

## **Unpacking autonomy**

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7-2 Meta-theory of IR Theory: Central Concepts in IR: a meta-theoretical conversation

Chair & Discussant: **Colin Wight** (University of Exeter)

## **Unpacking autonomy**

“Alors que les Etats restent au cœur du système international, leur capacité d'action se trouve désormais confrontée à la puissance des acteurs économiques, à la puissance des médias ou, pour le pire, à la puissance des réseaux terroristes et criminels; confrontée aussi aux risques de ce début de XXIe siècle: des flux migratoires de moins en moins maîtrisés; un bouleversement des équilibres économiques mondiaux qui accroît la méfiance à l'égard de la globalisation à mesure que les délocalisations gagnent, de proche en proche, tous les secteurs d'activité; ou encore des crises financières, comme celle que nous venons d'essuyer et qui pourraient se reproduire si les dirigeants des grands pays ne choisissaient pas de mener une action résolue et concertée en faveur de la transparence et de la régulation des marchés internationaux.”

(M. Nicolas SARKOZY, Palais de l'Élysée, Paris, August 27th 2007)

### **Introduction**

Political leaders and citizens all around the world have become more and more sceptical of their power to govern the life within their communities. In an attempt to satisfy this intensified need for knowledge, countless books, articles and committee reports have been published in turns by academics, politicians and public officials/organisations. Most of such studies have concentrated on identifying processes and actions affecting the capacities of states to deal with external challenges on their ability to adapt to the realities of more open and competitive global markets (e.g. Weiss 1998, Garrett 1998, Strange 1996). This adaptation is often taken to mean securing the profitability/competitiveness of “national industries” and/or the economic well-being of the citizens’, although some put more emphasis on other social, cultural, legal and political processes as well (e.g. Held et al. 1999; Scholte 2000). Whereas some focus explicitly on formal juridico-political influences like penetration of EU legislation in national legal system or governmental influence in supranational organisations, others concentrate on supranational ideational influences in producing shared understanding (“truths” or “cognitive structures”) (e.g. Marcussen 2002 and 2000).

These studies clearly revolve around notions of national self-determination and/or autonomy. Still, surprisingly little work is available that treats the concept of state autonomy (or national self-

determination) directly and theoretically. Autonomy is given different meaning by different users: it is common to conceptualise autonomy – rather ambiguously – in terms of *de facto* independence in order to separate it from the more *de jure* type notion of sovereignty (e.g. Ferguson and Mansbach 2004) or – especially in IR and IPE literature – the conceptions of state power are sometimes hard to separate from notions of self-determination (e.g. Strange 1996, xi; Barnett and Duvall 2005, 42). It is time to critically examine the concept of state autonomy in order to use it in exact manner. Next few pages try to serve as a preliminary and partial analysis of the concept of state autonomy. It is meta-theoretical in the sense that even though a broad core conception for autonomy is evoked, the actual analysis focuses on its specifying certain variables leading to differing conceptions of autonomy.

I will first spell out the core meaning of the concept and then introduce two perspectives which are present – but stressed differently – in all conceptions of autonomy. I draw loosely on Gerald C. Jr. MacCallum’s triadic understanding of individual freedom. Indeed, following MacCallum (1967, 319), I argue that every conception of autonomy, as closely analogous to the concept of freedom, “is always *both* freedom from something and freedom to do or become something”. Autonomy-freedom thus always has both negative and positive aspects. The differences between conceptions are rooted in the emphasis that is given to these two notions and, perhaps even more importantly, to “views on the ranges of the term variables”: identities of the agents, nature of possible obstacles and the range of what agents “might or might not be free to do or become”. I then construct state autonomy as a function of both negative freedom and power (as the positive side of the coin).

After the semantic examination of autonomy I will discuss MacCallum’s third essential aspect of any freedom concept: the autonomous agent/entity. In other words – and compatible also with theories of state power (e.g. Guzzini 1993; and Barnett & Duvall 2005) – autonomy entails capacity for agency. By definition there should always be an agent capable for (reflection and) action, an agent *x* who is free from *y* and has power to *z*.<sup>1</sup> In analyses of individual freedom the issue of agency is not a problem: “the beings to whom we can appositely ascribe freedoms or unfreedoms are live human beings” (Kramer 2003a, 447). It goes without saying that (except some ultra-structuralist or determinist thinking) human individuals are usually thought to have the capacity for agency. But is state autonomy something different? Do we need to choose a certain level of analysis so that states can be treated as if they – as collective bodies – were the agents whose autonomy was at question?

Clearly talk of *state* autonomy is afflicted by ambiguity. Firstly, there is a conceptual problem of what is state in the context of state autonomy. Secondly, there is the empirical question of the relevancy of

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there is a danger of being tautological here, since the capability of doing “autonomous decisions” is often considered as one of the defining properties of an agent (see e.g. O’Neill, Balsiger & VanDeveer 2004). In this way the question of state autonomy becomes secondary to the question of agency in the global system(s) in general.

states in the world politics. Although the two problems may be connected, it is the first one on which this paper focuses. I will not, however, attempt any deep discussion concerning different ontological or methodological positions towards states and agency, nor will I attempt any essentialist definition of state autonomy. I will merely, with the help of Colin Wight's discussion (2006, esp. ch. 5), differentiate between three possibilities of understanding autonomy depending on the view on states and agency. The first approach, that I call *the rulers' autonomy* is typical for IR theorists; the second approach, *organisational autonomy*, is sociologically attuned in understanding state as an institutional and organisational (juridico-political) entity that is separate from but connected with the rest of society; and lastly, the third approach, *democratic autonomy*, draws from the democratic theory tradition in linking communal autonomy to notions of democracy.

