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# The autonomy of globalizing states: bridging the gap between democratic theory and international political economy

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## Abstract

Scholars of democratic theory and international political economy often disagree over the effects of globalization on state autonomy. Yet, each approach pays minimal attention to the contributions of the other to their common object of study. In an effort to remedy this situation, I identify the premises and procedural habits of each approach which tend to make it appear irrelevant to the other, and then adjust them to remove the appearance of irrelevance without impairing the integrity of each approach. The argument is illustrated by observations from Britain, France and Sweden in recent decades.

## Keywords

democracy, democratic theory, globalization, international political economy, autonomy

## Introduction

This article investigates whether specific branches within the heterogeneous fields of normative democratic theory (NDT) and international political economy (IPE) can be brought closer in their understanding of how globalization affects the autonomy of advanced capitalist liberal democratic states. State autonomy is defined as the capacity of a government to perform alternative and varied political actions which are undetermined by internal minorities and foreign powers. For this capacity to count as positive for democracy, it must be controlled by the people and yield effects within the boundaries of the state in question. This article suggests that NDT and IPE can draw important lessons from each other and that their dialogue can be enhanced by adjusting ways of conceptualizing and operationalizing state autonomy.

The primary reason for developing this argument is an unarticulated disagreement between prominent contributors to NDT and IPE on the relationship between globalization and the

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autonomy of states. Studies in NDT commonly assume that states lose autonomy, often radically, as economic relations and regimes become increasingly global (e.g. Archibugi, 2004; Dahl, 1989; Dryzek, 2006; Gould, 2006; Habermas, 1999; Held, 1995; Kuper, 2004; McGrew, 2002; Rosow, 2000; Thompson, 1999; Warren, 2002). Empirical studies in IPE, on the other hand, often suggest that the globalization effect on state autonomy is nugatory, positive on the whole, or positive or negative according to the specifics involved (Adserà and Boix, 2002; Bernauer and Achini, 2000; Garrett, 1998a; Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Milward, 1992; Mosley, 2005; Simmons, 1999; Stephens et al., 1999; Swank, 2003; Weiss, 2003).

Of course, not all democratic theorists agree that globalization erodes state autonomy, and all scholars in IPE do not confirm the opposite. Some critical theorists (e.g. Strange, 1996) and case analysts (e.g. Genschel, 2002) in IPE support the assumption in NDT referred to above. The position argued more commonly in IPE is implicitly taken for granted in those contributions to NDT which do not integrate transnational factors in the first place (e.g. Richardson, 2002; Weale, 2007). Still, these greater affinities between specific strands of NDT and IPE do not constitute a dialogue between those other significant strands of the two disciplines which manifest a substantive disagreement on this point.

Enhancing dialogue between disagreeing contributions to NDT and IPE is important for several reasons. First, and from a purely academic point of view, it is important to identify and debate theoretical controversies so as to construct theories that are more widely acceptable. This holds also for theories about the relationship between globalization and state autonomy. Second, and with greater practical interest, a successful integration of insights from normative and empirical investigations is crucial for the capacity of theory to guide political action and reform. The next paragraphs discuss how increased communication between NDT and IPE can serve to improve both disciplines in this respect.

The literature on globalization in NDT has long been open to the charge of indulging in utopian fantasy, suggesting that global democratic reform can emerge from innovations such as cosmopolitan citizenship and the establishment of a world government (e.g. Kuper, 2004; Patomäki and Teivainen, 2004). To ground this normative thinking, it would be helpful to construct an empirically robust theory of the causal relationship between globalization and state autonomy in democracies. Not only would that theory serve to direct attention to reforms intended to deal with the real effects of globalization on state autonomy; it would also strengthen the arguments for visionary reforms when such are called for by the results of empirical research. In this way NDT can become more relevant to political practice.

The IPE literature on globalization and state autonomy, on the other hand, has been poorly equipped to analyze the normative legitimacy of states. The concept of state autonomy is unquestionably useful for understanding and judging legitimacy. At the most fundamental level of analysis, states retain their legitimacy only insofar as they are able to protect the basic values of their people (e.g. Hobbes, 1648/2005; Locke, 1690/2003), that is to say, as long as they retain a critical level of autonomy in the most valued policy areas. The question is, do states in fact possess this autonomy today? And if not, do they still have a right to demand our allegiance? For empirical assessments of state autonomy to play a role in the answering of such questions, the concept must be taken in conjunction with the dominant political value of our time: democracy. By reformulating its concepts and methods to take into account the notions of autonomy used by NDT, IPE will therefore be increasingly able to assess a necessary precondition for the legitimacy of advanced capitalist democratic states. This has become an important task in recent decades following international trends suggesting a decline in the legitimacy of liberal democracies. The theoretical task

of explaining these trends is essential to the practical one of combating their potential negative consequences, such as political apathy, social instability and violent break-downs. We have good reasons, therefore, to clear the ground for a second generation of empirical studies in IPE dealing with the effects of globalization on state autonomy – one which is more explicitly aware of the theory and practice of democracy, and, consequently, capable of casting new light on the legitimacy of the 21st-century state politics.

What follows is divided into four sections. The first section explains the common concern of IPE and NDT by examining some claims to the contrary, namely that the gap between the two disciplines is in some sense fundamental and unbridgeable. The second section develops the critique that IPE does not observe well-grounded requirements of NDT, and investigates what can be done about it. The third section develops the critique that NDT does not observe reasonable requirements of IPE. The fourth section illustrates the argument pursued in the second and the third sections by reporting empirical observations of state autonomy, as required by IPE, which are, however, sensitive to the conceptual and normative assumptions required by NDT.

