

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Susan Strange meets the everyday: The mundane sources of structural power

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Abstract

Scholars continue to demonstrate the enduring relevance of structural power when analysing contemporary international affairs such as US–China rivalry, transformations of global finance, and the increasing significance of cyber power. Yet, in this paper, I find that the everyday foundations of structural power remain vastly unexplored. While work on structural power and everyday research might be seen as opposites, I argue that there are important interactions between these two approaches to international power. Everyday forces and everyday agents constantly inform and shape structural power. This highlights a mutually dependent relationship between power in the international system and the everyday. In this paper, I therefore advance a new theoretical framework that explores these links between the mundane dynamics of the everyday and world affairs. It conceptualises the state as a mediator between the two levels and stresses how a perceptual selectivity favours certain parts of the everyday over others. I illustrate the usefulness of this theoretical approach and the continued relevance of structural power by exploring how intersections between everyday life and patterns of production in parts of the US have contributed to recent disruptions to American structural power and the way it is being deployed on the international stage.

Keywords: everyday; perceptual selectivity; state theory; strategic-relational approach; structural power; structure-agency

Introduction

Research within International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) continues to demonstrate the enduring utility of the concept of structural power. Scholars use it to interrogate topics as diverse as cyber power and interference in foreign elections,¹ exchanges and global finance,² and US–China rivalry.³ Yet more than 35 years have passed since Susan Strange published *States and Markets* and presented her four-faceted notion of structural power.⁴ Since then, the everyday turn in IPE has spurred a lot of debate about how to study power relations internationally by emphasising how certain actors and important practices often have been ignored or overlooked when conceptualising subject matter relevant for the field.⁵

¹Lennart Maschmeyer, 'Subversion, cyber operations, and reverse structural power in world politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:1 (2023), pp. 79–103.

²Johannes Petry, 'From national marketplaces to global providers of financial infrastructures: Exchanges, infrastructures and structural power in global finance', *New Political Economy*, 26:4 (2021), pp. 574–97.

³Anton Malkin, 'The made in China challenge to US structural power: Industrial policy, intellectual property and multinational corporations', *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:2 (2022), pp. 538–70.

⁴Susan Strange, *States and Markets* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

⁵Juanita Elias and Shirin M. Rai, 'Feminist everyday political economy: Space, time, and violence', *Review of International Studies*, 45:2 (2019), pp. 201–20; John M. Hobson and Leonard Seabrooke (eds), *Everyday Politics of the World Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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In this paper, I combine the idea of structural power with this everyday movement and argue that such a connection is necessary to understand contemporary international affairs. I demonstrate how research has circled around the mundane sources of structural power but still left the everyday vastly unexplored. To overcome this, I advance an everyday understanding of structural power that builds on Bob Jessop's and Colin Hay's work on the strategic-relational approach in order to connect the everyday with power relations on an international level.⁶ Using their framework as my point of departure, I argue that the state functions as a mediator between the everyday and international affairs. However, where Jessop and Hay use concepts such as strategic selectivity and discursive selectivity to describe the environment of social forces that surrounds the state apparatus,⁷ I argue that the state also is conditioned by a perceptual selectivity that places a premium on what is cognitively decoded as legitimate among everyday agents. As such, I identify a sequence of selectivities where perceptual interpretations on an everyday level lead to specific discursive constructions that, in turn, guide the strategic intentions of the state and how it deploys its international power. In other words, I introduce a new ontological element that operates prior to the discursive and strategic selectivities of the state in order to bridge the everyday and structural power. Being aware of this role of the state, I argue, will allow studies of structural power to incorporate the everyday and grasp a more complete picture of what constitutes power in the contemporary international system.

The theoretical framework I introduce in this paper therefore aims to make two distinct contributions. Firstly, it allows for the study of the complex interactions between the everyday and the international. While I present it by focusing specifically on structural power, the paper also attempts to demonstrate how international affairs in general, including other dynamics such as hegemonic ordering and bilateral cooperation, are inherently intertwined in an interdependent relationship with the everyday. Secondly, as these arguments are unfolded, the paper also revisits the structure-agency discussions in the everyday literature by offering a middle way between what has been called the 'everyday life' and 'everyday politics' approaches within the scholarship.⁸ Altogether, this paper forwards a bottom-up approach to the study of structural power that emphasises the agency of various actors and the importance of different mundane practices which often have been overlooked or neglected in research on international affairs.⁹

In the next section, I explore the continued relevance of the concept of structural power for contemporary IR and how the everyday is treated within this literature. After that, I introduce my theoretical framework and emphasise how the perceptual selectivity of the state allows scholars of IR to study the links between the everyday and international affairs. Finally, using President Donald Trump's so-called Liberation Day tariffs as a case, I illustrate the usefulness of this way of approaching power in the international system by investigating everyday transformations related to American production as a source of the current disruptions of US structural power.

The continued utility of structural power and the missing everyday

When Strange published *States and Markets* in 1988 and presented her four-faceted notion of structural power, she introduced a somewhat diffuse and pluralistic way of comprehending power as an analytical concept.¹⁰ *States and Markets* was in many ways a break from the realists' obsession with a state-centred notion of power. Literature on 'the politics of international economic relations', as

⁶ Colin Hay, *Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction* (Red Globe Press, 2002), chapter 3; Bob Jessop, *State Power* (Polity, 2008); *The State: Past, Present, Future* (Polity, 2016).

⁷ Colin Hay, 'Narrating crisis: The discursive construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, 30:2 (1996), pp. 253–77; Hay, *Political Analysis*, p. 212; Jessop, *The State*, pp. 53–9.

⁸ John M. Hobson and Leonard Seabrooke, 'Everyday international political economy', in Mark Blyth (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of International Political Economy (IPE): IPE as a Global Conversation* (Routledge, 2009), pp. 290–306.

⁹ Matt Davies, 'Everyday life as critique: Revisiting the everyday in IPE with Henri Lefebvre and postcolonialism', *International Political Sociology*, 10:1 (2016), pp. 22–38 (pp. 23–4).

¹⁰ Stefano Guzzini, *Power, Realism and Constructivism* (Routledge, 2013), p. 179.

she called it, reflected ‘the concerns of governments, not people’, and the consequence was scholars becoming ‘servants of state bureaucracies, not independent thinkers or critics.’¹¹ Instead, Strange presented a framework of structural power based on a market–authority nexus operating in four different domains: security, production, finance, and knowledge. Controlling the resources within these spheres, such as arms, capital, credit, and technology, determined who got to exercise that all-important structural power. As Stefano Guzzini puts it: ‘Obviously, these power resources are not limited to state agents. In fact, firms might be prominent in the last three, many states irrelevant in all.’¹² Yet Strange identified a realm of actors besides states and firms. She became a leading academic specialist on the authority of banks and financial institutions,¹³ but she also explored other forms of non-state authority such as organised crime, cartels, and ‘econocrats’ in international organisations.¹⁴

Strange was therefore well aware of the connections between domestic dynamics and international economic affairs. However, she hardly incorporated the everyday into her account of the domestic. After all, there is only a very limited amount of people who can be employed in international organisations, and while organised crime is a part of everyday life in many parts of the world, it would probably still be unfair to portray the vast majority of ordinary people as a part of it. In other words, Strange left the importance of the everyday sources of structural power vastly undeveloped. Nonetheless, it appears she became more and more aware of this in her late works.¹⁵ In *The Retreat of the State* from 1996, she circled around what could have been developed into an everyday approach to international power by continuously emphasising how she intended to extend ‘the focus of analysis from states to all forms of authority.’¹⁶ And she did so while highlighting how ‘politics is a common activity; it is not confined to politicians and their officials.’¹⁷ Unfortunately, Strange never presented any systematic exploration of various *everyday* forms of authority.

Despite this, scholars continue to demonstrate the enduring analytical utility and relevance of structural power when studying contemporary affairs in the international system. Although this often is done without engaging with Strange’s original work in any substantial ways,¹⁸ state-of-the-art endeavours have further developed the concept of structural power to better accommodate developments such as US–China rivalry, transformations of global finance, and the increasing significance of cyber power.¹⁹ Blayne Haggart and Randall Germain are responsible for one of the most exciting efforts in this regard as they advance a neo-Strangean framework that considers ‘the knowledge structure to occupy a privileged relationship to the other structures.’²⁰ Yet while some of these moves to update the concept have brought analyses closer to the everyday by forwarding

¹¹ Strange, *States and Markets*, p. 14.

¹² Guzzini, *Power, Realism and Constructivism*, p. 179.

