H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel H. Nexon. *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires, and International Change.* Princeton Studies in International History and Politics Series. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. xv + 354 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-691-13793-3.

Reviewed by Andreas Osiander

Published on H-Diplo (July, 2011)

Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball (DePaul University)

Published as part of the Princeton Studies in International History and Politics series, Daniel H. Nexon's new book mixes historiography and international relations theory. On the one hand, its principal concern is with the impact of the Protestant "Reformations" (Nexon uses the term in the plural) on the political structures of sixteenth-century Europe. On the other hand, Nexon's concern is with "appropriate forms of comparative-historical generalization" (p. xi). He endeavors to identify patterns in the processes shaping the evolution of sixteenth-century Europe that may help to understand structural change and structural dynamics, in other historical periods as well, not least our own.

Employing an approach that he calls "relational institutionalism," Nexon bases his theoretical discussion of structural political change on network theory (p. 14). He argues that the "composite" polities of sixteenth-century Europe do not fit the "states-under-anarchy" paradigm that is central to the "realist" school of international relations (IR) (p. 13). Whereas IR realism essentially views states as unconnected "billiard balls," the rulers of sixteenth-century Europe in fact presided over "star-shaped networks" (p. 99): dynasts ruled a plurality of heterogeneous dominions or segments of the network that had little in common, apart, precisely, from the person of the prince positioned at the center of the network. The emphasis on the composite aspect of the political structures of the period is of course not new, but I do not think that its implications for political theory have yet been worked out as systematically and perspicaciously as Nexon does in this book. He presents us with a brilliant piece of IR theorizing and derives from that methodological tools whose analytical purchase he demonstrates impressively.

He underscores that a key element of "composite" political structures is the combination of "indirect rule with heterogeneous contracting": "the ties that run from central authorities through each of their local intermediaries ... to local actors ... in each segment all represent a different combination of rights, rules, and obligations.... This

tends to prevent a concordance of interests between segments" (pp. 101, 104). In other words and applied to sixteenth-century Europe, subjects of the same prince but located in different dominions of that prince were unlikely to make common cause against him; even within separate dominions they were, moreover, divided by class barriers. Since the prince exercised only indirect rule, unpopular policies could be blamed on his local "intermediaries" or representatives, giving him a degree of "plausible deniability" (p. 116); if dissatisfaction became too intense, local representatives could be replaced. In addition, rulers could present themselves differently, project a different identity to subjects in different dominions--what Nexon refers to as "multivocal" or "polyvalent signaling" (p. 114). Because rulers did not have to bother with running their dominions directly, indirect rule was cheap. Even though their "extractive capacity" was limited in comparison with that enjoyed by governments today, the low cost of indirect rule combined with revenue accruing from plural dominions gave rulers an advantageous position (p. 7). It also gave them a strong interest in acquiring additional dominions, by marriage, inheritance, or conquest. Nexon insists that "the logic of international politics generated by an order dominated by dynastic agglomerations departed from realist conceptions of world politics in a number of important and highly consequential ways. First, 'reason of dynasty' rather than modern conceptions of state interests drove international-political competition.... Second, the heterogeneous nature of dynastic agglomerations and the logic of dynastic practices ensured that international politics contained what we would now call a significant 'transnational' component" (pp. 93, 96). At the same time, "notions of territorial control remained, at best, embryonic" (p. 95).

According to Nexon, the most significant effect of Protestantism on this structural setup had little to do with religion per se. Rather, what made the "Reformations" such a potent factor of structural change was that confessional solidarity promoted links between subjects within and across different dominions, enhancing their leverage: "The spread of reformation and counterreformation movements often ... linked actors in different regions and provided them with common orientations toward the policies of the center" (p. 109). Indeed, networks of coreligionists might transcend the borders between "dynastic agglomerations" in the manner of today's "transnational" actors and thereby gain still more power. Concurrently, confessionalization impeded the ability of rulers to engage in "polyvalent signaling" while also restricting their marriage options. Both factors helped push Europe in the direction of a more territorial, bounded conception of political units, though Nexon insists that this was a contributing factor, not the single or main cause of the process or processes that eventually brought about the idea of the territorial nation-state.

