The contributions to this volume convincingly demonstrate that the conventional wisdom of globalization as a process toward a stateless world is quite misleading; that nation-states continue to matter both in global reality and in studies about it, while at the same time the state as a concept remains shamefully underanalyzed; and, hence, that there is a burning need for rethinking in the field. So this book sends a needed warning to the scholarly community not to be carried by conventional wisdom—in the same vein as was recently done in another landmark volume whose editors paraphrase Mark Twain by noting that the rumors of the nation’s death are greatly exaggerated (Curran and Park 2000: 16). And I wish to add that this warning sign is particularly welcome in the community of media scholars who too often rush after fashionable mantras such as globalization.

One might find it ironic that such emphatic support for caution concerning a fashionable mantra comes from somebody who is known as a proponent of the conventional wisdom of the 1970s: media imperialism. I admit that it was another mantra in its time, but I refuse to deny all of its validity. The idea of media imperialism, with the notion of information sovereignty as an integral part of it, was a paradigm that was badly needed at that stage of understanding the world of communications. Seen from the angle of the history of ideas one may even say that it was a necessary step in the continuous intellectual project of understanding the world. Like all paradigms that convert sensitive social realities into scientific and/or political narratives, media imperialism and its cousin, the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), were turned into mantras serving political agitation rather than scientific analysis (see Nordenstreng 1993). But this does not undo its vital contribution to the big project, and it should not be used as a weapon to accuse and condemn its early proponents, who typically were less one-sided in their claims than was perceived by later critics.

Hence new and even fashionable paradigms do have a useful function to play in the historical project of constructing an ever more appropriate understanding of the world (let us leave the functionalist and objectivist aspects of this sentence for another debate). Therefore I am not ashamed but rather proud of having been an early proponent of the information imperialism framework—in the way articulated by my coeditor of the two “Sovereignty” volumes, the late Herbert Schiller (2000). Our pushing for that particular paradigm was instrumental in a gradual growth of collective wisdom, while it was vital that it was met by critical arguments and alternative paradigms such as those generated by cultural
studies, which hit media imperialism with findings of the active audience, and so on. In the same way we can see that globalization as a contemporary paradigm has been instrumental in providing the intellectual arena new perspectives—but only to the extent that it does not turn into a mantra.

This is where this book enters the arena of the history of ideas. The editors see it as a follow-up to the “Sovereignty” volumes that I edited with Schiller, but one should look further and specify the paradigmatic context into which each enters.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Our first edited volume, National Sovereignty and International Communication: A Reader (1979), was a package of articles inspired by an anti-imperialist approach, highlighting broad themes of national development and international law as well as specific issues of direct satellite communication and foreign news, with a subtext of supporting ordinary people and their democratic rights against commercial pressures coming increasingly from “the business system, operating globally” (quoted in the introduction to this volume). This was indeed a subtext, because we did remarkably little to elaborate the concepts of people, citizens, democracy, nation-state—and even sovereignty. In fact, our volume would have deserved harsh criticism for neglecting to define its conceptual foundations, and in hindsight we may say that it traveled too easily on the waves of then-conventional wisdom. A notable exception was a devastating critique from Daniel Lerner himself (Lerner 1980), but that was not based on the intellectual weaknesses of our work but on our political line, spelling out a veteran’s disgust with a whole generation of “the New Left” in communication studies that we came to represent for him.

Our second volume, entitled Beyond National Sovereignty: International Communication in the 1990s (1993), was put together in the early 1990s, when it had become clear that the collapse of Soviet-style socialism had not only brought welcome new political space for Eastern Europe but had also diminished the moral and material support that the Third World received from the international community. Accordingly, not only was the idea of a New International Order dropped by the United Nations and its specialized agencies such as UNESCO (across the board from economy to communication) but also an opposite New World Order was advocated by the U.S. regime that led the Gulf War. This meant the demise of an international system based on sovereign nation-states—the foundational philosophy of the UN as well as of the anti-imperialist paradigm of the 1970s. In this context it was logical that the volume had a new subtext: support for civil society, including a global civil society (for the latter, see my postscript “Sovereignty and Beyond”). But again we failed to provide theoretical elaboration for our central concepts, and civil society remained as hazy as the concepts of sovereignty and state had been in
the earlier volume. As pointed out in the preface, our original ambition had been to put together an update of international communication theory, but the rapidly moving landscape did not facilitate that and thus we had to settle for an eclectic reader.

The present book is situated in a context where globalization sets the parameters for TINA (“There Is No Alternative,” a slogan promoted by Margaret Thatcher)—aptly used by Robert Horowitz in Chapter 3. Ideologically, this represents a further swing of the pendulum to the Right from where we were in the early 1990s, but on the other hand there are countertrends particularly from two directions. First, environmental problems have been recognized as truly global problems by intergovernmental forums in Rio 1992 and Kyoto 1997 (notwithstanding the setback at The Hague follow-up conference in 2000). Second, civil society made a breakthrough at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 2000 as nongovernmental movements stopped the proceedings of one of the most influential organizations in the contemporary world—demonstrating that even TINA is questionable. The contemporary forces of global capitalism are paralleled by those of peace and development movements that only recently justified anti-imperialist politics precisely as “global problems” (and with emphatic support of the Soviet-led socialist countries of the time!).

Today—the shift of the millennium—is the time when globalization is coming under critical scrutiny, in all fields. Therefore this book is not only timely but also vital for anyone who wants to understand the state of affairs in international communications studies. Yet, while praising its topic I have to note that—like collections such as the two “Sovereignty” volumes typically do—this book provides stimulation for further study rather than a comprehensive analysis of the globalization/state problem. In this respect I may wryly note that it is indeed a follow-up to the two “Sovereignty” volumes.