Finally, the possible consequences of understanding ideal-typic autonomy either as an absolute or relative notion is discussed. Contra conventional wisdom, I claim that relative understanding can serve as a benchmark for empirical purposes as well as the supposedly value-free notion absolute autonomy. The discussion here is indebted to the work of Philip Pettit and Iris Marion Young who differentiate between conceptions of absolute and relative autonomy. Whereas the ideal of absolute autonomy is based on individualist philosophy, the relative notion based on holism being more supportive to ideas of global ethics. As will be shown, the seemingly neutral absolute conception of state autonomy is not only impossible to achieve but attempts to achieve such may have "morally repugnant consequences" to borrow the words of Dowding and van Hees (2005, 7).

### **Autonomy as freedom and power**

There is no agreement concerning the exact definition of the concept of autonomy,<sup>2</sup> although there is no controversy what comes to its etymological root and historical usage in general terms. The term was coined in the classical Greece and it literally means self-law or self-rule. In the classical context autonomy (*autonomia*) was a communal property, freedom of a polis whose law-making was not in control of outsiders (tyrants), whereas democratic liberty (*eleutheria*) was freedom within the polis (Hansen 1996). Indeed, the communal meaning is still in use either as a *property*, referring to the independent rule-making capacity of a sovereign nation-state, and as a sub-state *entity* with more or less limited rights for self-regulation. According to Onora O'Neill (2000, 40) it was only in Immanuel Kant's writings "that we first meet the idea that human agents, or quite specifically the human will, rather than polities, are the primary locus of autonomy". Even though Kant himself meant by autonomy what is known as his version of the positive aspect of freedom (freedom as "the capacity to

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Dworkin (1988, 6) – concentrating on individual autonomy – quotes several writers in order to show how their conceptions differ: "'autonomy' is used in exceedingly broad fashion.

live by the principles that plurality *can* adopt”), the concept has afterwards – at least in its individual usage – been seen as a synonym for individual freedom in general (see Lindley 1986).<sup>3</sup>

Although it is clear that the concept of autonomy can refer both to individuals and collectives, much of theoretical writing focuses solely on individuals. Political theory, apart from IR, has hardly problematized the authority of national governments, and this tendency has been strengthened by the practice of comparative politics (Ferguson & Mansbach 2004, 98). In the field of IR concepts of state power and sovereignty – interpreted through various theoretical approaches such as dependency or interdependency theories – have dominated the theoretical discussion. Whereas they both share some common ground with the concept of autonomy, neither of them has totally replaced it.<sup>4</sup> Some formulations of power, nevertheless, come quite close to the meaning of autonomy, and arguably power can be seen as a necessary element of state autonomy as capacity for self-determination. It may also be beneficial to learn from the theorists of individual freedom and develop the understanding of state autonomy (a) because there is a whole body of refined literature available covering everything from conceptual issues to possibilities for measuring freedom and (b) because state autonomy in certain conceptualisations is closely connected to individual agency.

According to MacCallum (1967, 314) individual freedom is always a “triadic relation” *of* something (agent/s), *from* something and *to* do, not do, become or not become something. Thus differing conceptions of freedom arise from the variation within the three variables: who or what are the proper agents, which types of constraints and what kinds of actions are relevant. MacCallum’s aim was to refute the firmly established dichotomy that rendered negative and positive freedoms as fundamentally different concepts. In Isaiah Berlin’s (1958/1969) conceptualisation negative freedom was understood as absence of obstacles, constraints or interference, whereas positive freedom required *presence* of something (e.g. self-mastery, self-realisation or self-determination) (Carter 2003). Berlin also set the scene for a claim that there is a “liberal tradition” (comprising of writers from Locke to Hayek and Nozick) backing the negative conception. Although many of Berlin’s ideas have been refuted,<sup>5</sup> negative and positive notions can be considered as *dimensions* of freedom in general. They are

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<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the tendency to associate autonomy with positive accounts of freedom is still strong. Following Dworkin (1988), Bavetta and Guala (2003) contributing to the so called Freedom of Choice Literature (FCL) distinguish between liberalist-freedom concentrating on “the availability of options as a measure of the extent of liberty” and autonomy-freedom requiring that the individual must be able to “reflect critically upon her preferences, evaluate (by approving/disapproving) them and act on the basis of such evaluation). The key of autonomy is awareness of the qualities of different options.

<sup>4</sup> I choose to omit any further discussion about the complex concept of sovereignty here.

<sup>5</sup> Some chosen problems in Berlin’s distinction involve: 1) the two categories are largely inconclusive: they can withhold a manifold of conceptions that are incompatible on some other analytical dimension; 2) not all positive notions are susceptible to the acclaimed authoritarian vices; 3) hardly any “liberalist” writer would actually subscribe to the pure – Benthamian – negative notion put forward by Berlin: indeed, a closer examination reveals that such classical liberalists as Locke and Montesquieu are rather close to Kant in their understanding of freedom. (Lagerspetz 1998.)

different sides of the same coin in the sense that to be free from something entails ability to do something. Indeed, it has been concluded that although the negative notion is necessary for all conceptions of freedom, it is not sufficient: “to be free a person needs to have the right to make her own choices, but in addition she must also have the power to make use of her rights” (Ringen 2005, 37; see also Lagerspetz 1998 and MacCallum 1967).

