

Two Regimes of Time

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ANDREW R. HOM, DEC 24 2012

Anniversaries present occasions to celebrate and lament relationships.[1] Since its introduction thirty years ago in the journal *International Organization (IO)*, regime theory in International Relations (IR) has cause to celebrate its influence and productivity.[2] However, at least one excellent, truly international example remains absent from IR's regime engagement so far: Western standard time. This is unfortunate because Western standard time facilitates at least two fruitful avenues of regime inquiry.

Western standard time (WST) refers to a particular form of time reckoning, developed largely in Western Europe and North America, that utilizes mechanical, electronic, or quartz clocks and the Gregorian calendar to measure or 'tell' the passage of time. WST likely does not require much explication, as nearly anyone reading an online journal will be familiar with solar years and days, lunar months, and artificial hours, minutes, seconds, and further subdivisions (see Zerubavel 1982, 1985; Frank 2012). Indeed, for most of us, such time reckoning is practically synonymous with time itself, inasmuch as we conceive of time's natural essence as composed of these units or as an empty and homogeneous dimension unproblematically segmented by them.

However, WST as we know it emerged over several centuries as a solution to perennial problems of *timing*, or attempts to coordinate, integrate, and control various continua of change (Elias 2007).[3] Without the accurate and precise time reckoning provided by the Western clock and its global diffusion in the form of time zones, such political activities as religious and communal observance, market and government relations, factory labor, navigation by longitude, travel by rail and air, intercontinental communication and exchange, and a host of military technologies—all of which require good timing—would remain exceedingly impractical, idiosyncratic, and in some cases simply impossible (see Landes 2000; Bartky 2007; Hom 2010). With regard to IR's disciplinary identity, absent the widespread adoption of Gregorian calendrical dating many of the field's signal events would require different monikers. There could be no internationally significant 1919 (e.g. Porter 1972), *Twenty Years Crisis* (Carr 1939), 1989 (Lawson, Armbruster, and Cox 2010), 'interregnum' (Cox, Booth, and Dunne 2000), 9/11 or 7/7, or long or short centuries (Arrighi 2010; Bacevich 2012) without a standardized, common calendar. Absent these features and events, the modern international system as we know it would lack any sense of common timing and would be largely unrecognizable.

Regime One

These brief remarks, along with the historical correlation between the emergence of standardized time reckoning and territorial state sovereignty (Hom 2010), indicate that WST is no natural phenomenon. Rather it is a historically contingent and even a *political* achievement central to much of what concerns IR scholars. Given its global reach, its ubiquity across levels of relations, and its largely unquestioned hegemony, WST looks much like a regime instituted, diffused, and embedded in international political life over several centuries. Furthermore, WST meets many of the criteria for regime analysis proffered by contributors to that seminal *IO* issue.

In his introduction, Stephen Krasner (1982, 186) defined regimes as composed in part from 'implicit or explicit principles' and rules 'around which actors' expectations converge'. WST functions as a largely implicit principle—a 'belief of fact' or 'rectitude'—inasmuch as we take for granted that time's content is identical with the explicit rule or 'specific prescription' of WST. Furthermore, WST manifests three causal variables that Krasner identified as

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prominent across regime theories. It emerged from significant expenditures of political power (Krasner 1982, 197; see Hom 2010, 1160ff), inculcated the 'principles' just mentioned (Krasner 1982, 200), and came to dominate time 'usage and custom' as it diffused globally (Krasner 1982, 202). As one example of the hegemony of WST, the vast majority of the world's peoples now reckon using WST, assume standardized time zones and calendrical dates, exhibit 'time discipline' in the form of voluntarily internalized norms of punctuality, efficiency and productivity, and recognize an international dateline which establishes a clean break between one day and the next even as it wanders to and fro across the Pacific ocean (Thompson 1967).[4]

Time discipline links WST to other regime theorist as well. Much like Krasner, Donald Puchala and Raymond Hopkins (1982, 246-47) viewed regimes as driven by principles and rules, but also stressed their subjective or 'attitudinal' aspects: 'a regime exists in every substantive issue-area in international relations where there is discernibly patterned behavior. Wherever there is regularity in behavior some kinds of principles, norms or rules must exist to account for it.' Similarly, Oran Young (1982) emphasized that regimes contribute to order in part by regulating interaction among social actors, and Arthur Stein (1982) located regimes in 'situations in which rational actors have an incentive to eschew unconstrained independent decision making,' as when 'states collaborate with one another or coordinate their behavior'. Discernible patterns and regulated and coordinated behavior all speak to the desire for effective and reliable timing that WST satisfies. Whether in diplomatic practice, international economic exchange, foreign policy decision making, or any number of other international political processes; intelligible, regularized, and coordinated interactions depend in part on a shared understanding of when they will take place as well as their pace and duration, all of which in turn rely on a common sense of time and time discipline.

