Evolution of the Contemporary Political Pattern

After taking this course you should have a basic understanding of what produced 200-odd "sovereign" states. This unit should briefly describe the development of the state idea in Europe and its diffusion to the rest of the world.

Territorial Principles of the Modern State System
A useful starting point is the sixteenth-to-seventeenth century’s political pattern in western/central European. The continent was dominated two distinct types of countries. One the incipient national states such as England, France, Spain, and Portugal and the other the empires in central and Eastern Europe. The Peace of Westphalia (1648), held that the Prince of any realm could determine the religion of that realm, as part of an arrangement that governed how territorial units in the Holy Roman Empire would relate to one another. This gave birth to a notion of sovereignty based in law. This legal principle became the foundation on which all units were to relate to one another, and the strong de facto sovereign arrangements of the west ensured that sovereignty was understood to be all encompassing.

The sovereignty principle is significant because it provided a theoretical foundation for carving territory into largely autonomous governmental units. This meant that the exercise of power was no longer seen in human hierarchical terms, but instead was to be exercised at a single scale - that of the state. However, as long as authority was vested in absolutist rulers and institutions the system was subject to warfare and collapse.

The other key ingredient to the future of the European state system was the doctrine of nationalism which the idea that each ethno-cultural community (nation) had the right to control its own affairs, and that the exercise of power ultimately rested with the members of that community. These nations were said to possess an immortal spirit that was more important that individuals. Furthermore nationalists believe that all progress and creative energy comes from the national spirit and the nation can demand supreme loyalty of its members. Further more the ideal form of government is where nations govern the territory they occupy - the nation state.

The actual pattern of people in Europe forced intellectuals to argue that nations could develop in a variety of ways. Some were diverse people knit together in centralized states (the English, the French, and the Spanish), some were the product of nineteenth-century movements to unify diverse peoples based on some sense of cultural continuity (e.g., the Germans and the Italians), some were the product of early-twentieth-century movements to free a group from dominance by another self-defined nation (the Irish and the Norwegians), and some were the product of movements to achieve self-determination from empires (the Serbs, Bulgarians and Croatians). In the United States the concept of nationalism calls for the blending together of very diverse people into a new nation.

The nation-state ideal has become a pervasive notion undergirding the modern state system but students should understand the gap between the nation-state ideal and the multi-cultural reality that lies behind it. The vast majority of the countries of the world are not nation-states in the original meaning of that term. Today we learn about Russians fighting Chechens, Palestinians seeking their own state, Basque separatists demanding greater autonomy from Madrid, Tamils and Singhalese fighting one another in Sri Lanka, and many more.

Colonialism and Imperialism World Systems

Theory holds that periods of colonial activity are determined by conditions in the core region of the world (Europe, Japan and the United States). There were two phases of large-scale colonization. The first lasted from 1415-1800 and was dominated by trading companies except in Latin America. In that region the Spanish imposed the rule of the monarch directly using techniques from the reconquista policy, which they developed to retake the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors. During this period colonialists focused on
the Americas and South Asia. The Russians directed their energy eastward into Siberia. The second phase was the late 19th century to post WWII. During it the colonialists focused on occupation and government lands in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The first wave was characterized by conquest, plunder, slavery, and annihilation of indigenous people. For example the Aztecs declined from 13 to 2 million by 1600. The second phase was less destructive of societies and economic exploitation is preferred to military conquest and rule.

Why periods of expansion? Colonialism resulted because of events in the core. When the core is insatiable - there is an expansion of colonial governments. When the core is stable there is a contraction of colonial activity. When stability in core exists an individual hegemonic power can control the world without colonialism. This is viewed as a better alternative to colonialism because formal colonies are expensive. Hegemony exists when one core power controls production, commerce financial and political leadership. It owns the large share of world production. Its currency is universal and its primate city is the financial center of the world. Such periods are characterized by peace and universal ideologies such as free trade. Hegemonic power relies on economic mechanisms to extract surplus value from the periphery.

Hegemons fall because rival powers can focus on capital accumulation while the hegemon is forced to spend its wealth maintaining political and military organization. Without a dominant power conflicts increase.

