

To Measure the Political Autonomy of States: Dealing with Conceptual and Methodological Difficulties

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Ossi Piironen (M.Soc.Sc)

University of Helsinki

Department of Political Science

Contact: ossi.piironen_at_helsinki.fi

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Introduction

During the last two decades the construction of social scientific measuring has proliferated. Reasons for this are manifold including demands for evidence-based policy making and impact analysis, but also increased international cooperation, coordination and competition. The most sought-after data is numeric allowing comparison between similar entities or time points. The use and users of comparative data range from policy makers and planners to academic experts, from bureaucrats working in international organizations to investors interested in knowledge relevant for their investment strategies. IR and comparative politics research is heavily involved in the production and application of measurements that take *individual nation-states as the primary units of observation* either for the purposes of descriptive comparison or causal explanation of social phenomena. While some measures are concrete and exact (e.g. voting power, armament, GDP) others purport to rank countries according to abstract, ambiguous, multidimensional or otherwise contested qualities such as levels of power, political freedom, democracy, governance performance, corruption, human development, well-fare, globalization or competitiveness. All kinds of qualities interesting from the perspective of political research have been advanced, but measures for one group of concepts are peculiarly absent. The world politics literature is filled with notions of state sovereignty, self-determination and autonomy, but still there are no measures developed for ranking countries according these qualities that I am aware of. It is my intention here to shortly explore the sensibility and possibility for measuring state autonomy¹ - i.e. the *de facto* capability to political self-determination – in asking: what are the main conceptual, methodological and normative difficulties in so doing? The reader may be disappointed, or more likely, relieved, for the fact that no actual framework for such a measurement will be provided here.

Although the conceptualization – exact definition – of autonomy is dealt later as the central difficulty of measuring it, we can only proceed by offering a general description of its meaning in the present context. I find Kjell Goldmann's (2001, 61-66) presentation of different aspects of national independence useful here. According to him the notion of national independence – as the broadest sense of a nation's control of its own affairs – can be analyzed as having dimensions of sovereignty, autonomy, autarky and self-determination. A distinction as this is crucial since the independency words are, unfortunately, often used as synonyms or otherwise ambiguously. So let us be clear: Sovereignty is a legal right, a claim to legitimate authority within a territory that is formally recognized by other state entities. Such legal authority is not to be conflated with actual political control, although in the real world they are interdependent: “legal authority is a source of actual independence, while actual independence is often seen as a condition, indeed, *the* condition for the recognition of a state as sovereign” (ibid., 62). Consequently, autonomy is *actual control*, or as Held et al (1998, 29) put it, “the actual power the nation-state possesses to articulate and achieve policy goals independently”. While I am not completely satisfied with these descriptions of autonomy, they suffice for distinguishing *de jure*, formal authority (i.e. sovereignty) from *de facto*

¹ I am using notions *state autonomy* and *national autonomy* interchangeably for the reason that will be elaborated under the topic “Whose autonomy?” Shortly: one of the most important issues that a constructor of an index of autonomy must face is the question of whose autonomy is actually measured, state's or society's. Since it is not my task here to give an answer but ask the question, I highlight this indecisiveness by the inexact reference to the subject.

capability to govern – to freely and effectively choose among a variety of policy alternatives – within a bounded territory. The concepts of autarky and self-determination are less important for our concern here, the former referring to “a country’s ability to produce what it needs for its survival” and the latter to the normative principles of a nation (the people) having a right to their own state (secession) or alternatively to leaders of its own choosing (democracy).

Why should we be concerned about measuring the level of states’ autonomy then? First of all, although we are beyond the worst hype surrounding the notion of globalization, we are still left with the old questions concerning its consequences on nation-states: retreat, revival or transformation? While the globalization debate usually empirically deals with the question of state autonomy – sovereignty, power or state capacity – hardly ever are we offered a satisfactory theoretical – conceptual, methodological or normative – account of state autonomy that could give a persuasive backing to the empirical evidence leading to a conclusion. We can be flooded with impressive amounts of empirical – often statistical – evidence, the significance of which remain disturbingly vague. We are clearly interested in the state of the nation-state in the contemporary world, but have been hitherto unable to give a forcible backing on any judgment concerning the reality. So initially it would not seem to be too a far-fetched idea to construct a well articulated theoretical device to measure the level of national autonomy and even to rank countries according to the autonomy scores produced. The results would then explicitly deal with the observed autonomy of different states and thus contribute to the debate on the significance of nation-state in the globalized world. Easier said than done, however, an array of difficult decisions, some without conclusive solutions, must be done in order to get even near creating a satisfactory measurement. But since, someone is sooner or later may come to construct an index of national autonomy, it is better we start contemplating with all the problems and benefits such an endeavor would generate.

The structure of the present paper is simple: I shall first take a general look at some of the common problems that burden all socio-political measurements aiming at producing internationally comparative information on abstract qualities. Here I will draw examples from actual measurements provided by organizations such as World Economic Forum (competitiveness), World Bank Institute (governance), and KOF Swiss Economic Institute (globalization). All of these take the state as the basic unit of observation and the primary unit of analysis. I will first briefly examine the problems related to conceptualization pointing to the difficulties constructors of measuring instruments have encountered in definition and operationalization of abstract concepts. After this I will delve more thoroughly to the methodological difficulties of measuring, problems related to aggregation of individual indicators into composites and methodological nationalism inherent in international comparisons. Related to the problem of conceptualization, I will lastly demonstrate that measuring (socio-political phenomena) contains always a normative – or political – element partly because of internal dynamics of measurement, partly – and perhaps paradoxically – because of the neutral appearance of numbers.

One should keep in mind, however, that this examination of general measurement problematic is to serve merely as an introduction to analyzing the difficulties specifically related to a hypothetical index of autonomy. What follows is a less systematically structured analysis than the first one. I first examine the difficulties of conceptualizing national autonomy: although I do suggest a core definition – a triadic understanding of autonomy in the spirit of MacCallum Jr’s (1969) notion of

individual freedom – any further specifications are harder to make. Although we are talking about state autonomy, it is not self-evident in *whose* autonomy should we actually be interested? Conceptualization and operationalization of the main attributes of autonomy – freedom and power – bring their own problems. For example, let us say that autonomy entail freedom to choose from real policy alternatives that are not blocked nor unduly burdened. Now the question is, should we assess a country's autonomy in relation to its preferences or objectives or in relation to “assumed objectives of actors in general” as Goldmann (2001, 65) formulates it? Does an increase in open possibilities automatically lead to enhanced autonomy or do these have to be somehow significant for the agent? Should we choose to account for exogenous infringements on our autonomy we face the epistemological question, whether we should only analyze “objective” observable (material and/or discursive) external factors affecting national autonomy or should we also include “subjective” beliefs, fears and ideas that, through self-control, influence the perceived opportunity structure of an agent. Measuring the power aspect entails again different set of problems to be solved.

Finally, some theoretical questions with normative considerations are discussed. Following Giovanni Sartori's analysis of the concept of democracy, I argue that autonomy is a concept that has both descriptive and prescriptive dimensions. Thus the empirical reality of state autonomy and the normative ideal of autonomy must balance each other making autonomy a historically contingent concept. Two consequences follow: First, autonomy – although anchored into a stable core concept – must be further defined so that it is empirically relevant for analyzing contemporary reality. Secondly, since our ideal of autonomy guides (but does not determine) our political practices, we are entitled or obliged to promote such a conceptualization that does not lead to morally unacceptable consequences. This thought – that an ideal of autonomy must be both empirically valid and morally acceptable – evokes one last consideration, namely whether to look at autonomy from the perspective of social atomism or holism. Methodological nationalism and social atomism go usually hand in hand and the notion of autonomy is usually linked to this line of thought. Nevertheless, autonomy – whether individual or collective – is possible to be understood in terms of a more holist background philosophy. Following – perhaps surprisingly – Immanuel Kant and J.S. Mill, I introduce a post-internationalist argument for looking at countries autonomy both externally and internally related to the extent that strengthening one's autonomy could not come at cost of that of others. Such an understanding of state autonomy could fulfill, the cosmopolitans argue, better the requirements of validity and morality. I then discuss the implications the holist perspective would have on attempts to measure autonomy and argue that while an extreme holist position would render state-wise measuring meaningless, a more mildly formulated position, exemplified by Iris Marion Young, could be conducive for some form of quantitative comparison of state autonomy.

1 Common problems of international socio-political measuring and ranking

a. Conceptualization, measurement and aggregation

Munck and Verkuilen (2002, 7–14) have conveniently distinguished among three “challenges that are sequentially addressed” in the construction of measures for democracy – a notoriously elusive concept, but one of the most measured quality – which can be applied also to other measures of abstract concepts in social sciences. The three challenges are those of conceptualization, measurement and aggregation. I will here omit the discussion related to data sources, data types, and problems relate to missing data.