### **An unbridgeable divide?**

The context in which the autonomy of states has emerged as an important topic of debate is both broader and narrower than that of globalization. Expansively defined as the gradual emergence of ‘transcontinental or interregional flows and networks’ (Held et al., 2000: 16), globalization incorporates a number of changes in world politics over the last decades, such as the regulation of markets above and below the level of states, the displacement of people across boundaries and continents, and the increasing flows of capital and goods among states and regions. All such processes need not have a significant impact on state autonomy. Partly overlapping and interacting processes – such as Europeanization (Caporaso, 2002), internationalization (Goldmann, 2001), and denationalization (Zürn, 2000) – or distinct changes – as in deindustrialization, ageing populations, and changes in consumer tastes (Iversen and Cusack, 2000) – can be as, or more, influential.

In any case, the studies in IPE suggesting that globalization does little or no harm to the autonomy of states have argued that the ‘benefits of globalization can be reaped without undermining the economic sovereignty of nations, and without reducing the ability of citizens to choose how to distribute the benefits – and the costs – of the market’ (Garrett, 1998a: 6); that ‘in the face of economic globalization, governments retain “room to move”, particularly in the developed world’ (Mosley, 2005: 355); that there is today a ‘political constraint’ rather than ‘an inexorable economic constraint’ to public spending (Stephens et al., 1999: 193); or simply, that state ‘internal power’ has increased in recent decades within the OECD (Bernauer and Achini, 2000: 227). Moreover, these arguments are not portrayed as any recent insights but as confirmations of observations made by an earlier generation of researchers (Cameron, 1978; Katzenstein, 1985).

From the perspective of NDT, the picture is very different. It has been suggested that ‘globalizing forces’ will ‘reduce the significance of the state as a locus of democratic collective action’ (Warren, 2002: 175); that ‘a state can no longer count on its own forces to provide its citizens with adequate protection from ... external effects’ (Habermas, 1999: 49); that the state will ‘suffer a considerable reduction in its capacity to control decisions on matters of importance to it’ (Dahl, 1989: 319); or that ‘globalization erodes states’ political autonomy and thereby curtails the efficacy of state-based democracy’ (Archibugi, 2004: 441). Moreover, this common wisdom remains influential even as some democratic theorists engage in empirical research. Although the decline of the nation-state is sometimes rejected as a myth even in NDT, the rethinking of democracy under

global conditions is undertaken on the partly contradicting premise that nation-states are no longer sufficiently autonomous for harboring democracy (e.g. Held, 2004).

Is this gap between NDT and IPE necessarily problematic or even surprising? It may be suggested that the two disciplines are concerned with two ontologically opposed objects of analysis, facts and norms, and that they must accordingly rely on different methodologies, that is to say, empirical observation and moral judgment. Why then should we expect any convergence between the two disciplines in the first place? This question would be consistent with a conception of IPE as a social science, in which theories are value-neutral statements about how the world works, and in which concepts allow for the articulation of hypotheses about the positive relationship among variables and the testing of such hypotheses against empirical evidence (e.g. Krasner, 1996). This understanding of IPE is certainly not uncommon, and some even regard it as the dominant paradigm (see Cohen, 2007, on the 'American school'). However, it is not the only perspective on IPE, and others would regard it as intellectually narrow as well as ideologically naïve: IPE is 'about justice, as well as efficiency' (Strange, 1984: x).

At a general level, this controversy over the nature of IPE is far-reaching (Weaver, 2009). However, the depth of the disagreement should not be exaggerated in relation to specific issues, like the one of how globalization affects the autonomy of democratic states (or their 'economic sovereignty', 'room to move', 'internal power', 'policy options', terms which are all used as synonyms for autonomy by the scholars in IPE cited above). In this case a closer dialogue between IPE and NDT would add an obvious value as the tenability of arguments developed in both disciplines clearly depends on assumptions investigated more closely in the other. When scholars in NDT suggest that globalization has diminished the autonomy of democratic states, they assume what researchers in IPE claim to investigate empirically, namely the effects of globalization on state autonomy. When researchers in IPE draw conclusions about the autonomy of democratic states on the basis of empirical observation, they rely on a concept which has been continually examined in NDT for decades and even centuries, namely autonomy. Hence it is clearly a waste of intellectual resources that branches of NDT and IPE which demonstrate an explicit disagreement on the issue of globalization and state autonomy pay little attention to the works of each other.

Another reason why the gap in communication between NDT and IPE may be perceived as unsurprising or even unproblematic concerns their respective definitions of autonomy. These definitions are rarely identical and, consequently, it is perhaps only the term, not the concept, which is common to both fields. Scholars in IPE often define the autonomy of states as the capacity of government officials to act independently of social pressures or particular classes. Such conceptions are common to theoretical traditions as diverse as the realism of Krasner (1978); the institutionalism of Skocpol (1985); and the Marxism of Poulantzas (1975; cf. DeCanio, 2001). In debates on globalization in NDT, on the other hand, state autonomy is a prerequisite for democracy within states (e.g. Archibugi, 2008; Dahl, 1989; Held, 1995). On that premise, state autonomy implies that governments are free from domination by internal minorities and external powers but also (and this is the difference in comparison with the conception in IPE just mentioned) that governments are controlled by their people. Discussions in IPE have often been concerned with the issue of whether the state is dominated by society (following Marx, 1848/2006) while a classical problem of NDT is to explain how individual liberty can be reconciled with the existence of political order and collective action (following Rousseau, 1765/1992). The former question requires a distinction between state and society which is typically collapsed in the concept of democracy in traditional answers to the latter.

In some contexts the two different conceptualizations of state autonomy indeed produce substantially different implications. A state whose government decisions are determined by the

citizenry acting together under conditions of individual freedom and political equality, in other words, a state which functions in accordance with a standard democratic ideal, will be autonomous according to NDT but not according to IPE. Furthermore, according to the concept of autonomy in IPE, an autocratic state may be more or less autonomous, while an autocratic state can by definition not manifest any such autonomy which is a concern in NDT. This is of course problematic for attempts at creating dialogue between the two fields. Fortunately, however, in the context of globalization and liberal democracy, the concrete implications of the alternative conceptualizations converge. Both disciplines agree that state autonomy is lacking when government actions are dominated by global economic or political actors. The critical point for IPE is that government officials cannot make the decisions they want or which they think represent the national interest. For NDT the problem is that those who determine government actions are not the right people. It follows in both cases that a determination of government decisions by global actors implies that the government is not autonomous with regard to those decisions.

