of the Mughals and tributaries to the rising Marathas.[32] As the power of the Ottoman Empire waned and European states waxed, the North African states were sometimes enmeshed in heteronomous relationships. Egypt, for example, was formally subject to the Ottoman empire in the mid-1850s while a consortium of European powers controlled its finances and the ruler otherwise had a free hand in domestic and international affairs (especially in Sudan).[33]

Remarkably similar language is used to describe the limited political reach and resulting frontier-like aspects of numerous pre-modern and early modern societies. States in early modern Southeast Asia have been described as mandalas: a center of power that radiated outward through diminishing orbits of control.[34] Similar descriptions invoking center and periphery have been used to describe states and empires in other regions including South Asia, West Asia, and Europe in their pre-modern and classical periods.[35] Importantly, low-density on its own will not create interstitial heteronomy. It is when at least two polities claim authority over a common but distant space that heteronomy arises. In this way, heteronomy arises on the periphery (or frontier) more than in the center where authority claims are likely to be resolved.

Functional Heteronomy

An altogether different form of heteronomy can occur along functional lines. Here, a polity is subordinate to at least two distinct, non-nested polities according to function and

[32] Tod 1902; Imperial Gazetteer 1908.
[33] Egypt is an interesting case. Some of its authority relations were more formalized and could be considered examples of functional heteronomy (Learoyd 2018, 155-156).
[34] Scott 2009, 58-59; Tambiah 1977, 69-74; Geertz 1980, 23.
[35] Barkey 2008, 86; Branch 2014, 77-78; Phillips and Sharman 2015, 81-86; Watson 1992, 13.

jurisdiction (e.g. trade, security, spiritual authority). Functional heteronomy often arises in complex, high-density systems where polities have greater reach on account of denser populations, more amenable geography, and/or better institutional and technological capacity. As a result, the boundaries between states tend to be clearer and more formalized. As states exercise greater control over sovereign functions, the possibility of formally sharing them or sub-contracting them out to other states and organizations increases. This form of heteronomy is more formal and functionally specific.

The contemporary European Union (EU) displays elements of functional heteronomy. This is one of the reasons why terms like neo-medievalism as well as polycentric and multilevel governance have been used in the literature on EU integration.[36] Catalonia is clearly in a subordinate, federal relationship with Spain. However, the EU, headquartered in Brussels, has functional authority over certain areas like trade and labour mobility. Yet, the relationship between Spain and the EU is not exactly nested, and there is a cross-cutting character to political authority. The logic of functional heteronomy is that polities hand over, or recognize, elements of functional authority in social, religious, economic, and even security domains. Such regions are generally characterized by various layers of connectivity – religious orders, trade leagues and unions, intergovernmental bodies, alliances, etc.

Is functional heteronomy a more recent phenomenon that characterizes zones within the modern system? Not necessarily, one can find patterns of functional heteronomy in different historical locales. Western Europe during the early 19th was a high-capacity and functionally diverse system replete with alliance formations, systems of diplomacy, and forms of transnational organization like the Zollverein. Further back, one could argue that the European medieval period possessed elements of functional heteronomy given the cross-cutting authority of the Church with respect to religion.

[36] Bull 1977, 245; Schmitter 2003; Plattner 2003.

Nevertheless, there is a modern texture to functional diversity because it tends to arise in denser, more technologically advanced and legally / institutionally developed systems where there are payoffs to cooperation and sharing sovereignty in certain functional areas (such as trade or taxation) and where states firmly control sovereign functions. Sharing sovereignty carries risks of exploitation so functional heteronomy might also be more likely in regions where trust is higher between polities.[37] Moreover, the sharing of some functional competencies is tied to modernity; for example, the formation of transnational organizations governing telecommunications would make no sense in any region prior to the development of that technology. We conclude that functional differentiation is more likely in complex systems where such cooperation pays off.

In sum, functional heteronomy and interstitial heteronomy arise in different conditions. Interstitial heteronomy is informal, located on the periphery, and characterized by vague, uncertain zones of control. It is heteronomy on the frontier. By contrast, functional heteronomy is formal and contractual, center-driven, and more common in dense systems. Functional heteronomy can encompass entire states, even the capitals, and is not restricted to the frontiers between them. It may be composed of diverse types of units such as trade blocs, alliances, or religious institutions. The order would be fairly rationalized, and true authority over a specific function can vary by level.