First a researcher must identify the attributes that are constitutive of the concept to be quantified. For example, a scholar trying to measure the level of competitiveness must first clearly define what the concept stands for: what is the best possible instance of competitiveness and what the worst. Giovanni Sartori (2009/1970, 18) maintained that “concept formation stands prior to quantification”, but was quite aware that much political research neglected proper concept analysis. Such neglect is evident in many of the prominent socio-political indices at the index markets. Either the definitions are so ambiguous that one needs to analyze the indicators in order to actually get a picture of what is actually measured or alternatively a definition for a contested concept is simply stipulated without paying proper attention to challenging conceptualizations. The former case resembles the case of over enthusiastic quantification, of which Sartori was concerned, the latter risks turning into an instrument of depoliticization by fixing the parameters of a sensitive conception. While these two features often stand together, I shall treat the latter – politics of numerical objectification – in the end of this section with more care.

So instead, let us first deal with the problem of ambiguity. Conceptualization is often challenging because of the multidimensional nature of things we are interested in. Often these dimensions are represented as, if not necessarily conflicting, then often ill at ease among each other. Take the notion of democracy, which can be seen either as the result of an interplay either between

- a. liberty and equality (the Athenian ideals, see Hansen 2004);
- b. individual, plural and communal autonomy (Lakoff 1996)
- c. popular control and political equality (Beetham et al. 2002)

It is easy to see that a measurement, especially when aimed at an aggregate score, is in difficulties with definitions such as a. and b. whose attributes call for continuous balancing and demarcation. But often the conceptual ambiguity is much more banal having more to do with a lack of theoretical contemplation than theoretical contestation. What comes to the notion of autonomy, we shall see that similar controversies are ripe, e.g. whether to look autonomy as a simple non-interference, non-domination (Pettit 1999, Young 2000) or a combination of negative freedom and positive capability (MacCallum 1967).

One of the most important and ambitious attempts to measure governance performance is the World Bank Institute’s Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) project, which has a produced data since 1996 that covers at present 212 countries and territories and is based on a total of 441 individual

variables from 35 different sources produced by 33 different organizations (Kaufmann, Kraay, Mastruzzi 2009). According the producers, the purpose is to produce knowledge concerning *the quality of governance defined as “the traditions and institutions by which [public] authority in a country is exercised”* (ibid, 5.) The WGI consists of six aggregate indicators – or attributes in terms of Munck and Verkuilen (2002) – that are designed to capture political, economic and institutional dimensions of governance: 1) voice and accountability, 2) political stability and absence of violence, 3) government effectiveness, 4) regulatory quality, 5) rule of law, and 6) control of corruption. A glance at the list of attributes reveal some general characteristics of the measure, for instance, that democracy is not emphasized too heavily in WBI’s conception of quality governance: from its six components only ‘voice and accountability’ measures clearly democratic aspects of governance. To get the overall meaning of WBI’s good quality governance, we must further open up mid-level attributes in order to see what is meant by *regulatory quality* or *government effectiveness*. To define “regulatory quality” (RQ) - as the WGI does – in terms of “the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permit private sector development” should hardly be seen as the only possible way in looking at qualities of regulation. The point is that although the core definition and its component attributes should be defined and presented with care and as much accuracy as possible, it is rarely so. The burden of definition is thus shifted into lower, operational levels so that individual indicators come to determine the concept, and not the other way round as it should be.

According to Munck and Verkuilen (2002), however, it is only the second challenge that pertains to the measures themselves. The researcher must – drawing from the lowest level of abstraction – choose the relevant indicators. This operationalization involves developing a set of observable variables that are assumed to tell something about the unobservable reality. In technical terms the selected indicators should be as valid and as reliable as possible: they should rigorously and without bias measure the occurrence of the abstract concept (such as some aspect of governance in our case). As Munck and Verkuilen (2002, 18) point out, however, it is important not to conflate validity and reliability. All aspects of validity cannot be tested simply by looking at the extent to which different measures produce similar results. Such tests may exclude the possibility of non-systematic biases in measurement, but fail to say anything about the concept validity of the measurement. Indeed, measuring contested concepts can – and should – never be insulated from conceptual critique. In such a case, the problem may be less technical and more theoretical. Going back to the previous example, it would seem perfectly valid to include an indicator “Environmental regulations hurt competitiveness” to the composite of RQ if the mid-level itself was conceptually valid. However, if we deem the definition of RQ invalid to tell us anything of relevance about quality of governance, we could not derive such an indicator in the first place.

The second series of judgments are related to the scientific methods concerning decisions on missing data, rescaling, weighing and aggregation, all having the potential of affecting the results – composite indicators and rankings – immensely (OECD 2008). Weighing is an important factor affecting the character of the measure and results of measuring actual cases. Weighing takes place always when there is more than one indicator, explicitly in, for example, giving more weight to reliable data sources, emphasizing some features because of theoretical considerations, or mitigating effects of double counting in cases of collinear indicators. Implicitly weighing can take

place when indicators are given equal weight: “This essentially implies that all variables are “worth” the same in the composite, but it could also disguise the absence of a statistical or an empirical basis, e.g. when there is insufficient knowledge of causal relationships or a lack of consensus on the alternative. In any case, equal weighting does not mean “no weights”, but implicitly implies that the weights are equal. Moreover, if variables are grouped into dimensions and those are further aggregated into the composite, then applying equal weighting to the variables may imply an unequal weighting of the dimension (the dimensions grouping the larger number of variables will have higher weight). This could result in an unbalanced structure in the composite index. (OECD 2008, 31.)

Aggregation goes hand in hand with weighing because an aggregation decision affects weighing and the other way around. According to Munck and Verkuilen (2002, 22–27) aggregation can be understood as reverse to that of conceptualization and operationalization. The researcher has to decide in which form the raw data should be presented. Should the variables be kept separate (possibly emphasizing the multidimensional nature of the object under scrutiny) or should the raw data be aggregated for the sake of parsimony and applicability? There cannot, of course, be any single answer to this. The main point is that both the developer and user/reader understands how and why the aggregation is made: What is lost or included in the aggregation? Which of the attributes are stressed and which are given less emphasis? Different decisions concerning aggregation may lead to different results, perhaps, leading to changes in country rankings. It is especially problematic, if an otherwise agreed upon conceptualization is distorted in the process of weighing.

An aggregation rule tells how to combine component indicators in order to produce a composite score for the measured quality influencing the outcome of a measurement. A constructor has to choose between linear (e.g. arithmetic mean) and geometric (e.g. multiplication) aggregations. Both methods allow a measure of compensability between indicators: in arithmetic aggregations this is constant, while with geometric aggregations a country with low scores on one indicator needs much higher score on the others to compensate the lowest component score (OECD 2008). In a politically motivated context such effects can be used tactically: “in benchmarking exercises countries with low scores prefer a linear rather than a geometric aggregation” (ibid, 33). Whereas most measures use the arithmetic model, Tatu Vanhanen’s Index of Democratization (ID) chooses the other alternative. Vanhanen (1997) assumes that the level of democratization can be measured as a combination of two dimensions, competition and participation, operationalized to a single indicator. He makes the (arbitrary) decision of weighing these equally since his theory does not tell him, which of them is more important. What his theory does tell him is that relatively high scores on both dimensions are necessary for a country to be counted as a democracy: a high score on the other cannot compensate a very low score on the other. Hence, the geometric aggregation method is chosen and the two indicators combined by multiplying them. A high ID value is provided only if values of both variables are high. To choose the other option would certainly affect the ranking of countries even if the data and indicators were the same. Arndt and Oman (2008) have made explicit numerous arbitrary decisions of these types in their analysis of the WGI.

b. The problem of methodological nationalism

It is no news to that social sciences, in general, are extremely state-centric disciplines. To borrow P.J. Taylor's (1996) terminology, albeit with modified meaning, *statism is embedded* in our methodology: for a sociologist the primary units of their analysis are nationally demarcated; economists keep tackling with problems of national deficits, markets and employment; education in history is divided into separate units dealing with national and foreign history. Political science is organized also along the same lines, juxtaposing the study of internal, domestic, and orderly politics with the study of international politics dealing with the interaction between separate and sovereign nation-states whose conduct is overseen by no higher authority. All of these scientific habits could be seen as manifestations of *methodological nationalism* in which the "national community [serves] as the terminal unit and boundary condition for the demarcation of problems and phenomena for social science" (Martins 1974, 276 quoted in Chernilo 2006). Underneath one can discern an implicit social ontology equating societies with nation-states and seeing these entities both as contexts for domestic socio-political processes and anthropomorphized actors in international political space. Indeed, were these ontological assumptions plausible, there would be not much reason to questions the statist methodology of our science. A growing body of literature has, however, come to question these assumptions, their further derivations – the naturalized characteristics of state (sovereignty, autonomy and national egoism) – and the research practices saturated by it.

