A Postcolonial Critique of State Sovereignty in IR: the contradictory legacy of a ‘West-centric’ discipline

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ABSTRACT This paper presents a postcolonial critique of state sovereignty as it is understood in IR. It is argued that the colonial relation between Orient and Occident has informed the development and practice of sovereignty. The Orient has been on the losing end of this relationship, as its experiences, trajectories and sociocultural and political life have been reduced to a set of homogeneous deficiencies. The result has been to consign it to a zone of ‘Otherness’, wherein sovereignty has become synonymous with inferiority and difference vis-à-vis the Occident. In demonstrating that IR has been dominated by a Western intellectual tradition that privileges the concept of sovereignty, I will critically question the epistemological privileging of the West, and in particular of Europe, as a source of knowledge regarding state sovereignty and interrogate how the East–West dichotomies—e.g. civilised–uncivilised, modern–traditional, democratic–undemocratic—that underpin IR studies make the practice of sovereignty a ‘conditional’ virtue for non-Western states, in both theory and practice.

In the field of international relations (IR) sovereignty represents a ‘sine qua non...for...relations between states’. Yet, ironically, it is inextricably linked to colonialism, its very antithesis. As we shall see, it is the colonial relation between Orient and Occident that has informed the development and practice of sovereignty. The Orient has been on the losing end of this relationship, as its experiences, trajectories and sociocultural and political life have been reduced, through a ‘reductive repetition motif’, to a set of homogeneous deficiencies. The result has been to consign the former to a zone of ‘Otherness’, in which sovereignty has become synonymous with inferiority and difference vis-à-vis the Occident.

This paper presents a postcolonial critique of sovereignty as it is understood in IR, one aimed at demonstrating that the field has been dominated by a Western
intellectual tradition that privileges the concept of sovereignty. More specifically, using a genealogical methodology, I shall demonstrate that the colonial legacy that helped shape the conceptualisation, practice and mode of sovereignty exists even today, albeit in new and more subtle forms. To this end, I shall critically question the epistemological privileging of the West, and in particular of Europe, as a source of knowledge regarding state sovereignty and interrogate how the East–West dichotomies—eg civilised–uncivilised, modern–traditional, democratic–undemocratic—that underpin IR studies make the practice of sovereignty a ‘conditional’ virtue for non-Western states, in both theory and practice.

Criticism implies the existence of alternatives; however, what is offered here is a postcolonial problematisation of state sovereignty rather than a postcolonial alternative to it. Nonetheless, what is distinctive about the critique presented here is that it seeks to ‘provincialise’ systematically the ‘West-centric’ orientation of IR’s understanding of sovereignty in an interlinked, five-fold way. First, with regard to methodology, the paper will discuss the potential of a postcolonial genealogy, one that is unique in many respects, to open up new ways of thinking about those colonial conditions of the past that have survived into the present. Second, the paper highlights the normative assumptions underpinning the concept of sovereignty, demonstrating in the process how a certain, dichotomous understanding of peace, associated with a particular historical era and geographical area, and manifest in the work of Immanuel Kant, has informed IR peace studies—in particular with regard to discourses on democratic peace, humanitarian intervention and responsibility to protect (R2P), each of which articulates state sovereignty in a specific way. Third, the ideological foundation of state sovereignty, as manifest in the work of Thomas Hobbes, will be interrogated with a view to shedding light on how its exclusionary elements, which developed primarily in response to a series of crises plaguing Europe in the 16th century, informed the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) and, as a consequence, the modern conception of sovereignty.

