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CONFRONTI

ISABELLA LAZZARINI

*Constructing and de-constructing diplomacy and diplomatic
history in the pre- and post-modern worlds.
The New Diplomatic History in dialogue with the
International Relation Studies*

Abstract: In 2008, John Watkins proclaimed that the time had come for a “new diplomatic history”. Watkins’s manifesto was so successful because it arrived at the right moment. A renovated diplomatic history is increasingly at the heart of a political history more attentive than ever to how social structures and cultural practices shape political interactions that are both multiple and flexible. On the other hand, post-1989 IR studies are facing new challenges: contemporary diplomacy is diverging from its classical Westphalian framework, and scholars and practitioners alike are looking for paradigms and models in order to deal with the challenges of globalisation. Moving from late medieval and early Renaissance Italy as a case-study, the communication aims at dealing with such a conceptual framework by focusing on a few key-concepts at the basis of the models of the building of both the ‘modern state’ and the ‘modern diplomacy’, such as sovereignty and territoriality.

Keywords: Diplomacy, International Relation Studies, Italian Renaissance

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In 2008, John Watkins proclaimed that

the time has come for a multidisciplinary reevaluation of one of the oldest, and traditionally one of the most conservative, sub-fields in the modern discipline of history: the study of premodern diplomacy.

Watkins’s manifesto was so successful not only thanks to the efficacy of its formula, but also because it arrived at the right

moment¹. After being defined in the nineteenth century as one of the backbones of the building of the nation-State, and being neglected in the second half of the twentieth century as an inward-looking, all-political field, diplomatic history, renovated by cultural history and historical anthropology, is increasingly at the heart of a political history more attentive than ever to how social structures and cultural practices shape political interactions that are both multiple and flexible. On the other hand, and a few years before, in 2003, Shaun Riordan, a former British diplomat turned political consultant, wrote a short and provocative book to foster a “New [contemporary] Diplomacy” which should face «the complex, multi-layered network of relations between post-modern states», recognize non-state actors, and develop proactive strategies to deal with the global problems hampering our multi-faceted contemporary world, characterized by what he calls an «asymmetric multipolarity»². Post-1989 studies on international relations (IR) are indeed increasingly sailing through uncharted waters: contemporary diplomacy is diverging from its classical Westphalian framework, and scholars and practitioners alike are looking for paradigms and models in order to deal with the challenges of globalisation, digital communication, and a much more multi-layered diplomatic agency than it was thought.

While undergoing a parallel process of critical discussion of classical models and teleological ways towards or within modernity (that is, a system of sovereign Western-like nation-States channeling diplomatic interaction into a formalised dialogue

¹ Some of these issues have been discussed at the *Third Conference of the New Diplomatic History Network 'Bridging Divides'*, Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, 24-26 October 2018 (I would like to thank Giles Scott-Smith, Noe Cornago and Luciano Piffanelli who were in my same panel on *Thinking Diplomatic Theory*, and all the friends of *Diplomatica* for that opportunity): see also I. Lazzarini, *Storia della diplomazia e International Relations Studies fra pre- e post- moderno*, «Storica», 65 (2016), pp. 9-41.

² S. Riordan, *The New Diplomacy*, Oxford 2003: <https://www.shauriordan.org> (consulted on 31st October 2023).

among peers), diplomatic history and International Relations Studies, together with research on International Law, are increasingly crossing their paths. The transformation of contemporary diplomacy in a globalised world has pushed research towards a re-reading of the same paradigms of sovereignty, territoriality, and boundaries – in a word, the notions of nation-States, international relations, and international law – that medieval and early modern historians are deeply scrutinising themselves. These traditionally disparate fields are starting to turn towards each other in search of useful categories and concepts, and new patterns of explanation.

1. Constructing and de-constructing diplomacy and political history: a frame

1.1. Diplomacy

Medieval Europe was a complex system in which polities and powers of different status and size developed in an unstable combination of institutional multiplicity and legal pluralism. The system was built on the reciprocal interplay of two universally sovereign authorities – the Empire and the Papacy – and a myriad of more or less autonomous territorial polities among which kingdoms and princes had the upper hand. Political authority was at the same time personalised and territorially distributed³. In this frame, Italian Renaissance diplomacy – that is, the diplomatic practice that developed among the many polities composing the Italian peninsula in a period roughly spanning from 1350 and 1520 – has traditionally been read as a turning point towards modernity, thanks also to Garrett Mattingly's great book on Renaissance diplomacy. According to Mattingly – or, maybe better, to the vulgarizing of Mattingly's thought – during the Renaissance permanent and reciprocal embassies increasingly controlled by the centralised power of kings and

³ J. Watts, *The Making of Polities. Europe, 1300-1500*, Cambridge 2009.

princes gave birth to a “modern” way of disciplining political interactions according to internationally recognised rules and laws, thus counteracting the overlapping powers and multiple loyalties so characteristic of the Middle Ages. Such diplomacy became the trademark of a “modern” state characterised by hierarchy, centralised power, and bounded territory, and the Italian laboratory was the space in which this process took its first steps⁴.