Most critics of state-centered science begin with the observation that there is a gap between our theoretical understanding of reality and the empirical reality that it tries to describe. They are united in their belief that we are only slowly "coming to grips with a *postinternational world* that is more complex and dynamic than the traditional ideal-type interstate system" (Ferguson and Mansbach 2004, 36). As national boundaries are becoming more porous, political space is delinking from territorial space; loyalties, responsibilities and identities get more fluid; our old methodological assumptions, theories and concepts become obstacles in analyzing contemporary social and political phenomena. Writes Beck (2001, 3): "the social sciences must be grounded anew as a *reality-based science of the transnational* – conceptually, theoretically, methodologically, and, incidentally, organizationally as well. This includes the fact that there is a need for the basic concepts of 'modern society' – *household, family, class, democracy, domination, state, economy, the public sphere, politics*, and so on – to be released from the fixation of methodological nationals and redefined and reconceptualized in the context of methodological cosmopolitanism" (ibid. 50). Beck's own strategy for reconceptualization is ambitious for his is to challenge the whole definition of the concept of national state – defending the notion of cosmopolitan state. In doing so, however, he retorts to such terms as autonomy and sovereignty that, in their common meaning, are definitely part and parcel with methodological nationalism (ibid. 91). The alternative strategy which I follow in the next chapter is to proceed through the characteristics of states by problematizing the methodological individualism in the background of our understanding of autonomy – which I see as much to blame for upholding nationalist tendencies in the notion of autonomy – without abandoning the concept itself but embedding it into a more holist version of social ontology.

As it happens, it could be claimed then that the discipline of comparative politics - as well as international politics – is among the main culprits in reinforcing (and simultaneously being a

hostage of) the methodological nationalist bias. Comparative political research – although it would not need to – usually takes the nation-state as its basic unit thus upholding the legalist illusion of separate and independent state-societies. The same holds, of course, to numerical country rankings: corruption, for instance, is measured – and the resulting scores presented – in a country-by-country fashion, not in a (industrial) sector-by-sector format. Other indices list countries according to their level of democracy, forgetting that legally sovereign states are not equally autonomous: a poor country may have enacted procedural political rights, but still incapable of actually transforming voters' wishes into policies. So to put it more provocatively, there is a methodological problem in virtually any country ranking. The problem gets much messier, however, when the alleged state-centrism gets in-baked into the conceptual or operational level of the measurement: in a somewhat differing way this can be seen to take place with some of the most well-known measures of globalization as well as our hypothetical measurement of state autonomy (which will be examined in the next chapter).

Measurements of globalization are interesting for our purposes, not only because of the partially shared problem field with possible measures of autonomy, but also because they serve as examples of methodological nationalism in action. One of the earliest of the kind was the KOF Index of Globalization that was first published in 2002 and has from 2005 onwards been updated and revised annually. Globalization is conceptualized as “a process of creating networks of connections among actors at multi-continental distances, mediated through a variety of flows including people, information and ideas, capital and goods”, it is “a process that erodes national boundaries, integrates national economies, cultures, technologies and governance and produces complex relations of mutual independence” (<http://globalization.kof.ethz.ch/>, accessed 18.8.2010). It is, to some extent, in line with the ideas of Ferguson, Mansbach and Beck although contrary to these thinkers it leaves open what comes out of this process of globalization. This should not be thought as a deficiency as such although it might leave a blind spot on evolving empirical phenomena. My concern is elsewhere as mentioned. The KOF index proceeds from the assumption that globalization be separated into three analytical dimensions – economic, political and social – globalization. The actual indicators measuring the economic dimension of globalization are further aligned under attributes titled “actual flows” and “restrictions” and social indicators under attributes of “data on personal contact”, “data on information flows” and “data on cultural proximity”. There are 29 indicators in total, comprising such as: trade (percent of GDP), flows of FDI (percent of GDP), mean tariff rate, international tourism, internet users (per 1000 people), number of Ikea (per capita), membership in IO's and international treaties. According to the measurement, countries are ranked from the most globalized country (Belgium in 2010 index) to least globalized country (ibid.).

The KOF (as well as other prominent globalization indices) takes the territorial nation-state base of measurement perhaps counter-intuitively since globalization should mean something else than plainly internationalization: “Global relations of this kind can be examined on the same ontological and methodological grounds as international relations” (Scholte 2005,55), as a function of cross-(state-)border flows and interactions. Beck (2005, 20) agrees in arguing that improper indicators serve only to distort the relation between empirical research and the possibilities of globalization. In other words, the indices, while producing statistically reliable empirical data, tune our mindsets

so as to be unable to ask the right questions pertaining to globalization: “the creation of empirical indicators presupposes the ‘national-international’ distinction; in other words, it follows the logic of national outlook. As a result, there is a systematic failure to recognize the specific nature of *transnationalisation* of production, capital flows, lifestyles, and so forth” (ibid.). Accordingly and perhaps paradoxically, it is possible that globalization indices tend to depict nation-states as natural institutional contexts for identification, supplying collective goods, and methodologically, for reinforcing the status of nation-state as the primary point-of-departure in social scientific research at the expense of other factors (class, income, education, ethnicity) affecting the life of individuals even more than their geographical location or citizenship.

c. Normative problems: objectification and depoliticization

Social scientific quantification usually entails reduction since that is one of the ways of making a mass of empirical data easier to analyze systematically. The reality is simplified for the sake of parsimony, and for many, only generalizations can justify science as science. As any other use of empirical data also numerical data is used to verify, to falsify, and to come up with novel hypothesis. New numerical data can bring on the agenda perspectives that were previously altogether unknown or misconceived. In the best case a new measurement can open an important debate – expose a myth or politicize an issue that was formerly either ignored or objectified. But, the very opposite is also true: at times measurements serve to objectify certain interpretations of abstract concepts and their empirical manifestations (see Desrosières 1998). Thus the proliferation of international data production should not go unchallenged: those in powerful position – those who are already considered as experts or who otherwise have resources to present their analysis for the public – are better positioned to get their version of both the reality and desired reality inscribed into public discourse. In binding knowledge production to policy processes the boundaries between causal research and impact assessment, value neutrality and policy-relevancy, expertise and politics is getting even more blurred than what they necessarily are. (Erkkilä & Piironen 2009.)

It has been elsewhere shown how the measures of democracy keep reinforcing a procedural version of liberal democracy and how governance indicators have strengthened the dominant – economist – vision of good governance by making the descriptive data appear neutral and apolitical (ibid.). Such measures hide their political nature into their neutral appearance: numbers are facts and only rarely – and never a journalist – does someone actually see what kind of conceptualizations, individual indicators, and aggregation rules the composite scores are grounded upon. Were these numbers questioned more actively, their political nature would soon be revealed. Let me explain more clearly how the depoliticizing mechanism of measurement work by looking again at the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) by the World Bank Institute.

I argue that *the very act of measuring is sufficient to render the measured “phenomena” normative*. In assigning ordinal or interval scale values to observed qualities of governance – possibly a neutral or empirical concept as such – the WGI (and any other similar measurement) necessarily comes also to classify aspects of governance as wanted or unwanted, good or bad. Through the measurement practice observed quality of governance becomes inevitably described in relation to a particular version of good governance. Indeed, “governance performance” of a country is nothing

but its relation to the polar-typic construction of good governance.² Now we can see that there is a double movement going on: On the one hand, we know that index-production is necessarily normatively loaded not only because of the multiple judgmental choices developing a data-set demand but, also, because of the inherent logic of measurement. *Simultaneously, the very practice of aggregation, numerical reduction and conceptual (mis)representation tend to hide the inherent normativity – even to the extent that the domain in question becomes depoliticized.* The WGI, for example, represents good governance as something fixed and agreed upon. Despite of the name - Worldwide Governance Indicators - the focus is not on the concept of governance but on countries performance in relation to a very particular economist objectification as we explained in the section dealing conceptualization. Politics is clearly involved in social scientific measuring and how this applies to the notion of autonomy will be discussed in the following chapter.

2 Problems specifically related to measuring autonomy

Here we will take a look into the various difficulties in constructing a measurement of autonomy. The problems discussed here are not always – although some are – derived clearly from the general problems dealt in the first section. I urge the reader also keep in mind that my treatment of the possible problems of measuring autonomy can only be a small portion of all possible difficulties such an endeavor would entail – just as it was not possible to include all possible general problems of social scientific measuring into the previous section. I do not deal with some of the most obvious problems, namely the multifacetedness of empirical autonomy possibly rendering it questionable to formulate any overall conceptualization let alone measure it. This point is akin to that of Baldwin (1979) concerning power: “It is time to recognize that the notion of a single overall international power structure unrelated to any particular issue-area is based on a concept of power that is virtually meaningless. [- -] Instead of talking about *the* distribution of power resources underlying *the* international power structure, students of world politics could more profitably focus on the multiple distributional patterns of a wide variety of resources related to a number of significant issue areas”. Similarly Weiss (2001, 4) has argued that since “...states are not uniformly capable across all policy areas”, “...there can be no such thing as state capacity in general...” Hence only noting that the level of state autonomy varies considerably according to the particular policy issue and decision-making arena could disqualify any attempt to measure overall autonomy of a state. Although such a verdict may prove to be plausible, it should not be allowed to prevent any further examination of measuring autonomy.