Fourth, to support the claim that this ideology is underpinned by a number of exclusionary and particularist assumptions, some of the dominant discourses current in IR, such as those on international law, modernisation and neoliberal globalisation, will be subjected to analysis. This will also serve to demonstrate how sovereignty has historically been put into practice. Lastly, in order to demonstrate the constitutive relationship between theory and practice, a chief concern of postcolonialism, I shall draw on theories that are currently dominant in IR, eg (neo)realism, neoliberalism and social constructivism, to show not only how they function to reproduce the classical conception of sovereignty but also how, as seen in the light of the analyses presented here, they further entrench a West-centric conception of sovereignty that works to underwrite the supremacy of the West and its colonial legacy. Against this backdrop, and given that R2P represents the latest variation on the concept of sovereignty, the paper will revisit R2P to demonstrate that, not coincidentally, it preserves the very tendencies that mainstream IR theories work to promote. All this goes to show that ideas are not confined to the world of abstractions; far from it, they inform past as well as current practices that are at the very heart of international politics.
Methodology: synthesising genealogy and postcoloniality

Ever since the 1987 publication of James Der Derian’s *On Diplomacy*, the genealogical approach has enjoyed considerable prominence in IR, notwithstanding the dearth of attention paid to what it actually entails. As Srdjan Vucetic contends, an IR genealogy ‘tends to be [almost exclusively] associated with two broad schools of thought’, namely post-structuralism and constructivism. Although interrogating Vucetic’s assertion lies beyond the scope of this paper, this section, apart from elucidating what genealogy actually entails, focuses on creating a space for thinking about it as a methodological tool which, together with a postcolonial lens, has the potential to disrupt and problematise totalising narratives in IR.

The scholar credited with developing the genealogical approach is none other than Michel Foucault. For Foucault, history, far from being abstract or grounded in universal structures of knowledge, is based on ‘regimes of truth’. This makes genealogy a series of contingent practices which require *Herkunft* (‘descent’ into the contingencies of past events), the use of historical fragments to re-channel all that is considered eternal into a process of becoming, which would otherwise remain accepted as a unified and valid understanding of events and practices. What is crucial to acknowledge, in particular with reference to the analyses selected for discussion here, ie those pertaining to the ideological, theoretical and normative components of sovereignty, is that genealogical analysis is episodical in that it ‘does not…seek to recount the entire history of a phenomenon’; rather, it ‘restricts itself to those historical episodes that are of decisive importance in seeking to understand that phenomenon in the present’. This makes every genealogical work ‘perspectival’ in essence—a method that seeks to uncover that truth which is not recorded, but rather created; that is produced, not apophasic—and thereby a distinct and authoritative account in its own right.

It is no surprise, then, that an enquiry of this kind offers a way to historicise grand abstractions. It does so, precisely, by tracing ‘movement[s] and clashes of historical practices that would [either] impose or resist structures… [which ultimately means that] social inquiry is increasingly disposed to find its focus in the posing of “how” questions, not “what” questions’. In this manner, genealogy uncovers ‘political histories of truth’, foregrounding the notion that a universal reading of truth must be subordinated to ‘regimes of truth’. Postcolonialism aspires to participate, and neatly builds upon, such endeavours, for in problematising history as commonly understood, it creates ‘truths’ in a manner that eschews ‘universal ideas and their unproblematic implementation globally’. In this way a genealogical analysis of postcolonial IR strips off the universality accorded to moral, theoretical and ideological narratives, eg totalising discourses on sovereignty, which ‘reproduce the power relations characteristic of the colonial encounter’, in the process discharging their universal applicability to all places and circumstances.

Furthermore, a genealogical approach involves investigating the past in a way that illuminates ‘how the present [has become] logically possible’. To this end, genealogy constitutes a historical investigation, one that ‘serves to illuminate the present from the perspective of the past’. In other words, every genealogy
seeks to relocate all that is perceived to be eternal in a process of becoming, and
for the purpose of explicating ‘something that remains problematic in the present’. Such a unique mode of historical investigation meshes well with postcolonialism and a postcolonial critique of IR, as the former is also concerned with history for the sake of determining ‘the configurations and power structures of the present’. The fact that genealogy is primarily concerned ‘with providing a history of the present rather than a history of the past’ provides compelling methodological grounds for claiming that far from signalling the end of colonialism, the ‘post’ in postcolonialism ‘does not mark the period after the colonial era, but rather [signals] the effects of this era in shaping the world that is ours’ right here and now.