In the past decades and at different pace, both medievalists and early modernists have revised such a model: the most recent research is moving away from diplomacy as the backbone of the building of the “modern State” and as an institutional tool, an «histoire diplomatique en soi», as Lucien Febvre used to say⁵. It is rather considered as a social and cultural practice that enabled Europeans and non-Europeans to engage with each other in formal and informal, state and non-state contexts, through the elaboration of common languages, shared practices of communication, and political cultures. A relevant feature of a multi-layered political system, diplomacy is seen as a flexible activity in which a full range of dynamics often examined separately – negotiation, information gathering, representation, and communication – interacted together in a process profoundly linked to political and cultural transformations of power and authority. The practices, customs, and languages of diplomacy are at the heart of present-day research, which for the Middle Ages is focusing its attention mainly on two turning points – the twelfth and the fifteenth century – and on the continental context but with a clear awareness of the influence of Latin and Muslim Mediterranean societies on diplomatic interac-

⁴ G. Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, Oxford 1955.

⁵ L. Febvre, *Contre l'histoire diplomatique en soi. Histoire ou politique? Deux meditations: 1930, 1945*, in Id., *Combats pour l'histoire*, Paris 1953, pp. 61-70, partic. p. 63; S. Péquignot, *Berichte und Kritik. Europäische Diplomatie im Spätmittelalter. Ein historiographischer Überblick*, «Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung», 39 (2012), pp. 65-95.

tions⁶. Interest in multiplicity and creativity in experimenting innovative forms of interaction based on communication and information gathering is gaining ground. We are increasingly aware that the many European polities – kingdoms and principalities, cities and city-leagues, secular and ecclesiastical lordships, sometimes still included in composite systems (such as the imperial territories both in the German and the northern Italian regions), sometimes increasingly autonomous – elaborated innovative instruments and strategies of diplomatic communication at a different pace. Specific figures of formal and informal agents were assigned to diplomatic missions different in length and scope; distinctive agreements became increasingly common in ordering territorial hierarchies; rituals and protocols both disciplined and publicly organised diplomatic interaction; the emergence of the vernacular in political and diplomatic discourse increasingly required linguistic adaptations and mediation; lay literacy, and new systems of written records and archives developed to suit an increasingly dense and flexible communication system⁷.

⁶ The most recent reference work is obviously J.-M. Moeglin, S. Péquignot, *Diplomatie et «relations internationales» au Moyen Âge (IX^e-XV^e siècle)*, Paris 2017. The broadness of scope and wealth of information of this study are extremely useful as an introduction to the topic, even though a monarch-centric idea of medieval diplomacy, no longer acceptable unless integrated and nuanced with more flexible models, still resurfaces here and there in the book.

⁷ To complement Moeglin and Péquignot, and as a general reference to the most recent studies and sources editions, I refer to the two critical reviews by E. Scarton, «*Con quelle accommodate manere*». *Imprese editoriali, diplomatici e diplomazia nel Quattrocento europeo e mediterraneo*, «Nuova Rivista Storica», 105 (2021), pp. 1223-1254, and P. Volpini, *La diplomazia nella prima età moderna: esperienze e prospettive di ricerca*, «Rivista Storica Italiana», 132 (2020), pp. 653-683.

1.2. *Politics and the State*

We have arrived to this state of the art because in the past decades and at different pace, both medievalists and early modernists have worked on the traditional model of a classical diplomacy also through a more general calling into question the idea of “modernity” (and, as a component of modernity, the role of the Italian Renaissance). Research on medieval and early Renaissance politics has put political power and agency at the heart of some of the most interesting efforts at a revision of the old idea of the late Middle Ages as a transition from something distinctively medieval (let it be universal, imperial, feudal) to something else more modern (that is, more functional and rational, closer to what is familiar to us). The confluence of cultural and social anthropology, geography, gender studies and an attentive and critical global history – that is, all the recent efforts to bring the ideas of “authority”, “sovereignty”, and “legitimacy” into the broader field of “power” and to detach it from its deep western roots – has provided with a wealth of alternatives the always re-surfacing grand narrative of the building of the “modern” nation-State in its pristine form of a centralised, bounded, sovereign kingdom⁸.

