Acting in International Relations? Political Agency in State Theory and Actor-Networks

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Introduction

Who acts in international relations? From state theory generally, and the field of International Relations specifically, the readymade answer is: ‘states do’ – so long as we assume states to be the high-modern regime of nation-states that so dominantly sorted-out conceptual possibilities of political agency during the 20th century. An alternative approach to global politics, in contrast, searches for political power beyond the state. Contemporary shifts toward neo-liberal and other transnational regimes are reshaping the political landscape to enable entities beyond the state to gain importance in governance. We are, thus, left with two options: We see states as entities capable of acting on the stage of global politics, or we see states as one of many patterns through which political activity is enacted. This dichotomy neatly parallels how agency has been conceptualized in social theory: Either we swallow the bitter pill of essentializing a high-modern model of human nature to understand how actors establish, maintain, and transform political order, or we join the deconstruction camp and dissect the mechanisms, techniques, and discursive patterns that surround this model of human nature, which will then one day probably be ‘erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.’\textsuperscript{1} We develop this tension in our paper about who or what acts during international relations.

In the past 50 years of conceptualizing the state, two theoretical positions emerged. While one group of scholars conceptualized the state as a kind of \textit{unitary actor}, the other saw it as an \textit{elaborate network}.\textsuperscript{2} Both approaches started out as modest research heuristics and from complex theoretical traditions, but each was later turned into

\textsuperscript{1} Michel Foucault, \textit{The Order of Things} (New York: Pantheon, 1970), p. 387.
simplistic sets of aphorisms loaded with assumptions that did serious disservice to their ability to guide research. One of them, perhaps even the most consequential, is the analytical blending of human nature and agency: Whatever acts during international relations must be human (or humanlike). Inversely, wherever (political) agency is expressed, human activity must be involved. The ‘state-as-an-actor approach can be (and has been) misunderstood as the implementation of a clear-cut concept of human nature into a conceptual framework for analyzing political agency. In recent IR theory, for example, this is obvious in Wendt’s aphorism ‘[s]tates are people, too’,\(^3\) which neatly blends together assumptions about human nature, personhood, and state entitity under the umbrella of agency. Similarly, the state-as-a-network approach can be (and also has been) oversimplified as the clear-cut consequence of abandoning high-modern notions of human nature in favor of ascribing agency to regimes of governmentality.

The result is a deadlock. It is impossible to empirically analyze what kinds of entities act in the field of international relations without applying, subsuming, and then reifying ready-made models from the extant literature. Thus, it is impossible to tell what political agency is – be it state agency, the agency of governmental bureaus, or the agency of non-state entities – without assuming it \textit{a priori}. State entitity is the assumption that a state is able to act as a unified thing \textit{and} the assumption that states have the ability and occasional necessity to interact with one another on the global stage. State entitity implies political agency, and models of state agency are largely built on models of human nature, especially in modern Western traditional thought. Some scholars of political theory have repeated, if not reified, this link between state entitity, political agency, and human nature, while others denied it.\(^4\) An alternative position to both would be to see this link as an open empirical question. If we want to ask such questions about the state and related political actions and actors, then we must adopt a conceptual framework that does not presuppose their answers, and instead affords us


\(^{4}\) See, for example, Paul Abrams, ‘Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,’ \textit{Journal of Historical Sociology} 1 (1988), 58-89.
the chance to empirically follow each or any of these possible enactments. In the following, we aim to develop such a framework.

Coming from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is widely known for its disrespectful restatement of concepts central to sociological theory. Its focus on symmetry\(^5\) has challenged commonly held beliefs that human and non-human agency are different; its insistence on heterogeneity of networks has arraigned common definitions of social networks. In contemporary (international) political sociology, ANT has been applied to the study of states and political action, offering a potential means to see the state simultaneously as both an actor and a network.\(^6\) ANT offers conceptual and empirical innovations regarding problems of (non-)human agency, different modes of ordering practices, and the performativity of politics. Therefore, it also opens up the possibility of finally overcoming essentializing conceptualizations of human nature in the study of political activity, while also making room for a post-humanist conception of political agency. As ANT is not at all a ready-made framework that can be applied to any problem or case, this chapter is not arguing for its value as yet another a theory of international relations. The purpose of this paper is rather to argue for a certain attitude towards research in the study of politics and