The triadic relation is visible in the definition of state autonomy by David Held et al. (1999, 29). State autonomy is “the actual *power* the nation-state possesses to articulate and achieve their policy goals *independently* - - even though these may on occasion clash with the dictates of domestic and international forces and conditions” (italics mine).<sup>6</sup> The definition is pretty much in line with the idea that autonomy entails both power to act and absence of constraints. The authors set out to find out whether “the sovereignty of modern state is fundamentally eroded [or - -] the autonomy of the state has been radically cut short.” For them, as it should be for others, it is an empirical question that demands research on the emergence of global politics, institutions and infrastructure. Their conclusion, in line with many others (e.g. Scholte 2005, Sørensen 2004) is that state autonomy has not simply been weakened, but transformed in the changing structures of global order. They suggest that “political communities and civilizations - - are enmeshed in complex structures of overlapping forces, relations and movements which have diverse impact on them” (ibid., 442). No “powerful forces” including the nation-state, they write, can insulate from these processes, but the impact on their autonomy does vary depending on the issue, the position of the state in global hierarchies, and in the domestic resources, institutions and politics.<sup>7</sup>

Let us start by examining MacCallum’s second variable (freedom from) in the context of state autonomy. For Held et al. (1999) states are analytically separate units and (empirically) centres of power, whose (foreign and domestic) policies are, nevertheless, affected and constrained by their external environment. The crucial question is what exactly counts as a constraint? A constraint can be anything from some objective physical block (e.g. a restricted opportunity set for producing “clean” energy in an area lacking proper rivers, turf or strong winds) to a socially produced (and perhaps only subjectively felt) burden making some options costlier than others (consider, for instance, an imagined attempt of reintroducing capital punishment in the UK, or fear of “capital outflow” making it unattractive to increase taxes on capital).

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<sup>6</sup> After this Held et al’s (1999, 29) conception becomes more controversial: “In effect state autonomy refers to the capacity of state representatives, managers and agencies to articulate and pursue their policy preferences even though these may on occasion clash with the dictates of domestic and international social forces and conditions.” We will come back to these considerations below.

<sup>7</sup> Note that the authors use notions of political community and state almost interchangeably.

So there are various possible dimensions within which constraints can be analysed and categorised: from block to burden, from objective to subjective, from intentional to unintentional, from agential to structural from empirical to illusory. Moreover, there is no consensus between the freedom theorists which types of constraints are relevant for assessing the level freedom. It must be stressed here that there cannot be any true meaning of autonomy and the extent of constraints must be left open for variation depending of the research and the researcher. Of course, the content of autonomy is dependent on the philosophy of science – setting limits for the real and researchable – in the background of each study, but no philosophy or metatheory can automatically construct a set of relevant constraints for autonomy. Strict positivists, should there be any, would be satisfied to deal with directly observable, whereas scientific/critical realism (see Patomäki & Wight 2000), recognize different levels of reality (the real, actual and empirical). By taking seriously both physical and ideational causes, it also allows a much wider variety of constraints for autonomy.<sup>8</sup>

The exemplary case of assumed tax competition illustrates how difficult it is to (a) make the decision of what counts as a constraint, and (b) how to actually assess the degree of some entity's autonomy on these bases. In a free market situation with more or less open national economies many feel that in order to secure jobs and attract investments into their country income must be kept in control and capital gains and corporation taxes on a “competitive” – that is on a relatively low – level. Should we acknowledge the relevancy of structural constraints, we could now contend that the logic of free markets (that being a structural feature) constrain national decision-making by forced tax-policies. In other words, the assumption/threat of X (taxes↑) causing Y (employment↓) is burdening certain policy options. Now, if we require from our constraints to be are objective, we can state – after either retrospective or counterfactual verification of X causing Y<sup>9</sup> – that policy-making in this situation was indeed constrained. Alternatively, we may contend that also subjectively felt threats – whether or not having the potential to actualise – burdening certain options may also be seen as constraints for autonomy. Indeed, it may be that the threat for capital flight is an exaggeration that has become a constructed as a truth (or as a part of a hegemonic discourse shared by political right and left).<sup>10</sup> The verification of such a threat might come in the form of discourse analysis or simply interviews.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Certain scientific realist approaches or metatheories (like structuration theory) would also alert the researcher to recognize the empowering/enabling side of social structures.

<sup>9</sup> “Until we know whether people would or would not have acted in certain ways if a person had sought to do something, we cannot know whether that person was free to do something” (Kramer 2003b, 65).

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, a number of studies suggest that alternative national policies – in form of high taxation and extensive welfare services – are possible and not automatically sanctioned by the markets (Jensen 2006, Garrett 1998, Veseth 1998).

<sup>11</sup> However, if the subjective burdens are not based on threats that do not have the potential to actualise if A acted in a certain manner, the idea of external influence can be made questionable. Is it an external constraint, if its effect is dependent on the subjective understanding of A? Does a (perceived) threat weaken autonomy even if the threat was based on inaccurate information or ideological knowledge?

As with the constraints, there is variation on what counts as relevant doing/being. For MacCallum (1967, 318) it is unsatisfactory to interpret the meaning of his example, “freedom from hunger” as simply being without hunger, or to see hunger merely as a barrier from being free to be well fed. For him the question is of freedom *from* constraints “constituted by various specifiable agricultural, economic, and political conditions *to* get enough food to prevent hunger” (ibid.). Autonomy entails, not only absence of constraints, but also actual capacity to do and be. This capacity can be called power.

Consider the following broad definition (supporting both agential and structural conceptions) of power “In general terms, power is the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate” (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 42).<sup>12</sup> Power, thus defined, and negative freedom are clearly different sides of the same coin. The differences in the two perspectives are important: whereas the other depicts active and dynamic production of effects, the other focuses on the (static) space framed by external constraining environment. Negative freedom approach alone cannot provide theoretical understanding neither on the enabling aspects of structures (e.g. productive power) nor the practice for transforming them, whereas power aspect alone provides no clear connection to the idea of self-determination/independence. Indeed, the degree of autonomy of an entity is dependent on its position within the structures of power and on its agential ability to shape structures of global systems (from economic to ecological) in order to “articulate and achieve” certain policy goals that has been set through conscious evaluation. One function of power is to produce effects that minimize constraints for “choosing over a ‘menu’ of possible preference profiles” (quoting Bavetta and Guala 2003) and achieving the preferred policy goals.