Personalistic Heteronomy

Until now we have discussed heteronomy in a manner that privileges territory over individuals. That is, we have examined political relations between territories and the people inside those territories. This resonates with contemporary international politics where authority is invested not in individuals but in sovereign states that possess an international

[37] Deutsch 2015.

legal personality. It is not Kim Jong Un that has a seat at the United Nations (UN), but the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. However, in many historical locales such as medieval Europe, matters were different because political authority was invested in individuals. This is exemplified by Ruggie's earlier example about the King of France and the tangled network of authority relations he shared with other leaders across Europe – all of whom were embedded in their own networks. Similarly, Kratochwil says that in the "largely personalistic political organization of the time…under feudal rule, loyalty was owed, depending on circumstances, to various overlords simultaneously."[38] A key factor is that political relations are built on personal ties. Individuals are subjects of the Monarch, and not the state.[39] Conversely, it is more appropriate to say that the Monarch rules over people rather than territory. This mode of political organization can give rise to what we call personalistic heteronomy, which is different from interstitial and functional heteronomy in terms of its structural logic.

It is crucial to specify how political order privileging personal ties can generate heteronomy. We distinguish between two potential dynamics that follow from personal relations, one that is not heteronomous and one that is. In the first dynamic, our attention is drawn to a monarch or person at the apex of power. For example, between 1885 and 1908, the Congo Free State was ruled by King Leopold of Belgium on a personal basis that was independent of his role as the monarch of Belgium.[40] During that 23-year period the Congo Free State was not under the political authority of the Belgian government. In a sense, there was an overlapping sovereignty given that Leopold, who resided in Belgium and never visited his vast African territory, was simultaneously the sovereign of two political units that had no formal connection to one another. This was an odd and antiquated arrangement, but it

[38] Kratochwil 1986, 33.
[39] de Carvalho 2016.
[40] Henige 1970, 5.

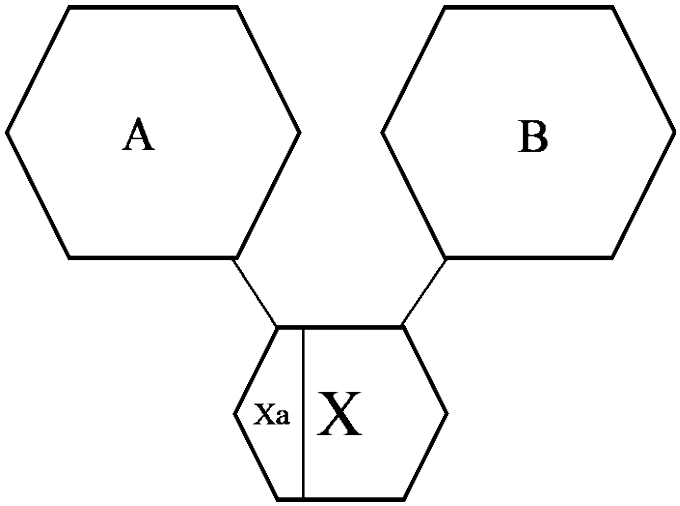
did not, on its own, produce heteronomy because both Belgium and the Congo Free State, and the inhabitants of those territories, were subject to only one entity/person: King Leopold. The basis of those political relations may have been different because one was rooted in the sovereign territorial order and the other was based on personal ties, but heteronomy did not result.

The second dynamic is where individuals are simultaneously the vassal of two or more rulers, who are not themselves politically connected, on account of personal relations. A good example of this is given by Spruyt when he discusses the oath of John Toul, a minor Lord in 13th century Western Europe who was simultaneously a vassal to the Countess and Count of Champagne, the Count of Grandpre, the Lord of Arcis, and the Lord of Coucy.[41] In his oath, Toul specified the conditions under which he would fight for these Lords, and how he would respond if they fought one another. In one potential scenario, Toul swore to serve in person with the Count and Countess of Champagne while sending one knight to fight for the Count of Grandpre for service owed for a fief given to Toul by the Count. In that scenario, Toul could have fought against one of his other Lords (Grandpre) and even against one of his own knights.