¹³ Susan Strange, *Mad Money* (Manchester University Press, 2015); Susan Strange, *Casino Capitalism* (Manchester University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), chapters 8, 11, 12. Similarly, Blayne Haggart and Randall Germain have recently described Strange’s approach as appealing exactly because of its pluralist conceptualisation of power: see Blayne Haggart and Randall Germain, ‘Strangely inspired: Recovering a neo-Strangean approach to power, authority and knowledge for IPE’, *Review of International Studies* (2025), p. 3.

¹⁵ Randall Germain has noticed somewhat similar developments in Strange’s scholarship, see Randall Germain, ‘Susan Strange and the future of IPE’, in Randall Germain (ed.), *Susan Strange and the Future of Global Political Economy: Power, Control and Transformation* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–18 (p. 5).

¹⁶ Strange, *The Retreat of the State*, p. 37.

¹⁷ Strange, *The Retreat of the State*, p. 12. This echoed some of the Coxian research at the time. See e.g. Mark E. Rupert, *Producing Hegemony: The Politics of Mass Production and American Global Power* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Haggart and Germain, ‘Strangely inspired’, pp. 1–2.

¹⁹ Malkin, ‘The made in China challenge to US structural power’; Maschmeyer, ‘Subversion, cyber operations, and reverse structural power in world politics’; Petry, ‘From national marketplaces to global providers of financial infrastructures’.

²⁰ Haggart and Germain, ‘Strangely inspired’, p. 7.

a more pluralist understanding of power,²¹ the mundane everyday sources of structural power remain untheorised. Instead, focus is directed towards allowing research on this form of power in the international system to study other hitherto-unexplored but important dynamics such as subversion²² or subcategories of productive power.²³

The bottom line, though, is that the groundwork for an everyday approach to structural power in IR already has been developed. As shown, Strange pushed her own work in that direction, and more recent scholarship has embraced a more pluralistic conceptualisation of structural power. At the same time, ordinary people and their actions, as well as their perceptions, have been heavily discussed in other parts of IPE, the field Strange was so instrumental in developing. Reflecting on the contours of contemporary IPE, Benjamin Cohen describes the field's explorations of the everyday as 'a sub-category of more specialized contributions that seek to formally extend the boundaries of the field in one direction or another'.²⁴ The movement, as Cohen calls it, signals a significant shift from the way more mainstream approaches tend to explore political affairs of the international economy. Where most theoretical schools of thought within IPE typically dismiss as irrelevant the mundane of the everyday,²⁵ everyday studies insist on how different aspects of everyday life interact with various dynamics on the international level while leaving important imprints on the subject matter of IPE.²⁶ As such, this bottom-up approach tends to zoom in on often overlooked practices, narratives, and agency to demonstrate how they influence the international political economy. In what follows, I attempt to make the idea of structural power in the international system meet the everyday. While these two perspectives on power might be seen as opposites, I argue that a careful examination of the state and its role as an intermediary between the everyday and the international is the glue that will allow these two levels of analysis to stick together.

The state as a mediator between the everyday and international affairs

Attempting to understand the everyday underpinnings of interstate relations and state foreign policies, my approach takes Bob Jessop's theory of the state as its point of departure. To Jessop, the state is essentially a social relation that is far from a 'unified thing' or a 'unitary subject'.²⁷ Instead, the state might better be conceptualised based on its institutional characteristics and treated as the playing field on which different political actors and forces meet, negotiate, and engage with each other in order to realise more or less well-defined intentions, interests, or preferences.²⁸ Advanced as the strategic-relational approach (SRA), this way of studying the state and state power entails a much wider focus than just the state apparatus, elite policymakers, or specific state policies. The SRA emphasises 'the exercise and effects of *state power* as a contingent expression of a changing

²¹ Maria A. Gwynn, 'Structural power and international regimes', *Journal of Political Power*, 12:2 (2019), pp. 200–23; Petry, 'From national marketplaces to global providers of financial infrastructures'.

²² Maschmeyer, 'Subversion, cyber operations, and reverse structural power in world politics'.

²³ Malkin, 'The made in China challenge to US structural power'.

²⁴ Benjamin J. Cohen, *Rethinking International Political Economy* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), p. 46.

²⁵ Davies, 'Everyday life as critique', p. 23.

²⁶ Kasper Arabi, 'Overcoming methodological statism: New avenues for hegemony research', *Review of International Political Economy*, 32:1 (2025), pp. 242–57 (pp. 251–2); Juanita Elias and Lena Rethel (eds), *The Everyday Political Economy of Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); John M. Hobson and Leonard Seabrooke, 'Everyday IPE: Revealing everyday forms of change in the world economy', in John M. Hobson and Leonard Seabrooke (eds), *Everyday Politics of the World Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–23.

²⁷ Jessop, *The State*, p. 54.

²⁸ Colin Hay and Michael Lister, 'Introduction', in Colin Hay, Michael Lister, and David Marsh (eds), *The State: Theories and Issues* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), pp. 1–24 (pp. 12–14); Colin Hay, 'Marxism', in Colin Hay, Michael Lister, and David Marsh (eds), *The State: Theories and Issues* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), pp. 66–88 (p. 84); Colin Hay, 'Crisis and the structural transformation of the state: Interrogating the process of change', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1:3 (1999), pp. 317–44 (p. 336).

balance of forces that seek to advance their respective interests inside, through, and against the state system.²⁹

This paper contributes to these discussions by adding the importance of the everyday to the institutional mix of forces that constitute the state, its form, and its different policies. The state has no agency in the international system on its own, and it has no opinion on how to act within the current configuration of structural power in the international system. The state has no life on its own. While some scholars therefore designate the state as non-existing, I follow Colin Hay's treatment of the state 'as if real', which values the state as an analytical instrument.³⁰ Yet, at the same time, it also recognises how the state 'has no agency per se though it can be seen to define and construct a series of contexts within which political agency is both authorized (in the name of the state) and enacted (by those thereby authorized).'³¹ In the following, this section of the paper seeks to explore how the everyday engages with these forces of the state and present how such a move will allow scholars to bridge the gap between the everyday and structural power in the international system.

The perceptual selectivity of the state and its everyday legitimacy

The conceptualisation of the state I have presented above is based on an ontology that assumes the state is constituted by an environment of social relations. Jessop calls this the social basis of the state and defines it as 'the specific configuration of social forces, however identified as subjects and however (dis-)organized as political actors, that support the basic structure of the state system, its mode of operation, and its objectives.'³² Yet instead of applying Gramscian concepts such as power blocs and hegemonic blocs to the analysis of this social basis of the state as Jessop suggests,³³ I approach these social dynamics of state power through the everyday. In practice, this means placing a heavy emphasis on the role of the legitimacy of the state and how it is rooted in the everyday practices, perceptions, and actions of ordinary, non-elite actors.³⁴ Elite policymakers enforce a certain policy position with specific outward effects that might influence structural power on an international level. However, that position is only sustainable in the long run insofar as the same policymakers find that no delegitimising pressures from below are challenging the status quo. If they experience their own position as coming under increasing stress, a reaction – whether big or small – is necessary to release tensions.³⁵ The everyday therefore plays an important role as it serves as the legitimising foundation of the state upon which its policies – including those with international effects – are sustained, enforced, or perhaps challenged.

But this just raises another question: why is the state dependent on everyday legitimacy? Or, to put it more straightforwardly, why should elite policymakers care about how state authority is being (de)legitimised on an everyday level? Answering this question, I follow previous everyday research which also has been grappling with the concept of legitimacy.³⁶ Leonard Seabrooke, for instance, criticises 'economic constructivism', which otherwise has directed attention towards endogenous dynamics when studying institutional change, for an implicit treatment of 'legitimacy

²⁹ Jessop, *The State*, p. 54.

³⁰ Colin Hay, 'Neither real nor fictitious but "as if real"? A political ontology of the state', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 65:3 (2014), pp. 459–480 (p. 463).

³¹ Hay, 'Neither real nor fictitious but "as if real"?', p. 460.

³² Jessop, *The State*, p. 72.

³³ Jessop, *The State*, pp. 72–3.

³⁴ Hobson and Seabrooke, 'Everyday IPE', pp. 13–15.

³⁵ Hay, 'Crisis and the structural transformation of the state', pp. 327–9.