Hence there is a common issue for IPE and NDT in the debate on globalization and state autonomy, namely to decide whether government decisions in liberal democratic states are determined by groups other than the people of those states. This definition of the issue of common interest also explains why even critical democratic theorists, located on the ideological left, are often willing to recognize the legitimacy of liberal democracy in this context: to sustain the argument that it is democratically problematic for states to be dominated by forces operating at global or regional levels, it is necessary to assume that controlling governments by means of liberal democratic procedures is at least a democratically preferable alternative.

## A critique of IPE

Although IPE and NDT do not conceptualize state autonomy in identical ways, and put different emphasis on empirical and normative inquiries, they are concerned with similar complex phenomena. Why then has NDT been so little inclined to engage with empirical findings in IPE? It will be suggested in this section that the lack of interest on the part of NDT has to do with the methods used to obtain the findings of IPE. This is not to say that conclusions drawn in IPE are necessarily wrong from the perspective of NDT, but that prevailing empirical methods are not sufficiently convincing to invite conversation over those conclusions in the first place.

To estimate the autonomy of states, a standard indicator seems to have been afforded by the policies actually pursued. To illustrate, the tenability of 'arguments about the constraining effects of globalization on national autonomy' (Garrett, 1998b: 822) is analyzed by describing the convergence among countries on variables such as government spending, public sector deficit, and rate of capital taxation; and by analyzing the correlations between these variables and various alleged indicators of globalization, such as exposure to international trade, multinationalization of production, and capital mobility. Others adopt a similar approach (e.g. Bernauer and Achini, 2000; Esping-Andersen, 1999; Garrett, 1998b; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Swank, 2003; Weiss, 2003). If a country pursues a policy of high expenditures in the social sector, the interpretation is that the state is autonomous with regard to such action.

The logic underlying this operationalization of autonomy may at first seem obvious: if a state pursues a policy, it must have the autonomy needed to pursue it. But from the perspective of NDT things are not so simple (Agné, 2004). To the extent that autonomy is defined in terms of the pursuit of policies, we are dealing with an indicator which ignores the possibility of an actor who, though possessing the autonomy to pursue a given policy, declines to pursue it. Theorists who



regard political autonomy as inherent in democracy would regard this tendency of the indicator as patently absurd. Say, for instance, that policy P is pursued and considered a good thing by the majority at one point in time, T1, and is not pursued and not considered a good thing by the majority at T2. In this case, if state autonomy is theorized as inherent in democracy, we would have to conclude that democracy in the area of P has decreased between T1 and T2 since autonomy with regard to P, as measured by the pursuit of this policy, has decreased. Yet all we really know about the situation is that the majority has changed its mind between the two points in time and that the government has accordingly changed its policy in the relevant areas. If policy P was still an option at T2, the change was simply an example of how democracy works, not an instance of democracy in decline. Democracy may be regarded as a distribution of power among citizens or as a specific way of making collective decisions (e.g. Barry, 1989; Dahl, 1998; Schumpeter, 1950/1975; Warren, 2002) but there appears to be no concept of democracy which requires citizens never to change their political views in the direction of more limited public policy (e.g. deciding not to pursue policy P or becoming indifferent whether P is pursued or not). The standard assumption is actually the opposite, that democratic procedures are neutral among particular ideological preferences (e.g. Dahl, 1989). Obviously, then, empirical methods must not necessitate the conclusion that autonomy – and by implication democracy – is weakening.

The methodological mistake identified here may to some extent derive from the imperatives of a quantitative research agenda, as large-n ambitions force scholars to pay little attention to actor preferences. Single cases, by contrast, are often used to illustrate how states may end up in outcomes which they did not want in the first place (e.g. Scharpf, 1999; Strange, 1996). In principle this is exactly what is required to avoid the difficulty illustrated above: to investigate whether policy outcomes conform to actor preferences or not. However, this is not to say that the way ahead is to pursue IPE by researching single cases that illustrate pre-given theoretical positions. What is needed, instead, is a clarification of the criteria for assessing whether a case illustrates absence or presence of autonomy, or little or much of it, or whether it has no firm interpretation at all in such terms. Concepts and methodological principles must be sufficiently clear to permit a classification of all instances, not just the evident ones which are useful for illustration of pre-given positions. The following is an attempt at such clarification of concepts.

Invalid conclusions about decreasing autonomy can derive from either of the following two conceptualizations of state autonomy, both of which should then be avoided in the context of democratic theory and practice. First, state autonomy may, misleadingly, be defined as a realization rather than as a possibility, in the sense that for political autonomy to exist it must be manifest in practice. In an attempt to analyze, among other things, the effects of the globalization of finance and trade on welfare regimes, Kitschelt et al. (1999: 439–20) define the similar concept of political control as

direct state control of the economy (i.e. the scope of state ownership of productive resources and the extent to which state actors are guided by criteria other than profitability in allocating those resources); indirect state control of the economy (i.e., the extent of state intervention in markets via subsidies, taxes, and regulations); welfare state intervention (i.e., the extent to which the state decommodifies labour and redistributes life chances); and labor market organization (i.e., the scope and intensity of collective versus market allocation in determining conditions of work).