The revision of both these models is forced upon scholars by the changing world in which we all live and its challenges. The heart of the problem is represented by the contemporary and growing difficulties of the nation-State on which traditional diplomacy seems to be grounded. Decolonisation after the Second World War and the implosion of the ex-Soviet galaxy definitively altered the previous international framework by multiplying the number of (more or less stable, and more or less historically credible) nation-States. However, the last three decades

⁸ I. Lazzarini, *Introduction*, in *The Later Middle Ages*, cur. Ead., Oxford 2021, pp. 1-17, partic. pp. 9-10. On one of the crucial facets of modernity – confessionalisation – and its revision, see now E. Bonora, *Quale riforma? Roma e l'Europa multiconfessionale*, «Studi storici», 64 (2023), pp. 21-52, partic. pp. 35-41.

have seen this same nation-State, which as a prevailing political form was gaining planetary diffusion, being eroded in many of its fundamental prerogatives by the process that Anne-Marie Slaughter defines as the «hydra-headed phenomenon of globalisation»⁹. In the various definitions that are given of contemporary globalisation, what seems common is the recognition of a profound systemic change that, also thanks to the information and communication revolution of new technologies, leads to the multiplication of relationships between individuals and groups across, above and below traditional territorial boundaries¹⁰. The flows of people and goods and the circulation of information in the contemporary world have made such a leap forward in terms of space, time and quantity as to cause profound qualitative changes in the political, social and civil fabric of different countries, affecting both the forms of sovereignty and the nature of authority, and finally the concept of territoriality¹¹.

Such transformation is prompting a revision of the notion of nation-State itself in all the many fields in which it has been central (politics and political history, and the related field of international relations, international law and the history of diplomacy). The use of new or renovated conceptual tools (from lexical to methodological) is therefore helping in replacing the idea of state/nation, with the more nuanced concepts of polity and political agency, and the correlated reading of diplomacy as more as an inter-polity and trans-polity political and cultural activity, regulated by the coexistence of numerous jurisdictions closely interwoven to each other and framed by a legal pluralism that is not forcibly confined to a “prehistory” of modern inter-

⁹ A.-M. Slaughter, *A New World Order*, Princeton 2004, p. 11.

¹⁰ Bibliography on this subject is immense: for our purpose here, see I. B. Neumann, O. J. Sending, *Governing the Global Polity: Practice, Mentality, Rationality*, Chicago 2011.

¹¹ I. B. Neumann, *Globalisation and Diplomacy*, in *Global Governance and Diplomacy. Worlds Apart?*, cur. A. F. Cooper, B. Hocking, W. Maley, London-Basingstoke 2008, pp. 15-28.

national law nor excludes any diplomatic interaction prior to the birth of the nineteenth-century nation-State. Such conceptual shifts help in reducing both the sense of imperfection, partiality, or anticipation linked to the “medieval” diplomatic actors and interactions, and the dramatic rupture supposedly due to the irruption of “modernity” between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century. At the same time, it bans the idea of the exceptionality of some experiences at the expenses of others. The Italian case is exemplary of such a risk, embodying both exceptionality and exception: Italy – that is, its many polities – is in fact supposedly precocious in “inventing” modern diplomacy in the late Middle Ages, and increasingly late on the main road towards the building of the modern state in the following centuries¹².

1.3. International law and ius gentium

Another layer can be added to such a revision: in order to analyse the main features of diplomacy in the late Middle Ages and in the early modern period – that is, in order to produce a “New Diplomatic History” – it is necessary to rapidly focus on another pivotal field, that is international law (IL). Again, the common understanding by international lawyers of the history of their field which has dominated most of the twentieth century roots back to the final decades of the nineteenth century, the heyday of the sovereign state and of Western imperialism. The mainstream narration of the history of international law is weighed down by its origins and is both state- and Eurocentric. Historians of international law have reduced their histories of international law to the place and time of the emergence of the sovereign state, Europe since the early-modern age or, at the

¹² I. Lazzarini, *Communication and Conflict. Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350-1520*, Oxford 2015; *L'Italia come storia. Primato, decadenza, eccezione*, cur. F. Benigno, E. I. Mineo, Roma 2021.