² “A polar type (of an ideal type) is only the extreme or polar end of a continuum, whose logical function is simply to define the continuum” (Sartori 1987, 70).

a. Conceptualizing autonomy

There is no agreement concerning the exact definition of the concept of autonomy,³ although there is no controversy what comes to its etymological root and historical usage in general terms. The term was coined in the classical Greece and it literally means self-law or self-rule. In the classical context autonomy (*autonomia*) was a communal or collective property, freedom of a polis whose law-making was not in control of outsiders (tyrants), whereas democratic liberty (*eleutheria*) was freedom within the polis (Hansen 1996). Indeed, the communal meaning is still used either referring to the independent rule-making capacity of a sovereign nation-state or to the (more or less) limited rights for self-regulation of a sub-state entity. According to Onora O’Neill (2000, 40) it was only in Immanuel Kant’s writings “that we first meet the idea that human agents, or quite specifically the human will, rather than polities, are the primary locus of autonomy”. Even though Kant himself, broadly speaking, meant by autonomy “the capacity to live by the principles that plurality *can* adopt” (ibid.), the concept has afterwards – at least in its individual usage – been seen as a synonym for individual freedom in general (see Lindley 1986).

It is beneficial to learn from the theorists of individual freedom in developing one’s understanding of state autonomy: Firstly, because there is a clear conceptual connection between the concepts of (state) autonomy and (individual) freedom. The entities or agents *may* be different in kind, but the underlying mechanisms of being free may be analogous to that of being autonomous. Secondly, there is a whole body of refined literature available covering everything from conceptual issues to possibilities for measuring individual freedom, whereas literature dealing with state autonomy is lacking: Before the emergence of globalization discourse, state autonomy was rarely the object of research, but more likely an implicit background assumption. In the field of IR, concepts of state power and sovereignty – interpreted through various theoretical approaches such as dependency or interdependency theories – have dominated the theoretical discussion. Whereas they both share some common ground with the concept of autonomy, neither of them has totally replaced it. Thirdly (and concerning the italics of the first point), it may be that agency in state autonomy is best understood to take place through individuals. The last point will be discussed more in this section.

According to MacCallum (1967, 314) individual freedom is always a “triadic relation” of something (agent/s), *from* something and *to* do, not do, become or not become something. Thus differing conceptions of freedom arise from the variation within the three variables: who or what are the proper agents, which types of constraints and what kinds of actions are relevant. MacCallum’s aim was to refute the firmly established dichotomy that rendered negative and positive freedoms as fundamentally different concepts. In Isaiah Berlin’s (1958/1969) conceptualization negative freedom was understood as absence of obstacles, constraints or interference, whereas positive freedom required *presence* of something (e.g. self-mastery, self-realisation or self-determination) (Carter 2003). What MacCallum did was to show that negative and positive notions can be considered as *dimensions* of freedom in general. They are different sides of the same coin in the sense that to be free from something entails ability to do something. Indeed, it has been concluded that although the negative notion is necessary for all conceptions of freedom, it is not sufficient: “to

³ Dworkin (1988, 6) – concentrating on individual autonomy – quotes several writers in order to show how their conceptions differ: “autonomy” is used in exceedingly broad fashion.

be free a person needs to have the right to make her own choices, but in addition she must also have the power to make use of her rights” (Ringen 2005, 37).

The triadic relation is visible in a standard definition of state autonomy by David Held et al. (1999, 29). State autonomy is “the actual *power* the nation-state possesses to articulate and achieve policy goals *independently* - - even though these may on occasion clash with the dictates of domestic and international forces and conditions” (italics added). The definition is practically in line with the idea that autonomy entails both power to act and absence of constraints. The authors set out to find out whether “the sovereignty of modern state is fundamentally eroded [or - -] the autonomy of the state has been radically cut short.” For them, as it should be for others, it is an empirical question that demands research on the emergence of global politics, institutions and infrastructure. Their conclusion, in line with many others (e.g. Scholte 2005, Sørensen 2004) is that state autonomy has not simply been weakened, but transformed in the changing structures of global order. They suggest that “political communities and civilizations - - are enmeshed in complex structures of overlapping forces, relations and movements which have diverse impact on them” (ibid., 442). No “powerful forces” including the nation-state, they write, can insulate from these processes, but the impact on their autonomy does vary depending on the issue, the position of the state in global hierarchies, and in the domestic resources, institutions and politics. While credible, the analysis if Held et al (1999) suffers from its in-built methodological nationalism that looks world political reality from an atomist perspective and autonomy as an exclusive property of separate state-entities thus making win-lose situations the norm in the distribution of autonomy among states.

b. Whose autonomy?

After deciding about the core of the concept, one needs to go further down in the ladder of abstraction. If we are to understand autonomy having to do with action – doing, becoming, reflecting, deliberating, resisting, choosing, deciding, and implementing – rather than passive being – independence and isolation, then we must encounter the problem of agency. For theorists of individual freedom it is clear that agency is about individual persons. But in exactly whose autonomy are we interested when talking about state or national autonomy? Deciding the “locus” of state autonomy not only involves tough methodological choices but affects the selection of indicators. Let us shortly discuss the methodological issue before going to the more concrete issue of operationalization.

Measuring state autonomy involves either implicit or explicit positions on such notoriously difficult (primarily) theoretical questions as: What is a state? Is there collective agency? Is state a collective agent? What is the relation between state and society? Now let us be frank: it is possible that – because of our insufficient understanding, or because we can look at reality from infinity of perspectives, or just because for harsh realities of empirical research – answers to such questions may seem either banal or incomplete. Nevertheless, this does not make the questions irrelevant or unnecessary – quite the contrary. One needs to be aware of one’s theoretical groundings in order to be able to make sound assessments of empirical findings. Theoretical clarity also serves the consistency and thus validity of the research and opening it to review and critique. And lastly, the theoretical base is not irrelevant what comes to the selection of relevant indicators for measuring

autonomy. To structure the discussion a bit we could ask whether we are locating autonomous agency into (1) the state apparatus (separate from the society) as a corporate actor, (2) the nation-state as a collective actor (i.e. state-society or the “people”), (3) an aggregate of individuals (citizenry, electorate, population), or (4) individual decision-makers representing the state? While this is not the place to deal with these questions thoroughly – let alone take any definite positions – I want to spell out what is at stake here.

The question of agency, individual and collective, derives from no less than one of the most fundamental controversies in social sciences, that over individualism and collectivism: whereas the former sees state action as action of individuals, takes the latter stance defending state as a collective actor with human attributes like beliefs, rationality and preferences. Note that a collectivist at one level can be an atomist on another level. In traditional IR thinking, fixated with the horizontal separation between different levels of analysis (e.g. individual, domestic, and international), states have been *treated* as agents in the international level, just as individuals have been thought to be agents at the domestic level. Thus the ontological status of states have remained ambiguous in the sense that (a) definite ontological statements have been avoided, (b) states have been treated as if they were unitary agents with person-like behaviour, but (c) still it has been hinted that the notion of state stands “in reality” for governments, top politicians and official agencies (see Wight 2006) . So while the overall picture of international politics is atomistic (and domestic political analysis often individualistic), there is still room to see states as collective actors in the international level of analysis: states are conceived as structures but their interaction at the world political stage is conceived in individualist manner. Some have taken explicitly individualist position, but maintained treating states as unitary structures in their system level analysis.⁴ Others have experimented with explicitly structuralist – and personified – definition of state while retained the atomist understanding of world politics (Wendt 2004), and some strived for a balance between the two (Wight 2006).