\(^5\) When first introduced in David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imaginary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) in the heyday of the “Sociology of Scientific Knowledge” (SSK) the focus on symmetry was used to methodologically argue for using the same heuristic framework for analyzing both successful and failed scientific projects and therefore to treat true or false results the same way. When transferred to the study of technological developments and technical artifacts, e.g. in Trevor J. Pinch and Wiebe E. Bijker ‘The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other’ *Social Studies of Science* 14 (1986), 399-441, the principle of symmetry became generalized to include all the artifacts that failed or succeeded in the history of a technology. When early actor-network approaches started using the term, it became even more generalized to become the famous heuristic device to treat all the elements in the heterogeneous networks that shaped the history of a technology at least in the beginning as equal contributors to that history: instruments, scientists, machines and users could be necessary actors. To avoid the danger of reifying (and mystifying) these actors, some ANT scholars rather focus on the process of assembling them into multi-faceted networks, a process that was called heterogeneous engineering in John Law ‘Technology and Heterogeneous Engineering: The Case of Portuguese Expansion.’ In *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology* edited by Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor J. Pinch (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) p. 111-134.

international relations of which ANT might be seen as a paradigm case.\(^7\) In order to reconstruct the conceptual problems in political science, (international) political sociology, we begin transforming theoretical assumptions, such as the assumption that states are unitary actors, into empirical questions. In what follows, we outline how the state-as-an actor camp of scholars established state entitity, how entitity was contested by the state-as-a network camp, and sketch alternative to both.

**How, When, and Why the State was Granted Actor-Status**

Historically, political agency and state entitity was not the problem for political theory that it is today. For 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) century classical liberalism and orthodox Marxism, conceptualizing an autonomous entity called the state, and assuming that it was capable of acting and being acted against, was a matter of drawing up the right blueprint for political practice. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, because political theory has long been seen as a calamitous cocktail made from normative and descriptive elements. In the 1970s, neo-statists sought to overcome this conceptual blend by ‘bringing the state back in’\(^8\) and explicitly conceptualizing the *state as an actor*.

While political agency is a relatively young idea, state entitity is an old one. The young Marx conceptualized the state as essentially autonomous from the capitalist class, while the late Marx saw the state as an indentured servant to the bourgeoisie.\(^9\) By the 1960s Marxist theorizing transformed.\(^10\) Gramsci’s ideas became germane; hegemony was at the core of inquiry into the ideological mechanisms of coercion in capitalist welfare states. The state was an instrument; the ideal collective capitalis; the structure that

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\(^7\) A paradigm, as Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) has argued, is not necessarily a full fledged theory or analytic framework, but exemplary research that helps focus attention and make sense of a vast array of approaches in different fields.

\(^8\) See Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).


served capitalism no matter who controlled it.11 This conceptualization of the state as a quasi-autonomous entity emerging from an ensemble of institutions serving various interests was well established already in neo-Marxist theorizing in the 1960/70s.12

But, for some, relative autonomy was not enough.13 Assuming complete conceptual state autonomy meant states could act and be acted upon in a ‘world-historic context’ structured by international relationships or conflicts but also by domestic conditions.14 Gradually, state entitativity was conflated with political agency. But, to neo–statists, state entitativity was originally a heuristic rather than a conceptual perspective, something to search for in empirical data, not something to assume a priori. The state for them is not per se an autonomous entity. The state gains autonomy – or agency – and loses it in historical context. This insight was a well-spring for comparative research on mechanisms of state power15 and how state formation and/or war-making shape the institutional environment states operate within.16 While it ignored the relevance of civil society and gender,17 another bias developed when actor modeling blended with political conservatism and anti-Marxism during the 1980/90s: This heuristic framework became a taken-for-granted theoretical presumption.18

13 Evans et al., Bringing the State Back In, p. 4.
14 Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 290.
Insistence on state entitiy persists ever since, despite convincing research on state engineering projects that draws the existence of the state into question. These works show how nearly any project is born of a menu of possibilities lashed together and then winnowed down by a variety of actors until a single unified course of action is established and then executed by a much distributed mass of agents and agencies – not as the result of the state’s will or interests.\(^\text{19}\)