most, the late Middle Ages¹³. However, recent research on the present-day globalised world has increased the awareness of the limits of the paradigm of the sovereign states' monopoly in international relations. The resulting acceptance of the coexistence of different forms of normativity has had important reflexes on the way in which we look at the *ius gentium* in early modern Europe and to its medieval foundations. The notion of international law and its categories, born from a long process in which the Middle Ages was mainly absent, are nowadays increasingly being revised and reformatted so as to ensure that they can be effectively used to interpret the medieval reality¹⁴. To this purpose, it is necessary to adopt a wide, functional understanding of what international law is, that is any legal organisation of traditional inter- or trans-polity activities, namely distribution of territory and resources, dispute settlement, war and peace-making, trade and communication, and diplomacy.

The historically contingent term of "international law" came in vogue to specifically denote the law which regulates the relations among sovereign states. It was for this purpose that its major coiner, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), suggested it as an alternative to "law of nations", which to him encompassed

¹³ W. G. Grewe, *The Epochs of International Law*, Berlin 2000, pp. 1-33. On the influence of post-colonized world in such a revision, see T. O. Elias, *Africa and the Development of International Law*, Leiden - Dobbs Ferry 1972; R. Prakash Anand, *The Influence of History on the Literature of International Law*, in *The Structure and Process of International Law: Essays in Legal Philosophy, Doctrine, and Theory*, cur. R. St. J. Macdonald, D. M. Johnston, The Hague 1983, pp. 341-380, and, on the European side, C. H. Alexandrowicz, *The Afro-Asian World and the Law of Nations (Historical Approach)*, «Recueil des Cours de l'Académie de Droit International», 123 (1968), pp. 117-214; W. Preisner, *Frühe völkerrechtliche Grundlagen der aussereuropäischen Welt. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Völkerrechts*, Wiesbaden 1976.

¹⁴ A. Wijffels, *Ompteda revisited: the metamorphosis of scholarship on international law*, «Irish Jurist», 38 (2003), pp. 312-330.

both inter-state as well as trans-national private law¹⁵. Bentham was justified in this assessment. Law of nations, or rather the original Latin phrase *ius gentium*, has over its long history held both associations, often at the same time: from that perspective, it would be the preferable term¹⁶. That said, and well aware of the many roots of this debate, Randall Lesaffer, coordinating a major research work on this topic for Cambridge University Press (*The Cambridge History of International Law*), still advocates the use of “international law”: to current international lawyers, the English version of *ius gentium*, “law of nations”, has lost its historical fluency as, over the twentieth century, it has almost become synonymous to public international law. Moreover, to many it suggests its appropriation – “law of nations” – by polities as law-making authorities and thus indicates the exclusion of tracks of transnational and common law. Moreover, “international law” is now the most established term, also in terms of writing the history of the inter-polity law¹⁷.

In this sense, and back to medieval diplomacy, I would therefore rely on Dante Fedele’s recent affirmation that

in the last centuries of the Middle Ages, the *ius commune* functioned as a “common”, supra-national legal system (based on Roman, canon and feudal law as interpreted and constantly adapted to historical change by the legal scholars of the day) which coexisted with a myriad of particular systems (*iura propria*) in such a way as to realise unity in plurality (and viceversa).

International law would then

¹⁵ M. W. Janis, *Jeremy Bentham and the Fashioning of International Law*, «American Journal of International Law», 78 (1984), pp. 405-423.

¹⁶ R. Lesaffer, *Roman Law and the Intellectual History of International Law*, in *Oxford Handbook of the Theory of International Law*, cur. A. Orford, F. Hoffmann, Oxford 2016, pp. 38-58.

¹⁷ I am referring here to the *General Outline* provided in 2021 by Randall Lesaffer to the research teams of the different volumes of *The Cambridge History of International Law*.

encompass the multi-normative framework of a manifold system of relationships that were established between political actors empowered with various degrees of jurisdiction, and also [to] cover both the rights and obligations of individuals (or groups of individuals) under this system and (to some extent) the latter participation in it¹⁸.

2. Concepts: sovereignty and territory in the pre-modern and modern world

The developments mentioned above have been imposed to historical research by the modern debate: the Middle Ages, however, has been influential also on modern research in an interesting bottom-up dialogue. In his 1987 book *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement*, James Der Derian refers more than once to «a rise of a new medievalism». Such an assessment is grounded on the general idea that

we are entering – and some say that we are already there – a period in which [...], beset by internal disintegration and external regional combinations, the state is losing its previously unchallenged supremacy as the most significant entity in the international system¹⁹.