Not surprisingly, the greatest among the dynastic agglomerations of sixteenth-century Europe, the Habsburg dominions, was hit hardest by the advent of Protestantism. Nexon largely devotes his two central chapters to the emperor Charles V and Philip II of Spain, respectively. He shows how Charles's decision to defend religious orthodoxy helped strengthen his initially shaky authority as king of his Spanish dominions but undermined his position in a Holy Roman Empire most of whose princes and free cities were going over to Protestantism, in the process forging new mutual bonds, such as the League of Schmalkalden, in order to strengthen their position. Philip II, who inherited the Spanish and Burgundian possessions of the dynasty from Charles, likewise suffered a major setback when he proved unable to keep hold of much of the Low Countries. Nexon's analysis of the Dutch Revolt uses his approach to its best advantage. He shows how religious heterodoxy in the Netherlands kept confronting the Spanish crown with dilemmas, beginning with the circumstance that the attempt to extinguish heresy required an intensification of central rule that inevitably increased dissatisfaction

with the crown and drew subjects in different provinces as well as of different social strata together. As the revolt against the crown came to be equated with a religious struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism, the Dutch rebels were able to draw on networks of co-confessionals especially in Germany and France as well as gain support from Queen Elizabeth of England and the French crown. Philip found himself obliged to combat not only the Dutch Calvinists, but also their Huguenot brethren in France while trying unsuccessfully to weaken the English crown by means of a direct invasion or by supporting rebellion in Ireland.

Nexon does an excellent job showing how the rise of Protestantism and the resulting cross-border ties and networks complicated the management of the Habsburg dominions and caused them to splinter. The method of blaming royal representatives in the Netherlands for unpopular policies and replacing them still worked to some extent, but "polyvalent signaling" became impossible. When he inherited the Spanish kingdoms, Charles of Habsburg, born and raised in the Netherlands, initially had trouble establishing himself in Castile because his new subjects perceived him as a foreigner. He strengthened his authority in his Iberian dominions not least by establishing his Spanish and Catholic credentials, at the price of greatly complicating his position in the Holy Roman Empire. As a Spanish Catholic, his son Philip in turn came to be seen as a "foreigner" in the Netherlands, the beloved homeland of his father--an irony to which Nexon draws attention on pages 115-116. Nexon likewise applies his approach to the French Wars of Religion and to the Thirty Years' War

The book is certainly not without its problems. The historical narrative presents itself as a distillation of the writings of other historians who are credited extensively even for rather trite information. The resulting impression of a certain lack of expertise is at odds with the self-assured tone of the mainly theoretical and analytical sections of the book and corroborated by the fairly numerous factual errors; the bibliography, incidentally, contains only works in English. Many pages in the historiographical portions of the book seem to exist for their own sake, consisting essentially in a run-through of events without much analysis. Where such analysis exists it tends to be buried in footnotes (good examples of this are on pages 222-223). The reader is often left to wonder how the detailed description of events is relevant to the argument of the book. Characters are introduced without making clear their exact role and significance. This is true, for example, of the remarks about Archduke Matthias on pages 218-219. On page 138 we read: "Ferdinand's decision to declare Charles his successor stood on dubious legal ground"--but since Ferdinand has not been introduced the reader is left to guess that Nexon is talking about Charles's grandfather; soon afterward Ferdinand's wife Isabella is likewise mentioned without the reader being told who she was. In the most striking example of this, Jacques d'Albon, hardly a well-known figure, is mentioned a single time on page 247 without any indication who he was or what role he played. Maybe this is the result of hasty revision of a text that was originally more detailed.

Names are a weak point. For example, Cesare Borgia becomes "Cesare Borge" on page 116 (and "Borge, Caeser" in the index). The d'Albret dynasty of Navarra is consistently called "d'Albert" (pp. 155, 244, index). Such minor instances could be multiplied. There are numerous references to somebody called "the Elector of the Palatine" (e.g., pp. 167, 175): he was, of course, the Elector-Palatine ruling a part of Germany known as the Palatinate. One alleged incumbent mentioned repeatedly, John Casimir, never did hold the post: referring to events in 1578, Nexon tells us on page 219 that "the frightened leadership in Ghent invited John Casimir, elector of Palatine [*sic*], and his German troops to their defense." In reality, the Elector-Palatine in 1578 was John Casimir's broth-

er Louis. Oddly, earlier on the very same page and for the same year 1578, Nexon refers to John Casimir as "the administrator of the Rhine Palatinate" (the correct form for the country)--which he became on Louis's death in 1583, when he assumed the regency for his nephew. But this was five years later and John Casimir never became an elector himself.