³⁶ Hobson and Seabrooke, 'Everyday international political economy'; Leonard Seabrooke, 'Everyday legitimacy and institutional change', in Andreas Gofas and Colin Hay (eds), *The Role of Ideas in Political Analysis* (Routledge, 2010), pp. 78–94; Liam Stanley, "'We're reaping what we sowed": Everyday crisis narratives and acquiescence to the age of austerity', *New Political Economy*, 19:6 (2014), pp. 895–917.

by proclamation.³⁷ What this means, he argues, is ‘the assumption that an ideational entrepreneur’s proclamation of a “winning” idea automatically generates legitimacy’.³⁸ Drawing on a Weberian economic sociology, Seabrooke instead stresses legitimacy as processes of belief-driven actions and rejects treating the concept as a binary condition which can be ‘implemented by the state’.³⁹ The value of this approach for the notion of legitimacy is how the links between the state and its everyday basis become ‘two-way relationships between claims made by those who seek to govern by the rightfulness and fairness of their actions, and the conferral or rejection of such claims by those being governed’.⁴⁰

The state and its power, in other words, are not only legitimised via elite policymakers and their proclamations. They are also dependent on how they are justified amongst everyday agents. As David Beetham notes in his seminal study of the legitimacy of power, the contemporary state is a ‘form of power-structure that requires legitimation, not so much to function, or even to survive over a period of time, but to achieve those purposes that depend upon the support of its population, and to maintain its political system intact in the face of serious policy failure or challenge to it’.⁴¹ This has important implications for how we study the legitimacy of the state and its power. Liam Stanley, who draws on both Seabrooke and Beetham, argues that narratives – that is, crisis narratives in Stanley’s case – are not ‘legitimate because those with power say so’ but rather ‘because the story is justified in light of existing assumptions and lived experiences’.⁴² That is why, I contend, we must explore how the state’s international endeavours and policies are experienced and perceived on an everyday level among everyday agents. Because without those shared beliefs of legitimacy, the international affairs of the state regime and its structural power will turn unstable and rickety. In other words, without an explicit focus on legitimacy and its everyday foundation, research might be left with a significant blind spot that prevents it from analysing important drivers behind the (in)stability of structural power in the international system.

At this point, the reader might be thinking: ‘Well, then, who are those everyday agents?’ This is incredibly challenging to pinpoint in exact terms because everyone has an everyday life. As Anna Killick notes: ‘even a Chancellor of the Exchequer has an everyday understanding of the economy’.⁴³ Scholars, including Killick, therefore argue that it is more useful to approach the everyday as a site of practice.⁴⁴ Doing so has the benefit of avoiding a distinction that is based on what kind of title one is holding. Such a proposition runs the risk of conceptualising politics in a narrow, top-down sense that has more in common with what John M. Hobson and Seabrooke label ‘Regulatory IPE’ and characterise as being organised by the question ‘who governs?’.⁴⁵ Approaching the everyday as a site, on the other hand, draws attention towards questions such as ‘who acts and how do their actions enable change?’.⁴⁶

At the bottom line, ‘everyday agent’, then, denotes those who live their lives within this site. However, as Stanley and Richard Jackson argue, the site we call the everyday is ‘not normally a place or activity that one can choose to opt into or out of unless they opt out of society itself’.⁴⁷

³⁷ Leonard Seabrooke, *The Social Sources of Financial Power: Domestic Legitimacy and International Financial Orders* (Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 9, 22, 40.

³⁸ Seabrooke, *The Social Sources of Financial Power*, p. 22.

³⁹ Seabrooke, *The Social Sources of Financial Power*, p. 45.

⁴⁰ Leonard Seabrooke, ‘The everyday social sources of economic crises: From “great frustrations” to “great revelations” in interwar Britain’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 51:4 (2007), pp. 795–810 (p. 796).

⁴¹ David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 118.

⁴² Stanley, “We’re reaping what we sowed”, p. 898.

⁴³ Anna Killick, “I know my economy”: A political ethnography of how everyday actors understand “the economy”, PhD diss., University of Southampton (2018), p. 162.

⁴⁴ Killick, ‘I know my economy’, p. 162; Liam Stanley and Richard Jackson, ‘Introduction: Everyday narratives in world politics’, *Politics*, 36:3 (2016), pp. 223–35.

⁴⁵ Hobson and Seabrooke, ‘Everyday international political economy’, p. 291.

⁴⁶ Hobson and Seabrooke, ‘Everyday international political economy’, p. 291.

⁴⁷ Stanley and Jackson, ‘Introduction’, p. 231.

It is, in short, an all-encompassing label whose analytical value lies in the way it redirects attention towards where international relations 'are constructed, performed, or enabled'.⁴⁸ Following Benedict J. T. Kerkvliet, who has influenced parts of the everyday scholarship profoundly, the framework I present on these pages therefore uses 'the everyday' as a mechanism to study the processes or people 'embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct'.⁴⁹ This entails, as I illustrate in the last section of the paper, focusing on how people cognitively experience the world around them, their social relationships, and their social spaces.

Nonetheless, defining the everyday as a site does not assume that everyday agents are subject to no structural restrictions. In fact, the degree of everyday autonomy is widely discussed in the literature. Everyday research is often divided into two different approaches: 'everyday life' and 'everyday politics'. Originally suggested by Hobson and Seabrooke,⁵⁰ their differing attitudes to the agency of everyday people is perhaps the main issue that sets these two approaches apart. The 'everyday life' approach utilises a logic of discipline that aims to identify, challenge, and neutralise various structures of exploitation that in numerous ways constrain everyday life. Everyday agency is therefore subject to various structures and external forces that create a pressure of conformity upon ordinary people and their day-to-day activities.⁵¹ The 'everyday politics' approach, on the other hand, moves focus away from various structures of constraint and brings agency and autonomy to the forefront by emphasising how different forms of everyday practice and action on a micro-level can bring about change and macro-transformations.⁵² Operating after a logic of appropriateness, this line of work emphasises how power is constituted, shaped, or informed by various everyday actions – whether overt or covert, direct or indirect – through significant but often overlooked bottom-up processes.⁵³

The framework I present on these pages, I argue, offers a middle way between these two approaches. On the one hand, it explores how everyday agency from below might lead to changes of structural power in the international system. It does so by emphasising the importance of everyday legitimacy for the state regime and its foreign policies. What this implies, then, is that the cumulative build-up of everyday activity over time – and not isolated occurrences of everyday action – can become a source of stress for the state and its structural power in the international system. However, at the same time, I point towards the state's selective context and suggest that it filters and prioritises certain everyday actions over others. In other words, the framework aims to explore in more detail the conditions under which everyday actions are impactful and hold the potential to transform world structures. But, simultaneously, it also aims to explore the conditions under which everyday action is blocked from doing so.

I am far from the first to point towards the importance of the legitimacy of international affairs among non-state agents. Steven Bernstein has previously presented a framework to study legitimacy that uses a somewhat similar approach.⁵⁴ It is based on the premise that legitimacy is rooted in both social structures and political communities. The first is 'composed of global norms and institutions' and 'serves a constitutive function by defining what appropriate authority is, where

⁴⁸Davies, 'Everyday life as critique', p. 23.

⁴⁹Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, 'Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours)', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36:1 (2009), pp. 227–43 (p. 232).

⁵⁰Hobson and Seabrooke, 'Everyday IPE'; Hobson and Seabrooke, 'Everyday international political economy'.

⁵¹Examples of the 'everyday life' approach include Davies, 'Everyday life as critique'; Paul Langley, *The Everyday Life of Global Finance: Saving and Borrowing in Anglo-America* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵²For an often-highlighted example of the 'everyday politics' approach, see Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁵³For a detailed introduction to these two approaches, see Hobson and Seabrooke, 'Everyday international political economy'.

⁵⁴Steven Bernstein, 'Legitimacy in intergovernmental and non-state global governance', *Review of International Political Economy*, 18:1 (2011), pp. 17–51.

it can be located, and on what basis it can be justified.⁵⁵ Yet legitimacy is also rooted in political communities, Bernstein argues: 'New modes and sites of governance throw traditional notions of the international community into question because they increasingly target or affect (directly or indirectly) non-state actors or communities.'⁵⁶ These communities cover a range of both state and non-state actors; rule-makers as well as those who are targeted by the rules. 'This complexity forces attention to how different audiences of states, global civil society, or marketplace actors may share or differ in criteria or weightings of the elements of legitimacy that justify political domination.'⁵⁷ What seems to be on the line here is how interference with the daily routines and practices within such communities might inform the level of legitimacy an institution enjoys within these various settings.

Yet this does not hint at how those agential expressions of legitimacy at the everyday level, such as perceptions and experiences, filter through all the way to the abstract confines of international affairs. How do such everyday expressions of legitimacy move from the micro-level to inform the abstract macro-dynamics of the international? This is where the state and Jessop's SRA come in, as it excels in how it offers 'the potential to transcend the dualism between structure and agency'.⁵⁸ Conceptualising the state as a playing field entails that everyday agents constantly engage with the structural limits and constraints such as the rules of the game and access to the field itself. An important caveat is embedded in these processes: not all everyday actions are equal. While all everyday agents might be a part of what Bernstein calls political communities and form their own opinions about what is legitimate when it comes to the state and international affairs, the social environment favours some actions over others. Jessop refers to this as the strategically selective context to encapsulate how the state system's 'structure and *modus operandi* are more open to some types of political strategy than others.'⁵⁹ Social forces therefore have different access to different configurations of state power; the state regime and the way it deploys its international power is selective and discriminates against certain everyday strategies while favouring others.