One important dimension within the broad notion of power is, whether it is restricted to include only agential forms of power or also structural (impersonal and productive) forms of power (Guzzini 1993). Agential power refers to agents’ capacity to control outcomes by doing things, by changing and conserving conditions or by resisting and influencing the action/behaviour/conditions of others. This in turn can be direct or indirect (e.g. institutional power); it can be directed both towards external environment (agents/structures) or domestic conditions; it can be intentional or unintentional. However conceptualised, agential power must be essential for the notion of autonomy (covering MacCallum’s *to do* term) and it is possible to separate it from the notion of negative freedom for analytical purposes.

Dealing with structural forms of power is much more difficult since this kind of power does not emanate from any single agent or organisation, but is still conditioning the actions (and identities) of agents: “it produces the very social capacities of structural , or subject, positions in direct relation to

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one another, and the associated interests, that underlie and dispose action” and as such the structures “allocate differential capacities, and typically differential advantages, to different positions (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 53). Although tempting, external structures cannot be understood in simple negative terms (as constraints for state autonomy). Indeed, impersonal and often empowering structural aspects of power – not to even mention the more general, Foucauldian notion of productive power – are difficult to fit into the triadic understanding of freedom. A solution might be to examine the structural effects to state autonomy in comparative terms. One can, for instance, analyse how discourse of good governance and the respective mechanisms of objectification (e.g. international audits) create intersubjectively shared truths and self-evidences, produce identities and place countries into different positions according to some constructed criteria. These structured identities and positions then condition both the policies within countries and policies towards these countries.<sup>13</sup> Anyway the separation of different types of power is analytical in the last instance: “...because each type of power has at least implicit view on both agency and structure, none simply reflects an entirely agentic or structural perspective (to the neglect of the other)” (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 49).<sup>14</sup>

To employ the power concept in an analysis of state autonomy obviously differs from the traditional IR usage. Although autonomy entails always power in a very general sense, it does not require maximization of power; this is especially true if one conceptualises power in terms of A’s power *over* B. The need for power is determined by the preferences of the state (, community or citizens): autonomy does not require power for the sake of power, but just to be able to live by one’s own rules. For instance, some state’s decision to allow gay marriages does not call for power in an IR realist sense at all. However, a decision to raise taxes on alcohol in one country may require a degree of institutional power<sup>15</sup> for getting the price levels harmonised also in the neighbouring countries as an effort of harnessing private import and consumption (seen as costs for the intended tax increases). Power in IR – even in extremely informed contributions (e.g. Guzzini 1992) – is always seen as directed towards or from states’ external environment, it is always about foreign-domestic relations.

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<sup>13</sup> A simplified example: World Bank Institute has produced a set of indicators measuring various aspects of good governance in national contexts. One of the aspects is “rule of law” which is measured by a set of indicators, which, in turn, construct a single particular version of the rule of law which stresses the security of business environment. This particular objectification of rule of law may now affect the way rule of law is understood in general – perhaps leading to policy changes in the country (if it is seen as a valuable thing in broad terms). Country’s position in the low end of the measurements may also affect the way it is treated by outsiders: it may affect other countrywise evaluations (like sovereign risk ratings) or it may not qualify into some scheme for debt cancellation.

<sup>14</sup> “Nevertheless, they do vary in specific ways. Compulsory (and, to a lesser degree, institutional) power emphasizes agency to the point where structure becomes the context in which A’s actions and B’s reactions are set and constrained, thereby leaning heavily on agency and treating structure as constraint. In contrast, concepts of structural and productive power emphasize structure relative to purposeful agency, even while recognizing that meaningful practices, and hence human agency, are essential in producing, reproducing and possibly transforming these structures” (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 49).

<sup>15</sup> Institutional power refers here, perhaps a bit unorthodoxically, to the capacity of “preconstituted actors exercising control over others indirectly through institutions” (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 51).

But to understand autonomy, one need to keep in mind also the domestic-domestic relation: power to effect policies that are only partly connected to outside action or supranational structures.

### **The agents of state autonomy**

Thus far the question of the entity being autonomous has been avoided. Indeed, the meaning of *state* autonomy is by no means self-evident, although it is crucial to settle if any empirical research is attempted. By the term state in the context of state autonomy, do we refer to a set of individuals representing the whole of the society (rulers' autonomy), to a set of institutions, organisations and personnel somehow differentiated from the rest of society (organisational autonomy) or to the political community either as a collective agent or as an abstraction for all the citizen-agents forming that community (democratic autonomy)? All of these conceptions can be defended, but none of them seem satisfactory for all purposes. It is neither necessary nor desirable to give the term "state" a fixed universal meaning: the term can be used as a signifier (or symbol) for slightly different things in different contexts. Now the question is of what kinds of state conceptions are coherent in the context of autonomy as freedom and power.

Thus far we have contented that autonomy requires agency: according MacCallum only agents can be free (unconstrained) to do something (e.g. decide upon and enact policies).<sup>16</sup> For much of the IR research this is no problem: states are *treated* as agents in the international level, just as individuals are thought to be agents in the domestic level. This is typical not only for the mainstream IR – neorealism and neoliberalism – but serves also for the purposes of the constructivist Alexander Wendt, who treats states as real persons capable for reasoning and deciding (Wight 2006, 180-183).<sup>17</sup> By treating states as structures emerging into corporate agency, Wendt intends to avoid individualist reductionism of treating state actions as simply aggregate governmental actions. This corporate (or collective) agency emerges from the will of individuals to "act jointly on behalf of collective beliefs, whether or not they subscribe to them personally" (ibid., 183). Wight criticises Wendt (1) for being too structuralist in the sense that individuals become nothing but "cultural dopes" following the "diktats" of collective decisions (ibid.), and (2) for "attributing to the state a set of powers that are actually located in a different entity [i.e. in the individual]" (ibid., 216).