According to this concept of political control, it is a contradiction in terms to have control and not to exercise it. If the production of welfare services is transferred from public authorities to

market actors, political control, by definition, becomes weaker. However, this conclusion is reasonable only on the false premise that all states are ruled by more or less socialist governments. Imagine that a liberal free market government has been elected, promising to reduce the number of publicly undertaken welfare programs; but that this policy is so heavily opposed by civil servants and well-organized interest groups that it is never implemented (Pierson, 1996). This would then imply that a government has more control over how resources are allocated when forced to implement a welfare program it does not support than when successfully implementing its own privatization policy. This seems counterintuitive, but more seriously it is inconsistent with the notion of democracy pointed to above, namely that democracy is equally favorable (or unfavorable) to diverse political ideologies. An ideologically more neutral, and democratically more appropriate, conception of 'political control' would also imply a capacity to transfer economic functions from the state to the market. Without that capacity a government has less political control over the allocation of resources; with that capacity it has more.

Second, the methodological mistake identified above could derive also from a conception of political autonomy as the capacity of an actor to realize his or her preferences (e.g. Krasner, 1978; Nordlinger, 1981). This may seem perplexing, since our normative interest in political autonomy is apt to reside not only in the freedom to choose among many and various actions, but also in the capacity to realize preferences. However, to define political autonomy as the capacity to perform only such actions as the actor prefers would lead us to exactly the implication we want to avoid, namely that the level of political autonomy varies with variation in political preference. For example, if people change their views so as to prefer a political action which can be achieved, or so as not to prefer or to be indifferent about a political action which cannot be achieved, they thereby will have strengthened the autonomy of their state, and done so simply as a consequence of their change of political opinion. As already noted, if autonomy is regarded as constitutive of democracy, this conclusion is inconsistent with the notion that democracy is equally favorable to different sets of preferences. The implication of this argument is not, of course, that preference fulfillment is in itself hostile to a democratically relevant notion of state autonomy. Since the actions of a fully autonomous actor cannot be determined by other actors, a fully autonomous democratic state is typically able to realize its preferences (i.e. the democratically formed and aggregated preferences of its citizens). One should add only that a democratically fully autonomous state can abstain even from such policies as it currently prefers to pursue, since it must be able to respond to changes in citizen preferences.

All the quantitative studies referred to above are to some extent susceptible to these objections, but not equally so. Some studies take into account the party composition of governments in office during the pursuit of particular policies, in order to estimate the importance of ideological positions for policy decisions (e.g. Garrett, 1998a; Iversen and Cusack, 2000; Korpi and Palme, 2003; Stephens et al., 1999). The greater the effect of the party composition of government on policies pursued, the greater the room for autonomous choice, according to this logic. However, to avoid the methodological problems identified here it is not sufficient to take party composition of governments into account. What we must identify is the cases of non-pursued policies that should not be taken to instantiate absence of political autonomy. This requires that we know a government's ideological position on specific policies; and we can have a rough indication of this from the party composition of governments only if alternative governments differ ideologically across all the policy issues we are interested in and if the ideological differences among them are stable over time and from one country to another.<sup>1</sup> But this seems much too great an assumption. Indeed the contrary is possible and even likely – that ideological tension over economic policy will decline once



the policy in question has been established, and so has led to the organization of new interest groups who work in favor of it; or it will intensify as market integration exacerbates the income differences between those who are competitive and those who are not. Hence insufficiently precise information about party composition of government should be replaced by accounts of situations in which an observed shift in policy must be explained by a change in autonomy, and situations in which policy shift can just as well be explained by a prior shift in ideology.

The positive and methodological implications of this critique can be summarized in two simple rules of interpretation. First, the actual pursuit of a policy implies possession of sufficient autonomy to pursue it, regardless of actor preferences. By following this rule, we avoid the flawed conclusion of regarding autonomy as weak because it is exercised in all alternative governments, or of regarding it as declining because ideological tension among alternative governments is becoming weaker. Second, the abstention from a policy implies some lack of autonomy if and only if the agent actually wishes to pursue it. By tempering our interpretations in this way we avoid the fallacy of counting a state as autonomous only with regard to the policy it actually pursues. Based on these rules of interpretation, state autonomy can be constructed as a dichotomous variable of discrete policy outcomes. Autonomy with regard to the production of a certain policy outcome is present if the outcome is in fact produced; it is absent if the outcome is not produced while desired by the actor; and unknown if the outcome is not desired and not produced by the actor. A special case is when the actor does not desire a specific outcome while still producing it. By implication of the above definitions, autonomy is then present with regard to producing the undesired outcome while absent with regard to abstaining from producing it.

The purpose of defining a method for measuring state autonomy in these abstract terms is to facilitate its application across time and space. Questions about whether a policy is present or absent, desired or undesired, are general enough to be investigated in different policy issues, different institutional contexts, and different countries. Empirically useful operationalizations should be able to travel across contexts.

## **A critique of NDT**

Having considered some reasons why IPE has had little impact on NDT, and what scholars in IPE could do about it, it is now time to direct the equivalent question to NDT: Why have arguments developed in NDT made such little impression on scholars in IPE? It is worth noting that in NDT the negative relationship between globalization and state autonomy is sometimes construed in tautological terms. In recent years it has become fashionable to adopt a definition of democracy according to which all those affected by a decision should be able to participate in making it (e.g. Archibugi, 2004; Habermas, 1999; Held, 1995; Zürn, 2000). The implication of this so-called all-affected principle is an extremely strong notion of political autonomy: people should not be affected by decisions which they have not participated in making, and therefore decisions made externally to the people must be avoided. Furthermore, democratic theorists generally agree that international organizations are themselves no democracies and that such political participation as we consider essential to democracy remains confined within national boundaries (e.g. Dahl, 1999; Zürn, 2000). Therefore, since globalization implies that people are increasingly affected across national boundaries, it follows that, if globalization occurs, people will increasingly be affected by decisions the making of which they had no democratically sufficient ability to participate in. Hence if democracy is understood to require that everyone affected by a decision be able to participate in making it, globalization, by definition, represents a defect in democracy (Agné, 2006).