Furthermore, Western standard time discipline meets Robert Jervis' (1982) mark of an international regime, which is that 'restraints' must be 'internal' rather than externally imposed. And the diffusion of WST is hard to imagine without some growth of shared 'understandings of acceptability within an inter-subjective framework', as in John Ruggie's (1982) formulation .[5] Finally, WST rationalizes behavior and reduces transaction costs by providing 'high quality information' in the form of consistent and precise time reckoning which, despite the development of the international realm beyond the conditions which engendered WST's emergence, creates 'a demand for [its] own continuance' (Keohane 1982). WST therefore fits Robert Keohane's understanding of an international regime.

Perhaps the only work from the *IO* issue with which WST might not fit as a legitimate candidate for regime analysis is that of Susan Strange (1982), who thought regime theory unfit for analysis in the first place because it was 'ambiguous and imprecise, value-biased towards order rather than change or equity; essentially static in its interpretation of the kaleidoscopic reality of international cooperation and conflict; and finally, rooted in a limiting, state-centric paradigm.' Ronen Palan (2012) recently added a sixth 'dragon' to Strange's list: the triumph of economic form over political substance in regime theory, which provides 'a theory and rationale' for cooperation by assuming 'a shared enterprise of coordination among different subjects' and depends on a commonly accepted goal that simply does not exist at the international level. Yet in many ways, WST poses an empirical alternative to Strange's and Palan's theoretical critiques. It is deliberately unambiguous and marks the apotheosis of efforts to render time measurement more and more precise. By its precision and clarity as well as its static, quantitative interpretation of kaleidoscopic reality, WST brings order to the experience of change. To the extent that WST is coeval and co-constitutive of modern state sovereignty (Hom 2010), it undergirds state-centrism. And with regard to Palan's charge, given WST's close relationship to capitalism along with its purpose in facilitating coordination and cooperation, the clarity, precision, and order which WST enables are all examples of economic form substituting for political substance. Inasmuch as WST manifests across a range of 'shared enterprises of coordination', or regimes in Palan's formulation, we can view WST as *the* preeminent international regime because it sprang from a shared enterprise of coordination to become an invaluable and inescapable mechanism for the coordination of nearly *all* other shared enterprises.

Regime Two

Western standard time seems to have something for most regime theories, even if regime theorists have so far had little to say about time. Yet there exists an additional and important dimension to the relationship between time and regime theory. In Young's (2012) recent re-appraisal, one challenge for regime theory is that 'all social institutions rest

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on ideas, even when they have been around so long that it is difficult to ascertain the origins of the relevant ideas and trace the pathways through which they became influential.' In the case of time, this need not be the case. The intellectual and cultural traditions out of which WST emerged have grappled with time for over two millennia, which suggests that pathways of influence are there to be traced. Although this brief essay cannot accommodate such an undertaking, I do want to mention a different, older understanding of time as a fruitful first step in reconstructing WST's pathways of influence. This is time understood as a malevolent agent or force that opposes our endeavors and guarantees our mortality, what I call the 'problem of time' (Hom 2013).

From at least the recorded cosmologies of the ancient Near East onward, time has been embodied by various superhuman entities.[6] In Persian Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, and Greek and Roman mythology, 'time' is an evil god responsible for all forms of dissolution and chaos who holds dominion over the human or sublunar realm. In Judeo-Christian monotheism, the sublunar realm becomes a vale of dissolution and chaos through original sin, after which God must intervene periodically to correct 'temporal imperfection' as well as ultimately to deliver faithful souls to eternity. Although significant variation exists across cultures and cosmologies, the upshot of these systems of thought is that to inhabit the earthly realm is to dwell under the *regime* of a baleful force called 'time,' which ensures chronic instability, dissolution, and ultimately death. This is the venerable and vivid sense of living a 'time-bound' existence, and it remains pertinent to contemporary experience, as when we refer to the 'ravages' or 'spoils' of time, or the idea that 'time devours' all in the end.

The older regime of time maps less readily than WST onto the social theoretical approach found in IR regime theory. For an older understanding of time, we need an older understanding of regime.[7] 'Regime' stems from the Latin *regere*, 'to rule' or 'be ruled', guided, managed, or directed, and was originally a reference to 'the regulation of aspects of life that affect a person's health or welfare'. 'Regime' later came to indicate 'a method or system of rule, governance, or control', in particular if that system enjoyed 'widespread influence or prevalence'. It also takes on a negative connotation when rule is authoritarian, and occasionally refers to a 'set of physical conditions and influences to which a system is subject'.