The cavalier treatment of names here shades into the kind of more substantial error found quite frequently in the book. Examples: "Although technically part of Castile, the cities of Andalusia--the recently conquered Kingdom of Granada--not only spurned the Comuneros but even formed a league against them" (p. 144): in fact, Andalusia is of course far larger than the former kingdom of Granada, not coextensive with it. "On 19 April [1521] the [German] Diet condemned Luther; within a month Charles [V] published the Edict of Worms, which banned Luther's writings" (p. 152): on April 19, the day after Luther had refused to recant, Charles personally rejected Luther's doctrine in an autographed French text that he communicated to the diet; he put Luther under the ban of the empire in an edict backdated May 8 but only promulgated on May 26 after the formal proceedings of the diet had been closed. Although Charles asked for and obtained the informal assent of those estates of the empire that were still present in the city, the diet of Worms as such never condemned Luther. "In 1525 Albrecht von Hohenzollern ... dissolved the Teutonic Order, and became the first Duke of Prussia" (p. 158): Albrecht appropriated the holdings of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, turning them into a duchy that he received as a secular fief from the Polish crown. The Teutonic Order, which for the time being held on to Livonia and moreover had substantial holdings in the Holy Roman Empire, remained in existence; it currently has a membership of about one thousand with its headquarters in Vienna. "In 1527 Habsburg forces compelled Pope Clement VII to accept a separate peace, and not long after that the infamous sack of Rome ... left the papacy firmly under Charles's control" (p. 160): the sequence is wrong. It was of course the sack of Rome itself that put Pope Clement under Charles's control and induced him to make peace with Charles. However, Charles's control over the pope was hardly firm, or at least did not remain so for long--Clement soon resumed his collusion with the French crown against Habsburg, for example by arranging the marriage of his niece Catherine de' Medici to the future Henry II of France (indeed he officiated personally at the wedding). "With Charles's victory over the Schmalkaldic Leage in Germany the Burgundian 'circle' was finally established in 1548" (p. 196): the "circles" (Kreise) of the Holy Roman Empire were regional administrative units. Six were created in 1500, four more, among them the Burgundian circle, were added in 1512; this had nothing to do with Charles (elected to the German throne only in 1519) or his victory over the League of Schmalkalden. What happened in 1548 was that at Charles's request the diet removed the Burgundian circle, which consisted almost exclusively of Charles's Burgundian hereditary lands, from the jurisdiction of the Holy Roman Empire even though technically it remained part of the empire.

All these errors are minor. Two are more serious. One concerns the German crown. "From 1273 until the ascension of the second Habsburg emperor (Frederick III) in 1440, the princes of the empire limited imperial power by refusing to elect successive members of the same dynasty" (p. 80). This simple sentence is wrong on more than one count, and does not begin to do justice to a complicated situation. For one thing, the princes of the empire--in the sense of "all the princes"--had no say in the matter: the right to choose the German king lay with the seven electors alone. Further, Frederick III was not the second, but the first Habsburg emperor, the first member of the dynasty to obtain, in 1452, the imperial coronation from the pope. (The only other Habsburg to be crowned emperor by the pope was Charles V in 1530--but from 1508 onward papal intervention

was no longer considered necessary for the German king to assume the imperial title.) At the same time, Frederick was the fourth Habsburg to be elected to the German throne, after Rudolf I (d. 1291), Albert I (d. 1308), and Frederick's immediate predecessor Albert II (d. 1439). Finally, despite the elective character of the monarchy, dynastic continuity was prized highly, and overall there was quite a bit of it during the period in question. This is the one pattern that does emerge, whereas what dynastic discontinuity can be found seems attributable to various and indeed contingent factors. To show this requires going into some historical detail--readers less interested in this should skip the next two paragraphs.