To the extent that NDT construes the relationship between globalization and the autonomy of states in tautological terms, they should, of course, not be surprised if their arguments receive little attention from empirical scholars, whose methods don't apply to logical relations among concepts. Fortunately, however, democratic theorists are themselves no lovers of tautology. According to Held (1995: 100), whose relatively early contributions remain a signpost in this area, the scope of state autonomy is determined by the 'constraints which disrupt the possibility of the translation of national policy preferences into effective policy outcomes.' And if such constraints are the things that must be avoided in order to establish autonomy, the role of globalization is indeed an empirically open question. Not only do the empirical studies presented in the previous section claim to investigate exactly this, but explanations as to why globalization may actually increase state autonomy in this sense are premised on commonplace notions of political science.

First, scarcity of resources imposes limits on almost any kind of political action. Therefore if globalization can bring more resources to more people, it will in general mean less restriction on action capacity constitutive of state autonomy. Resources, in turn, are likely to increase as competition and division of labor increase while markets integrate across national boundaries. Second, when a state for economic reasons turns to actors outside its own territory it not only faces new adversaries attempting to dominate it; it also gains new potential allies capable of freeing it from the domination of domestic actors, such as experts, producers, laborers, owners, and others (e.g. Gritsch, 2005). And as in any power struggle, alternative alliances are an asset. Of course, these are not the only factors of globalization relevant to state autonomy. Several other well-known arguments suggest an opposite development. The factors mentioned, however, are sufficient to establish that there is no necessary decline in the autonomy of states as a consequence of globalization. In some circumstances, its consequences may be quite the reverse.

Now, the problem with NDT in the light of global concerns is that, once tautological arguments have been removed, it nonetheless tends to ignore the importance of systematic empirical study. This is particularly troublesome with respect to its key assumption, that globalization erodes state autonomy. Much evidence in support of this proposition is either misdirected, inconclusive, or wholly absent. Here are a few examples to indicate what needs to be changed if the two fields of research are to benefit from open channels of communication between them.

### *Absence of evidence*

Perhaps most common among democratic theorists is to treat the declining autonomy of states as a background premise, the investigation of which can be delegated to others. For example, Warren (2002), McGrew (2002), and Kuper (2004) simply assume that globalization is a threat to the autonomy of states, and then undertake their theorizations of democracy on that basis. However, lack of interest in what others have discovered hardly invites engagement in fruitful discussion. Moreover, it is ultimately impossible to arrive at a sustainable theory by insulating one part of an argument from others on which its relevance or validity depend.

### *Misdirected evidence*

Evidence supporting the thesis of declining state autonomy is oftentimes derived from observations of globalization. Held, to use a well-known example, identifies five dimensions of globalization – law, politics, economy, security, and identity or culture. Having observed the processes that take place along these dimensions, he concludes that they 'alone warrant the statement that the

operation of states in an ever more complex international system both limits their autonomy (in some spheres radically) and impinges upon their sovereignty' (Held, 1995: 135). But this argument begs the question, as it draws its description of state autonomy from its description of globalization. Both conceptually and in empirical terms, state autonomy must be treated as a discrete category; otherwise a minimum requirement for a joint debate with empirical researchers is not met.

### *Inconclusive evidence*

One need not be a stickler for scientific precision to notice that the evidence adduced by NDT to prove decline in state autonomy is often inconclusive. Many contributors will pick out a few instances where globalization may have had this effect rather than report tendencies within neutrally selected groups of observations. For example, when Habermas (1999: 49) points to 'pollution, organized crime, arms trafficking, epidemics, security risks associated with large-scale technology, and so on' as evidence that state autonomy is weakening, he doesn't inquire whether there might be examples pointing in the opposite direction. Other contributors make their points by theoretical elaboration alone, with the misleading implication that what is stated is self-evident (e.g. Cerny, 1999).

As long as scholars in NDT tend not to support empirical propositions with empirical evidence, or construe positive relationships between phenomena so as to make empirical evidence superfluous in the first place, they will almost certainly discourage empirical researchers in IPE from engaging with their related conceptual and normative inquiries in NDT. Is it possible then to improve the situation by observing state autonomy in practice while remaining true to the meaning of this concept in NDT? I turn to this question in the next section.

## **Towards an empirical democratic theory**

To assess state autonomy in accordance with the methodological approach developed in a previous section, we need to investigate which policies have been pursued and whether relevant actors have supported them ideologically. On the question of indicating policy this article follows the lead of the studies whose methods have been criticized above, i.e. to study levels of public expenditures (e.g. Bernauer and Achini, 2000; Garrett, 1998a; Mosley, 2000; Swank, 2003). Expenditure levels are not less problematic as indicators of welfare policy than all alternatives (Korpi and Palme, 2003). However, for now the purpose is to bring out the methodology proposed here in as clear a contrast as possible, and that aim can be attained more effectively if those methodological premises of earlier studies which are not directly challenged in this article are retained.

Ideological convictions will be indicated by policy positions of the government party or parties, and more specifically by the percentage of space in election manifestos devoted to expressing individual policy preferences (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006).<sup>2</sup> These measures are preferable to the qualitative left-right judgments criticized in a previous section which describe ideological positions for distinct policy issues and time periods. While quantitative content analyses have been criticized by contributors to NDT for not taking account of how the 'subjects actually do apprehend the world' (Dryzek and Berejikian, 1993: 48), this concern becomes less serious as the quantitatively derived estimates used here differ very little from those reached through qualitative expert judgments (McDonald and Mendez, 2001). In a context of liberal democratic states, this information should therefore speak to IPE, because it describes the preferences of government officials, as well as to NDT, because it draws on the policy preferences voted for by the people.