Much as WST meets many of the contemporary criteria of regime theory, the older problem of time exemplifies traditional understandings of 'regime'. As an epitome the Persian time god, Zurvān, proclaims that '[b]y Time are houses overturned—doom is through Time—and things graven shattered. From it no single mortal man escapes' (quoted in Brandon 1965, 40). This particular evocation exemplifies how the problem of time captures crucial aspects of the traditional definitions of regime: it suggests quite authoritarian rule or dominion, the direction of human affairs, the regulation of life, and even a set of physical conditions to which the sublunar realm is subject (doom is *through* time). Although it is safe to say that Zurvanism is on the wane in contemporary international affairs, the problem of time persists when history 'returns' in the form of destabilizing events, or when the 'river of time' brings 'one damned thing after another' (too many discordant experiences arriving too quickly) or threatens some stable situation with instability and chaos, or when human individuals or collectives perish.

Conclusion: Theorizing Two Regimes of Time?

How might time regime two inform our understanding of time regime one? There are, after all, over two millennia separating the emergence of malevolent time gods and that of WST. Yet the relationship between time regimes one and two is more than a mere coincidence of language. Rather, I submit that the regime of WST emerged to *solve* many of the problematic aspects of existence associated with the older, more authoritarian regime of time.

Recall that standardized time reckoning facilitates behavior that is well-ordered, interactions that are coordinated and rationalized, and internalized time discipline. These are all instances of the effective *timing* of social beings, processes, and phenomena. They also are antithetical to the traditional problematic influence of time on human existence. Whereas the problem of time brings chaos and instability, the principles and rules that constitute WST facilitate rectitude, predictability, and regularized interaction—all features which qualify WST as an international regime by IR's theoretical standards. This suggests that if we want to grapple adequately with the origins of our contemporary, standardized time regime, we should pursue the question of how it effectively overcomes the ancient, problematic time regime. Furthermore, it is specifically by close regime theoretical scrutiny of WST that we can

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develop sites of historical analysis with potential to explain how and why WST *orders* interactions to prevent the *disorder* associated with time's flow; or how it encourages *internal restraint* and thereby *restrains* time's ancient and malevolent power; or how it overcomes the authoritarian *rule of time* by various *rules of time reckoning*. In short, combining contemporary regime theory with historical inquiry can explicate how Western standard time *tames* the *problem of time* through effective *timing*.

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Notes

[1] I am grateful to Luke Herrington for the invitation to contribute to *e-IR's* regime series, to Halle O'Neal for a close reading of my text, and to Harry Hom for pointing out how the argument would not be operationalizable as a psychological experiment.

[2] Oran Young (2012) lists four primary areas where regime theory has made headway: international economy, the environment, security, and human rights.

[3] The link between WST, timing, and coordination became empirically explicit in 1961, when *Coordinated Universal Time* (UTC) was standardized by the International Radio Consultative Committee and replaced Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) as the global scientific time standard. UTC is based on a weighted average of time signals from atomic clocks in national laboratories around the globe, and utilizes occasional 'leap seconds' to keep it aligned with the time defined by the earth's rotation (UT1). I use WST instead of UTC to refer to the modern time regime because the former captures the historical development of a global standard, of which UTC is one of the latest variations.

[4] The line varies by some 40 degrees of longitude as it travels from North to South Pole, largely as a result of sovereign states choosing on which 'side' of global midnight they would like to fall. For example, the island state of Samoa 'jumped forward in time' in 2011, switching from the eastern to the western side of the international date line in order to boost trade with Australia and New Zealand by aligning the Samoan workweek with theirs (Lesa 2011). 119 years earlier, Samoa first 'jumped' in the other direction to improve trade with the United States and Europe. In 1892, Samoans re-lived a day when they jumped. In 2011, the jump 'effectively eras[ed] Friday', although those who gathered around the capital city of Apia's central clock tower to celebrate and pray over the move did not report any experiential effects despite having lost twenty-four hours in the blink of an eye (Lesa 2011).

[5] In the case of WST, the International Meridian Conference of 1884 provides one potentially rich source of empirical evidence on the intensely political construction of an intersubjectively acceptable framework of global time reckoning (see Bartky 2007; Dohrn-van Rossum 1996, 349; Hom 2010, 1163; O'Malley 1990, 107–09).

[6] This very short summary relies on (Brandon 1965; Boyce and Grenet 1991; Whitrow 1988); a more substantial version appears in (Hom 2013).

[7] All definitions are from ("regime, n." 2012).

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