Amid a changing world which no longer seems dominated by a system of sovereign and territorial Western-like nation-States reciprocally interacting through codified and recognised international rules, the Middle Ages resurfaces on the table of contemporary scholars and attains a new level of interest because of the “non-modern” nature of medieval power. In such a general context, the Middle Ages – juxtaposed to modernity as a system of «overlapping authority and multiple loyalty» (ac-

¹⁸ D. Fedele, *The Medieval Foundations of International Law. Baldus de Ubaldis (1327-1400), Doctrine and Practice of the Ius Gentium*, Leiden - Boston 2021, pp. 12, 16.

¹⁹ J. Der Derian, *On Diplomacy. A Genealogy of Western Estrangement*, Oxford - New York 1987, p. 79.

cording to Hedley Bull in 1977)²⁰ «held together by a duality of competing universalistic claims», as Jörg Friedrichs completes Bull's renowned definition in 2001²¹ and regulated by a complex system of legal pluralism becomes interesting to all those investigating the multiplicity of contemporary, post-modern diplomacy. It is, after all, a context of experimental, fragmented and plural medieval polities and powers in which both the modern nation-State and the system of international relations supposedly generated by the birth of classical diplomacy – the one defined by Satow in 1917 as «the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states»²² – and early modern and modern international law are visibly absent. Some conceptual exchanges in such a context are therefore increasingly common, even though on both sides we face the methodological risk of stereotyping one context or the other. Often the Middle Ages is not interpreted by IR or IL scholars according to its own logics, but is reduced to a provider of simplified models and examples. According to an equally simplified logic, medievalists sometimes use modern concepts and models without the appropriate methodological cautions in order to make the Middle Ages more palatable and accessible to modern audiences.

Methodological cautions apart, working on diplomacy in past or present ages necessarily pushes scholars to consider the nature of public authority and/or political organisms (whatever their name: s/State, polity, power) in a given period and context, and to take into account, define or compare some fundamental concepts at work within the discourse on public power. Among those concepts I will single out today at least sovereignty (and authority/legitimacy) and territory (and boundaries).

²⁰ H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: a Study in World Politics*, London 1977.

²¹ J. Friedrichs, *The Meaning of New Medievalism*, «European Journal of International Relations», 7 (2001), pp. 475-502, partic. p. 482.

²² E. M. Satow, *Satow's Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, London 2009 (or. ed., London 1917), p. 3.

2.1. *The Middle Ages*

Medieval sovereignty is a problematic concept: in a world in which – as Tabacco said as early as in 1970 – power was conceived as “allodial” – that is, a sort of private resource – and public prerogatives (such as justice, war, fiscal revenues etc) were exercised to various extent by polities and powers whose authority was differently graduated, variably effective, and generally applied over territorially incoherent domains, sovereignty could not be but limited and negotiated²³. Recent research therefore has moved away from any rigid idea of statuality – John Watts in 2009 was lapidary: «it is not necessary to frame – one might almost say burden – the structural history of politics with the notion of the state»²⁴ – and focused instead on the «molecular and omnipresent character of power mechanisms»²⁵. Difficult for everyone, the effort of freeing historical analysis from the burden of teleological models coming from elsewhere in time and space has been particularly exhausting for Italian scholars who had to face the uphill climb of explaining the undeniable political creativity of a country out of the mainstream leading to the standard monarchical nation-State²⁶. In this sense, Giorgio Chittolini, in 1994 wrote that the “state” could be defined as

un sistema di istituzioni, di poteri e di pratiche [...] che ha fra le sue principali caratteristiche una sorta di programmatica permea-

²³ G. Tabacco, *L'allodialità del potere nel medioevo*, in «Studi medievali», 11 (1970), pp. 565-615.

²⁴ J. Watts, *The Making of Politics*, p. 35: Watts refers in a footnote here to R. Davies, *The Medieval State: the Tyranny of a Concept*, «Journal of Historical Sociology», 18 (2003), pp. 280-300.

²⁵ A. M. Hespanha, *Storia delle istituzioni politiche*, Milano 1994, pp. 11-12, my translation in English (or. ed., Coimbra 1982).

²⁶ It is worth recalling here at least Chabod's attempt to recompose the hiatus between the Italian 'states' and Renaissance Europe, F. Chabod, *Y'a-t'il un État de la Renaissance* (1956), in Id. *Scritti sul Rinascimento*, Torino 1967, pp. 604-623.

bilità da parte di forze e intenzioni diverse (o, se vogliamo, “private”), pur in un’unità complessiva di organizzazione politica²⁷.