Hay develops these insights further as he advances the idea of discursive selectivity to acknowledge how actors do not always 'have a fairly direct and unmediated access to the contours of the terrain they inhabit'.⁶⁰ Doing so, he highlights how different narratives, speech acts, discourses, and certain key events are presented in ways that lead to a specific decoding by the receiver. This is different from how Jessop deploys the SRA. Studying the Winter of Discontent in 1978–9, for instance, Hay places a premium on how the crisis was discursively constructed in British media instead of seeing it through purely materialistic lenses as a battle between social classes. In Hay's own words: 'Ultimately far more significant [than the descriptive accuracy of the media coverage] is their narrativisation, the subject positions constructed and the resulting attributions of causality and responsibility – in sum, the *discursive selectivity* imposed by such narratives upon the decoding process'.⁶¹

Jessop's strategic selectivity and Hay's discursive selectivity constitute a conceptual framework that allows one to study how different everyday forces interact with and influence different state policies – including those that have international effects and might influence the configuration of structural power in the international system. Treating the state as a playing field opens the possibility of studying how everyday agents and practices interact with other social forces in such an environment that is regulated by both discursive and strategic selectivities. Yet these two types of selectivity seemingly operate at two different ontological levels. Hay's discursive selectivity appears to sit prior to Jessop's strategic selectivity as it emphasises how different discursive constructions

⁵⁵ Bernstein, 'Legitimacy in intergovernmental and non-state global governance', p. 25.

⁵⁶ Bernstein, 'Legitimacy in intergovernmental and non-state global governance', p. 27.

⁵⁷ Bernstein, 'Legitimacy in intergovernmental and non-state global governance', p. 28.

⁵⁸ Hay, *Political Analysis*, p. 127.

⁵⁹ Bob Jessop, *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in Its Place* (Polity, 1990), p. 260.

⁶⁰ Hay, *Political Analysis*, p. 209.

⁶¹ Hay, 'Narrating crisis', pp. 265–6.

influence the strategic biases that constitute the strategically selective context of the state. In other words, everyday agents are assumed via Jessop's strategic selectivity to adopt a certain strategy when trying to influence state policies. The state is in turn selective of those strategies deployed by the everyday agents. However, such a position assumes that everyday agents and state officials alike have clear and precise views of the playing field on which these forces are interacting. To rectify this, Hay's idea of discursive selectivity highlights how discursive constructions inform various actors' intrinsic intuitions for the game, how they read the field, and how they battle both each other and the strategic selectivity they are manoeuvring against.⁶²

However, this reveals little about how those discursive constructions come about. Being aware of the discursive selectivity of the state holds the potential to broaden our knowledge about how dominating narratives and other social constructions influence state policies such as responses to various international crises and wars.⁶³ Yet in order to understand why certain discursive constructions become more important than others, a further ontological element must sit prior to the discursively selective context in the same way as it is prior to the strategic selectivity. It is not predefined or set in stone that certain narratives should dominate the discursive selectivity over others. Instead, the dominating discursive constructions seem to be the outcome of a perceptual selectivity that favours certain perceptions over others. The implication of this is that certain players on the playing field have privileged access to defining the discursive selectivity of the game; that all everyday perceptions by no means are equal. While Hay's discursive selectivity redirects the analytical attention of the SRA towards *intersubjective* dynamics, I propose to add an *intrasubjective* lens to the framework that puts a premium on how everyday agents perceive and experience the world around them and their social networks, as well as their own life situations – and how such individual cognitive decodings influence the playing field that constitutes the state. What we end up with, then, is a sequence of selectivities where perceptual interpretations lead to specific discursive constructions that, in turn, guide the strategic intentions of the state.

What I describe here implies that there is a certain epistemic bias that characterises the state which decides whose perceptions and experiences with international affairs it listens to when formulating foreign policies and determining how to respond to international developments. This argument has certain similarities with the concept of epistemic injustice, coined by Miranda Fricker, that emphasises how systematic biases cause 'wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower'.⁶⁴ Each of these 'knowers' – or everyday agents as I label them – has their own distinct perceptions, experiences, meanings, or ways of decoding the world around them. Yet all do not carry the same weight when it comes to influencing state policies. While Fricker distinguishes between two types of bias – testimonial and hermeneutical injustice – the outcome is the same: a perceptual selectivity that discriminates against certain perceptions and experiences, meaning that the everyday cannot be treated as a unified whole when trying to link it with international affairs.

From the everyday to structural power in the international system via the selectivities of the state

So, what I have described above outlines how the everyday influences the state through a perceptual selectivity. It entails that different power configurations on both the state level and the international level have favoured different kinds of everyday agency throughout time and space based on what has been perceived as threats to the status quo by elite policymakers. All of this demonstrates how the selective context functions as a filter between the everyday and the state that in turn operates as the gate to structural power. I have depicted these dynamics in [Figure 1](#). Various forms of everyday action based on experiences and perceptions are only able to reach the state level if they manage to get through the selective context. When writing the selective context, I refer to all three selectivities

⁶² Hay, 'Narrating crisis'; Hay, *Political Analysis*, pp. 209–13.

⁶³ Wesley W. Widmaier, Mark Blyth, and Leonard Seabrooke, 'Exogenous shocks or endogenous constructions? The meanings of wars and crises', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51:4 (2007), pp. 747–59.

⁶⁴ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 1.

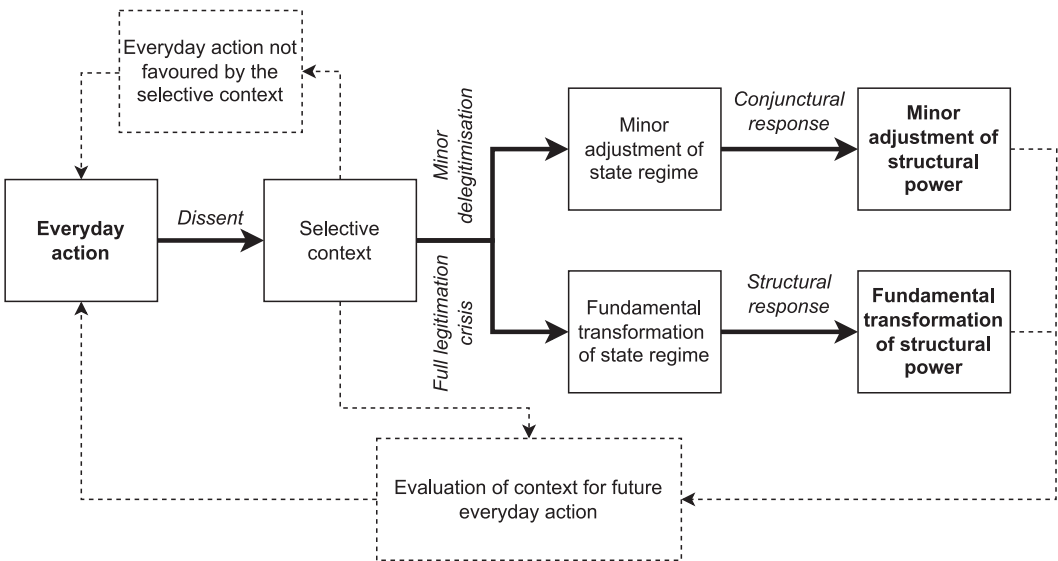


Figure 1. Linking everyday action and structural power.

– that is perceptual, discursive, and strategic – and how they operate at different ontological levels. Some everyday actions might be filtered out because they are based on perceptions that are not favoured at the given time or space. Others might not be successful because they are at odds with the discursive narrative in play. Finally, they might be stopped by the strategic intentions of the state. But this raises another fundamental question: how do everyday actions actually slip through the context? Everyday agents might try to delegitimise a specific policy consensus related to international affairs. But these efforts will only succeed if the policy elites find their position is coming under increasing stress. This might happen in two ways: (1) The everyday challenges originate from actors and experiences already favoured by the selective context, or (2) the elite policymakers experience the selective context as changing to such an extent that the delegitimising everyday forces no longer can be ignored.