State entitiy endures among scholars for conceptual reasons. By linking the neo–statist approach to a particular interpretation of Weber’s definition of the state as ‘a compulsory political organization with continuous operations [politischer Anstaltsbetrieb]’ whose ‘administrative staff successfully upholds the claim of the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order,’\(^\text{20}\) it was also linked to the rising mindset of methodological individualism\(^\text{21}\) and therefore with a certain understanding of political agency: This mindset saw collective action as the aggregate of individual human action or as the activity of collective actors modeled with a certain ideal-type of human nature as its backdrop. Consequently, the behavior of these conceptual entities was modeled after ‘homo œconomicus’ replete with interests, preferences, and intentions; state entitiy and political agency were united under a largely assumed and inexplicit model of human nature.

The assumption of state entitiy neatly fits the rhetoric of global politics: ‘Libya rises up’, ‘Greece is broke’, or ‘China copies Germany’s patents.’ Westerners are accustomed to ascribing political agency to singularized state entities, and it serves as a shortcut for summing-up whole populations, governments and administrations, even national businesses. Whether or not this shift was fostered by the use of neo–statist


concepts in political, journalistic, and everyday discourse: State entitity and the assumption of its a priori political agency became a presupposition. According to Abrams, sociologists inadvertently reified ‘the state’ in their analyses, so much so that the practice is now endemic. Scott’s research, for example, describes state-driven planning in ‘high-modern’ projects, which, in Mitchell’s words, makes the state appear like ‘a person writ large.’ But the reification of state entitity is not only present in sociological accounts of the state, but also in debates on the study of international relations, culminating in Wendt’s conclusion that ‘if we want to have states then it is better they take the form of persons rather than something more amorphous, because this will help make their effects more politically accountable.’

Bartelson and Ringmar have shown up the tendency to conceptualize the state as both a given entity and an entity that has enough features in common with the type of human actors scholars are (based on commonsense) most familiar with. That states can be thought of as entities like human actors acting on the stage of world politics is a common theme already in realist political theory. Assumptions about how this human-like actor will act in international relations can be directly derived from equivalent assumptions about human nature and human agency as old as Hobbes’ Leviathan. With a homo öconomicus model nested deeply in state theory, state entitity, political agency, and human nature blend together such that states become ‘unified, purposive, utility-maximising, actor[s].’

28 de Mesquita, The War Trap, p. 87-92.
However, these human-like state entities seem to disappear once the empirical analysis begins to trace political agency in bureaucracies, organizations, and regional and local institutions, which is a key insight from a long tradition of pluralist scholars. There is moreover an equally long tradition of arguing that the assumed comparability of ‘state agency’ (i.e., the conceptual blending of state entitivity, political agency, and human nature) should only be understood as a working metaphor. And it is this metaphorical ‘as-if’ that Wendt argues against when attempting to re-establish a strong version of the state-as-an actor (even a person) by referring loosely to biological debates on organisms and analytical philosophy when discussing the potential emergence of intentions.

Rejecting State Entitivity by Unweaving the Networks of Stateness
Also emerging from the 1960/70s, in another scholarly camp state autonomy was rejected in favor of a new, much distributed model of political agency as manifest in and between citizens as they self-regulate. While neo–statists started with a purely analytic framework, which was conceptually reified afterwards, this approach was a theoretical movement before it became a full-fledged heuristics for interpreting political processes and relations from the 1980s on. It privileges a different vantage point, as it emphasizes the complex and interwoven conditions of statehood as the outcome of a set of contingent and unstable processes of governing citizens, rather than thinking of policy decisions and international relations as the outcomes of actions of large and powerful entities.