In addition to the ambiguous character of state as a collective actor or an aggregate of individuals, the referent is often unspecified also otherwise. In many writings, it is left for the receiver to reason from the context what is meant when the UK, Turkey or Andorra is mentioned: the state apparatus, government, society, population, ethnic majority, prime minister, territory, or national team in football. Methodological nationalism in social sciences tends to blur the distinction between state apparatus and society. Globalization literature clearly deals with impacts on national economy and sometimes on the territorially-bound society, while at the same time urges actions from governments to influence (or adapt to the reality of) the external influences. In other words, the state gets various meanings depending on the need. Similarly the KOF index of globalization, while providing no definition, is based on a broad societal (economic, social, political, cultural and legal) understanding of state incorporating indicators measuring cross-border trade and financial flows in and out from the economy, citizen’s contacts with foreign people and culture, participation in international treaties, and number of embassies within its territory. While such ambiguity is clearly

⁴ A citation from a well-known IR textbook: “In political life, and to some extent in IR scholarship, the terms state, nation, and country are used imprecisely, usually to refer to the decisions of state governments. It is common place to discuss states as if they were people [- -.] Ultimately only individual human beings are true actors making conscious decisions. But treating states like people makes it easier to describe and explain the relations among them. It is convenient to use the language metaphorically, though it is only a mental construction (Goldstein 1996, 11).

a deficit, for example, in risking statist reification and homogenisation of society, it invalidates certain issues more seriously than others. Empirical study of state autonomy is clearly in danger zone, for the idea of agency is inbuilt into its definition and demands specification. Let us have an example.

Krasner (1995/96) systematically links state autonomy to top officials separating the state from “domestic society” and “international environment”. Hence, state autonomy is “rulers’ autonomy” that can be violated either directly (e.g. through economic sanctions or political conditionality on sovereign loans) from outside or indirectly from inside by altering “conceptions of legitimacy held by domestic groups” (ibid., 127). For Krasner, the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) violated autonomy of Soviet Union and its satellites, not because governments were somehow forced to oblige, but because it “altered conceptions of human rights and legitimate state behaviour that were held by groups in Eastern Europe...” (ibid., 144). The view presumes a strict differentiation between the state (i.e. “the rulers”) and society (individuals and groups) and incongruity between their autonomy: increase in the one’s autonomy can mean losses in that of the other, and *vice versa*; or in other words, autonomous rulers can make decisions that are neither preferred nor in the interests of the rest of society.

This is partially repeated in the treatment of autonomy by Held et al (1999) who, to be honest, cannot be accused of vagueness. Remember how they defined state autonomy as “the capacity of state representatives, managers and agencies to articulate and pursue their policy preferences”. Initially it resembles Krasner’s treatment of state, but notices also differences between states: “Moreover, to the extent that modern nation-states are democratic, sovereignty and autonomy are assumed to be embedded within, and congruent with, the territorially organized framework of liberal democratic government: the ‘rulers’ – elected representatives – are accountable to ‘the ruled’ – the citizenry – within a delimited territory. There is, in effect, a ‘national community of fate’, whereby membership of political community is defined in terms of the peoples within the territorial borders of the nation-state; this community becomes the proper locus and home of democratic policies” (Held et al. 1999, 29). According to these authors, we are observing the autonomy of the rulers, but in democratic settings this autonomy can be assumed to represent the whole of the political community. The difference between democratic and non-democratic countries is that in the former the category of rules is extended to cover – I suppose – almost all of the voting citizenry, while in the latter rulers are delimited to a small governing elite. Unfortunately, the authors limit their empirical work exclusively on liberal democratic states in advanced capitalist societies, and hence we cannot be entirely certain how they would treat autonomy in non-democratic contexts.

The operational consequences of deciding about the specifics of an autonomous state are also best illustrated by an example. Say we want to measure an EU member state’s influence in regional economic policymaking. From the view point of state apparatus (1) we could choose indicators like voting power in the Council of Ministers, number of officials at OECD headquarters, or financial weight measured by governmental expenditures. But in addition to these, we should measure the state’s capacity, for example, to impose new policies on domestic industry or to get support for policies that affect sub-national regions unequally: one could, for instance measure the level of institutionalisation of state-industry linkages or centralisation of governance. From the perspective of state-society (2) our interest would be broader; we could assess the voting power not only in the

Council but also in the European parliament – in theory responsible directly to the people – or the resources of national agricultural lobby or country's financial weight measured by the GDP. Measuring influence of individuals that make up the country as an aggregate (3) seem to be more difficult, since direct ways to affect regional economic policies are limited, capacities of individuals probably varies widely, and state's policies are not satisfactory to all (sometimes not even to the majority): influence comes thorough the representative system, NGO's and social movements, resistance to policies, market behaviour, and public opinions. Because of our state-centered mindsets and statistic tools, it is difficult – but not impossible – to construct a measure of autonomy from these bases. In very general terms, it could probably be postulated that individuals in higher social and occupational positions, those with better education and more wealth have the potential of being more autonomous than less successful individuals on these terms. Socio-demographic variables (and their aggregates like the Gini coefficient) could perhaps serve as proxies for individually defined state autonomy. Lastly, we might want to limit our measurement on the autonomy of top officials (4) – heads of states, ministers, members of parliaments, heads of governmental agencies – and see how autonomous they are with respect to foreign influences and, perhaps, to domestic body of citizens and organizations. The actual indicators would have to be quite like the indicators as in the first case but also include more data on individual capacities (level of professionalism, extensity of social networks, etc.).

The main point here, is not so much criticise others or attempt to draw rigid boundaries between the different concepts of state and the respective indicators but to highlight the fact that theoretical specification and clarity pays off in some way or the other. In the following, to make our examination less complex we will ignore our own advice and treat the state ambiguously.

c. Measuring constraints

Let us stay on the operational level by examining one of the attributes of freedom, negative *freedom from*, in the context of state autonomy. While the empirical data is more or less constant, we can, in principle, proceed to assess either directly the quantity of open policy opportunities or do so indirectly by concentrating on external constraints on policy-decisions. If we opt for the first, we have to deal with the question raised by Goldmann (2001, 65): should we assess a country's autonomy in relation to its real preferences and objectives or in relation to a set of “assumed objectives of actors in general”? Does an increase in open possibilities automatically lead to enhanced autonomy or do these have to be somehow significant for the agent? While we acknowledge that there is a lively and complex debate among freedom theorists of how we should relate opportunities to preferences, Bavetta and Guala (2003) offer an interesting point of view that may open the way for empirical analysis. According to them, it is necessary to consider both the scope of open opportunities as well as the scope of one's potential preferences. But the research is no in the position for sorting out whether open possibilities are matching the preferences the actor whose autonomy is under scrutiny. Neither can the researcher assume what actor's preferences might (or should) be. Instead she should account for the scope of *possible* preferences: to check whether the actor is conscious of all the possible options she has; that she has a real opportunity of consciously evaluating one's preferences and then act on the basis of that critical evaluation. By this

token, it should be possible to measure an actor's autonomy-freedom without a need to know her subjective preferences or objective interests.

Nevertheless, since positive catalogization of all possible opportunities would probably prove to be both ambiguous and onerous, it might be wise to examine the constraints on opportunities. The crucial question is what exactly counts as a constraint and this too is fraught with difficulties. A measurement of autonomy should be able to assess the quantity and quality of external constraints on national policies. There are various possible dimensions within which constraints can be analysed and categorised: from block to burden,⁵ from objective to subjective, from intentional to unintentional, from agential to structural, and from empirical to illusory. Moreover, there is no consensus between the freedom theorists which types of constraints are relevant for assessing the level of freedom. The extent of constraints must be left open for variation depending of the research and the researcher. To be sure, the variation of relevant constraints is dependent on the philosophy of science – setting limits for the real and researchable – in the background of each study, even though no philosophy can automatically be used to determine a relevant set of constraints.

A case of assumed tax competition illustrates how difficult it is to (a) make the decision of what counts as a constraint, and (b) how to actually assess the degree of some entity's autonomy on these bases. In a free market situation with more or less open national economies many feel that in order to secure jobs and attract investments into their country income must be kept in control and capital gains and corporation taxes on a “competitive” – that is on a relatively low – level. Should we acknowledge the relevancy of structural constraints, we could now contend that the logic of free markets (that being a structural feature) constrain national decision-making by forced tax-policies. In other words, the assumption is that a threat or fear of X (taxes↑) causing Y (employment↓) is burdening certain policy options. Now, if we require from our constraints to be objective (threat), we can state – after either retrospective or counterfactual verification of X causing Y⁶ – that policy-making in this situation was indeed constrained. Alternatively, we may contend that also subjectively felt threats (fears) – whether or not having the potential to actualise – burdening certain options may also be seen as constraints for autonomy. Indeed, it may be that the threat for capital flight is an exaggeration that has become constructed as a truth (or as a part of a hegemonic discourse shared by political right and left).⁷ The verification of such a threat might come in the form of discourse analysis or simply interviews.

However, if the subjective burdens are based on threats that do not have the potential to actualise if A acted in a certain manner, the idea of external influence can be made questionable. Is it an external constraint, if its effect is dependent on the subjective understanding of A? Does a (perceived) threat weaken autonomy even if the threat was based on inaccurate information or ideological knowledge? Sometimes it is, however, not easy to differentiate between real and perceived, especially because of the reflexive nature knowledge. If a sufficient number of people believe in certain theories, they may begin to behave in the manner the theory describes. The case

⁵ The terms block and burden are borrowed from Philip Pettit 2003.