Regarding the latter process, when the selective context is changing, there will most likely be no immediate indications that a certain threshold or tipping point has been met where cumulative everyday actions translate into actual change on the state level. It might only be afterwards that such a shift becomes apparent to those everyday agents that are involved. That is because those intrasubjective constructions that make up the perceptual selectivity have no predefined or predictable effects that can be measured or evaluated right away. That said, the behaviour of relevant advocacy organisations can be a sign that change is underway. Kerkvliet distinguishes between everyday politics, advocacy politics, and official politics.⁶⁵ Yet, instead of treating them as separate, seeing advocacy politics as the link between everyday politics and official politics (which is similar to what I refer to as elite policymaking throughout this paper) offers a way of understanding how the everyday more specifically interacts with the state, its selectivities, and its policy positions.⁶⁶ Where the everyday constitutes those forces the advocacy groups react upon and the input they receive, it is the selective context that determines what access the advocacy groups have to elite policymakers. So, if such advocacy organisations ramp up the delegitimising pressure on the state in accordance with everyday experiences, it might be an early indicator of shifting state selectivities.

⁶⁵Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics*, p. 22.
⁶⁶Robert Cox advanced a somewhat similar argument using American labour unions as examples. See Robert Cox, ‘Labor and hegemony’, *International Organization*, 31:3 (1977), pp. 385–424 (p. 390).

This outlines how everyday actions can be carried from the everyday level to the state level, and through the selective context, by certain advocacy groups. When the everyday agency arrives at the state level, it can reinforce the current configuration of the state by providing further legitimisation, or it can undermine it through a process of delegitimisation. The configuration of the state is similar to what Hay calls 'state regime' and defines as 'a particular stage in the evolution of a state form'.⁶⁷ Crucially, the transformation of a state regime that stems from delegitimising everyday action does not necessarily entail a fundamental, some might say revolutionary, change of the core of the regime. The problems or contradictions that lead to those delegitimising everyday actions might be resolved using the instruments or tools that are available within the existing toolbox. But, occasionally, these within-regime modifications are simply not enough, and elite policymakers find themselves in a fully fledged legitimacy crisis. Such situations can lead to a crisis of the entire state regime itself that requires broader and more structural responses which in turn lead to deeper and more fundamental transformations of the state regime itself.⁶⁸

The last step in Figure 1 is the alternations of structural power in the international system. The stress on the state regime might induce a policy change with implications for the structural power. Just like state regime transformations, the extent of alternation of structural power in the international system might take different forms. If the change is structural, it could signal a fundamental rearrangement of power relations on the international level as some countries gain structural power while others lose it. If the delegitimising dynamics from below are of a less fundamental character, the transformation could imply less of a radical change than a mere reorientation of the way the current configuration of structural power materialises. Examples of such a 'conjunctural response', to use Hay's label,⁶⁹ include the transformation of American structural power in the 1970s and 1980s, where the Americans did not lose their international power but, in Strange's words, just 'changed their mind about how to use it'.⁷⁰

Neither of these movements are one-way processes that only flow from the everyday and upwards. Hay notes how actors' own reflexivity ensures what he calls strategic learning.⁷¹ Everyday agents monitor how their actions are treated by the selective context and form their subsequent actions accordingly. That is what I call evaluation in Figure 1. This process of evaluation is not only a product of the selective context. Transformations on both the state level and the international provide feedback to the everyday and influence further action. As such, this framework offers a dialectical relationship between the everyday and structural power that highlights a mutually dependent relationship between the two levels.

So far, I have only focused on the steps that take the analysis from the everyday to the international level. I have yet to address what happens *in between* these stages. Those flows that tie everyday action together with the selective context, the context with the state, and the state with the international system are arguably just as important as the steps themselves.

I use the concept of dissent to describe the interactions between the everyday and the selective context. Doing so, I draw on the work of Paul Langley on financial dissent which he deploys in 'an attempt to move towards a political analysis that does not work through the simplifying and false dichotomy of power/resistance'.⁷² The aim here is to avoid reducing acts of dissatisfaction to explicit practices of protest or overt defiance. Instead, I use dissent to describe how actions on an everyday level might challenge the existing policy arrangements regardless of whether such practices are overt or covert, conscious or unconscious. In the words of Bernd Bonfert, David J. Bailey, and Mònica Clua-Losada: 'Dissent also cannot be restricted to instances of protest and resistance only.

⁶⁷ Colin Hay, *Re-stating Social and Political Change* (Open University Press, 1996), p. 12.

⁶⁸ Hay, *Re-stating Social and Political Change*, pp. 94–5.

⁶⁹ Hay, *Re-stating Social and Political Change*, pp. 94–5.

⁷⁰ Strange, *States and Markets*, p. 31.

⁷¹ Hay, *Political Analysis*, p. 133.

⁷² Langley, *The Everyday Life of Global Finance*, p. 37.

It also includes concrete socio-economic alternatives and prefigurative experiments.⁷³ Examples of such covert forms of dissent, explored further in the last part of the paper, include alternations of social life and the sealing of new identities in gun clubs and churches instead of union halls which otherwise used to be the setting in which likeminded communities were identified.⁷⁴

Those activities that slip through the filter of perceptual selectivity become a fundamental part of the (de)legitimising dynamics mentioned above. How the state regime reacts to these pressures of dissent from below is a matter of how forceful they are. The size of the legitimacy gap, that is, 'the space between *claims* to the fairness and rightfulness of policy actions by those who seek to govern, and the conferral of legitimacy on these claims through *belief-driven* acts by those being governed',⁷⁵ is crucial in determining what kind of response the state regime needs to take. At the same time, the state's response is driven by beliefs in the same way as elite policymakers react to challenges to the state regime's legitimacy based on how *they* perceive them.⁷⁶ If the delegitimising forces from the everyday level are related to issues of world affairs, the state's response might leave those imprints on the international level in the form of the structural or conjunctural changes described previously.

As Sean Starrs demonstrates, working empirically with such dynamics of structural power and dominance in the international system is far from straightforward.⁷⁷ Adding an everyday component complicates matters even more. In the next section, I therefore attempt to illustrate how this might be done by putting the theoretical framework presented above to work. I turn to the transformations of the productive capabilities of the American state and argue that their everyday underpinnings have contributed to recent disruptions in the way US structural power is being deployed. Relying on ethnographic research and interviews conducted by scholars such as Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol as well as Lillian B. Rubin in combination with presidential statements and recent policy announcements,⁷⁸ I hope to demonstrate how the perceptual selectivity and the conceptualisation of the state as a playing field translate into empirical material that is fit for study.

Towards an everyday understanding of structural power: An empirical illustration

Production is just one of the four structures of power that were identified by Strange.⁷⁹ Security, finance, and knowledge were, as previously mentioned, the three others she pinned down as primary structures of the world economy. Exploring the American sphere of production and how it has developed in recent decades, as I do below, allows for an illustration of how the theoretical framework presented above and its mechanisms operate empirically. Yet, before I begin this demonstration, I must acknowledge how the four facets of structural power might be characterised by differing degrees of everyday influences. In what follows, I illustrate the links between the everyday and the production structure, and scholars have similarly investigated the everyday sources of financial power.⁸⁰ Likewise, exploring recent developments in the knowledge structure, Haggart and Natasha Tusikov emphasise how the knowledge-driven society 'follows its own particular logic,

⁷³Bernd Bonfert, David J. Bailey, and Mónica Clua-Losada, 'Dissent within the global political economy: Four frustrations, and some alternatives', *Global Political Economy*, 1:1 (2022), pp. 12–25 (p. 20).

⁷⁴Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues: Why Working-Class Voters Are Turning Away from the Democratic Party* (Columbia University Press, 2023), pp. 141–9.

⁷⁵Leonard Seabrooke, 'Legitimacy gaps in the world economy: Explaining the sources of the IMF's legitimacy crisis', *International Politics*, 44:2 (2007), pp. 250–68 (p. 252).

⁷⁶Hay, 'Crisis and the structural transformation of the state', pp. 327–8.

⁷⁷Sean Starrs, 'American economic power hasn't declined – it globalized! Summoning the data and taking globalization seriously', *International Studies Quarterly*, 57:4 (2013), pp. 817–30.

⁷⁸Newman and Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues*; Lillian B. Rubin, *Families on the Fault Line: America's Working Class Speaks about the Family, the Economy, Race, and Ethnicity* (Harper Collins, 1994).

⁷⁹Strange, *States and Markets*.

⁸⁰Langley, *The Everyday Life of Global Finance*; Seabrooke, *The Social Sources of Financial Power*.

which manifests in challenges to previously deeply embedded norms.⁸¹ These new dynamics, I suspect but leave to future research to explore further, connect with everyday life in various ways – from the emergence of the Internet of Things (IoT) in our private homes as well as artificial intelligence (AI) in our daily work routines. The security structure is therefore the odd one out here, and it is possibly the one of the four structures that is influenced the least by the everyday. While this underlines how the argument in this paper is not that the everyday is the only driver behind every transformation of structural power, the following, I hope, illustrates that the everyday still is too important to be left out.