Figure 4 provides an illustration of personalistic heteronomy. Here, X (e.g. John Toul) is a vassal to both A and B (e.g. the Count and Countess of Champagne and the Count of Grandpre), but A and B are not hierarchically ordered in relation to one another. Thus, this is not a nested political relationship but a cross-cutting one. Moreover, X is obliged to support their lieges A and B under certain conditions. Indeed, as with the case of John Toul, they may send personnel from one of their fiefs that they hold for a specific Lord (e.g. a knight from Xa to A) while fighting on the side of an opposing Lord. The obligations vary, they are cross-cutting, and they produce patterns of dual vassalage.

[41] Spruyt 1994, 39; Strayer 1965, 146.

Figure 4: Personalistic Heteronomy



One of the startling features of medieval European maps is the seeming archipelago of land holdings. Relative to interstitial and functional heteronomy, personalistic heteronomy is more likely to yield territorially disconnected authority relations. In part, this is because authority is invested primarily in individuals and, unlike territory, individuals are mobile. A Countess will take her web of political connections and obligations with her when she moves to a different holding, and that mobility increases the potential for disconnectedness.

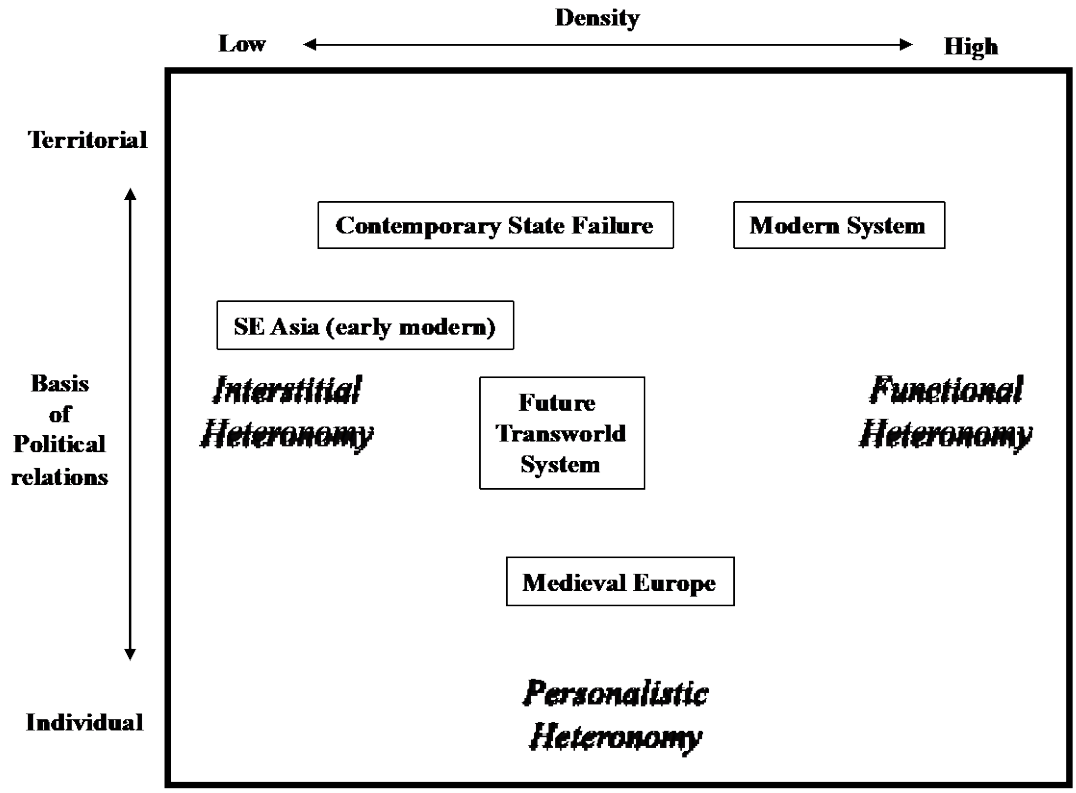
Theorizing and Locating Heteronomy

We now sketch a theory of heteronomy based on the specification of the three forms. Although these forms can to some extent overlap with one another and can potentially be found within the contemporary international system, they each meet our definition of heteronomy and can occur independently. Interstitial heteronomy typically occurs on the frontier in low-density systems, often in the context of expansive states or empires.[42] Functional heteronomy is common between states with complex functional networks and more centralized control over sovereign functions. Personalistic heteronomy often yields mobile and disconnected islands of authority relations.

