3.5: Beyond the State

While the legacy of conventional Cold War-style thinking still looms large in contemporary analyses, researchers have been interested in developing nonstate-centric and more fluid perspectives. We already mentioned environmentalism and feminism as examples of analytical perspectives that acknowledge the importance of actors other than the state, and the role of individuals in particular. Some analysts have not completely abandoned the state perspective but suggest looking into what exactly it is inside states that might be contributing to what happens in the global sphere. This could be related to their internal characteristics, such as their form of government, their economic profile, their cultural and ideological composition or their demography. This perspective includes a distinctive focus on the societies that make up a specific state as much as particular groups and individuals within those societies. Many analysts invite their readers to open the ‘black box’ that way. In other words, to break up the conventional IR habit of treating states as secluded units and containers of power, politics and societies. They also openly challenge the assumption that there is such a thing as ‘unitary’ state action. They would dispute, for instance, that ‘Germany’ – as a nationstate – would push for austerity measures in Greece. Rather, they would insist that related policies are initiated by specific German politicians that advocate such measures out of a particular sentiment, out of an individual interpretation of current developments, or for reasons that might be linked to their own political future or specific preferences of their electorate.

Apart from a focus on the individual and group level of official decisionmaking, this ‘sub-state’ (meaning, ‘below the state’) level of analysis also attempts to expand the scope of scholarly investigation beyond formal interactions of the state, its official representatives and of its constituent parts to include informal relationships and non-official exchanges, such as flows and transfers of goods, information, communications, services and people – above and below the purview of the state.

Contemporary IR is interested in looking at actors that operate across state borders instead of being specifically confined by them – for instance, citizens of a particular state or proponents of a particular ethnic or cultural minority within that state. The study of IR has gradually widened to include all kinds of interactions between a variety of actors,
including the general public and individual members of it, people like you and me.

Such an analytical move seems welcome if we think of how potent the influence of individual actors can be that do not officially represent or act on behalf of states or any of their constituent parts. An example of this is the activist Julian Assange, who spearheaded a widely publicised whistleblowing campaign leaking government secrets via the website WikiLeaks. Another example is Osama Bin Laden, who built a global terrorist network (Al Qaeda) based on his own religious and political visions. Both Assange and Bin Laden, although very different in nature, have had lasting impact on top-level global politics from the position of a private persona with no official political status or role.

What is significant in this context is that the traditional conception of the state as the main framework of political interaction and the main point of reference for both society and the individuals within it has lost a lot of its meaning and importance. If we look at the world around us, state borders do not seem to accurately delimitate global affairs. The majority of global interactions – be they related to global finance, production, education, personal and professional travel, labour migration or terrorism – no longer occur via state channels the way they once did. We could say that the increased focus on non-state actors and cross-border issues has marked a close-to-revolutionary turn in IR; something that could be interpreted as a shift away from the international (‘between-states’) to the ‘trans-national’ (‘across/beyond-states’ and their borders). Robert Keohane, one of the leading scholars in the field, recently stated that ‘International Relations’ is no longer a suitable label and that we should instead refer to the discipline as ‘Global Studies’ or ‘World Politics’ (Keohane 2016). In today’s world, few societal and political issues, challenges and problems are neatly confined by the borders of individual states or even groups of states. Thinking about world affairs in ‘trans-national’ rather than in purely ‘inter-national’ terms therefore seems more of an analytical necessity than just a choice.

Individuals and groups interact across borders and thus relativise the meaning of space and territory as conventional IR knew it. International commercial aviation and the rapid spread of information technologies has further increased people’s mobility and the rate at which interactions occur across and beyond state borders. The ability for common people to store, transfer and distribute large amounts of information, the possibility for data to travel across the world in virtually no time, and the increasing availability of high-speed internet have not only changed lives at personal and community levels but also dramatically altered the general dynamics in politics and global affairs.

Social media provide accessible platforms of communication that allow for the projection and promotion of ideas across borders at virtually no cost to the individual or group generating and advocating them. Various political agendas – be they progressive, revolutionary or outright dangerous – can unfold in a relatively uncontrolled and unregulated way, posing real challenges to governmental agencies and the political leaders that try to improve and direct them. Random individuals can potentially start a revolution from their homes, bypassing any conventional conceptions of power and transcending spatial and material boundaries to the point where political activity and even confrontation become weightless and immaterial altogether. A powerful illustration of this can be found in Thomas Neuwirth, an Austrian singer, who is most commonly known by the stage persona ‘Conchita Wurst’. The political messages displayed during a show at the Sydney Opera House in March 2016 multiplied and spread through social media. This eventually urged various representatives of the Australian government to take a stance on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues and also gave momentum to the global LGBT movement. A national politician from, say, Austria, would likely not have been able to influence the domestic debate in Australia to that extent, let alone spark a worldwide debate that way.