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Scholars of state reorganization now often see the state as a network of actors and agencies – a perspective which offers a fresh, process-oriented view of political structures. The radical theoretical underpinnings of this perspective are crucial to its emergence. Foucault’s re-conceptualization of power and his work on neoliberal ‘gouvernementalité’ set the model in motion, but his vision of the state would go underdeveloped for decades. Power, for Foucault, is neither a capacity of someone ‘in power’ nor a possession of someone who ‘has power.’ Applied to state entitativity, no state can be in power nor possess it, so entitativity could be challenged on these grounds alone – but Foucault has more. Power, Foucault maintains, is manifest between us, in networks of influence, constituted by the whole machinery and mechanisms implemented in disciplining and regulating subjected subjects who then, in turn, self-discipline and self-regulate. In this perspective, there are no states, only stateness (étatisation). Stateness is, at least under modern conditions, the exercise and expression of power. Detailed analysis of the various parts of this machinery has inspired numerous research projects under the label of Governmentality Studies. They reveal that whatever looks like a state is constituted by human relationships and becomes a way of linking, in a quasi-Foucauldian terminology, what can be said, done, and seen.

Post-Foucauldians emphasize the mundane ‘art of government.’ Also referred to as ‘microphysical methods of order,’ in Mitchel’s detailed analysis of political institutions, the art of government captures established networks of disciplinary power that enact ‘the organized power of armies, schools and factories, and other distinctive institutions of the modern state.’ The state ceases to be identified as the cause of regulatory techniques and becomes their effect, which is clear in Steinmetz’s work uncovering the

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32 See e.g. Rose, *Powers of Freedom* or Rose and Miller, ‘Political Power beyond the State’, 173-205.
35 Jessop, ‘Bringing the state back in (yet again),’ 7.
diverse interwoven processes of state-formation wherein the supposedly monolithic state under construction ‘appears as an abstraction in relation to the concreteness of the social’.38

Foucault’s ‘microphysics of power,’ however, cannot answer a simple but crucial question: Why are states commonly conceptualized as actors, if they are not, in some meaningful way, actors? Foucault’s best answer is historical. Populations could be regulated by other institutionalized forms besides states, but techniques of subordinating modern citizens converged under this strange abstraction called the state, hence, under modern conditions, we notice a ‘governmentalization of the state.’39

How should scholars and politicians answer the same question? Non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations grow in prominence, stabilizing and destabilizing alliances with government agencies across the globe. When states pursue their own de-governmentalization, they no longer resemble unitary entities, and this makes network-based theories of the state all the more appealing to researchers and journalists.40 Conceptually, seeing states as networks shifts analytical attention to interlinked and interwoven practices that form not states but stateness. And yet, this school of thought’s counterintuitive use of concepts (e.g., power, governance, governmentality) and its sheer popularity have led to many diverse and sometimes contradictory uses of these terms. This huge corpus on high-modern neoliberal governmentality and the knowledge-power relationship remains incommensurable to any description that views states as actors.41

From this perspective, the question of political agency is fairly open. Human nature - at least in the essentialist position - seems absent in post-Foucauldian studies of political relations. Foucault’s analysis in the ‘Order of Things’ shows how ‘humanity’ was at the

