

Peter Gourevitch

“The Second Image Reversed: the International Sources of Domestic Politics” (IO 32:4, Autumn 1978)

In this paper, which is a review of many different currents in the literature, Gourevitch examines the relationship between international and domestic politics. As the title implies, his main focus is reversing Waltz’s second image, and looking at how international politics affect domestic structure. The goal is to show that theories of international politics in which domestic structure is an independent variable are problematic, since the supposedly dependent variable of foreign policy (or more generally the international arena) in fact has an effect on the domestic political environment. The author hopes that this paper will encourage us to “think differently about the linkage between international relations and domestic politics” (p.882).

Two main facets of the international system affect states on the domestic level: war and trade, or more broadly, the distributions of power, economic activity, and wealth. Gourevitch chooses to focus on regime type and coalition pattern as the dependent variables, arguing that these are “enduring features of a given political system, ones which operate over time to shape behavior at specific moments of decision, events, or policy formation” (p.883). He proceeds to examine the effects of these international forces, proceeding with a review of several currents of literature which have ascribed (different) roles to international economic forces in terms of their effects on regime type and coalition patterns.

The first school is the Gerschenkronian school, which has argued that the international context which a country industrializes, measured by whether it is an early or a late industrializer, inflicts different entry costs. The higher the costs, the stronger a central coordinating apparatus is needed to collect them. Thus, late industrializers developed stronger central institutions. In this argument, the character of the world economy affects domestic political outcomes.

Dependency theorists impute an even greater influence of the international political economy on political development. The common thread is the emphasis both schools place on the new rules and costs of each phase of development. For these authors, the advanced capitalist countries set up a system which determines (as opposed to affecting) the options of regime type and coalition formation of the developing countries. Gourevitch points out that the dependency theorists do not examine the variation in regime type among developing countries, concentrating instead on the international system.

This focus on the international system is taken to an extreme by Wallerstein, who argues that one cannot understand states by examining them in a disaggregated, individual manner. They must be examined, he argues, within the context of the international system, from which states “precipitate”. Again, Gourevitch highlights a weakness of Wallerstein’s argument, arguing that to understand the difference between strong and weak states, some understanding of domestic politics is necessary.

Gourevitch also discusses the liberal school, as well as authors who place an emphasis on the importance of transnational relations, which focuses on the actions of non-state actors and argues that these may be more important than the state itself in determining international outcomes. Finally, he looks at the writings of what he calls

neo-mercantilists and state-centered Marxists, both of whom assert the role of the state as primary in responding to international forces. For the first, the international system leaves room for the response of the state, which can when it sees fit control the actions of transnational actors. The neo-Marxists differ only in their view that the state is the tool of economic elites., and their view of domestic structure as class- rather than interest-based. Thus, for all of these theorists, the forces of the international economic environment affect domestic structures, though in varying ways and degrees.

In the next section, Gourevitch examines the effects of the international state system (the distribution of power) on domestic political structures. He discusses the importance of the variation in the external, national security environment on state formation, and refers to the much-cited case of the geographical differences between 17th century England and Prussia. He also discusses the effect war has on the domestic balance of power, in which it acts as a central force, seen as threatening democracy in the United States by isolationists, and as a threat in many other circumstances.

Gourevitch argues that “students of comparative politics treat domestic structure too much as an independent variable, underplaying the extent to which it and the international system interact”. (p.900) He criticizes arguments based exclusively on Waltz’ third image, stating that the international system is underdetermining; always leaving some leeway for states to choose among possible outcomes. These choices are made on the basis of domestic politics. What aspect of domestic politics, then, is the primary motivator of this choice, expressed through choices of regime type and coalition pattern? Gourevitch dismisses purely process-based factors, arguing that too much of the literature focuses on the structure of politics rather than the content of the views being expressed by the different actors. He uses the argument which uses state strength as an explanatory variable as an example. The point is that these arguments do not provide a basis for the explanation of the orientation of policy of the states. If it is determined by social actors (weak states), then the preferences of the actors must be examined. And if it is determined by the state (strong state), then how are these preference-based decisions made? In short, Gourevitch makes a case for the importance of coalitional analysis, or the examination of “how specific interests use various weapons by fighting through certain institutions in order to achieve their goals” (p.905). This will provide a more nuanced view of the complex interactions by which foreign economic policy and domestic political structure impact upon one another.

Gourevitch closes with a caution against viewing the present state as critically different from that of the past. He argues that both interdependence and anarchy are “old realities”, and thus the current international environment is nothing new or unique. Neither is the “interpenetrated quality of international relations and domestic politics”, which “seems as old as the existence of states” (p.911).