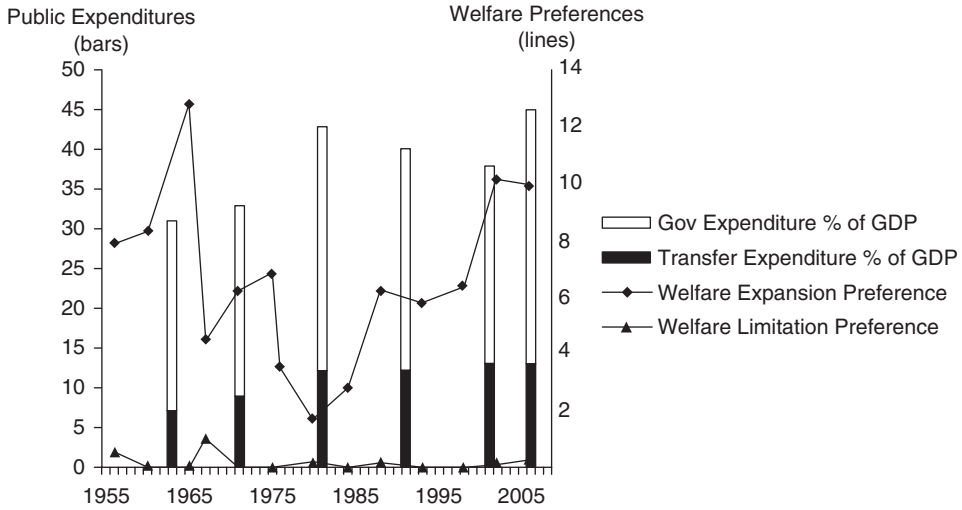
There is no need to assume that the preferences of government parties are equivalent to those of the people, let alone that the procedures through which the people establish their governments are in any sense perfectly democratic. Nonetheless, political procedures in liberal democratic states remain the best source available for knowing what the will of the people actually is simply because 'the will of the people is definable and expressible only via a set of constitutional procedures' (Richardson, 2002: 206). Self-appointed spokespersons of the people, whether benevolent dictators, democratic theorists, or readers of opinion-polls, simply have no access to any superior source when it comes to identifying the will of the people. Hence policy preferences of government parties, as communicated and chosen in elections of liberal democratic states, are a reasonable indicator of the will of the people.

While the purpose of this article is not to nuance the picture of globalization or its effects on state autonomy some remarks on the measurement of globalization are still worth making. Analyses in IPE have often relied on individual indicators of globalization, such as exports and imports, foreign direct investment, or the number of capital controls in operation at any given point in time. For communication with NDT, this is not ideal. For one thing, individual indicators do not fit with the perceived multidimensionality of globalization (e.g. Archibugi, 2004; Habermas, 1999; Held, 2000). Moreover, such ways of measuring globalization frustrate the intention of democratic theorists to analyze a process of historic systemic change, as opposed to a yearly fluctuating one. It may seem preferable then to study the effects of globalization over prolonged time periods, in which several dimensions of globalization operated simultaneously: for example, integration of financial markets, developments in international broadcasting, and intensification of supra-national governance. In the liberal democracies of Western Europe, the post-1945 period will then cover relevant material (Held et al., 2000). The theoretically important criterion is to compare between points in time which are sufficiently remote from one another for significant changes in most dimensions of globalization to have occurred; this is accomplishable by comparing among decades rather than individual years. Of course, such comparisons will blind the analysis to variation between shorter time periods, which may seem unsatisfactory from the perspective that research should explain as much variation as possible. However, comparisons across longer time periods are not absent even in positivist IPE (e.g. Stephens et al., 1999) and for our purposes there are good reasons for proceeding in that way: it narrows the analysis to cover the effects only of changes that are theoretically significant according to NDT.

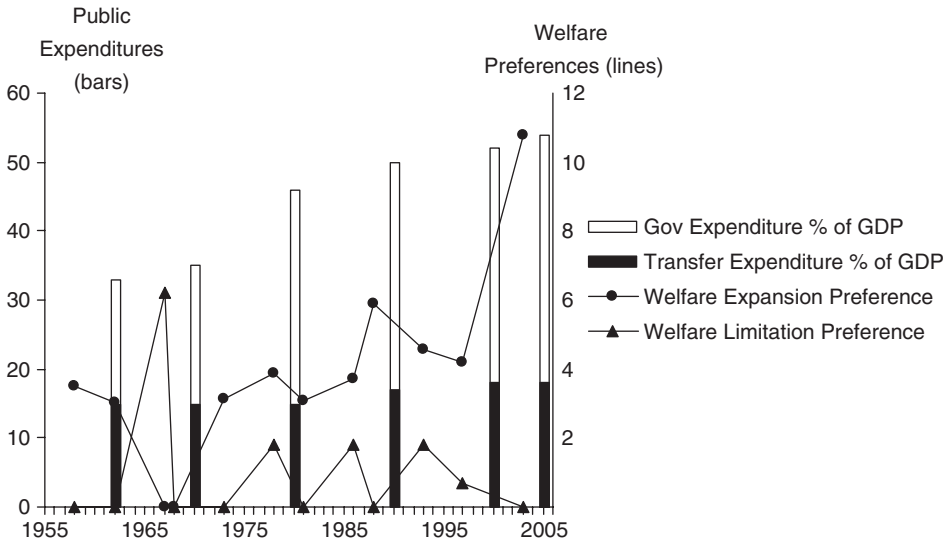
The absence of ambition in this discussion to analyze the effects of globalization empirically has implications also for the selection of countries. Three advanced liberal democracies – France, Sweden and the UK – will prove sufficient to illustrate how the suggested conceptualization and operationalization of state autonomy yields both different and similar conclusions in comparison with the alternative methodologies criticized earlier. These countries share the experience of economic globalization in the post-1945 period (Held et al., 2000) and differ in terms of their welfare and industrial production regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kitschelt et al., 1999) as well as their year of entrance into the European Union and its predecessors. If such differences and similarities invite questions about how globalization interacts with other factors in the production of effects on state autonomy, they will have served an important purpose in addition to that of illustrating the practicability of an improved conceptualization and methodology.