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<sup>16</sup> To talk about "free society" is "intelligible only because it is thought to concern the freedom of agents of some sort or other" (MacCallum 1967, 316).

<sup>17</sup> To be sure, Wendt is not the only one to render states as "collective agents". O'Neill, Balsiger and VanDeveer (2004), who are ready to see also other types of "international agents" like certain IGO's, INGO's, private firms, epistemic communities and global governance regimes.

It is more common, however, within the IR tradition “to treat the state as a synonym for the government” (Wight 2006, 216), “state leaders” or “rulers”.<sup>18</sup> This, naturally, is true when the focus is on states’ behaviour, action, agency or power in their “international environment”. Otherwise, references to states are more in line with institutional definitions of state (i.e. in political science and comparative politics). In other words, state entities are treated differently depending of the “level of analysis”. Krasner (1995/96) provides an example of the reductionist approach in his well-placed critique of Westphalian model of sovereignty in treating state autonomy like it was a synonym for rulers’ autonomy (vis-à-vis international and domestic social forces). Indeed, this is more or less also the strategy of Held et al. (1999) in their treatment of state autonomy: ““In effect state autonomy refers to the capacity of state representatives, managers and agencies to articulate and pursue their policy preferences even though these may on occasion clash with the dictates of domestic and international social forces and conditions”. In Wight’s (2006, 192) words this would, no doubt, be an instance of providing “an illusion of having incorporated the state into our analysis when no such integration has occurred”.

Other possibility is to drop the idea that analysis of world politics would require a perspective differing from that of social and political research in general. This does not entail discarding the concept of state (or state power) or renouncing the existence of state autonomy. For Wight the state is a real structural entity, although its power cannot be directly observed but only “experienced through the activities of its officials”. More precisely: “A state can be considered a structuratum constituted of many structured organisational entities and institutions, which are themselves structured in certain ways” (ibid., 219). As a structured structure, “the state cannot exercise power, but constrains and/or enables embodies agents to act” (ibid., 222). Individuals are the real agents in both domestic and global political arenas, but not independent of state’s structural conditioning. Or the other way round, there are powers inscribed into the structures of the state that only individuals can activate. Even though the state, according to Wight, has to be analysed in relation to a wider political, social and cultural setting, the state is a separate, emergent entity having unique properties and powers (ibid., 223).

If state is a structural and organisational entity, is it compatible with our “agential” definition of state autonomy? Who or what is/are the autonomous entity/-ties the term state is referring to? Consider the quote, in which Wight (2006, 203-204) discusses organisations within (/as?) state complexes: “.an

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<sup>18</sup> A citation from a well-known IR textbook: “In political life, and to some extent in IR scholarship, the terms *state*, *nation*, and *country* are used imprecisely, usually to refer to the decisions of state governments. It is common place to discuss states as if they were people [- -.] Ultimately only individual human beings are true actors making conscious decisions. But treating states like people makes it easier to describe and explain the relations among them. It is convenient to use the language metaphorically, though it is only a mental construction (Goldstein 1996, 11).

organisation can be considered a structured structure - - The relations (structures) of organisations are governed by a range of differing mechanisms. These range from clearly formulated and regulated rules to informal rules and social norms. Moreover, the structure of organisations is also governed by sets of rules, regulations and laws that are external to the organisation. - - This means that no organisation can be considered wholly autonomous and independent of external structural influences. When applied to the state, this fact alone should lead us to treat with suspicion artificial boundaries separating inside from outside, or dividing the world into artificial levels.”

The quote above could be interpreted in several ways. We could conceptualise organisations (even states and nations) as social systems and discuss their autopoiesis/autonomy in non-agential terms derived from biological/natural systems theories.<sup>19</sup> But state autonomy can also be conceptualised more generally as organisational and institutional separation from the civil society (i.e. public-private separation) and supranational influences (i.e. national-supranational separation) in general. This comes closer to such institutional definitions of state as that of Michael Mann for whom state is, among other things, “a differentiated [in relation to society] set of institutions and personnel embodying centrality” (Mann 1986, cited in Shaw 1997, 506) or Neomarxists like Nicos Poulantzas, for whom state apparatus (a “juridico-political region”) is a set of institutions, operationally autonomous (i.e. separate but connected) in relation to the dominating classes and to the economic region in general (Jessop 1982).<sup>20</sup>

But autonomy is more than passive insulation. Knowing that there are no structures, institutions nor organisations without individuals who inhabit them, the agency-dependent understanding of autonomy does not need to be discarded. “External” influence works through individual agency that is “layered and differentiated and inextricably linked to social contexts through the relations in which it is embedded” (Wight 2006, 213). State autonomy – which can only be relative or partial – refers then to the capacity of structurally conditioned agents embodying the institutions and organisations of state to act and decide. It remains open whether the agents of state autonomy refer only to the so called “state officials” as Wight seem to suggest (ibid., 222), to all citizens or to a combination of both. This, I

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<sup>19</sup> I refer here to attempts of applying biological systems theories – and especially the concept of self-organisation – into human social world (see e.g. Roth & Schwegler [eds.] 1981). Lately Mingers (2004) has discussed whether social systems – such as nations, states or economies – could be considered autopoietic, i.e. organisationally closed systems producing their own components (rules, structures and position-practices. Drawing on theories of self-organisation (Maturana and Varela) and structuration (Giddens and Bhaskar) he concludes that although structural reproduction occur in social systems, it is “extremely difficult to identify empirically the bounded closure of a particular social system” (ibid., 421). Referring to the multiple loyalties of individuals and cultural fragmentation within nation-states, Mingers is especially careful not to treat states as organisationally closed societies unified by a common identity.