Intersections between the everyday and the production structure

‘A production structure’, Strange noted, ‘can be defined as the sum of all the arrangements determining what is produced, by whom and for whom, by what method and on what terms.’⁸² While Strange did not give it much attention, intersections between the mode of production and its mundane sources have been one of the fundamental pillars of everyday research. This has especially been the case within feminist political economy which has redefined what is considered productive labour by emphasising how (unpaid) female labour often has been overlooked by mainstream approaches to production.⁸³ Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill, for instance, note that dynamics of social reproduction must be included when studying world order. Specifically, when studying the power–production nexus, they argue that such relations ‘have traditionally been mediated by inequalities stemming from racialization, sexuality and gender’ which include ‘biological, daily and generational reproduction of labor power and communities, and identities.’⁸⁴

The framework presented here contributes to these discussions by theorising the processes through which shop-floor politics (whether it is at work or at home) transcend the micro-level and influence the abstract confines of the international system by approaching the state as mediator sitting firmly in between. In *States and Markets*, Strange emphasised how American state policies had supported US dominance in the production structure throughout ‘the American century.’⁸⁵ In what follows, I illustrate how the intersections between the everyday and the production structure continue to inform present-day American structural power. The aim of the remaining paragraphs is, in other words, to illustrate how the theoretical framework’s mechanisms operate empirically, and how it can be utilised to study real-world phenomena.

The loss of everyday legitimacy and the MAGA challenge to American structural power

As Trump has commenced his second term in office, the Make American Great Again (MAGA) movement is once again back in power. The movement arguably represents a shift in the American state regime. ‘With Trump’s victory’, Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon argue, ‘self-proclaimed American nationalists now hope to wreck or upend an unrivaled network of American influence that took more than 50 years to build.’⁸⁶ Already during Trump’s first presidency, scholars debated the future of American international influence. While Cooley and Nexon foresaw a significant

⁸¹ Blayne Haggart and Natasha Tusikov, *The New Knowledge: Information, Data and the Remaking of Global Power* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), p. 4.

⁸² Strange, *States and Markets*, p. 70.

⁸³ Elias and Rai, ‘Feminist everyday political economy’; Juanita Elias and Adrienne Roberts, ‘Feminist global political economies of the everyday: From bananas to bingo’, *Globalizations*, 13:6 (2016), pp. 787–800; Isabella Bakker, ‘Social reproduction and the constitution of a gendered political economy’, *New Political Economy*, 12:4 (2007), pp. 541–56 (p. 541); Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill, ‘Ontology, method, and hypotheses’, in Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill (eds), *Power, Production and Social Reproduction: Human In/security in the Global Political Economy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 17–41.

⁸⁴ Bakker and Gill, ‘Ontology, method, and hypotheses’, p. 26. For more on the gendered dynamics of production, see Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2011).

⁸⁵ Strange, *States and Markets*, pp. 80, 87–8.

⁸⁶ Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, ‘Trump’s antiliberal order: How America First undercuts America’s advantage’, *Foreign Affairs*, 104:1 (2025), pp. 16–8, 20–24 (p. 18).

decline of American power in the international system,⁸⁷ others emphasised that the US remains a 'structurally advantaged hegemon'.⁸⁸ Regardless of where Trump 2.0 will take American influence, recent disruptions in the way American structural power is being deployed – here exemplified by Trump's reciprocal tariffs announcements – demonstrate how everyday politics of production holds the potential to inform the broadest macro-trends in the international system.

Newman and Skocpol's study of the *Rust Belt Union Blues* offers an exemplary methodological approach to the analysis and exploration of everyday life and its links to the patterns of production.⁸⁹ Focusing on western Pennsylvania, they interviewed more than 50 blue-collar workers to explore the shift in their political loyalties from the Democratic Party to the Republican. These interviews – in combination with Newman and Skocpol's ethnographic observations and archival work – provide remarkable insights into the everyday politics in present-day America and how shifting shop-floor struggles have created a delegitimising pressure from below upon the American state regime.

Western Pennsylvania is illustrative of the changes in the American structure of production and its effects on everyday life. Once an important steel- and coal-producing state characterised by heavy industry, deindustrialisation altered its economy radically in the late 20th century. In the period between 1990 and 2024 alone, the state of Pennsylvania lost close to half of its jobs in manufacturing, meaning that almost 400,000 jobs have disappeared.⁹⁰ While efforts have been made to transition the economy from industry and manufacturing to service and knowledge, Newman and Skocpol demonstrate how this process 'has been wrenching not only fiscally but also socially and psychologically for many workers and community members'.⁹¹ They find how union members – who previously were loyal to the Democratic Party but now had jumped the fence and voted for Trump in 2016 – displayed a feeling of being 'left behind'. As one interviewee told them:

When we first came to Pittsburgh, we went to see the [U.S. Steel's] Homestead Works. You got a sense of just how big it was. It was just huge and it was very impressive to see. Then, all of a sudden, it was all empty. When Caliguri [former Democratic mayor of Pittsburgh] was asked one time about Pittsburgh losing a third of its population after the steel collapse, he said, 'Well they weren't the best people anyways.' Yeah. Can you believe that?⁹²

In short, Newman and Skocpol and their empirical findings demonstrate how changing patterns of production – from industrialisation and manufacturing to a service and knowledge-driven economy – changed everyday life significantly in these distressed areas. Wage stagnation, increasing inequalities, and urban decay have unfolded before the eyes of everyday Americans in what previously was seen as industrial powerhouses. 'Insecurities about employment coupled with feelings of social downgrading', Newman and Skocpol argue, 'led to a new kind of blue-collar social identity and outlook, filled with resentments in sharp contrast to the optimistic "union man" identity of the mid-twentieth century'.⁹³ Furthermore, where industrial towns used to be characterised by a wealth of different community associations – often centred around a local union hall – social life is now more dependent on more conservative gatherings and most importantly gun clubs. 'I see [the guys I used to work with] every so often. I saw one guy over at the gun club, every time [we see each other] we tell stories [about the mill], we just laugh our butts off', a retired steelworker told

⁸⁷ Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁸⁸ Doug Stokes, 'Trump, American hegemony and the future of the liberal international order', *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), pp. 133–50 (p. 134).

⁸⁹ Newman and Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues*.

⁹⁰ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'All Employees: Manufacturing in Pennsylvania', *FRED*, available at: <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PAMFG>.

⁹¹ Newman and Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues*, p. 172.

⁹² Newman and Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues*, p. 174.

⁹³ Newman and Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues*, p. 175.

Newman and Skocpol.⁹⁴ This new identity and transformation of everyday life have come with new political orientations. Where Democratic presidential candidates used to be highly competitive in the latter half of the 20th century in western Pennsylvania, support for Democrats has plummeted since the turn of the millennium.⁹⁵

While Newman and Skocpol's findings in western Pennsylvania are fascinating, research shows that they most likely are not unique to that specific geographical area. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Rubin interviewed close to 400 working-class and lower-middle-class people from across the US.⁹⁶ Doing so, she documented how economic decline made people anxious, angry, and dissatisfied with various government policies, immigrants, and racial minorities. A father of three who used to work in an automobile parts factory told Rubin: 'We did everything we were supposed to do – worked hard, saved some money, tried to raise our kids to be decent law-abiding people – and what do we get? ... The goddamn company goes belly-up and look at me now. ... I worked hard to get where I was, and it's damn hard to go backward.'⁹⁷ Others, who also have interviewed various everyday Americans, have found the same sense of resignation and bitterness when asking about their economic situations.⁹⁸

Why do these everyday perceptions related to shifting circumstances of production matter for the structural power of the US? Because Trump, in the words of John L. Campbell, 'drew political strength from the economic discontent that had developed around the decline of the Golden Age'.⁹⁹ Dating the discontent back to the 1970s,¹⁰⁰ it had been brewing for a while. The rapid transformation of the American economy from manufacturing, industry, and Fordism to service, knowledge, and globalised neoliberalism changed everyday life in parts of the American society significantly. And, as exemplified in Figure 2 below, while perceptions that went against these transformations were apparent for decades, as documented by Rubin,¹⁰¹ the selective context of the American state regime allowed policymakers and those in power to look another way towards the perils of a globalised and deregulated economy where rapid financialisation was seen as a welcomed regime of accumulation.¹⁰² The previous state regime had, in other words, been successful in offsetting those everyday grievances that Rubin had documented by expanding access to credit and the financialised economy, which dampened material hardship. As Herman Schwartz noted during the Great Recession: 'cheap mortgages are financing the trenches defending against new demands for social protection in the US and some other countries'.¹⁰³

This all changed at the start of the new millennium. As the housing market collapsed with the Great Recession, the bulwark which had allowed the state regime to keep the delegitimising pressures from below at arm's distance took a hard hit. 'The financial crisis', Campbell notes, 'exacerbated America's economic woes and made people angry'.¹⁰⁴ Scholars have since then mapped important everyday perceptions, for instance, by interviewing everyday Tea Party supporters in different American states and by exploring the rural–urban divide in different communities

⁹⁴Newman and Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues*, p. 186.