In the medieval “state”, therefore, the institutions – that is, the public frame of authority – represented the flexible network through which many forces and different intentions intervened, crossed and mixed at different pace. The idea of the composite nature of late medieval political bodies – or “polities”, as the plasticity of the English language allows us to say – has increasingly been at the heart of a series of discourses on political organisms that have progressively broadened to include entities that are very different from each other in terms of both territorial dimension and institutional profiles, from empires to extensive monarchical domains, from urban federations or republican governments to nation-based regnal polities²⁸. Such a composite nature is revealed not only by the structures and substructures of politics – such as institutional frames or fiscal, diplomatic, military or administrative networks – but also by informal arrangements such as networks, practices of grace and service or lineages, affinities, patronage, and feudal connections (Chittolini’s *intenzioni*). This field of forces was the confrontation ground for languages and ideas of power and resistance that shaped the political discourse and that could come as well from above as from below²⁹. In this interpretation, authority is

²⁷ G. Chittolini, *Il ‘privato’, il ‘pubblico’, lo Stato*, in *Origini dello Stato, Processi di formazione statale in Italia fra Medioevo ed Età moderna*, cur. G. Chittolini, A. Mohlo, P. Schiera, Bologna 1994, pp. 553-590, partic. 569.

²⁸ For the notion of ‘composite states’, see J. H. Elliott, *A Europe of Composite Monarchies*, «Past and Present», 137 (1992), pp. 48-71, and most recently for Italy, M. Gentile, *Leviatano regionale o forma-stato composita? Sugli usi possibili di idee vecchie e nuove*, «Società e Storia», 89 (2000), pp. 563-573. For a re-reading of European political multiplicity between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age, see W. Blockmans, *Citizens and their Rulers in Empowering Interactions: Political Cultures and the Emergence of the State in Europe, 1300-1900*, cur. W. Blockmans, A. Holenstein, J. Mathieu, Aldershot 2009, pp. 281-291.

²⁹ Research on these themes is nowadays huge: apart from the volumes of the ERC project *Signs and States. Semiotics of the Modern State*,

at the heart of medieval political confrontation, and it does not coincide with sovereignty, which is much more fragmented and limited: as a consequence, legitimacy is difficult and fragile.

Territory is a problematic concept as well, together with the interplay between territories and power: the assumption that the historical process of modernity is based on the turning of «scattered islands of political power» into a «solid block of territory in which one ruler had final authority» has long been the backbone of the research of the “medieval origins” of the modern state³⁰. Recent research has, on the contrary, emphasized that medieval jurists associated the idea of territory not with an anachronistic concept of “state” but with the *iurisdictio* linked to a stratified idea of a community (a *universitas*) holding a bundle of rights over their respective spaces³¹. A medieval territory was a space not defined by linear boundaries, but instead politically modelled by processes of production of places characterised by some power and endlessly interacting in shared, disciplined or hierarchised ways. As Luca Zenobi points out, «*territoria* were then conceptualised as the jurisdictional spaces

whose principal investigator is Jean-Philippe Genet and that focus on political languages in Europe between 14th and 17th centuries (see the Éditions de la Sorbonne collection on *Le pouvoir symbolique en Occident*: http://www.editionsdelasorbonne.fr/fr/collections/?collection_id=77), some references can be found in *The Later Middle Ages (The Short Oxford History of Europe series)*, cur. I. Lazzarini, Oxford 2021.

³⁰ J. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, Princeton 1974, p. 31, lastly quoted by L. Zenobi, *Beyond the State. Community and Territory-Making in Late Medieval Italy*, in *Constructing and Representing Territory in Late Medieval and early Modern Europe*, cur. M. Daen, K. Overlaet, Amsterdam 2022, pp. 53-80, partic. p. 54.

³¹ J. Canning, *The Corporation in the Political Thought of the Italian Jurists of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, «History of Political Thought», 1/1 (1980), pp. 9-32; and in general J. M. Najemy, *Stato, comune e “universitas”*, «Annali dell’Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento», 20 (1994), pp. 81-130. On *iurisdictio*, the first reference still is P. Costa, *Iurisdictio. Semantica del potere politico nella pubblicistica medievale, 1100-1433*, Milano 1969.

of communities of people»: boundaries were therefore not linear, but personal³².