<sup>20</sup>As relatively autonomous, a capitalist state “secures the process of capital accumulation even though it sometimes acts against the immediate short-term interests of the dominant class” (Jessop 1982, 19). Autonomy of Marxist kind means, that the outcomes of juridico-political processes are not determined by any single class fraction (or social force).

guess, is dependent on the extent of the particular definition organisational and institutional boundaries of state, but also on context (e.g. whether the authority structures of a country are democratic or not) and possibly on the particular issue in question. The important point is that autonomy examined from the institutional-organisational perspective can also be treated in agential terms.

It makes a difference whether one treats states as unitary entities (whether individual or collective agents) or internally incoherent complexes, where officials, their agencies, ideals and interests often conflict. Krasner (1995/96), as we saw, systematically links state autonomy to “the rulers” of the states. State autonomy is “rulers’ autonomy” that can be violated either directly (e.g. through economic sanctions or political conditionality on sovereign loans) from outside or indirectly from inside by altering “conceptions of legitimacy held by domestic groups” (ibid., 127). For Krasner, the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe violated autonomy of Soviet Union and its satellites, not because governments were somehow forced to oblige, but because it “altered conceptions of human rights and legitimate state behaviour that were held by groups in Eastern Europe...” (ibid., 144). The view presumes a strict differentiation between the state (i.e. “the rulers”) and society (individuals and groups) and incongruity between their autonomy: increase in the one’s autonomy can mean losses in that of the other, and *vice versa*; or in other words, autonomous rulers can make decisions that are neither preferred nor in the interests of the rest of society.

This is largely repeated in the treatment of autonomy by Held et al (1999). Remember how they defined state autonomy as “the capacity of state representatives, managers and agencies to articulate and pursue their policy preferences”. As such it shares the problems of Krasner’s ruler-centered understanding of state autonomy although democracy is now explicitly brought into the analyses:<sup>21</sup> “Moreover, to the extent that modern nation-states are democratic, sovereignty and autonomy are assumed to be embedded within, and congruent with, the territorially organized framework of liberal democratic government: the ‘rulers’ – elected representatives – are accountable to ‘the ruled’ – the citizenry – within a delimited territory. There is, in effect, a ‘national community of fate’, whereby membership of political community is defined in terms of the peoples within the territorial borders of the nation-state; this community becomes the proper locus and home of democratic policies.” (Held et al. 1999, 29.)

So according to these authors, we are observing the autonomy of the rulers, but in democratic settings this autonomy can be assumed to represent the whole of the political community. Unfortunately, the authors limit their empirical work exclusively on (liberal democratic) states in advanced capitalist societies, and hence we cannot be entirely certain how they would treat autonomy in non-democratic contexts. In principle, however, autonomy as conception is not conflated with democracy and hence

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<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that Krasner would not agree with these democratic additions.

the ruler-centered conception of state autonomy can be applied to both democratic and non-democratic countries alike – just as the classical *autonomia* could be applied to both oligarchies and monarchies.

Is the relation between autonomy and democracy somehow different if the focus is not exclusively on the political elite but on institutions and organisations that are embodied by human individuals? Surely conceptualising autonomy must now be much more complicated, since the locus of state agency is not universal or fixed, but dependent on the context and the issue: states are internally differently structured and different issues activate different agents. But if we are interested in individual agents with often differing interests and multiple (sometimes transnational) loyalties, why are we still clinging on the notion of state autonomy? Wight (2006, 221) seems to think that the post-modern state<sup>22</sup> still forms an important institutional structure in guaranteeing legitimacy for the social order, and as such it is also closely connected to most other institutional domains. To put it bluntly, it is through state institutions and organisations that certain agents derive their authority (but whose capability to authoritative decision-making is conditioned by the very same institutions).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, as the pre-eminent social structure state may, into some extent, unify individuals and their fates within state borders and separate them from peoples and processes outside.

The community of fate can be described as unity in terms of shared identity or sense of belonging but also in terms of material processes giving credibility to such beliefs. This feeling of togetherness does not have to be based on any ethno-cultural beliefs on sameness; also physical closeness, conventional practices, historically formed institutions, organisational linkages unify people. Although individual citizens of a country X differ in many respects, most of them share experiences and loyalties pertaining to the socio-cultural system they are born into. Indeed, the fact that I was born and lived my life in a particular socio-cultural setting does play a crucial role in the development of my identity “without completely determining it” (Wight 2006, 213). Many elements of social structures affecting our life are identified as national: my job opportunities are dependent on the overall employment of the country; my daughter is similarly affected by changes in national curricula than a school boy in other part of the country; through my local team I belong to the only national basketball union, whose is financially largely dependent on state’s funding.

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<sup>22</sup> The term post-modern state is borrowed from Georg Sorensen (2004) who uses it in reference to an ideal typical form of statehood that has evolved out of modern, Westphalian state and that can be analytically separated from weak, postcolonial states, whose statehood is almost solely dependent on external structures (i.e. principle of sovereignty).

<sup>23</sup> This resembles Rosenau’s concept of “spheres of authority”, SOA. State’s form SOA’s in the sense that the enable certain actors “to evoke compliance when exercising authority as they engage in activities that delineate the sphere” (Rosenau 1997, cited in Ferguson and Mansbach 2004, 13). In the case of states, this sphere is delimited into the bounded national territory and those who comply are the citizens.

What really counts is the recognition of unity by the insiders (“we” is internally related to “them”) but also a treatment as a separate unity by the outsiders. The modern statehood is more or less constituted and reproduced by the (legal) principle of sovereignty. Much of the global governance efforts still count on national separation reproducing states as primary world political entities (e.g. governmental representation in EU through the Council of Ministers, voting in UN General Assembly, or allocation of emission quotas according to the Kyoto Protocol). As such external actors and global structures – sometimes through legal categories like citizenship – reproduce the notions of unity either by influencing domestic institutions or directly treating all citizens of country A in similar fashion but differently than citizens of country B. By the same token, I and my fellow citizens are also constrained *en masse* by the same global structures, and thus even in the contemporary situation citizens of different countries often do form real *communities of fate*.