⁹⁵Newman and Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues*, pp. 245–7.

⁹⁶Rubin, *Families on the Fault Line*, p. 14.

⁹⁷Rubin, *Families on the Fault Line*, p. 126.

⁹⁸Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (The New Press, 2016); Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹⁹John L. Campbell, *American Discontent: The Rise of Donald Trump and Decline of the Golden Age* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 52.

¹⁰⁰Campbell, *American Discontent*, p. 2.

¹⁰¹Rubin, *Families on the Fault Line*.

¹⁰²Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (Verso, 2012), pp. 306–7; Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 22.

¹⁰³Herman Schwartz, 'Housing, global finance, and American hegemony: Building conservative politics one brick at a time', *Comparative European Politics*, 6:3 (2008), pp. 262–84 (p. 263).

¹⁰⁴Campbell, *American Discontent*, p. 14.

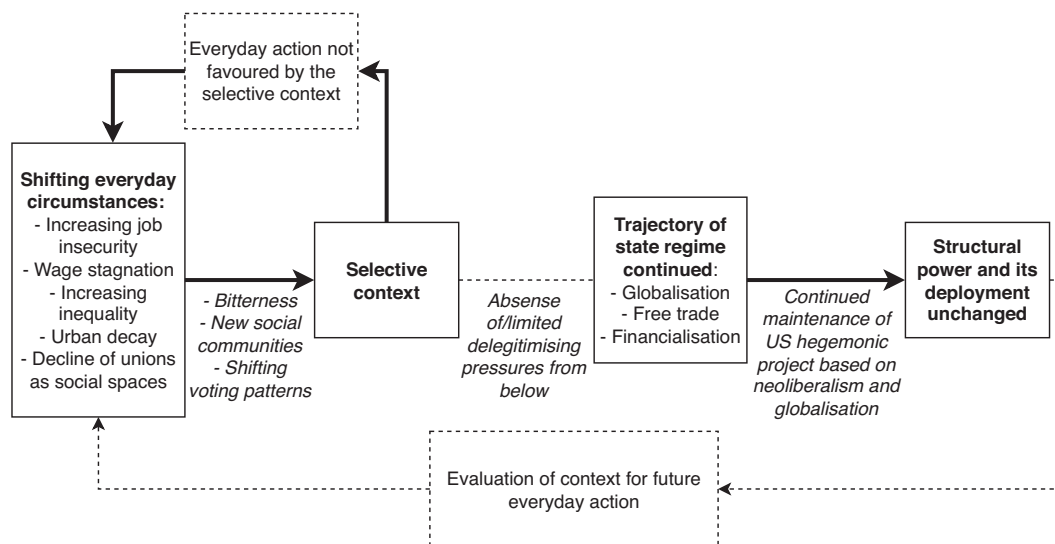


Figure 2. Everyday perceptions of production unfavoured by the selective context of the American state towards the end of the 20th century.

throughout Wisconsin.¹⁰⁵ While these studies focus on somewhat different dynamics, their empirical findings demonstrate how similar perceptions of anger and bitterness, partly connected to the transformation of the American production structure, still are very present in the minds of everyday people. But this time with a hefty anti-government add-on and perhaps even stronger resentment towards marginalised groups such as racial minorities and refugees.¹⁰⁶ As Arlie Russell Hochschild puts it:

For the Tea Party around the country, the shifting moral qualifications for the American Dream had turned them into strangers in their own land, afraid, resentful, displaced, and dismissed by the very people who were, they felt, cutting in line. The undeclared class war transpiring on a different stage, with different actors, and evoking a different notion of fairness was leading those engaged in it to blame the ‘supplier’ of the imposters – the federal government.¹⁰⁷

It has been debated to what extent Trump’s 2016 success was driven by white, working-class men in distressed areas.¹⁰⁸ Yet, regardless of Trump’s electoral base, his victories (in plural) demonstrate how the selectivities of the American state have changed. The development from Ronald Reagan’s ‘the freer the flow of world trade, the stronger the tides of human progress and peace among nations’¹⁰⁹ to Trump’s ‘instead of taxing our citizens to enrich other countries, we will tariff

¹⁰⁵Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*; Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*.

¹⁰⁶Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, pp. 102–4; Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, pp. 68–72.

¹⁰⁷Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, p. 155.

¹⁰⁸Patrick D. Tucker, Michelle Torres, Betsy Sinclair, and Steven S. Smith, ‘Pathways to Trump: Republican voters in 2016’, *Electoral Studies*, 61 (2019) 102035.

¹⁰⁹Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at a White House Meeting with Business and Trade Leaders’, 23 September 1985, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, available at: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-white-house-meeting-business-and-trade-leaders>.

and tax foreign countries to enrich our citizens'¹¹⁰ illustrates how the discursive selectivity of the American state has undergone important transformations. The new discursive constructions, forwarded by Trump, address those perceptions and concerns that everyday agents told Rubin around 1990 as well as what they told Newman and Skocpol and Hochschild circa 20 to 30 years later.¹¹¹ In fact, when Trump announced his reciprocal tariff policy on his self-declared 'Liberation Day' in April 2025, he invited a former autoworker – and founder of Auto Workers for Trump – to the stage, who put those experiences of the changing patterns of American production and the following transformations of the perceptual selectivity into words:

My first vote for president was for Ronald Reagan. I thought that was gonna be the best president I ever saw in my lifetime until Donald J. Trump came along. ... My entire life I have watched plant after plant after plant in Detroit and in the metro Detroit area close. ... We support Donald Trump's policies on tariffs 100%.¹¹²

In short, transformations of the American production structure caused a shift in the everyday life of working-class America in areas that previously were characterised by heavy industry. Trump's rhetoric and the (re-)emergence of the MAGA movement demonstrate that those working-class perceptions and experiences, which for a long time were left isolated by the selective context of the state, succeeded in delegitimising the previous selective context and have now made their way into the most powerful offices in Washington, DC.

However, as I noted previously, these dynamics are not one-way processes that flow from the everyday and upwards. Evaluation and influence happen constantly, informing experiences and perceptions on an everyday level. As Hochschild also emphasises: 'Not only does Trump evoke emotion, he makes an object of it, presenting it back to his fans as a sign of collective success.'¹¹³ But Trump's feedback effects are not only emotional. Alternative political agendas have attempted to address the same everyday concerns in contemporary American politics. Recognising the delegitimising pressures from below and the changing selective context of the American state, President Joe Biden, for instance, applied an alternative strategy with instruments such as the Inflation Reduction Act and its significant investments in the American structure of production. In fact, when celebrating the anniversary of the act, Biden praised what he saw as its positive effects for manufacturing before noting: 'You know, just don't take it from me. The CEO of U.S. Steel called the Inflation Reduction Act ... the "Manufacturing Renaissance Act" because it's bringing jobs back to America, manufacturing here in America. Made in America.'¹¹⁴ These measures can, first, be interpreted as evidence showcasing how the Biden administration was reacting to the changing selectivities of the American state. Yet, secondly, they also demonstrate how Trump and his team have been more successful in telling American everyday agents that his more anti-globalist and overtly protectionist agenda resonates better with their concerns than Biden's more Keynesian-inspired and interventionist strategies. While everyday agents managed to change the strategic selectivities of the state, leading to new economic agendas, effects of evaluation from above have worked in Trump's favor.¹¹⁵ One important question persists, though, and that is how these delegitimising pressures from below will inform American structural power in the international system.

¹¹⁰ Donald Trump, 'The Inaugural Address', 20 January 2025, The White House, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>.

¹¹¹ Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*; Newman and Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues*; Rubin, *Families on the Fault Line*.

¹¹² Sky News, 'Donald Trump announces 10% trade tariff on UK imports', 2 April 2025, YouTube, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lp8QrpajHtI>, 7:44–8:31.

¹¹³ Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, p. 161.

¹¹⁴ Joe Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on the Anniversary of the Inflation Reduction Act', 16 August 2023, The White House, available at: <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-anniversary-of-the-inflation-reduction-act/>.

¹¹⁵ So did the American electoral system, it must be noted, that, for instance, allowed Trump to win in 2016 despite having lost the popular vote.