## State autonomy during globalization

Comparing the spending levels of the 1960s and the 2000s we note a sharp increase in total as well as transfer government expenditures by the latter period in all three countries. Only when the levels

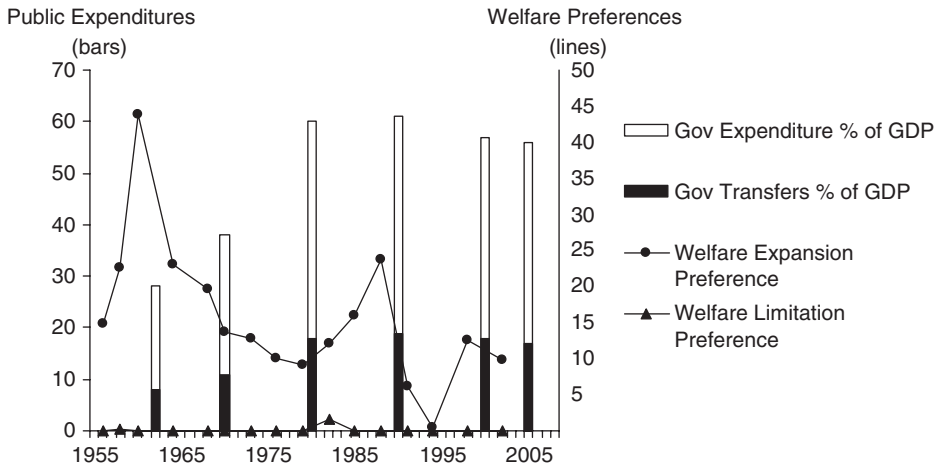


**Figure 1.** Public expenditures and government welfare preferences, UK. Preference data from Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; spending data from OECD *National accounts* (various years). Source: OECD (database); government party data from Woldendorp et al. 1998; *Political Data Yearbook*.



**Figure 2.** Public expenditures and government welfare preferences, France. Preference data from Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; spending data from OECD *National accounts* (various years). Source: OECD (database); government party data from Woldendorp et al. 1998; *Political Data Yearbook*.

for 1980 are compared with those for later years do we find a small but sustained reduction in government expenditure in Sweden and a temporary reduction in Britain. Moreover, the increase in spending is paralleled by a divergence among countries over time (Figures 1 to 3).



**Figure 3.** Public expenditures and government welfare preferences, Sweden.

Preference data from Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; spending data from OECD *National accounts* (various years). Source: OECD (database); government party data from Woldendorp et al. 1998; *Political Data Yearbook*.

This is the kind of evidence which, in more elaborated forms, has for a long time made researchers in IPE conclude that the economic globalization of post-war OECD-countries has not weakened their state autonomy (Stephens et al., 1999; Adserà and Boix, 2002; Bernauer and Achini, 2000; Garrett, 1998a; Mosley, 2005; Simmons, 1999; Swank, 2003; Weiss, 2003). In view of the two rules of interpretation presented earlier, however, this conclusion is premature. There is not one inevitable interpretation of these trends but rather three further hypotheses. First, autonomy to pursue high expenditure policy may have increased from the 1960s to 2000. But in that case we must also observe that some typical high expenditure policies were desired before they were realized. Otherwise it could have been a free choice not to pursue them in the 1960s or 1970s, and in that case there would not necessarily be any change, and possibly even a decrease, in autonomy to pursue high expenditure policies. Second, autonomy to abstain from high expenditure policies may have decreased. To rule out this interpretation we must confirm that preferences to reduce high expenditure policies were weak or absent once those policies had begun to emerge; otherwise we would have to conclude that the people in democratic states have become decreasingly able to undertake the low expenditure policies they used to pursue in the past. Third, both of these trends could have taken place at the same time. This would be the most reasonable interpretation if high expenditure policies were desired at the time when they were not pursued and ideologically opposed in later periods when they were in fact undertaken. Without having investigated preferences in each case, earlier studies have simply no ground for their claim that spending figures like those diagrammed above indicate that state autonomy has remained or even increased in the post-1945 period.

This leads us to the question of whether large and increasing welfare state undertakings were desired before and in the course of implementing such policies, and whether a decrease in public spending had ever been desired once spending started to rise. In the light of the ideological convictions of government parties, as described in the diagrams, a preliminary answer would be that an increase in autonomy to pursue high expenditure policy has indeed occurred during the relevant period while no decrease in autonomy to abstain from such policy can be confirmed. With the exception of France, there was a desire among governing parties to expand welfare, from the



mid-1950s and well into the 1960s, i.e. long before the realization of that policy. This would seem to suggest, first, that the policy was not freely abstained from in the 1960s and, second, that any closer fit between policies and preferences in later periods could not simply be discarded as an imposed adaptation of preferences to existing policies (that is, we can see how ideological convictions develop more independently of public policy than presumed by the adaptation argument). Moreover, when the preference for expanding welfare undertakings had diminished in response to their actual expansion, the expansionist preference did not disappear<sup>3</sup> and they were certainly not replaced by any preferences for welfare state limitations – a fact which should further indicate satisfaction with the policy pursued. The expansionist preferences are much stronger in Sweden than in Britain but this does not change the overall picture. Despite the significantly lower levels of spending and weaker trend of expansion in Britain, both countries share a similar experience of strengthening state autonomy over this time period. Hence the tendency of these observations is to confirm the common position in IPE that state autonomy is, with regard to a particular kind of policy outcomes, sustainable or increasing in a time period of intense economic globalization (e.g. Bernauer and Achini, 2000; Garrett, 1998a; Mosley, 2000, 2005) while the opposite position in NDT is now undermined on the basis of a method more sensible to the assumptions of this discipline.