2.2. *The Modern Age*

Sovereignty and territoriality are problematic categories for modern research too: globalisation is indeed a game changer not only for the history of diplomacy – or diplomacy itself – but also for the territorial nation-States. John Ruggie in 1993, on the footsteps of a debate originated by Bull's *The Anarchical Society*, clearly put on the table the theme of the «unbundling of territoriality»: if in a generical middle ages power was characterized by overlapping authorities and non-exclusive forms of territoriality («the medieval system of rule was both personalised and parcelled within and across territorial formations»), and in the early modern age states were «territorially defined, fixed, and mutually exclusive enclaves of legitimate domination», in the 1990s such bundled territorialities were about to be unbundled by a “post-modern turn” towards a globalized political society in which political authority is organised in a nonterritorial, functional way³³.

In western societies before the end of the cold war, sovereignty was a powerful concept because «conceptually, and in practice, it connected the organisation of modern democracy with the organization of the international system» seen as a system of discrete and bounded regions. After the 1990s, according to Ansell, sovereignty becomes a less useful concept because it is almost inextricably linked to territoriality; in this sense, he argues, it is better to focus on the fact that what has become unbundled is authority rather than territoriality. In

³² Zenobi, *Beyond the State* cit., p. 56: see now also L. Zenobi, *Borders and the Politics of Space in Late Medieval Italy. Milan, Venice, and Their Territories*, Oxford 2023, partic. pp. 23-44.

³³ J. G. Ruggie, *Territoriality and Beyond: Problematising Modernity in International Relations*, «International Organization», 47 (1993), pp. 139-174, partic. p. 142.

some cases, authority is being unbundled within the territorial state – as when public authority is being privatized or deconcentrated – or new forms of authority are being created beyond the state. In still other cases, it is useful to think of authority as being re-bundled – when discrete bundles of functional or territorial authorities are joined together in new combinations (themselves territorial or functional). Anyway, the mutually reinforcing relations among territory, authority and societal interests and identities can no longer be taken for granted³⁴. Some scholars, such as Rebecca Adler-Nissen, argue that the characteristic form taken by authority and sovereignty in the post-Westphalian age could be defined as “late sovereignty”, a framework in which

nation-states continue to claim territorial authority, but non-state polities also make claims to authority, often an authority that is bounded not by territory, but by function.

Diplomacy in such a framework operates in a multidimensional order characterised by «constitutional pluralism and an uneasy combination of “national” and “common” or “other” interests»³⁵.

The debate about the changing nature of modern sovereignty and its relations with territory and authority is deeply connected to the discussions about the nature and forms of contemporary statuality. The analysis and conceptualisation of the various ways in which the nation-State deals with the pluralism of social and political actors and practices derived from globalisation is extremely interesting for a medieval historian

³⁴ C. K. Ansell, *Restructuring Authority and Territoriality*, in *Restructuring Territoriality. Europe and the United States Compared*, cur. C. K. Ansell, G. Di Palma, Cambridge 2004, pp. 3-18, partic. pp. 4, 6-7, 9.

³⁵ R. Adler-Nissen, *Late Sovereign Diplomacy*, in «Hague Journal of Diplomacy», 4 (2009), pp. 121-41 (re-edited in *International Diplomacy*, vol. III, *The Pluralisation of Diplomacy - Changing Actors, Developing Arenas, and New Issues*, cur. I. B. Neumann, H. Leira, Sage, Los Angeles, London, Delhi, Singapore 2013, pp. 155-174): «the late sovereign order has rival representational practices of state and non-state polities with overlapping legal and political authority and competencies», pp. 159-160.

because of the conceptual effort it requires to scholars in order to contemplating new models. The “state” – once again – is re-imagined and re-labelled.

The propensity to typologies is sometimes overwhelming: Thomas Biersteker lists – provocatively – post-modern states, defective states, self-restraining states; one could say, however, that such a provocative list compares with Wim Blockmans’ 2009 list of twelve possible late medieval political units ranging from the free peasant or urban communities and their federations or leagues, to princely unions, integrated kingdoms, empires³⁶. The urge towards complexity could become anachronistic. However, some discourses on the nature of contemporary polities are thought provoking. According to Ann Marie Slaughter, for instance, the changes that governmental institutions are undergoing to answer to transnational needs and emergencies not only prompted the shift from the idea of “national government” to the transnational concept of “global governance”, but also pushed the unitary state to reinvent itself as a “disaggregated state”, that is an aggregation of distinct institutions with separate roles and capacities, organised in horizontal and vertical networks. These networks build regular and purposive relations among similar governments units working across the borders that divide countries from one another and that demarcate the “domestic” from the “international” sphere³⁷. In this sense, the permeability between “domestic” and “international” echoes the parallel revision of any rigid distinction between “inside” and “outside”, and a “political” and “diplomatic” sphere in the medieval context which is increasingly gaining ground in historical research. Saskia Sassen, even more interestingly, looks