⁶ “Until we know whether people would or would not have acted in certain ways if a person had sought to do something, we cannot know whether that person was free to do something” (Kramer 2003, 65).

⁷ Indeed, a number of studies suggest that alternative national policies – in form of high taxation and extensive welfare services – are possible and not automatically sanctioned by the markets (Jensen 2006, Garrett 1998, Veseth 1998).

of tax competition is a potential example of reflexivity: a social perception (“high taxation is bad for business”) can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (“lets get out of here!”). Thus the substance (real/illusion, true/false) of a perception is in many cases contingent on social behavior of actors. The mode of such a threat would be unstable varying in space and time. This would make it extremely hard to draw a line between true and illusion. Even if we, somehow, were able to identify some of such illusion creating constraints, we would never be able to map them all. It would, perhaps, be possible to get valuable (but not general) information about such processes by interviewing national politicians, bureaucrats or academic observers, but to convert this into nation-specific comparative form would be unattainable. This would give us knowledge on possible threats and pressures, not however, of their status as real or illusionary.

Even if we chose to concentrate our assessment of autonomy on easily observable (objective) constraints on political decision-making, there would still be considerable problems to be solved. It is not wrong to think that some external effects have stronger influence, or are more compelling/empowering than others: are we to account for all types of external intervention or should we choose only intervention that is enforced on us? Most of the effects that are relevant for autonomy are such that they do not completely block or determine state policies, but more likely affect the costs and benefits of different policies and policy options. What kind of force must an external influence have, in order to be counted as affecting autonomy? Think about international agreements and organizations producing legally binding regulation. The formal regulation may or may not be enforced with formal sanctions: (1) there can be no sanctions at all (completely voluntary obedience), (2) the sanctions can be informal like shaming (which may bear direct consequences like product boycotts or lowered credit ratings), or (3) sanctions can be formal enforced by collective action (including travel bans, trade embargos, exclusion from co-operative arrangements, tariff increases, or even military operations). The last group of enforcement can pretty safely be counted as being a real constraint. I would rank the second as a constraint as well, although doing this makes empirical observation more difficult. It would also raise the problem discussed above, namely how to treat potential effects (or threats) or subjective perceptions: shaming may lead to materially felt consequences and changes in costs and benefits – or it may result to nothing concrete. The first case could probably be omitted from measuring autonomy altogether, although theoretically this also could affect the freedom-autonomy of national political decision-making.

The discussion thus far has looked at constraints from an atomist perspective that induces us to take the internal/external demarcation as objective and observable (perhaps also natural) and to see all external interferences as constraints of some degree. A vision from a more holist – or cosmopolitan – perspective problematizes both of these suggestions making straightforward measurement more difficult. Challenging the given internal/external demarcation such a vision may point to the extreme conclusion that an assessment of national autonomy must be an assessment of autonomy of the whole system whose constraining structures we should concentrate on. A milder version, however, focuses primarily on qualifying different influences: not all interferences on domestic policy-making and/or conditions are to be counted as infringements of national autonomy. In the last section I will present a principle – following Philip Pettit and Iris Marion Young (2000) that

could provide us with a useful screening device for deciding which influences count as constraints and which does not. In fact, external influences may be both restrictive and empowering.

d. Measuring power

Autonomy entails, not only absence of constraints, but also actual capacity to do and be. Not surprisingly, however, it is by far clear what such doing and being should mean. In treating this capacity in terms of power, I do not literally follow MacCallum jr. (1967), but conceptualise the 'to do'-variable more in terms of power as it has been theorized in the IR tradition. Consider the following broad definition of power "In general terms, power is the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate" (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 42). Power – in its agential and structural form – and negative freedom are different sides of the same coin of autonomy. While negative freedom can be interpreted as absence of detrimental structural power, autonomy entails also agential power – active and dynamic production of effects.

Variance within the power-term could, to give a simplistic example, take place on a continuum from agential to structural forms of power (see e.g. Guzzini 1993). For a long time mainstream IR theorists restricted their analysis to include only agential forms of power, and only during two last decades also structural (impersonal and productive) power analyses have gained general acceptance. Agential power refers to agents' capacity to control outcomes by doing things, by changing and conserving conditions or by resisting and influencing the action/behaviour/conditions of others. This in turn can be direct or indirect (e.g. institutional power); it can be directed both towards external environment (agents/structures) or domestic conditions; it can be intentional or unintentional. However conceptualised, agential power must be essential for the notion of autonomy (covering MacCallum's *to do* term) and it is possible to separate it from the notion of negative freedom for analytical purposes. Dealing with structural forms of power is trickier since this kind of power does not emanate from any single agent or organisation, but is still conditioning the actions (and identities) of agents: "it produces the very social capacities of structural, or subject, positions in direct relation to one another, and the associated interests, that underlie and dispose action" and as such the structures "allocate differential capacities, and typically differential advantages, to different positions (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 53). Nonetheless, what must always be kept in mind is that the separation of different types of power is analytical in the last instance: "...because each type of power has at least implicit view on both agency and structure, none simply reflects an entirely agentic or structural perspective (to the neglect of the other)" (ibid., 49).⁸

To employ the power concept in an analysis of state autonomy does not obviously have to carry all the limitations of traditional IR paradigms. First of all, maximization of autonomy does not always entail maximization of power vis-à-vis other states. From the perspective of autonomy, a country

⁸ "Nevertheless, they do vary in specific ways. Compulsory (and, to a lesser degree, institutional) power emphasizes agency to the point where structure becomes the context in which A's actions and B's reactions are set and constrained, thereby leaning heavily on agency and treating structure as constraint. In contrast, concepts of structural and productive power emphasize structure relative to purposeful agency, even while recognizing that meaningful practices, and hence human agency, are essential in producing, reproducing and possibly transforming these structures" (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 49).

does not require power for the sake of power, but just to be able to live by one's own rules. Not all power is relevant for autonomy – just as not all open opportunities are relevant from the perspective of an actor. For instance, state's decision to allow gay marriages does not require much power in an IR realist sense. Switzerland is in no need for massive military resources for being as autonomous as Israel or South Korea, nor does Germany's military spending tell anything about its autonomy. This is also one of the reasons that make it difficult to simply proxy the level of state autonomy using indices of national power. Secondly, unlike national power in IR tradition, an increase in one country's autonomy may come without decreasing the autonomy of anyone else. The disagreement with traditional national power indices is that they tend to conceptualize *one country's power as relative to the power of other countries* (or relative to the dominant country) in a system under scrutiny.⁹ Such a conceptualization does not allow a win-win situation between the reference country and its challenger(s): If China's national power is measured against USA, any enhancement in the former is considered as weakening the latter's (relative) power. While this may be an appropriate way of depicting power fluctuations in a state system – which I suspect – it does not depict the reality of national autonomy accurately. Autonomy is relative to an abstract ideal not to any empirical equal. Hence, a win-win situation is possible; autonomy of one may be enhanced without any detriments to others. Nevertheless, an atomist vision of autonomy does allow also win-lose situations: a decision to raise taxes on alcohol in one EU member country may require a degree of institutional power¹⁰ for getting the price levels harmonised also in the neighbouring countries as an effort of harnessing private import and consumption (seen as costs for the intended tax increases).

Theoretical questions aside, would it be possible to incorporate the existing indicators of national power (e.g. CINC) to an analysis of state autonomy? Since measures of power are nowadays manifold and they make use of a wide variety of variables, their relevancy from autonomy's point of view should by no means be played down. As power measurements have increasingly incorporated "soft power" variables into their tool box, they could perhaps provide some points of entry into measuring the "to do"-aspect of autonomy. Consider, for example, the CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) formula for measuring "comprehensive national power" (CNP) that draws on more than 60 individual indicators incorporating eight attributes gauging: (1) domestic economic activities, (2) science and technology, (3) foreign economic activities, (4) social development, (5) military, (6) government regulation and control, (7) foreign affairs, and (8) natural resources (Kim 2003). The CASS framework is getting closer to understanding power in terms of state capacity – or infrastructural power – not only to "exercise control over territory and regulate social relations" (Soifer 2008, 233) but to do this so as to harness domestic capabilities – a wide variety of resources – to meet external challenges (cf. Weiss 1998). While state and society are still *dealt as* a whole toward external environment, it is simultaneously assumed that *in reality* national power is dependent on state's capacity to penetrate the society it governs to maximize its power vis-à-vis other states. As power frameworks are getting more nuanced they come to share more common ground with conceptualizations of autonomy, and because of this, they can come to provide single indicators applicable also in measuring autonomy. But because power is not

⁹ Usually the relation in power analysis is dyadic – a country's power share in relation to a country of reference.