If, following the death of Rudolf I (reigned 1273-91), Count Adolf of Nassau was elected to succeed him rather than Rudolf's son Albert, it may indeed have been that in his capacity as head of the empire, Rudolf had greatly increased the power of his family. To the original Habsburg hereditary lands, limited to quite modest holdings in northern Switzerland and Alsace, Rudolf had added the extensive fiefs of the extinct Babenberg dynasty--the duchies of Austria and Styria and other lands. This made Albert a very powerful lord to whom the electors apparently preferred a middling count--such as Adolf was and Rudolf himself had originally been. Much like Rudolf, however, if less successfully, Adolf as king developed a mind and ambitions of his own, earning him the collective enmity of the electors. In 1298, they deposed him in favor of none other than Albert, suggesting that if their original rejection of the Habsburg candidate was indeed motivated by fear of his power, this fear had abated; or, alternatively, that in light of recent experience a satiated prince seemed preferable to one whose attempts at enlarging his relatively narrow power base would likely continue to collide with the interests of one or other of the electors. Nonetheless Albert was soon himself on bad terms with the electors. At his death in 1308, his eldest son Frederick was only seventeen; moreover, with the Bohemian throne--whose incumbent was one of the electors--an object of dispute following the extinction of the Přzemyslid dynasty, no vote was cast for Bohemia in 1308. That made it easier for Archbishop Baldwin of Trier to persuade his fellow electors to opt for his brother Count Henry of Luxemburg. In his mid-thirties, Henry had the right age and fit the profile of the "middling count," whereas Frederick of course inherited the vast new Habsburg hereditary lands. Henry died in 1313, but succeeded during his short reign to secure for his son John the Kingdom of Bohemia. In adjudicating the Bohemian succession in his capacity as head of the empire, Henry denied a competing Habsburg claim. With John king of Bohemia and Baldwin archbishop of Trier, the Luxemburg dynasty disposed of two out of seven votes in the upcoming election. Though he too was only seventeen at the time, John's prospects of succeeding his father looked good until Frederick of Habsburg also announced his candidacy and several electors seemed attracted by the idea of restoring the Habsburg dynasty to the throne once more. The reason for this cannot have been a desire to limit the power of the crown. With the addition of Bohemia, the holdings of the Luxemburg dynasty were comparable to those of the House of Habsburg, so that in this respect there was now little difference between the two. But, if Frederick had become king, he might well have tried to secure Bohemia for Habsburg after all, making him more powerful than John. In light of this latter danger, Archbishop Baldwin now made the strategic choice of putting the long-term interest of the Luxemburg dynasty in holding on to Bohemia ahead of the short-term goal of having John follow his father as German king. He leaned on John to withdraw in favor of a new candidate, Duke Louis of Bavaria, a member of the Wittelsbach dynasty who gave assurances that he would honor the Luxemburg claim to Bohemia. With the help of the two Luxemburg votes he narrowly prevailed against Frederick. The next three elections once again put members of the Luxemburg

dynasty on the German throne, which it held for almost a century from 1348 until it became extinct in 1437. To be sure, in 1400 some of the electors deposed King Wenzel (Venceslas) of Luxemburg and replaced him with the Elector-Palatine Rupert (another Wittelsbach)--not because Wenzel was too powerful but because, on the contrary, he completely neglected the empire in favor of his Kingdom of Bohemia, where he spent his time battling local nobles and rival members of his own family. When Rupert, whose legitimacy as German king was somewhat doubtful, died in 1410, the electors, glad of the chance to restore dynastic continuity, gave the crown to Wenzel's younger brother Sigismund.

It is true, then, that the norm of dynastic continuity was violated in 1291, 1298, 1308, 1313, and 1400--but note that four out of these five instances are concentrated in a relatively short period around the turn of the fourteenth century, and that a desire to limit the power of the crown does not emerge as a clear or consistent motive here. Moreover, even regarding this transitional period around 1300 it is significant that Albert did follow his father, albeit not immediately, and that Albert's son Frederick came very close to doing the same. The 1313 election was split (four votes for each of the two candidates, as the Bohemian vote was cast twice, by rival contenders), and Frederick claimed the throne until defeated in battle by Louis of Bavaria in 1322. After Louis's death, dynastic continuity was restored with the single and somewhat questionable exception of the decade of Rupert's kingship. In 1437, at the death of the emperor Sigismund, the throne passed back to the Habsburg dynasty for the simple reason that Sigismund was the last of his line. The electors respected his wish to put his son-in-law Albert of Habsburg, designated heir of the Luxemburg hereditary lands, on the throne, and when Albert died in 1439 they replaced him with the new head of the Habsburg dynasty, Frederick. Thereafter, the German crown remained in Habsburg hands, elective though it was. Nexon's assertion that "the lack of a continuous dynasty between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries ... contributed to the decentralized nature of political authority in the empire" must therefore be treated with skepticism (p. 81).