³⁶ T. J. Biersteker, *State, Sovereignty, and Territory*, in *Handbook of International Relations*, cur. W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, B. A. Simmons, Los Angeles - London - Delhi - Singapore, 2013, pp. 245-272; W. Blockmans, *Citizens and their Rulers*, in W. Blockmans, D. Schläppi, *Empowering Interactions. Political Cultures and the Emergence of the State in Europe, 1300-1900*, London 2009, pp. 281-291, partic. pp. 284-285.

³⁷ Slaughter, *A New World Order* cit., p. 14.

at the internal dynamics by which the state reacts and change within globalisation: according to Sassen, in fact, two sets of dynamics drive globalisation. One of these involves the formation of explicitly global institutions and processes, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO); another one does not necessarily scale at the global level as such, but is enabled and enacted by the state itself. A good part of this kind of globalisation consists in an enormous variety of micro-processes that begin to denationalise what have been constructed as national within the nation-State. While talking about denationalising the essential form of the state, Sassen does not want to entail the notion that the nation-State would disappear, but rather that in addition to being the site for key transformation, it will itself be a profoundly changed entity³⁸. In this direction, Neumann and Pouliot, by using Foucault's concept of *gouvernementalité*, tend to see the effects of globalisation on state government and power not as deprivation in favour of non-state actors, but instead as a re-alignment of governing towards a «global-level governmental rationality» based on a mutual interaction between institutions and the civil society. Globalisation influences not only the public face of authority but also society: their reciprocal reactions to change, by making civil society “object and subject of government”, transform the nature of the state into something at the same time open to external and internal inputs.

What all these theories – and possibly many others – have in common is an attempt at reading contemporary changes outside the grand narrative of the nation-State: in doing so, they are not attentive to, or interested in, the end of the state, but in the transformation of public power.

³⁸ S. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights. From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton 2006, p. 423.

3. *An attempt at some conclusive notes*

Research is reaching a point in which – despite the diversity of methodological tools, conceptual models, and heuristic objectives – two strictly connected and complementary grand narratives are being deeply revised. Such grand narratives are the teleological trajectory of political power and authority towards the “final” form of a nation-State which must become centralised, bureaucratic, and territorially bounded; and, consequently, the slow but inevitable diffusion of a “classical” diplomacy generated by the increasingly predominant system of nation-States as previously defined. That is not to say that nation-States or a diplomatic system mainly ruled by international law did not exist, even though the dismantling of the grand narrative of modern diplomacy has gone as far as to say, with Noe Cornago, that maybe «the widely held view of diplomacy as an exclusive attribute of sovereign states is more an institutionalised political discourse than the product of empirical evidence»³⁹. It rather is to say that the nation-State and its international relations system happened at some point, but are not “the” inevitable final result of political evolution. On the other even in their climax, they were not exclusive: other forms of power and authority existed, and other ways and agents of interaction concurred to maintain and enact dialogue, and to limit conflicts. History – at least medieval and early Renaissance history – and IR and IL studies – at least a part of them – converge towards the revision of this heavy, aggressive, Western, and ideological model: the nation-State and its diplomatic system are but a historical possibility and a theoretical model (an “anomaly”, as Friedrichs calls them⁴⁰) amid many others.

³⁹ N. Cornago, *Diplomacy and Paradiplomacy in the Redefinition of International Security: Dimensions of Conflict and Co-operation*, in *Paradiplomacy in Action. The Foreign Relations of Subnational Governments*, cur. F. Aldecoa, M. Keating, London - Portland 1999, pp. 40-57, partic. p. 40.

⁴⁰ Friedrichs, *The Meaning of New Medievalism* cit., p. 481.

If this is true, comparisons and cross-disciplinary encounters can become challenging – complexity is never easy – but extremely productive. If a rigid and teleological model deemed to become the standard against which every other process must be measured fades away, then comparing different contexts and historical periods becomes more useful and conceptually significant. When finally freed by more or less conscious definitions as pre- or post- modern/classic/national phenomena, historical processes and dynamics re-acquire their richness, complexity, and meaning.