¹⁰ Institutional power refers here, perhaps a bit unorthodoxically, to the capacity of "preconstituted actors exercising control over others indirectly through institutions" (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 51).

autonomy, researchers should resist the idea of proxying one with the other even though there was a strong correlation between the two.

e. Autonomy as description and prescription

The concept of state autonomy is often treated in empirical accounts of globalization straightforwardly as states' *de facto* policy-making independency. But can state autonomy be treated exclusively in a descriptive manner? I do not think it can. As with any other social scientific quality, we must obtain a theoretical understanding of what is being measured before we can actually do the measuring: we must have a conceptual apparatus of some kind before can actually observe such phenomena in reality (cf. Sartori 1970/2009), and, in fact, this is exactly the very idea of the present analysis. In general sense, measuring autonomy is prone to similar (indirect) normative – or political – consequences as measurement of democracy, competitiveness, etc. We can also allow that a most research of state autonomy is, at least implicitly, methodologically nationalist and thus have the potential of reinforcing a state-centric understanding of social reality. But can we not assume that the notion of autonomy is normative in a more fundamental manner: Does the fact that we obsessively try to find out whether (and how) globalization has affected states' autonomy not indicate that the concept has also an intrinsic normative connotation? What kind of concept is state autonomy: a neutral description of reality, an abstract idea or value, or something in between?

Drawing on Giovanni Sartori and especially his insights concerning the concept of democracy (1987), I suggest that the concept of state autonomy can be understood as consisting of both descriptive and prescriptive parts. Sartori's work with conceptual analysis is based on the idea that that "clear thinking requires clear language" and explicit vocabulary (1970/2009. 22). This in turn is supported by a conviction that at least within boundaries of different scientific disciplines, it is possible to come to share a common vocabulary with agreed upon meaning for "the most important" carriers of concepts (e.g. democracy, liberty, consensus, etc.). Conceptualization, however, is far more arduous task than that of simply stipulating a given meaning to a particular word. There are two interconnected reasons for this: (1) words – empirical concepts – are connected to some real entities,¹¹ and (2) meanings of words have been molded by this reality in a (historical) process of trial-and-error. In the end, it is for these reasons that a careful conceptual analysis is required if the task is either to formulate new concepts or reformulate old ones. What is more, such analysis is to be anchored in both conceptual and non-conceptual history: We need to be aware of the historical and social situation that frames the use and meaning of words in different times and places. We need to be conscious that the precise meaning of a word is not fixed – although the most universal core might remain stable – but prone to (adaptive) transformation. But the reason for this awareness is primarily instrumental: We must learn from the past experiences in order to understand the contemporary reality better, to construct better concepts.

¹¹ This hints to something akin to a scientific realist ontology, although Sartori refuses to discuss his philosophical premises in these terms.

“Since political systems are human-made and conceived, the invention of present-day democracies hinges on, and is best traced in, the history of ideas and ideals... These words [e.g. power, coercion, liberty, equality, laws, justice and representation] (and many more) are carriers, then historical experience in the important sense that their core meanings largely established by success and failure and thus *incorporate historical learning*. As a mainstream discourse on politics develops across the centuries it discards the unfit, that is, the meanings (definitions) of power,..., and the like that have not withstood “trial” and instead have been conducive to “error”, to repeated and patent failures in application”. (Sartori 1987, xii-xiii.)

In other words, Sartori is taking historical lessons seriously: we should be able to formulate a common understanding concerning key political terms in order to make good science. What he thinks is, that we should be aware of past ideas in a more profound sense: we should relate such ideas to empirical evidence and ask whether they were successfully applied to reality and whether they could be successfully applied at present. This is in agreement with Beck (2001) who is trying to replace old state-centered concepts with empirically more accurate ones in order to understanding our contemporary – cosmopolitan – reality.

But there is more into Sartori’s analysis than that: concepts should be historically sensitive not only because of descriptive concerns but because their normative implications. Democracy, for Sartori, is neither a purely theoretical (ideals) nor empirical concept (Sartori 1984). The bifurcation between normative and empirical theories prevents us from seeing democracy correctly, as an amalgamation of ideational and empirical. Sartori’s main idea concerning democracy is possible to derive from the idea that concepts are ‘experience reminders’: “*To the extent that an ideal is converted into reality, to the same extent it must become feedback monitored* (Sartori 1987, 71). Sartori’s ideals are mental pictures, born from the dissatisfaction with reality (ibid., 68). Ideals are not necessarily ‘values’, ethics is but one motive for reacting to the existing (ibid., 242). To be sure, democracy may or may not be/become a moral value, it is not automatically such: “A democratic system is established as a result of deontological pressures. What democracy is cannot be separated from what democracy should be. A democracy exists only insofar as its ideals and values bring it into being. Democracy comes into being as a result of an interaction between ideals and reality (ibid., 7)”. The same goes with autonomy: our ideals of autonomy – whether moral values or not – guide our action and this action (together with intervening factors) translate into good and bad results depending on the point of view. Formed by a living ideal, the level of state autonomy can never be a purely objective description of reality.

The inherent normativity of the concept places responsibility on the shoulders of those who attempt to numerically objectify it. Any attempt to measuring the level of autonomy should not only proceed from the basis of an empirically relevant conceptualization but also on the basis of such that do not cause any “morally repugnant consequences”, to borrow the words of Dowding and van Hees (2005, 7) discussing the notion of liberty. Hence normative criteria can legitimately – but with extreme sensitivity – be incorporated into attempts of conceptualising state autonomy for the purposes of empirical research.

f. State autonomy in terms of atomist and holist social ontology

Until this point we have only in passing hit upon the last issue one must specify in any attempt of measuring state autonomy, namely whether state autonomy should be examined (1) against a background of atomist social ontology according to which the autonomy of one is only externally related to that of others or (2) against a holist social ontology positing states' autonomy as both externally and internally related. While both perspectives retain some methodological nationalist tendencies – it is not possible to examine state autonomy without presuming that states bear some relevance in contemporary world and that they have the capacity for being autonomous – the latter type of analysis rise to meet the cosmopolitan challenge of Beck – and the Sartorian challenge of keeping scientific concepts feedback monitored – in proposing to look at autonomy as a property that is connected to the idea of post-international world order sketched by theorists such as Ferguson & Mansbach (2004). In my discussion of holist autonomy I will, however, draw on political theorists – Iris Marion Young and Philip Pettit – who more subtly tie their conceptualization of autonomy into the mainstream debate not claiming to revolutionize the whole field of social thinking as Beck has been criticized for doing (Chernilo 2006).

The conventional billiard-ball way of looking at the world political system is atomist depicting a competitive arena filled with separate, autonomous players, whose behavior resembles that of rational individuals trying to realize their internally determined preferences. Autonomy is strictly a property of state entities that is of course relative in the sense that it is always more or less constrained by other entities and external influences. While not always taking the form of a zero-sum game, the relationship between two countries' autonomy is external in the sense that enhancement of one's autonomy is possible to come at the expense of another. Country A's decision to build polluting factories close to its border, diminishes the neighboring country B's possibilities to govern over the quality of its air. Conversely, if two poor countries incapable alone to supervise drug traffickers routes to their countries, decide to cooperate in order to being better able to enforce their preferred narcotics policies, both countries' autonomy is strengthened. The abstract ideal against which real empirical cases are benchmarked is implicitly that of absolute autonomy (although getting even close to that is of course understood to be impossible). Such an understanding is easily comprehended, for it is in line with our everyday vocabulary and individualist thinking. It is, however, tied to nationalist thinking: the ideal of autonomy – even as a universal principle applied to all communities/nations – is parochial in the end just because it justifies and reinforces separation of these entities. Maximization of one's autonomy may have morally questionable consequences.

But such an understanding can be challenged by another vision of autonomy, one based on a holist understanding of social reality. The most simple way in understanding the holist position is based on metaphysics of systems thinking which sees virtually every system – be that physical or social – as causally and reciprocally related to other systems; parts of a system as systems in their own are always structured by both internal and external conditions: “Reality is a network of systems, some of them mutually independent and related causally or not at all (gravitation apart), others that are reciprocally related, overlapping, or nested. (Weissman 2000, 11). Young goes further in linking

Kantian moral thinking (advocacy) into her moderately holist understanding of social ontology (2000, 231): “- - an adequate concept of autonomy should promote the capacity of persons to pursue their own ends in the context of relationships in which other might do the same. While this concept of autonomy entails a presumption of non-interference, it does not imply a social scheme in which atomized agents simply mind their own business and leave each other alone. It entails recognizing that agents are related in many ways they have not chosen, by virtue of kinship, history, proximity, or the unintended consequences of action.” These formulations are not only social in nature, by stipulating that agents are in constant and identity defining relation to each other, but also normative in an altruistic fashion – just like the individualistic view is often normative in an egoistic manner – requiring that all should enjoy similar rights and duties.