A full legitimization crisis or minor delegitimation?

It is still too early to judge the international effects of Trump's second term in office but what is apparent is that he has succeeded – at least – in shaking the foundation of the hegemonic project that America has led and built since World War II. In terms of those everyday experiences with the structure of production treated above, the most significant shift is probably how Trump's second administration has set off by embracing tariffs and protection of American industries.¹¹⁶ After emphasising how 'American steelworkers, autoworkers, farmers, and skilled craftsmen' had 'suffered gravely',¹¹⁷ Trump continued in his 'Liberation Day' speech:

Our country and its taxpayers have been ripped off for more than 50 years. But it is not going to happen anymore. ... In a few moments, I will sign a historic executive order instituting reciprocal tariffs on countries throughout the world. ... It's our declaration of economic independence. For years hardworking American citizens were forced to sit on the sidelines as other nations got rich and powerful. Much of it at our expense. But now it's our turn to prosper.¹¹⁸

As I already have touched upon above, this new direction for the American state regime and the way it uses its structural power in the international system seems to tap right into the perceptions and experiences of those everyday Americans who have experienced deindustrialisation, shifting circumstances of everyday life, and local decay. As Carla Norrlof described Trump's first electoral victory: 'The announcement of an intention to "make America great again" resonated strongly with citizens of a Great Power who hardly felt economically privileged in relation to the rest of the world.'¹¹⁹ And while experts and commentators will demonstrate how Trump's tariffs and protectionist policies will work against the interest of those who feel like they have been left behind, this is likely to be rejected based on the everyday experience that 'the economy' has not been working for them in the past decades, so why should it now?¹²⁰

I have attempted to illustrate these dynamics in Figure 3. It showcases how a perceptual selectivity – rooted in everyday experiences amongst everyday agents in distressed American areas – has led to a change in both the discursive and strategic selectivities of the American state. The link between these everyday experiences and the American state regime is therefore much more apparent than previously, as shown in Figure 2. And while this has disrupted the American structural power – or maybe more correctly, how American structural power is being deployed and utilised – it is still too early to judge what exactly this means for American power on the world stage. This has, of course, to do with how the international system reacts to the state regime and its shift in foreign policies. But the long-term resilience of the new trajectory for American structural power also has to do with how these delegitimising forces from below are seen. Judged in isolation from his second term, Trump's first electoral victory can be interpreted as the outcome of delegitimising pressures – partly rooted in changing patterns of production – that led to a conjunctural adjustment of the state regime and how it uses its structural power. Only time will tell whether his second term and everything it represents will be evaluated as the outcome of a fully fledged legitimisation crisis with more fundamental effects on American structural power.

¹¹⁶This paper was revised in the same week as Trump's reciprocal tariffs announcements. It is therefore still too early to judge the exact implications of these tariffs for American structural power.

¹¹⁷Sky News, 'Donald Trump announces 10% trade tariff on UK imports', 00:37–00:47.

¹¹⁸Sky News, 'Donald Trump announces 10% trade tariff on UK imports', 1:10–2:06.

¹¹⁹Carla Norrlof, 'Hegemony and inequality: Trump and the liberal playbook', *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), pp. 63–88, (p. 64).

¹²⁰Similar ways of comprehending 'the economy' were displayed in relation to the Brexit referendum. See Matthew Watson, 'Brexit, the left behind and the let down: The political abstraction of "the economy" and the UK's EU referendum', *British Politics*, 13:1 (2018), pp. 17–30.

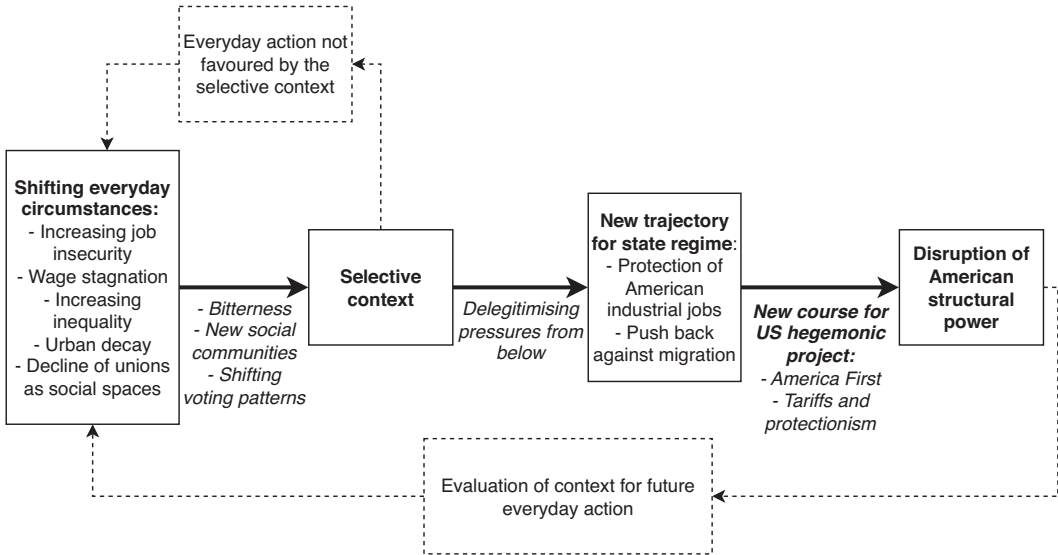


Figure 3. Everyday perceptions of production favoured by the selective context of the American state in the 2020s.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have called for an everyday approach to the study of structural power in the international system. While the concept still is being used to analyse contemporary developments such as US–China rivalry and transformations of global finance in ways that increasingly embrace a more pluralistic understanding of what actually constitutes structural power, I find that its mundane everyday underpinnings are left vastly untheorised. Addressing this striking lacuna, I have advanced a new theoretical framework that allows for the study of the links between the micro-level characteristics of the everyday and the macro-level dynamics of structural power. This framework relies on a reconceptualisation of the state as the mediator that sits firmly between these two levels, and it draws heavily on Bob Jessop's and Colin Hay's work on the strategic-relational approach. Using their arguments as my point of departure, my theoretical framework demonstrates that it is possible to link the everyday with structural power in the international system by treating the state as a gatekeeper between these two levels. Nonetheless, I find that this is not the only filter between the everyday and world affairs. A selective context has favoured certain everyday actions over others at different times and places throughout history. To demonstrate this, I have made the case for a third selectivity of the state, which I label perceptual selectivity, in an attempt to demonstrate how different intrasubjective and cognitive decodings do not carry the same weight when engaging with the social forces that constitute the state. I have therefore added a third ontological element to the strategic-relational approach that materialises in a sequence of selectivities where perceptual interpretations lead to specific discursive constructions that, in turn, guide the strategic intentions of the state. As such, a main finding advanced in this paper is that all everyday agency by no means is equal. While parts of the everyday possess the potential to flow through the state apparatus and inform the shape of structural power, others are confined to the boundaries of the everyday. In that sense, the paper offers a middle way between what has been called the 'everyday life' and 'everyday politics' approaches to the study of the everyday by exploring the conditions under which everyday agents leave imprints on the world around them and under what conditions they are blocked by structural constraints.

Using Trump's Liberation Day tariffs as a case, I illustrate the usefulness of this theoretical framework by investigating the transformation of production and its implications for present-day American structural power. Drawing on interviews with everyday Americans – conducted

by scholars such as Newman and Skocpol as well as Rubin who demonstrate the utility of ethnographic research methods for IR and IPE – I argue that transformations of American productive capabilities led to significant changes of everyday life in parts of the US in the latter half of the 20th century. Deindustrialisation caused distress, dissatisfaction, and a sense of being ‘left behind’ on an everyday level. While these experiences and perceptions were apparent for years, it is only recently that these delegitimising pressures from below have been forceful enough to change the selective context of the American state. The MAGA movement’s conquest of the White House is the most apparent example of this, and Trump’s disruptions to American structural power demonstrate how dynamics on an everyday level can leave marks on international affairs. At the same time, the case of American production as a source of structural power demonstrates how the selective context is a dynamic entity that in different periods favours and discriminates against different everyday perceptions.

What I argue here has implications that surpass studies of structural power in the international system. While I use structural power as the main focal point in this paper, I find that my framework enables scholars to explore the connections between the everyday and international affairs more generally. In other words, I aim to direct attention towards the intersections between everyday dynamics, such as anger and discontent, and international phenomena like hegemonic ordering or bilateral cooperation. At the very least, I hope my framework will stimulate discussions on how to link such phenomena with the mundane dynamics of the everyday. Making Susan Strange meet the everyday might be the first step in that direction.

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