39 Foucault, Governmentality, p. 103.
40 Rose & Miller, Political Power beyond the State.
41 Additionally, seeing states as networks is also often merely employed in a metaphorical sense.
center of re-framing modern discourse in the fields of economics, biology, and linguistics.\footnote{Foucault, \textit{The Order of Things}.} Still, this small mention of human nature is not enough to establish a full-fledged image of political agency for state actors from Foucault’s work. If we then ask, who is acting in international relations?, we must answer: apparently, no one. The closest thing to agency in a network model must be the interwoven and ongoing enactment of a vast network of mechanisms, techniques, and discourses that generate patterns of self-regulatory human behavior. A huge body of literature under the label of governmentality studies focuses on showing how under contemporary conditions, techniques of self-governing have extended to every corner of modern life. Driven also by the misconception that governmentality was a neologism connecting ‘government’ and ‘mentality’,\footnote{For a critique see Thomas Lemke ‘Neoliberalismus, Staat und Selbstechnologien. Ein kritischer Überblick über die governmentality studies’, \textit{Politische Vierteljahresschrift} 41 (2000), 31–47.} those searching for the subtle traces of this transformation under (post)modern conditions turned the question of ‘who acts?’ into ‘what acts?’. In IR, numerous scholars see this post-Foucauldian perspective as a workable alternative to conceptualizing the international arena in which human-like states act.\footnote{David Chandler, ‘Critiquing Liberal Cosmopolitanism? The Limits of the Biopolitical Approach’, \textit{International Political Sociology} 3 (2009), 53-70; David Chandler, ‘Globalising Foucault: Turning Critique into Apologia – A Response to Kiersey and Rosenow’, \textit{Global Society} 24 (2010), 135-42; Jonathan Joseph, ‘The Limits of Governmentality: Social Theory and the International’, \textit{European Journal of International Relations} 16 (2010a), 223-46; Jonathan Joseph, ‘What Can Governmentality Do for IR?’ \textit{International Political Sociology} 2 (2010b), 202-4; Jan Selby, ‘Engaging Foucault: Discourse, Liberal Governance and the Limits of Foucauldian IR’, \textit{International Relations} 21 (2007), 324-45; Wendy Larner & William Walters, \textit{Global Governmentality. Governing International Spaces} (London/New York: Routledge, 2004).} However, Wanda Vrasti argued, convincingly, that employing Foucault’s concepts at a global level is invalid; not because the network model is invalid, but because post-Foucauldian IR adopted them hastily without reflection.\footnote{Wanda Vrasti, \textit{Volunteer Tourism in the Global South. The Self as Enterprise} (London/New York: Routledge, 2012).}

\textbf{States as Actor-Networks}

\textit{ANT} provides an alternative to both positions, especially regarding agency. How can states be singularized actors during international relations and vast networks of...
mechanisms encouraging citizens to self-regulate? The mistake of past conceptualizations of the state and stateness was insistence on their mutual exclusivity.

An ANT approach to states avoids state reification or trivialization through post-structuralist insights, especially that of multiplicity. Searching for the ontology of the state, we contend, is a waste of time. Instead, with ANT, we attend to ontologies of state. The shift toward state multiplicity is subtle, but important for state theory. As a analogy, we draw on Mol’s *The Body Multiple*, wherein ‘multiplicity’ is expertly deployed. For Mol, the body is at once ‘one standing bag-of-meat’ and yet only made sense of in different, sometimes competing ways, because ‘the body’ is at once one thing and many things depending on how it ‘registers’ on charts, diagrams, reports, films, etc. Crucially, Mol abandoned the search for the ontology of the body and, instead, attended to the ontologies of body. States and bodies have a lot in common; from Hobbes’ original imagery of the state as a humanesque Leviathan to Wendt’s contemporary insistence that states are persons (too), the role of bodies has a long history in state theory. Still, for state theory to make the leap that Mol did, we must radically re-conceptualize ‘actors’ and ‘action.’ We must also create a vocabulary to examine states as actors without recognizing or reifying them as such analytically or literally. We can never again ask ‘what is a state?’ and must instead see states as assemblages, gatherings, and things made of many other things depending on how they register.

The proposed approach is an attempt to overcome a problem for IR as well as STS. Actor models of the state provided no possible entry point to start studying the infrastructural setting that Rose and Miller called the ‘technologies of government.’ Network models are more appropriate, but also inadequate. Fashioned from fine-grained studies conducted during the 1980/90s, post-Foucauldians, in rejecting the existence of state agency, missed an opportunity to study the way in which these infrastructural developments were practically bound to notions of state entitivity.

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In ANT, we assume that actors we study exist (i.e., take meaning, exert force, and, therefore, ‘act’), but only in relation to other heterogeneous actors variously assembled in networks. And this relationality operates horizontally, so that any appearance of vertical scale is, in principle, an artifact of lateral relations. As a shortcut, one might even say that this is the main insight upon which ANT is built. Masses of small, heterogeneous actors become tremendous sources of force, which, like levers, can shift and re-align the various social and material associations that make durable different facets of society.48