The historical geographer Donald Meinig described four types of colonial landscapes. In the Latin American case, extensive colonial influences date back farther than in the rest of the areas. Spanish and Portuguese colonialism in the Americas is associated with decimation of indigenous populations but, in the Spanish case in particular, there was also considerable intermarriage with indigenous peoples. The Spanish set up an administrative system in South America to facilitate the administration of a vast area and as well as the extract wealth from it. The administrative units bore some relationship to the physical character of the region, but none to the indigenous ethnic pattern. These units became the basis for the modern pattern of states in Latin America. The current states emerged in the early nineteenth century when Spain’s declining power coincided with the emergence of a political class in Latin America that wanted to be free of Spanish control.

In South and Southeast Asia the European colonists did not have a demographic impact on local peoples, nor were they powerful enough to claim major land empires in the early centuries of the colonial era. Instead, they set up key coastal bases and they developed a highly elaborate trade network focused on those bases. In the late nineteenth century Europeans were finally able to control large areas in these regions.

These two systems provided the framework for the current political pattern, but in Southeast Asia, they were not completely disconnected from local ethno-political patterns. Instead, the European colonial bases were frequently ports at the mouths of major rivers, which drained basins where rather homogeneous groups lived (Burmese, Vietnamese, etc.). The states that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, while encompassing many minorities, often had a single large ethno-cultural majority group. The European colonials had a practice of bringing peoples from one colony to help administer another colony. This explains, for example, the large number of Indians in cities such as Rangoon.

Africa experienced a different form of colonialism. European trading posts and some colonial ports were established along various parts of the African as early as the 16th century but in last two decades of the nineteenth century that the Europeans participated in an unprecedented land grab on the part of several European powers. The geographer Donald Meinig called these new colonies the "nationalist empires" because they were established by European owners for nationalist goals. That is each power wanted as much land as it could get. The resulting pattern of political boundaries was unrelated to cultural patterns among the indigenous Africans. The African colonies were also the last to gain independence-many as late as the 1960s. The new states were based on colonial boundaries and had little administrative/governmental infrastructure.

The United States, Canada, and Australia present another pattern of colonialism. Because they were thought to have a climate suitable for European settlers they were all destinations for European migrants. The settlers
ignored the rights of the indigenous population and treated these regions as effectively empty areas. These colonies were to provide a place where migrants from the colonial power could make a home and increase the power of the colonial power. By expansion of settlement and independence movements these colonies created countries that fulfilled the dreams of the settlers, but they largely destroyed indigenous patterns and institutions.

These four types of colonialism led to the creation of political patterns in different parts of the world. The leadership of newly independent colonies faced a dilemma. Their countries units entered a world political system based (at least theoretically) on the concepts of sovereignty and the nation-state. But the economic dependencies that had developed during the colonial period were difficult to shed and their sovereignty was often as much a fiction as a reality. At the same time, the legitimacy of state leaders was tied to their ability to exert power in the name of "nations"- and in the process created another type of fiction. These issues link the political geography segment of the course focused on global economic patterns, for understanding the geographical dynamics of the global economy.

In many former colonies rulers can trace roots to colonial social structures, and many of the colonial powers remain actively involved with their former colonies through formal associations of ex-colonies (e.g., the British Commonwealth ) or through more informal mechanisms of influence and control. During the Cold War powerful states played off so-called Third World states against one another, and supported internal developments that fit a geopolitical game plan.

Review Questions:

1. How did the Peace at Westphalia after the Thirty Years’ War provide the foundation of statehood? (2 pts)
2. The sovereignty principle and nationalism have been key to the evolution of the European state system. Briefly describe the sovereignty principle and nationalism. Explain how the nations of Europe have developed in a variety of ways. (2 pts)
3. Briefly summarize and explain the first phase of European colonialism (1415-1800). (2 pts)
4. Briefly summarize and explain the second phase of European colonialism (late 19th century to post WWII). (2 pts)
5. Explain how fluctuations in the core affect colonial activity. (3 pts)
6. Describe Donald Meinig’s theory of the four types of colonial landscapes (Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and the US, Canada, and Australia) and how these environments led to the creation of political patterns in their respective areas. (6 pts)
7. Explain how knowing the history of colonialism and imperialism provides a better understanding of the geographical dynamics of the global economy. (3 pts)