[42] Pitts 2010.

Figure 5 illustrates a conceptual map based on two-factors that help locate where the forms of heteronomy arise. The first is the density of the system, varying from low to high. The second is whether political relations privilege territory or the individual. How do these factors stand in causal relation to the three forms? In the case of personalistic heteronomy, it is one of necessity but not sufficiency. That is, a system based on personalistic / individual relations is necessary for, but does not have to produce, heteronomy. In contrast, system density has a more probabilistic relationship with interstitial and functional heteronomy; it renders them more or less likely.

Figure 5: Forms of Heteronomy



To appreciate the causal role of system density, it is helpful to define several terms. The first is what Buzan and Little call interaction capacity, "the amount of transportation,

communication, and organizational capability" within a system.[43] It is a useful way to gauge the socio-political density of a given geographic space. On one end would be high-density regions like the Rhine and Ganges river valleys in the early modern era. On the other end would be low-density regions such as the steppe of Central Asia and the Southeast Asian hill country. State makers face different realities in these contrasting examples. An additional set of terms, also from Buzan and Little, are structural and functional differentiation.[44] Functional differentiation is a measure of political order between political units, measuring the degree to which they divide and allocate functional authority. Structural differentiation assesses the extent to which governments delegate authority and autonomy to sub-state actors. In a somewhat stylized sense, functional differentiation captures political order between polities just as structural differentiation measures order inside them.

Building from the work of Butcher and Griffiths, we note the relationship between interaction capacity and functional / structural differentiation, and how they relate to two different forms of heteronomy.[45] Low-density systems tend to have high levels of structural differentiation, and create the conditions for interstitial heteronomy. In contrast, high-density systems tend to yield higher levels of functional differentiation and increase the possibility of functional heteronomy.

All three forms of heteronomy can overlap. Although it is true that a geographic point cannot be both low-density and high-density, the density can vary across a system. For example, medieval Europe possessed elements of functional heteronomy given that different actors like the Church and the Holy Roman Empire claimed authority over distinct polities. Meanwhile, interstitial heteronomy also occurred on the sparsely populated frontiers between political centers.[46] A similar relationship exists between political orders that stress territory,

[43] Buzan and Little 2000, 80. This is similar to Ruggie's concept of dynamic density (1998, 151).
[44] Buzan and Little 2000, 87. Also see Donnelly 2012.
[45] Butcher and Griffiths 2017.
[46] Ruggie 1998, 179.

as the modern system does, and more feudalistic political orders that privilege relations between people. Although systems tend to stress one or the other, there is a continuum, as de Carvalho showed with the gradual process of subjectivation in English law.[47] Where heteronomy is concerned, personalistic political relations act as an amplifier, and can exist in the range of environments between low and high-density. Intriguingly, personalistic heteronomy was likely more common in low-density environments, as Herbst argued in his analysis of precolonial Africa,[48] given the tendency for rulers to stress control over people as opposed to territory.

Using this two-dimensional map, one can locate different systems across time and space. To be clear, these are rough locations that useful in a more relational and illustrative sense. For example, the medieval European system would be located in the lower middle section of the map given the stress on personalistic relations, and the blend of interstitial and functional heteronomy. However, through processes like English subjectification there was a gradual movement upward as regions within the system transitioned away from personalistic relations. We find that numerous pre- and early-modern systems experienced interstitial heteronomy in low-density contexts, often on the frontiers of states and otherwise imperial polities. This was the case in much of West Africa.[49] Likewise, early modern Lao kingdoms such as Ventianne and Luang Prabang experienced forms of dual vassalage with larger regional powers like Siam, the Vietnamese states, and eventually France.[50] A similar pattern existed for Kedah, which was located in a zone of mutual contestation between Siam and Malacca.[51] We suspect that this is the most common form of heteronomy over the sweep of

[47] De Carvalho 2016.
[48] Herbst 2000.
[49] Oliver and Atmore 2001.
[50] Stuart-Fox 1997.
[51] Winstedt 1920.

history. In contrast, functional heteronomy was historically less common and, where it did exist, less functionally variegated.