While Immanuel Kant or J.S. Mill would probably not have initially been sympathetic Weissman’s ontological formulations – which seem to go against the notion of individual autonomy and possibility of free will – I think that common grounds can be found. I will not go into these theories of autonomy as thorough as they deserve here, but only want to make the point that strengthening of individual autonomy has been seen, for a long time, tied to strengthened autonomy of everyone in the community. Kant’s notion of (individual) autonomy is tied to an idea of universal rationality (and thus morality and moral value) of human beings and “the goal of attaining autonomy throughout a community” (Guyer 2007, 106), and Mill’s notion of individuality “necessarily involves social preconditions and has social consequences” (Capaldi 2004, 288). Kant’s universalist thinking leads him to posit that every rational being is capable and has the right to co-author “or at least consent to the laws that apply to them” (Guyer 2007, 97) and to act consistently with all the universally valid laws. Individuals are thus part of a wider community whose general laws they should consistently respect in their own conduct. Kant’s emphasis on the necessity of treating other people as ends in themselves is mirrored in Mill’s conviction that individual autonomy requires cultural support: “Given the assumption that the goal of recognizing and realizing autonomy is a universal truth about human nature, and given the assumption that autonomy per se in one person can never conflict with autonomy in another person, and given the argument that autonomy can be achieved and sustained only in a society in which it is recognized that autonomy must be had by all...” (Capaldi 2004, 264-5). Mill acknowledges internal relations between individuals and their negative effects on autonomy: “We can never be free if we are defining ourselves in terms of others, either in order to subordinate ourselves to them or in order to subordinate them to ourselves” (ibid., 250). What follows is that an autonomous act cannot, by definition, be deleterious to others. This is the very same interpretation that Guyer (2007, 105) makes in his analysis of Kant’s *Groundwork*.

It can be argued, that these Kantian and Millian formulations of individual autonomy, could serve as models for conceptualizing a holist notion of state autonomy – or actually autonomy interpreted against a holist background philosophy, although the justification for holist state autonomy might slightly differ from the (almost) purely moral justification of the former. From such a perspective states, nations or other collectivities could be seen as relatively autonomous entities, whose level of autonomy is externally and internally related to every other entity’s autonomy. This conceptualization is based not only on normative (wishful?) thinking – cosmopolitanism – but also on transformed world political reality – post-international order – that has rendered the state-centered atomist notion of autonomy meaningless in a world where individual loyalties are

dispersed to various, often overlapping and sometimes conflicting locations; where authority structures do not simply follow territorial borders; and where societies are irrevocably interdependent ecologically, economically, culturally, socially, and politically. Autonomy is still there, would an advocate of methodological cosmopolitanism claim, but it just makes no sense to look at it from the old statist and nationalist perspective.

To be sure, contemporary theorists have attempted to analyze autonomy from other than a purely atomist perspective. The starting point can be that of Philip Pettit's conceptualization of freedom as non-domination: "One person is dominated by another, - -, to the extent that the other person has the capacity to interfere in their affairs, in particular the capacity to interfere in their affair on an arbitrary basis" (Pettit *ibid.*, 165). Pettit does not take an explicitly holist position, but he approaches freedom in such a way that necessitates one's actions to be reconciled with those of others by definition. A social dimension is now brought to the very core of the concept. Nevertheless, the idea as such is hardly original. Held (1996, 301), for example, constructs his principle of autonomy introducing limits to absolute freedom of action: "Persons should enjoy equal rights, and, accordingly, equal obligations in the specification of the political framework which generates and limits the opportunities available to them; that is, they should be free and equal in the determination of the conditions of their own lives, so long as they do not deploy this framework to negate the rights of the others." Thus, an entity is autonomous as far as some other actor is not capable of intervening without taking into consideration the interests of the affected. Both Pettit and Held stay pretty much in the confines of negative liberty, but what makes the former formulation valuable, is (1) that it erects a clear criterion – arbitrariness of interference – for deciding which influences are to be seen as infringements and which conducive to autonomy, and so (2) incorporates the idea of positive or empowering (exogenous) influence into the notion of freedom. Such a conceptualization – coming rather close to Millian thinking – is more appropriate for analyzing freedom in the world of complexity and interdependence. Pettit's idea is, that non-domination would be actualized in a polity where each individuals' and groups' rights are constitutionally guaranteed – just like in most liberal democratic nation-states they – more or less – are.

The credit for seeing the promise of Pettit's thinking for post-internationally oriented analysis of communal autonomy must go to Iris Marion Young (2000) who develops the her (implicitly cosmopolitan) vision of autonomy as non-domination enjoyed by many kinds of communities, nevertheless, nation-states still maintaining the primary importance. Young's "moderate holism" comes in the guise of "autonomy for all" – a morally qualified analysis of relatively autonomous entities sharing the same political space, the globe – positing same rights for every community whose claim to autonomy is recognized. Her vision for world political order resembles Kantian cosmopolitanism – or actually internationalism (cf. Doyle 2006, 205-6) – but is presented more concretely: nation-states retain their right to a limited self-government, but in addition there is a regulated federated relationship between them. Each state should take into consideration implications on others when deciding about policies; a state would also have the right to make claims on other nations if their policies had harmful effects outside their borders. Hence, there would be a need for neutral institutional arrangements through which governments could make claims and counterclaims, negotiate, and reach agreements. This would, of course, indicate some

kind of strengthened democratic international governance, approximating global democracy. In the best case, as Young seems to think, a global regulatory framework would ensure that every nation could get themselves heard, their cases discussed and decided upon. There would be interventions for sure, but these would not be arbitrary and thus detrimental to national autonomy. Whether Young would have gone as far as looked at autonomy as logically impossible to enhance when detrimental to others, I am not sure of.

In conclusion, we have two types of autonomy that are based on different philosophies concerning social reality. Whereas the one based on an atomist background is, in principle, conducive to state-by-state measurement and even ranking, the other, based on a more holist background philosophy, makes state-centered analysis and comparison of autonomy questionable altogether. Indeed, if the latter position was taken to extreme, it would shift the focus empirical research of autonomy into the system itself: Into what extent does the system, or the “global culture of autonomy”, support, enable or weaken autonomous agency of states? Such contextual supportiveness could perhaps be quantified and even compared diachronically. Or one could perhaps measure “regional cultures of autonomy” and commit a comparison between these. A less orthodox way of empirically analyzing state autonomy in a (mildly) holist framework would be one applying the arbitrariness criterion to render out whether particular influences are to be considered as infringements or not – whether a state is capable of getting its voice heard in international political deliberation concerning both domestic and foreign externalities. Unfortunately, such an analysis would make measuring and comparison of national autonomy even more arduous business that it already was. Such a strategy is probably more suited to qualitative (case and small-n) studies of autonomy.

Conclusions

In the present paper I have primarily attempted to answer the initial question: what are the main conceptual, methodological and normative difficulties in measuring state autonomy? I first examined some of the most important problems related to any almost any social scientific international measurement and especially ranking. These included problems related to conceptualization, operationalization and aggregation that all affect the results of the measurement. We also examined methodological nationalism, criticized by the so called post-international and cosmopolitan theorists, that is embedded in country comparisons. Lastly, we argued that numerical objectification of abstract qualities/phenomena involve more or less hidden political aspects that any constructor of measurement must be aware of. Thereafter we moved to examine the particular issues that surface when attempting to measure state autonomy. We showed that there are various ways to conceptualize the notion itself – decisions concerning the exact attributes (freedom and power) and the locus of autonomy (agency) – the impacts of which are transmitted to the operationalisation of autonomy. Justified by the general political implications of any social measuring, problems related to methodological nationalism, and the inherent normative character of the notion of autonomy, we lastly differentiated between two background philosophies – atomism

and holism – against which autonomy may be understood and which offer two differing standards for empirically analyzing (and practicing) autonomy. The choice between these has also implications for measurement, and I suggested that the holist understanding of autonomy resists attempts for state-wise measurement and ranking.

Are we ready to give our verdict whether or not autonomy is possible to measure and whether it would be possible to construct an Index of State Autonomy (ISA)? While anything is possible, the analysis here suggests that results would be meager and contested. Too many theoretical and methodological questions are open and the empirical reality so complex that it makes overall assessment of the level of state autonomy highly problematic. In addition, those who operate with related concepts, numerical variables and causal research are probably quite satisfied with the power metrics that can, with serious reservations, be interpreted to come close (or proxy) the atomist understanding of autonomy especially if soft power aspects are incorporated. Thus, there may not be outright demand for an index of autonomy amongst those who most actively make use of the international index data. That said, it is fully possible that someone will attempt to construct such an index and if she succeeds the resulting variables will – and there is no doubt whatsoever – be used in causal research. The more authoritative this constructor is the more attention it will get and references earned. We will not, I hope, experience as powerful depoliticizing tendencies as is the case with some other numerical objectifications (e.g. democracy, corruption, good governance, etc.) because such measure's problematic nature could not be just ignored.

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