As I see it, if states’ are conceptualised as institutional and organisational ensembles, the identity and number of agents activating state capacities is never fixed. In principle all the members of the national community are potential agents working in and through the state institutions, but it depends on the state structures themselves who are enabled to compete for and use the legal authority of state and who are constrained. The more inclusive the political system, the more agential potential is realised in activating state powers. The more exclusive the system is, the more improbable it gets for citizens to “use the state power”.

Whereas the instrumental reductionist approach to state agency and autonomy leads to an uncomfortable separation of rulers from the ruled (and difficulties in examining autonomy both the cases of democracy and non-democracy), the institutional-organisational understanding helping to conceptualise a satisfactory notion of states’ as communities of fate allows to make an analytical separation between a qualified domestic unity and its external environment. Whereas the notion of rulers’ autonomy is, in the end, always of only rulers’ autonomy alone, organisational autonomy can – through providing an explanation why nationals may form a meaningful community of fate even in non-democratic states – provide a better justification of understanding state autonomy as communal self-determination. This brings us to the question of democracy.

### **Autonomy and Democracy**

Let us now consider state autonomy from the perspective of (liberal) democratic theory that, until recently, has been dominated by state-centric thinking. Accordingly, a political community (usually a state) in order to be democratic must also be autonomous: democratic rule requires effective rule. From the democratic perspective, autonomy without democracy is meaningless, as is democracy

without autonomy. The ideal typical democratic autonomy entails that all the citizens are included (i.e. have equal potential) “to articulate and pursue their policy preferences even though they may occasionally clash with the dictates of international order” (see above). Surely there are conflicts between the citizen-agents, otherwise there wouldn’t be democratic politics at all, but it is assumed that political process produces unity and legitimate compulsion if so is decided. Democratic autonomy becomes more or less comparable to what freedom theorists’ call “collective freedom”<sup>24</sup> with the exception that autonomy is constrained only by external influences – not by constraints emanating from actions of the government or other citizens which are conceptualised as problems of democracy.

If rulers’ autonomy can be accused of its reductionism, democratic autonomy is can be called idealist. Although it can – and legitimately so – serve as a model towards which strive for, it is difficult to describe existing states as coming even close to the ideal. Whereas rulers’ and organisational conceptions of autonomy are dependent on only one variable (degree of autonomy), requires the notion of democratic autonomy interplay between two variables (autonomy and democracy). Following Held et al. we could control the other, and limit the analysis exclusively to liberal democratic countries, which would allow focusing only on the outside-inside relations. But it becomes confusing, if we try to analyse democratic autonomy of non-democratic countries. Consider this in the light of Krasner’s example: did the external influence of CSCE Principle VII endorsing human rights improve or weaken state autonomy in Eastern Europe? Although it certainly worked against the rulers’ wishes, it did this by empowering the citizens.<sup>25</sup> The downside is that should we conflate state autonomy and democracy we would need to accept conclusions against our established understanding of autonomy.<sup>26</sup>

The crucial question is, should we treat autonomy as something valuable, as a normative ideal, or as a seemingly neutral concept in the sense that countries’ autonomy can be evaluated independently of the nature of their authority structures. From the democratic standpoint, especially the rulers’ (but also organisational) autonomy in a non-democratic context is worthless (or possibly even damaging). Dowding and van Hees (2005, 7) at least are pretty confident that having *freedom* should be something valuable and “for a conception of freedom to be convincing it should be possible to explain why *that*

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<sup>24</sup> “By collective freedom we mean the degree of freedom that can be attributed to a society as such, and which is a function of the amount of freedom that all individuals enjoy in that society” (Dowding and van Hees 2005, 15).

<sup>25</sup> In addition of empowering citizens by providing their demands a moral legitimation, one can think of the idea of Bavetta and Guala (2003) that autonomy entails active and conscious process of choice (or deliberation) over possible preference profiles. In similar vein, strengthening human rights in some country may be considered as an instrument for enlarging the scope of experiences (and options also) available for the citizens.

<sup>26</sup> At least comparison between state’s would become much complicated: Should one see Ghana – a formally democratic country with “free” civil society, but whose policies are heavily dependent of international dictates (see e.g. Whitfield 2005) – be seen more or less autonomous (in the sense of democratic autonomy) than autocratic China whose leaders are able to resist many kinds of external political and economic pressures?

kind of freedom is thought to be valuable. Or formulated differently, if the adoption of a policy that aims at securing or enhancing freedom can have morally repugnant consequences, “then we should reject the conception of freedom on which the policy is based” (ibid.). In other words, should we continue to treat autonomy largely as a synonym for freedom, it follows that the notion of democratic autonomy best fulfilled the requirement of the *normative criterion* endorsed by the two theorists (provided that democracy serves as a benchmark for morality).

But the notion of autonomy (whether democratic, organisational or rulers’) requires even more qualification in order for not leading to immoral consequences. Even though most theorists are ready to concede that state autonomy in political reality can never be absolute but is always imperfect and relative, they may still uphold an understanding that ideal typical autonomy is absolute (against which empirical cases are then compared). This reflects our individualist mindsets: separate parts are more important than the whole; the social is approached from the perspective of individual. But autonomy as an ideal-type does not have to be absolute, it can be also relative binding the social perspective into the very core of the concept.

Now it is a well known fact that individuals – always living in communities of some sort – cannot be free to do anything they want without damaging other people or their freedom. It is a moral question whether to stress individual freedom or freedom for all in the community. Similarly, if we accept the reality of multiple state-communities existing in the globe we are bound to run into problems with the absolute conception of autonomy (as an ideal type). Although the reality of imperfect state control has more or less been accepted (and supranational arrangements for providing order and preventing free-riding have been created) the starting point is always autonomy of this or that state – not autonomy of all.