The second major lapse concerns Sweden and Poland-Lithuania. "The [Polish and Lithuanian] nobility," Nexon writes, "elected [Sigismund] Vasa ... to gain Swedish support for Poland-Lithuania's wars with Muscovy.... The resulting Swedish claim to the Polish crown led to 'a half-century of futile and destructive wars between Sweden and Poland'" (pp. 91-92; the quotation is from a book by H. G. Koenigsberger and George Mosse, ***Europe in the Sixteenth Century*** [1968]). Nexon has it the wrong way round. There was no Swedish claim to the Polish crown, since that was elective--even though here, too, dynastic continuity was a paramount consideration for the electors, who in the following decades put members of the Polish branch of the Vasa dynasty on the Polish throne until the dynasty became extinct. Conversely, the Vasa kings of Poland-Lithuania--Sigismund and his descendants--continued to claim the Swedish crown and fought for it after Sigismund, who following his election to the Polish throne in 1587 also inherited the Swedish crown in 1592, was deposed in Sweden and replaced by his uncle in 1600. The reason for that was that Sigismund was a Catholic but most of his Swedish subjects were Lutherans. Prior to the advent of Protestantism, Sigismund in all likelihood would have had no problem holding on to both the Swedish and the Polish thrones. But the fact that he was of a different faith than his Swedish subjects first induced him to strengthen royal rule in Sweden at the expense of the traditional elite (he bypassed the Riksråd or royal council, a mouthpiece of the Swedish magnates, by appointing six governors directly answerable to him when he returned to Poland) and then caused the magnates, with support from the Swedish church, to oust Sigismund--another fine example of a composite monarchy splintering on account of religious heterodoxy,

but due to his factual error Nexon apparently failed to recognize it.

It is a tribute to the strength of Nexon's general argument that such errors do not really undermine the book. Overall I find his approach and his analysis of concrete historical processes illuminating and convincing. It would be a pity if factual inaccuracies of the kind listed above were to prevent professional historians, often distrustful of political scientists, from taking the book seriously.

As mentioned, Nexon does not limit himself to shedding light on the evolution of sixteenth-century Europe but also seeks to identify patterns that might be valid across time and space. He displays a welcome caution concerning "the degree to which historical structures display actual isomorphisms," but nevertheless does not despair of the possibility to "explain how we might construct specific theories of international continuity and transformation that balance the goals of ***taking historical particulars seriously*** with ***producing generalizable propositions***" (p. 61, emphasis in original). His solution is to "construct ideal types in order to create an idealization of a phenomenon's characteristics that can then be compared against other, related ideal-typifications. A particular ideal type will never accurately or exhaustively describe the concrete manifestations of a specific phenomenon, but it does provide a benchmark for the comparison of real political formations. This approach enables us to connect explanations of particular outcomes ... with more general causal claims. To the extent that specific formal properties of relational contexts endure across time and space, we should expect to see similar mechanisms and processes at work" (p. 65).

As noted, Nexon's interpretation of the politics of sixteenth-century Europe is undergirded by his notion that the principal political actors of the period sat at the center of "star-shaped networks" responding in specific ways to the large-scale ideological mobilization produced by Protestantism and the opposition to it. Nexon points out that neither composite political units nor ideological and religious mobilization are a monopoly of sixteenth-century Europe. He adduces the example of colonial empires faced in the twentieth century by the spread of nationalist secession movements. Although the dependent colonial territories were linked by few, if any, historical, cultural, or economic ties, anticolonial mobilization spread everywhere, causing the hold of the metropole to crumble. As examples of present-day composite political entities Nexon points to the European Union and the Russian Federation. The latter is indeed faced with secessionism fueled by religious heterogeneity, in particular in Chechnya. For Nexon, even the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan can be interpreted along "relational-institutionalist" lines. He notes that "even temporary 'occupations' create relational structures akin to those found in imperial composite polities: indirect rule through an occupying authority or local regime, coupled with a bargain specific to that territory" (p. 296). Here, too, the element of transborder religious mobilization against the occupier is an important factor.

Indeed, Nexon reaches the conclusion "that treating composite polities ... as ideal types will probably prove more productive than using the 'nation-state' as the most important benchmark against which to judge contemporary political communities" (p. 299). Not everybody will be convinced by the case his book makes in support of this claim, but it is a strong one from which readers are sure to benefit.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: Andreas Osiander. Review of Nexon, Daniel H. *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires, and International Change.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2011.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25354

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.