If we assume concepts such as ‘the market’ or ‘the state’ translate, respectively, to insights like ‘markets drive the economy’ or ‘states act on the global scene,’ then the conclusion is already written because the ontological insights are assumed in advance; the research, in effect, has already been done. If state entitativity is instead treated as a hypothesis then it is neither abstract, assumed, nor transcendental. It is made up of numerous interlinked mundane practices and procedures that build the state as a unitary actor, or fail to. Thus, for scholars, it is an empirical matter to see how states are enacted. The construction of actor-networks,49 their maintenance50 over time, and their eventual or stalled disbandment51 are the critical processes to observe and account for by tracing the associations made, maintained, and broken. An additionally valuable line

48 Bruno Latour. Reassembling the Social (London: Oxford, 2005). Of course, we are not the first to notice this: Elements of ANT are readily found in research on statehood. For example, Carroll (2006:14,15) recognizes material agency, and, when applied to matters of state, it becomes clear that materiality shapes and is shaped by discourse and practice in cases such as Mukerji’s (1997) gardens, Davis’s (1986) demonstrations, and Carroll’s (2006:145) bogs. Patrick Carroll, Science, Culture, and Modern State Formation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Chandra Mukerji, Territorial Ambitions and the Garden of Versailles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Susan G. Davis, Parades and Power (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).


of research could attend to the practical matter of how politicians and other individuals speak in the name of an entity called ‘the state.’ The obvious necessity of alliance-building through enrollment becomes not just something to study but something of practical use to construct boundaries between constellations of networked individuals that buoy the material and cultural practices that give form to states and statehood. The state hypothesis is likely to be constructed from a practical array of concepts that link technologies of government infrastructure to the processes of hiding their nuts-and-bolts beneath entity-like surfaces.

The state, therefore, is and must be spoken for, because ‘the state’ – a single, unitary actor – does not exist other than as a practically relevant hypothesis occasionally enunciated. We speculate on states’ declining relevance, practically and scholastically, but unless we stop encountering its invocation in the material we study, we cannot reasonably assume or insist that there is no such thing as the or a state. Speaking for the state is not to be understood as merely linguistic, although this does provide a good start. Indeed, actors can enunciate the state in practical ways by counting citizens and quantifying natural resource stores, or by defending territories with strong rhetoric of retribution and installing diplomats who then ‘speak for’ the state verbatim. States are performed, enacted, or spoken for in various ways by linking the hypothesis of an ‘actor-like’ state to a certain territory, to procedures of political activity, to a global polity, and to the human beings that are labeled as its citizens. Not unlike scientist who (sometimes) have to speak for their probes and their objects of investigation in order to make them become real and effective, state spokesmen, who do not have to be human, build-up states as macro entities by speaking for other micro-actors. In this sense, a fence at a frontier ‘speaks’ for a population that has to be protected in the same way that a politician ‘speaks’ for the same population that has to be governed – and both protect the idea of the state and its role in protecting the people ‘it’ represents. This raises tangential issues dear to social theory, especially concerns over legitimacy.\(^{53}\)


\(^{53}\) While an interesting direction for future research, it is beyond scope of this chapter; however, see, for example, Shane P. Mulligan. ‘The Uses of Legitimacy in International Relations’ Millennium - Journal of
Seeing states as actor-networks obviates the need for bogus assumptions, inherited from state theory, that collapse human nature and political agency. It also avoids trivializing the unitary actor model of states by opening it up as an empirical question. Thus, from the actor-network perspective, asking ‘who acts during international relations?’ must be reformulated into ‘how is state agency established, expressed, granted, and transformed?’ That question must be answered empirically, in the study of both domestic and international politics. State agency or autonomy are established, maintained, and can dissolve over time, and these achievements and failures are a feature of the vast, widely distributed array technologies of government that (un)enroll, (de)align, and (dis)invoke the state hypothesis. From this vantage point, human nature might indeed appear again, but on the empirical rather than conceptual front. As Latour famously argued in *We Have Never Been Modern*, the ontological constitution of contemporary society separates hybrid masses of agencies primarily by separating human entities from asocial and natural things. The same holds true for states: The Leviathan might have been modeled with human nature in mind, but in a world of increasing hybridization of agency, we can see, from an actor-network perspective, that this is but one possible invocation of political agency.54

Conclusion
Assumptions about human nature have influenced conceptualizations of political agency throughout the history of state theory. In this chapter, we showed that the question of ‘who acts during international relations?’ has been answered (i.e., ‘the state’), dismissed (i.e., ‘no one’), and subsequently transformed (i.e., to ask ‘what is acting?’ the answer being ‘technologies of government’) in extant state models. We documented how states have been conceptualized in scholarly research and elucidated how they are thought of as actors by some scholars and as elaborate networks by others. Both traditions have tremendous utility for understanding the inner workings of public bureaucracies and the

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global efforts of states during international relations, both approaches appear to be rooted in practical political trends and transitions, and both approaches have resulted in robust bodies of literature.

