

1 Introduction

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This book seeks to introduce a fresh perspective on the dynamics underlying the transformations of world politics. We initially developed this perspective through four months of interdisciplinary dialogue at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung, ZiF) at Bielefeld University, Germany, in summer 2024. The group of international relations scholars (Mathias Albert, Christian Bueger, Heikki Patomäki), historians (Diana Lemberg, Heidi Tworek), and sociologists (Bettina Mahler, Ralf Rapior, Tobias Werron) discussed and debated how best to understand changes in world politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In so doing, we found it most productive to approach the topic with a new term and concept: worldmaking projects (WMPs).

In this short introduction, we explain briefly what observations and processes led us to the idea of worldmaking projects before providing an overview of the chapters in this volume. We hope that the fruits of this interdisciplinary exploration will be the start of a conversation with a broader range of scholars about both how to foster productive interdisciplinarity and how to build upon our conceptual framework.

While much social science scholarship focuses on the concepts of order and ordering, we suggest that it may also be productive to use *worldmaking projects* (WMPs) as a heuristic to explore programs and practices that seek to advance specific forms of order in world politics. To make our exploration more manageable and concrete, we focus on how such worldmaking projects rely on communications infrastructures. We chose communications infrastructures because they are all too often

neglected in discussions of world order, although they are crucial to the conception, creation, and maintenance of global relations. Indeed, focusing on communications infrastructures opens up the possibility of rethinking the history of global political orders: It encourages us to reconsider the relationship between idealistic projects for shaping the world and the actual political organization of world politics, and to ask how both have been influenced by changes in communications infrastructures. Historically, this draws our attention to a period that began in the mid-nineteenth century with the introduction of numerous new communication technologies and continues to this day.

In order to pursue this idea consistently and fully exploit the potential of our interdisciplinary cooperation, we do not rely on or advance any particular theory. Rather, this book draws on a wider range of theories and *theorizes* in constant interplay with empirical foci – but it does not build ‘a’ theory. This understanding reflects one of the three initial observations which inspired us to undertake the intellectual journey documented here.

The *first observation* was a lack of interdisciplinary engagement between disciplines interested in similar global problems. There is little interaction between different theoretical approaches in the discipline of International Relations (IR) to world politics. There is even less interaction between IR and other disciplines with considerable scholarship on world politics, namely History and Sociology. There are vanishingly few, if any, conversations between historians, sociologists, and IR scholars on how to study similar phenomena across disciplinary and theoretical boundaries.

The discussions that led to the concept of WMPs thus included scholars from History, Sociology, and IR who approached communications infrastructures and world politics with very different theoretical and intellectual approaches. While this project only encompassed a particular subset of the diverse approaches and scholarly trajectories within these three disciplines, it was a first attempt to bring them together. As we developed and discussed ideas around WMPs, we also tried to be reflexive about the many perspectives missing or underrepresented. This included questions of Eurocentrism, the standpoint of academics all based

in Europe and North America, as well as other questions of power, violence and the struggle for hegemony. The power relations in world politics play into the construction of standpoints and theories of world politics, just as these conversely underpin and legitimize power relations. From a sociological perspective, theories about world order are part of world order, orienting and legitimizing (or delegitimizing) action.

The *second observation* was that contemporary *political discourse*, but also, to a somewhat lesser extent, academic debates, tend towards a mono-narrative regarding contemporary and future transformations of world order, centering around the figure of a (possibly now past) U.S.-led (or a 'liberal international') versus a Sino-centric order, or an ongoing great power/imperial competition between these orders. World politics often was and is described using one evolutionary dynamic or distinction (e.g., from a world of empires to a world of nation-states, or colonial/post-colonial), or the primacy of one ordering principle or structuring logic (e.g. anarchy or balance of power). Such a tendency towards mono-narratives however tends to obscure that from its inception as an (Eurocentric) identifiable realm of the social world during the nineteenth century, world politics was always characterized by a multiplicity of orders, ordering principles, subsystems etc.

The reaction to the second observation was to inquire into the multiplicity of world orders and ordering principles (connecting to a range of debates about multiplicity in IR¹). However, as we will explain further in the conceptual chapter following this introduction, despite its wide usage, the conceptual and theoretical apparatus that comes with seeking to understand world politics in terms of 'order' became more inhibiting than revealing when studying the transformations of world politics in their real-world complexity. Broadly speaking, we found that understanding transformations requires looking into *how specifically, in concrete historical settings, 'world orders' are constituted through being made*. Within the extant research on this issue, our specific take is to develop the concept of worldmaking projects to understand dynamics of change. As we

1 See, for example: Rosenberg/Kurki 2023; Rosenberg 2016: 127–153; Albert 2019: 132–141.

detail in chapter 2, we draw on myriad literatures on ‘world’ and ‘worlding’ to develop WMPs as a heuristic for understanding transformations in world politics, without drawing on the statism that remains indelibly embedded in the concept of ‘order.’