France, as already noted, does not follow the pattern set by the other two countries. There has not been any exceptional decrease in total public spending in France after 1980, and in some years there has been a preference for welfare state limitations, which in one year was even greater than the preference for welfare expansion. The existing but unmet preferences for welfare limitations make it relevant to consider, in the French case, the second of the three hypotheses suggested above, namely that autonomy with regard to abstaining from high expenditure policies has decreased from the 1960s and onwards. If the preference to pursue low expenditure policies had been strong and present throughout the period, we ought indeed to have concluded that autonomy with respect to attaining that aim had been decreasing. However, the high levels of support for welfare expansion that can be observed in France since the beginning of the 1970s, in comparison with the support for welfare limitations, reject this interpretation. Nonetheless, the significantly lower levels of government support in France for welfare expansion in the 1950s and 1960s, compared with the other two countries, illustrate yet another point at which simple observation of pursued policy will lead to premature conclusions. Because there is no unquestionable desire for welfare expansion in France prior to the actual expansion of this sector, we cannot reject the possibility that abstention from high expenditure policy in the 1960s was a French choice; and failing to reject that assumption we cannot know whether the higher levels of expenditure in the 1980s and 1990s represent an increase in autonomy rather than a new political choice. Hence the French case shows that, in contrast to conclusions drawn in prominent studies in IPE (e.g. Bernauer and Achini, 2000; Garrett, 1998a; Mosley, 2000, 2005), increasing levels of public spending do not imply increasing or even sustained levels of state autonomy.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that specific branches of NDT and IPE can be brought closer to each other in research on the autonomy of globalizing states by adjusting conceptualizations and operationalizations of state autonomy prevalent in these two disciplines. In important contributions to IPE, state autonomy is conventionally measured by the level of public spending, the policy convergence of countries over time, and the explanatory power of the party composition of governments. From the perspective of NDT, all these indicators are seriously flawed and should be avoided. NDT, on the other hand, has tried to get along with poor, or no, use of empirical analysis even when it comes

to the founding assumption of much work in NDT during the last decade, namely that globalization erodes the autonomy of states. In this it must change its ways. The common ground on which NDT and IPE should be able to meet could then be described as an empirical research agenda sensitive to the standard notions of NDT. Such an agenda ought, at a theoretical level, to define autonomy in terms of possible rather than realized actions, and it should dispense with the requirement that actors must desire to accomplish the actions that instantiate autonomy. In a nutshell, the autonomy of a democratic state can in this context be said to consist in the capacity of its government to perform, within the boundaries of the state, alternative and varied political actions which are at the same time controlled by the people and undetermined by internal minorities and foreign powers. Thus conceived, state autonomy could be operationalized as – in a somewhat simplified formulation – the extent to which policies are pursued, or abstained from, in accordance with government party preferences as communicated and established in general and free elections. More exactly, the pursuit of a policy implies possession of sufficient autonomy to do exactly that, regardless of whether the actor prefers the policy or not; and abstention from a policy implies a limitation of autonomy if and only if the agent actually wants to pursue it.

The practicability of this methodology has been discussed in this article only with regard to the autonomy of choosing levels of total and transfer public expenditures. The British and the Swedish cases confirmed the position in IPE that state autonomy has remained or increased over the last three or four decades while the French case did not lend itself to support of either the IPE or the NDT position. This is but a tiny fraction of state autonomy, and a more complete picture cannot emanate from any assumption that all policy areas will be the same (Krasner, 1978). By contrast, a more complete picture presupposes application of the methodology suggested in this article across all policy areas. Future research will therefore need to include a renewed study of autonomy in areas like distribution of income, agriculture, exchange rates, transportation, budget deficits, as well as with regard to wider social processes, e.g. ageing populations, deindustrialization, or globalization itself. Do the observed developments accord with present as well as earlier preferences? Then, and only then, should a strengthening of state autonomy be concluded.

Future research will also need to include factors other than globalization which may or may not influence the autonomy of democratic states; this is important not least in view of prevailing arguments that demography and deindustrialization are more influential on public spending, and perhaps also of autonomy in this area, than is the largely parallel process of economic globalization (Iversen and Cusack, 2000). Importantly, such broadening of the research perspective does not limit the applicability of the methodology proposed here. If, for example, high public expenditures are sustainable and supported by democratically elected government parties, the state autonomy manifested in this policy does not become less significant because high expenditures are needed to counter the effects of an ageing population, or more significant because globalization has yielded an economic net-gain which makes such spending possible. To see this more clearly, one may contrast a state in which autonomy is absent in one out of two areas with a state where autonomy is absent in both: the state which can and will increase its public expenditures to counter the effects of, say, an ageing population will be more autonomous than a state which in the same situation lacks precisely that capacity. Hence the validity of the operationalization of state autonomy suggested in this article does not rely on any assumption that autonomy is affected by globalization only, and it does not presuppose that autonomy in one policy area necessarily depends on autonomy in other areas. This is essential to allow the operationalization to be applied in research beyond public spending and the effects of globalization.

Two more general consequences of further research along these lines were mentioned in the introduction. First, by improving the means for measuring the autonomy of democratic states, researchers will strengthen their capacity to explain variation in state legitimacy and to combat

negative consequences of its weakening or absence. Second, by knowing whether democratic states actually lose autonomy in the course of globalization, scholars will make empirically better informed judgments as to whether democracy should be extended beyond the nation-state. There is every reason therefore to refine existing ways in which the autonomy of liberal democratic states is typically conceptualized and observed.

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### Notes

1. If ideological tension between different governments increases (decreases) over time, a regression analysis may report an increasing (decreasing) effect of those governments' party compositions on policy indicators over time, even in cases where state autonomy remains constant or is moderately decreasing (increasing). This raises questions about conclusions such as those reached by Garrett (1998a, 1998b).
2. In the case of coalition governments the reported measure is an unweighted mean among the government parties. The reason for not weighting the means according to, say, parliamentary seats is that even small government parties can veto the future existence of a government.
3. Notice that in Sweden they even continued to grow during the highest expenditure period from 1980 to 1990.

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