It is paradoxical that while the absolute notion of autonomy is indeed compatible with state-centric liberal democratic thinking, it certainly is not compatible with any broader notions of democracy. Even if it would probably be neutrally, or even positively, aligned with the two main principles of democracy – freedom and equality – in one country, it would hardly go hand in hand with equality between individuals, peoples or nations. Autonomy as absolute non-intervention is based on individualist thinking; it is not a theory concerned with the whole, but with the part. Not only is the conception empirically invalid but also normatively (assuming democracy and peace as the value standards) questionable.

As said, autonomy/freedom of individuals is often qualified in relative terms. Held (1996, 301) for example constructs his *principle of autonomy* by limiting the freedom it gives the agents. “Persons should enjoy equal rights, and, accordingly, equal obligations in the specification of the political

framework which generates and limits the opportunities available to them; that is, they should be free and equal in the determination of the conditions of their own lives, so long as they do not deploy this framework to negate the rights of the others.” Although the conception remains very much a negative in nature, it now accepts the social dimension and the *equal* right of autonomy for all. Young (2000, 231) makes similar proposition in writing that: “- - an adequate concept of autonomy should promote the capacity of persons to pursue their own ends in the context of relationships in which other might do the same. While this concept of autonomy entails a presumption of non-interference, it does not imply a social scheme in which atomized agents simply mind their own business and leave each other alone. It entails recognizing that agents are related in many ways they have not chosen, by virtue of kinship, history, proximity, or the unintended consequences of action.” These formulations are not only social in nature, by stipulating that agents are in constant relation to each other, but also normative in an altruistic fashion – just like the individualistic view is normative in an egoistic manner – requiring that all should enjoy similar rights and duties.

These ideas of relative autonomy can be applied also to states, societies or other communities. Qualified external intervention becomes part of the concept of state autonomy, as Young substitutes Philip Pettit’s (1999) notion of freedom as non-domination for the principle of non-intervention. Autonomy is still conceived largely in negative terms, since most external constraints are regarded as detriments to it: “One person [or state] is dominated by another [state or other actor], - -, to the extent that the other person [state or other actor] has the capacity to interfere in their affairs, in particular the capacity to interfere in their affair on an arbitrary basis” (Pettit *ibid.*, 165; text in brackets mine). Thus a state is autonomous as far as some other actor is not capable of intervening without taking into consideration the interests of the other.

In Young’s vision of providing autonomy for all (2000, ch. 7) nation-states retain their right to a limited self-government, but in addition there is a regulated federated relationship between them. Each state should take into consideration implications on others when deciding about policies; a state would also have the right to make claims on other nations if their policies had harmful effects outside their borders. Hence, there would be a need for neutral institutional arrangements through which governments could make claims and counterclaims, negotiate, and reach agreements. This would, of course, indicate some kind of strengthened democratic international governance, or global democracy.<sup>27</sup> In best case, as Young seems to think, a global regulatory framework like this would ensure that every nation could get themselves heard, their cases discussed and decided upon. There would be intervention for sure, but it would not be arbitrary, and thus detrimental to national autonomy.

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<sup>27</sup> Especially at the more concrete level many of Young’s ideas echo those of Held’s (1995) and his cosmopolitan democracy, although the Heldian cosmopolitan democracy seems to be much more centralised and institutionalised into formal and centralised organisational structures.

In conclusion, we have two ideal type of autonomy that are based on different social ontologies, and that “guide” states to behave rather differently. The first, the absolute conception, is based on an atomist view of social reality endorsing maximization of state’s capacity to do as it chooses, and the other, relativist conception, is founded on more holistic ontology supporting the idea of maximization of every nation-state’s autonomy by accepting non-dominative forms of intervention. Neither of the concepts describes the contemporary status of state autonomy as it stands.

## **Conclusions**

The concept of state autonomy, often used in rather off-hand manner even in academic contributions, requires proper examination for there are many possibilities for substantially differing conceptualisations. Drawing loosely on ideas and analysis on the concept of individual freedom, I was able to focus my analysis on three different aspects (the triadic relation) that should be considered in every conceptualisation of autonomy. Applying MacCallum’s (1967) ideas rather freely, I suggested that state autonomy can be understood as function of negative freedom (from) and power (to), and that part of the variation in different conceptualisations is dependent either on what kind of influences are termed as constraints and how notions of structural power are dealt with.

Secondly, as freedom is always a property of *someone*, also autonomy needs an agent. This time drawing rather freely on Wight’s discussion on concepts of state and agency, I examined how different understandings of state agency affect analysis of autonomy. State autonomy as a property of rulers’, a common conceptualisation in mainstream IR, is in problems in separating rulers from the ruled and thus, especially in non-democratic contexts, undermines the value of autonomy by giving the false impression that possible external constraints on the ruler(s) should automatically be seen as constraints for autonomy of whole community. Understanding autonomy as a property of agents embodying the juridico-political organisational and institutional ensemble called state provides better possibilities for treating state apparatuses and the socio-cultural systems as connected and not essentially contradicting. Organisational autonomy provides thus a more realist framework for analysing autonomy in the real world.

Finally, applying Dowding and van Hees’ normative criteria for conceptual analysis, it was argued that it is legitimate to construct a concept of autonomy from the basis of moral considerations. Whereas a notion of autonomy that essentially combines the values of democracy and communal self-determination was found ambiguous for any empirical purposes, it can still serve as a model towards which to strive for. Nevertheless, it was noted that were any of the three ideal typic notions of

autonomy (i.e. rulers', organisational and democratic autonomy) understood in absolute terms, they could not serve as basis for morally sustainable global politics.

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