Briefly, we came to define WMPs as discursive-practical formations that: (a) are planetary in scale and articulate universalizing aspirations; (b) conceptualize and work towards realizing visions for the future (‘projects:’); (c) are (world) *political* projects as they relate their visions to some form of statehood, particularly by imagining characteristics of and relations between states and by addressing states as accountable actors. WMPs can vary widely in character, scope, scale, and impact. We seek to illustrate this variety in the following chapters. Analyzing single WMPs does not take us very far, however. Only by studying how they emerge, disappear, and interact with each other can we elucidate how WMPs ‘make’ world politics. We describe the concept of WMPs and how we came to these three criteria in much more detail in the following chapter.

The *third observation* was that ‘orders’ are often approached as mental and linguistic constructs, and infrequently as very material and physical endeavors. Infrastructures more specifically are often written out of debates on historical and contemporary world politics. Yet, infrastructure is an essential component of connecting the world as well as establishing and cementing power relations.

The reaction to the third observation was to use communications infrastructures in particular to study WMPs. This enabled us to move beyond examining world politics as actions and words. Rather, the focus of communications infrastructures ensured that we considered how WMPs also leave material traces in the world, and vice versa: communications infrastructures are often overlooked facilitators, inhibitors, or otherwise important foundations for the emergence of any kind of ‘order’ and, in our case, WMPs. We certainly do not suggest that all communications infrastructures are products of WMPs or that WMPs can be explained solely by studying communications infrastructures. But we suggest that they present crucial conditions of possibility for WMPs to emerge, realize their progenitors’ ambitions, or shape the world. Be-

cause of that, infrastructures are often important sites of contestation and battlegrounds between WMPs, while at times also enabling people to coordinate or cohere their plans and ambitions.

We arrived at the concept of WMPs during our meetings as a residence group at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) in summer 2024. These discussions took multiple directions in the first few weeks, as we sought to establish a common understanding of how we saw historical developments at the level of world or global politics. As anyone who has participated in interdisciplinary exchanges will know, such meetings quickly surface fundamental differences or disagreements on even basic definitions and methodologies. We sought to explore and discuss such differences through multiple routes: common readings; specific examples; conceptual debates. As these discussions progressed, we slowly developed the concept of WMPs and sharpened the definition as something that everyone in the group found productive, although we all took different routes to using the concept.

Different members of the group then worked on developing and operationalizing the concept in different ways, whether developing its theoretical foundations or exploring its practical ramifications. We then fed those explorations back into our initial theoretical work and developed a concept paper that we road-tested at a workshop in July 2024. We invited outside guests from all three disciplines to critique our work thus far. We are deeply grateful to all participants for their enthusiastic and trenchant interventions, which fundamentally shaped both our conceptual apparatus and our approach to this volume. At the workshop, Vincent Kuitenbrouwer and Simon Potter provided historical insights and reflected on their own experiences co-authoring a major publication on the history of international broadcasting (Potter et al. 2022). Ayşe Zarakol suggested how to deepen the examination of the rhetoric around WMPs versus reality, also drawing on her own interdisciplinary experience with historians (Toynbee Prize Foundation 2023). Andrew Dougall (2024) drew on his framework connecting communications technologies to world ordering in British and American history to suggest how to embed the examination of infrastructures within a broader theoretical landscape. Iver Neumann supplied helpful reflections on chronology and on taxonomy as a

tool. Finally, Peter Haldén pushed the group pragmatically towards crucial decisions.

Throughout our time as a group in Bielefeld, we also tried to be reflexive about the perspectives missing from our group. Inspired particularly by Ralf Rapior (2020), we considered the Eurocentrism of all three academic disciplines. Christian Bueger brought a rigorous approach to infrastructures and imaginative creativity in considering how to write about WMP (Bueger et al., 2023). As the time in Bielefeld progressed, we also turned to discussing potential written outputs from the project. As we ultimately had multiple different approaches and writing styles, we decided upon the format of this volume. Each person would contribute a chapter taking different approaches to the concept of WMPs with a first conceptual chapter that laid out the stakes of our jointly-developed concept. We also held several Zoom meetings in 2024–25 to discuss draft chapters and coordinate as far as possible between them. What has resulted here then is more than a conventional edited collection, but less than a jointly-authored monograph.