Seeing states as actors freed state theory from conceptualizing the state either as an instrument of control or as a disinterested mediator between diverse groups. However, this movement toward ‘bringing the state back in’ has had the side-effect of producing its own problematic interpretations of the state. If the state is out there, why is it that we cannot take a picture of it? If it is a person, why can we not meet him/her? The state has been frequently confused with an actual macro-being of its own – an entity or unitary actor whose actions can be studied by social researchers and abstractly systematized by political theorists.\textsuperscript{55} This is also where human nature was blended into understanding this unitary actor’s political agency; the state was modeled with a high-modern vision of human nature in mind. This was partly, Latour argued,\textsuperscript{56} because it fits our linguistic frameworks that tend to ‘humanize’ non-human entities, and partly because of an underlying methodological individualism that, transferred to an abstract level of collective action, only allows for modeling actors as entities with intentions, preferences, and interests: a homo œconomicus writ large.

Conversely, seeing the state as a network emerged as an attempt to re-conceptualize the ontology of states. Importantly influenced by post-structural theory, especially by the works on power by Foucault, analytical attention shifted away from actions attributable to states (i.e., as unitary actors) and toward complexes of interlinked practices that bring about flexible, self-regulating citizens no longer in need of a strong, unitary state. Much less intuitive but no less sophisticated than seeing the state as an actor, the state-as-a-network model was beset with misinterpretation, which compromised contributions

\textsuperscript{56} Latour, \textit{We have never been modern}. 
seeded by post-structuralist thought on the state.\textsuperscript{57} This is obvious when focusing on the problem of human nature again: For post-structuralists, the ‘human’ in human nature emerged as a frame of reference to restructure discourse formations in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. This interpretation of human nature, as a specific historical creation unfit for use in theorizing states, displaces humans from political agency, so that, especially in governmentality studies, we mainly observe political agency as expressed in and between technologies of government that form a complex web, or network, of statehood. We do not reject this position completely, but consider it incomplete given the unquestionably important role that humans play in social life.

As an alternative to both camps, we presented an actor-network approach to states which enables us to acknowledge both and yet embrace neither model of the state by opening them up as empirical questions rather than accepting them as theoretical suppositions. Political agency is, likewise, no longer something to assume or reject as explicitly human or otherwise; instead both humans and non-humans are viewed as equal contributors to political outcomes. With this model of political agency, we can no longer assume micro phenomena to be necessarily fluid, interactive settings; macro phenomena can no longer be anticipated as stable, unitary structures or agents. Every macro phenomenon is a local achievement, but does not necessarily stay local. Whatever seems huge – and, therefore, powerful or structural – stays small during analysis, and states only become powerful through micro-level assemblages of mechanisms, procedures, texts, and trained bodies. States become unitary actor-like entities not by virtue of the scientist studying them, but by the assemblages that produce them and by practices of invoking the state.

As the social turns out to be a relational material assemblage, as structures turn out to be ongoing material and discursive achievements, and as macro-phenomena turn out to be local enactments, some of (international) political sociology’s most beloved assumptions about the stuff that societies and, consequently, politics are made of have to be revised. By conceptualizing states as actor-networks, (international) political

\textsuperscript{57} Lemke, ‘Neoliberalismus, Staat und Selbsttechnologien’, 31–47.
sociology loses a parsimonious way to speak of states as institutions, unitary actors on a world stage, or as political entities *sui generis*. In exchange, however, a line of research in International Relations adopting a flexible framework for analyzing states would observe how states become and are maintained as institutions, what enables politicians to speak for them as actors in international relations, and how political entities of all forms are constructed, invoked, and performed.
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