How would we characterize the modern system? Although it is a high-density system that privileges sovereign territorial relations, heteronomy does arise. Positioned in the upper right quadrant of Figure 5, the modern system does experience forms of functional heteronomy in contexts like the EU, and other relationships pertaining to trade blocs, alliances, and the jurisdiction of international bodies like the UN. Meanwhile, forms of interstitial heteronomy are now quite rare given the ubiquity of national borders and absence of land-based frontiers. One could argue that interstitial heteronomy is perhaps most present in situations of state failure, prolonged conflict characterized by indeterminate control, and competing attempts at rebel governance.[52] Of course, personal political relations do exist, even across borders on account of citizenship, tax laws, etc. However, individuals are not invested with sovereignty and are ultimately members/subjects of specific sovereign states.

Some theorists have speculated that heteronomy may once again come to characterize world politics, if it has not already.[53] These fascinating discussions have yielded terms like neo-medievalism, and polycentric and multilevel governance.[54] Of the three forms of heteronomy we identified, some are more likely to recur. Of these, functional heteronomy is currently the most salient, and the most likely to endure, if not increase, as the international system becomes denser, more interconnected, and functionally more complex. In contrast, interstitial heteronomy is unlikely to recur in the near future given the sovereign delineation and territorial enclosure of the Earth's landmass, and the absence of frontiers. Although elements of personalistic heteronomy are present, they are not likely to increase unless international order begins to stress personal relations of authority in a way that challenges or

[52] Arjona 2016; Cunningham and Loyle 2021; Breslawski 2021.
[53] Ruggie 1998; Spruyt 1994.
[54] Bull 1977, 245; Schmitter 2003; Plattner 2003.

supersedes that of the sovereign territorial state. Perhaps developments in cyber-technology will gradually shift authority relations from a territorial basis to one increasingly rooted in personal relations that are mobile and globally connected. Overall, we conclude that when scholars envisage heteronomy in the modern system, it is mostly functional, and not interstitial or personalistic heteronomy, that they have in mind.

However, international order changes and one could imagine various futures. For illustrative purposes, we will map out one such scenario. In his recent work on space expansion, Deudney drew a parallel between the frontier expansion of earlier historical periods and the potential for similar expansion into the solar system.[55] That expansion into an open system could blend elements of functional heteronomy with interstitial heteronomy on the frontier. Moreover, given the trend toward the commercialization and privatization of space exploration, it could generate patterns of personalistic heteronomy. Like the European medieval system, a trans-world system such as this could exhibit all three forms of heteronomy.

Conclusion

The concept of heteronomy entered the IR lexicon as a way to critique Waltz's states-under-anarchy framework and to understand the transition of the European medieval period into the modern system. It has become a residual category to describe forms of political order other than the modern system in various regional settings of the past, and potential forms of political order in the future. After interrogating the concept, we defined heteronomy as a relationship in which a polity (or actor) is subordinate to at least two polities (or actors) that are not themselves engaged in a nested, hierarchical relationship. Essentially, it is the notion of split vassalage/subordination that heteronomy is meant to capture. Using this definition,

[55] Deudney 2020, 345.

we identified three different forms of heteronomy that existed in different historical locales: interstitial heteronomy, functional heteronomy, and personalistic heteronomy.

We extrapolated from this variation in form to develop a theory of heteronomy based on the density of the system (low, high) and the nature of political relations (territorial, personal). The resulting two-dimensional map is useful for locating different political systems across time and space. We conclude that while interstitial heteronomy was common historically, it is unlikely to recur as long as the international system remains dense and closed. Meanwhile, functional heteronomy is a feature of contemporary international life and ought to increase as the global density increases. Although elements of personalistic heteronomy are present, they are not likely to increase unless international order begins to stress personal relations of authority in a way that challenges or supersedes that of the sovereign territorial state.

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