THE NATURE OF THE STATE

The focus on the state invites me to make a fundamental point: The state is always a composite of social, political, and economic interests rather than an isolated entity. A Marxist way of making this point is to speak about “the class nature of the state.” Western scholarship has a tendency to go along with a libertarian view whereby the state is typically seen as an inherently repressive bureaucracy based on military and police force, buttressed by secret service agencies, and dominated by a law and order culture. Such a demonization of the state effectively eliminates the democratic aspirations of ordinary people, which, after all, constitute the leitmotif for a state in original theories of democracy (Held 1996).
In the democratic view, the state is truly meant to be a mechanism to facilitate governance in accordance with the people’s will. Its basic nature is democratic and popular instead of repressive and elitist—in theory. In practice, however, most states have limited at least part of the mandate of the people and turned themselves into less democratic bureaucracies. The Soviet and other former East European states are textbook examples of how theoretical “people’s democracies” in practice may end up with undemocratic state structures. The current power struggles between politicians and “oligarchs” in these countries—with accompanying media wars mostly concerning the control of television—furnish us with evidence of how important the state continues to be even in the neoliberal conditions of postsocialism, and also how contradictory its political line may be (for the Russian case, see Nordenstreng et al. 2001).

The chapters of this book provide illuminating examples of the nature of the state, helping us to deconstruct the original concept of the state as a mechanism of democracy. Take South Africa (see chapter 3): A state “owned” by a narrow apartheid regime moved almost overnight into the hands of a broadly based democratic government. In both cases the state does matter, but the color of the state changes—not only in racial terms but also in almost all respects. Or take India (see chapter 4): A state operating as a platform to balance conflicting socioeconomic forces from both within and outside of the country. These are persuasive cases in point for today’s Marxists: The state indeed has a class nature.

Another example comes to mind. At the height of the NWICO battles in the 1980s, the coalition dominated by U.S. press proprietors and led by the World Press Freedom Committee (WPFC) engineered “The Declaration of Talloires,” which advocated the U.S. First Amendment notion of media freedom and attacked the NWICO for ostensibly advocating state control of the media. This call by the self-proclaimed voice of the “independent news media” was endorsed by a letter from President Ronald Reagan, the highest representative of the U.S. state (Nordenstreng 1999: 257). The Talloires group went around proudly quoting the letter, without seeing the paradox: the state actively advocating a denial of state involvement in the media.

The ideological struggles around NWICO exposed the central role that the concept of the state occupies in media policies, both national and international. Given the libertarian bias held even by many leftist media intellectuals, it was relatively easy to construct the big lie that NWICO promoted state control (such as licensing of journalists). A demonized notion of the state traveled so well that many professional and academic experts failed to see that while opposing state control and supporting media freedom they were in fact subscribing to a corporate initiative, conspicuously directed against democratic interests.
True, the situation was quite complicated in the international arena, with the Soviet-led socialist countries as well as several less democratic Third World countries supporting the NWICO. Later, when Eastern European countries became fellow travelers of Western powers, the balance also shifted at UNESCO, which switched from advocating to opposing NWICO. This reversal reveals another paradox: The United States had left UNESCO, citing among other reasons its displeasure with NWICO as an instrument of state control of the media, while in the post-NWICO period the United States, formally a nonmember, gained significant influence over UNESCO’s liberal media policies, mainly through the surrogate body WPFC.

Yet the bottom line is clear: First, states and intergovernmental organizations are not sociopolitically neutral or inherently biased in one or another direction, but always represent the forces that happen to be in power (leaving aside here the many questions about types of power). This is evident throughout this book, notably in the chapters on Canada, India, Australia, Korea, and the EU. Second, there is a lot of ideological baggage in the media field, capitalizing on the notion of a solid and suspicious state, which is seen as fundamentally opposed to the ideals of freedom and democracy. Contributions like this book are vital steps toward getting rid of that ideological baggage.

A FINAL NOTE

My focus above—like in most of the chapters in this book—has been on the state as a political-administrative entity surrounded by the forces of globalization. But a nation-state contains much more than formal structures of governance: It leads us to consider the social welfare state, cultural identities, and collective psychologies. In other words, it invites us to focus on the life world of ordinary people—on real civil society and not just those nongovernmental organizations that are vocal in its name (and often elitist even though they are fighting for democracy).

Such a focus on people is part and parcel of the new and genuine importance placed on human rights in international law and politics. But we should not place human rights in opposition to the nation state. Rather we should see that the state is a guarantor of human rights, democracy, and rule of law.

Moreover, the state remains crucial for development in the Third World. The welfare state may have nearly completed its task in industrialized countries, and thus may have exhausted much of its progressive role. Indeed, in the view of some interest groups, it has overreached itself and should be rolled back, with civil society and the so-called third sector assuming a greater role in the management of society. But the developing countries are far from ready for this. In these countries it is mainly the state that can ensure that poverty and
inequality can be seriously tackled; relying on civil society or NGOs would be largely wishful thinking. In this respect globalization does stand against development.

Historically, a strong state is a legacy of the colonial powers. While the state was to a large degree democratized in the industrialized West, it remained largely undemocratic in the developing South. What developing countries need is not to replace an undemocratic state with an undemocratic global market but to democratize their states and to retain national development as top priority.

It is with this spirit—focusing on both people and development—that we should continue to examine the concept of the state.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