The volume proceeds as follows. The second chapter by Mathias Albert, Diana Lemberg, Heidi Tworek, and Tobias Werron explores the ideas underpinning the concept of WMPs and why the concept might be helpful for interdisciplinary conversations about transformations in world politics over time. It explains the idea of an infrastructural nexus, or why communications infrastructures are such a crucial space for understanding worldmaking projects as intellectual ideas and practices. We unpack the different types of worldmaking projects as well as the many ways that infrastructures relate those projects to each other. We also explore the different forms of relations, suggesting that these go far beyond the antagonistic or competitive, which is the most traditional conception of interaction between world orders. Overall, this chapter lays the conceptual groundwork for the other pieces of the volume.

The next chapter by Tobias Werron delves into the interaction between a specific set of worldmaking projects and communications infrastructures in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Werron shows how nationalism and imperialism became imaginaries that envision the world political sphere in specific ways and seek to change it

according to their respective vision. He argues that the communications infrastructure of telegraphy in particular enabled the transformation of nationalism and imperialism into WMPs. Rather than competing ideologies, nationalism and imperialism were deeply intertwined: they became WMPs simultaneously and both strove for global legitimacy as a mode of political ordering. Werron ends by reflecting on how this analysis can inform today's discussions around 'new imperialism.' He suggests that what's new about current forms of imperialism is the relationships between informal imperial practices and the rhetoric and practices of nationalism.

The next three chapters showcase how the concept of WMPs enables scholars to examine different spaces, particularly those less explored like islands, the air, and the polar regions. These geographical foci emerged through the group's discussions of the relationship between WMPs and communications infrastructures. They suggest that the concept of WMPs can point to new geographical spaces for scholarly study as well as how to integrate them into broader global works.

In chapter 4, Diana Lemberg uses islands as a lens to understand how communications infrastructures shaped world politics, particularly imperial worldmaking projects. Lemberg points out that while world-making had long occurred phenomenologically, it only became spatially global with expanding communications infrastructures, especially across the Pacific, that incorporated islands and previously independent places into empires and economic relations of capitalism. The focus on islands enables her to elucidate interimperial visions and aims for ordering the world that developed even as those same empires competed for territory. She then traces the continuities and discontinuities of the pre-1914 period up to the present.

In the following chapter, Mathias Albert suggests that the polar regions offer a useful avenue to explore the reaches of WMPs. Despite little research interest, polar regions were fundamental for contemporaries projecting the future of the world from the nineteenth century to the present, where the polar regions serve as a paradigmatic example of climactic collapse. Albert examines two main questions. First, he considers how WMPs overlapped in the polar regions. Second, he reflects

on whether ‘polar WMPs’ ever existed, providing a critical reflection on how scholars can determine what does or does not rise to the level of a WMP. Overall, Albert shows the utility of exploring the constituent parts of worldmaking and projects from regions not conventionally understood as central to such endeavors.

Meanwhile, in chapter 6, Diana Lemberg and Heidi Tworek explore WMPs’ interaction through new communications infrastructures in the air and space. They trace intellectual visions for WMPs alongside practical attempts to instantiate them through two examples: interwar wireless/radio as an illustration of WMPs cooperating, as well as satellite communications as an instance of competing WMPs in the 1960s and 1970s. These examples delve into different modes of interaction between WMPs as well as actors attempting to uphold or contest WMPs. Both collaboration and contestation could happen, with communications infrastructures as key sites for those interactions.

In chapter 7, Bettina Mahlert zooms into the micro-level of WMPs, analyzing specific ‘worldmaking activities’ (WMAs). Using examples from Africa, she considers how human actors sought to create spaces for realizing what was important to them under the conditions created by WMPs. She traces how these efforts involved attempts to resist, or, more broadly, to change the order created by WMPs. The examples analyzed pertain to questions of access to land and citizenship as well as the saving and storing of money

Finally, in chapter 8, Heikki Patomäki explores how competing worldmaking projects of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries related to ideas of world statehood, though he points out the ambiguity of this relationship too. He first provides a conceptual evaluation of how WMPs emerged before examining how twentieth-century history could be told through the lens of WMPs and their intra- and interactions. The idea of WMPs enables him to illustrate continuities after the end of the Cold War and to bolster the idea of history as evolutionary.

Overall, this volume aims to open up the scholarly conversation about how we can use interdisciplinary methods to trace change in world politics over time. We hope that other researchers are similarly inspired to experiment with bringing together theory and empirical

work from different disciplines in ways that make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.