A genealogical approach also complements postcolonialism by demonstrating that what is assumed to be valid knowledge is actually grounded in power relations, that power and knowledge are inseparable and that their prominent place in a discourse reveals them to be largely fluid entities. It does so precisely by ‘open[ing] up an intellectual and political space for resist[ing]…dominant regimes of truth and…emancipat[ing]…marginalised forms of knowledge’. To do so, genealogy illuminates a deep-rooted concern within postcolonialism, one focused on ‘who are the agents of theoretical knowledge, for whom do they speak and how do they theorize’. Put another way, in opposing ‘the effects [or] the power of a discourse that is considered to be scientific’, unchanging and natural, genealogy reveals how Western discourses are framed to make normalising judgements about what constitutes ‘truth’ and ultimately determines what facts about certain historical moments become known, accepted and entrenched in practices and policies.

A genealogical investigation of postcolonial IR thus interrogates the relations of power through ‘which unity with the past is artificially conserved’. In fleshing out such power relationships, a genealogical investigation of some of the most prominent IR discourses will reveal that the Occident controls the production of Oriental knowledge and images for the purpose of legitimising the exercise of colonial power. The best illustration, as well as the most enduring legacy, of coloniality are the ‘binarisms’ that (re)produce categories of both otherness and difference throughout the globe. It is these binarisms that give rise to a number of interrelated colonial modalities underpinning the practice and conceptualisation of sovereignty. They serve to construct the colonised as a static entity inherently inferior to as well as doomed vis-à-vis the coloniser, in the process connoting the latter as ‘rational’, ‘civilised’ and ‘progressive’, and thus imbued with a paternalistic and historical mission to elevate the uncivilised and backward ‘Other’. This is to be achieved, in large part, by imposing mechanisms of exclusion on zones of otherness, all in the name of duty, care and responsibility, in the process legitimising the exercise of colonial power. These colonial conditions, as will be seen, are replicated, in one way or another, in the diverse ‘genealogical episodes’ presented here.

IR and peace studies

The way in which IR studies has applied the concept of sovereignty to analysing global affairs, to the debate about the meanings and practices of sovereignty
during times of war and conflict, and to the associated theoretical frameworks engages a number of normative assumptions. Peace studies in IR developed along with other specialities within the discipline and, as a result, reproduce IR’s application of sovereignty to global affairs and the debate about the meanings and practices of sovereignty during times of war and conflict. All therefore share the normative assumptions and theoretical underpinnings of the discipline in general.

Peace studies have a formidable liberal underpinning, being rooted in the European Enlightenment of the 18th century and, most notably, in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant provides the foundation for the liberal ideas that infuse IR peace studies, along with a prescription for peace that can be applied in so-called ‘zones of conflict’. He proposes three interrelated prerequisites for establishing a sustainable peace: the establishment of European ‘republican constitutions’; a system of European commercial exchange regulated by ‘cosmopolitan law’; and a system of international law for republics that are governed domestically by the rule of law. Kant’s assertions are based on a number of key liberal assumptions, including a belief in the individual’s capacity for rational thought; faith in the possibility of progress in social life; and the view that humans can ‘cooperate and construct a more peaceful and harmonious society’, despite their tendency to act in their self-interest. Achieving peace is not merely an ideal for Kant; he also believes that ‘natural processes of self-interest [can] impel rational individuals to act as agents to bring [about] a just peace’.

Kant claims that international law and organisations, along with alliances that ensure collective security, democratic governance and economic interdependency, represent mechanisms capable of effectively addressing states of war or conflict.

In applying his notion of sustainable peace to the global arena, Kant distinguishes between those states capable of existing peacefully and compelling other states to do so and those requiring external assistance to achieve this condition. Kant proclaims:

> Just as we now regard with profound contempt as barbarous, crude, and brutally degrading to humanity, the attachment of savages to their lawless freedom, by which they would rather struggle unceasingly than subject themselves to a lawful coercion to be instituted by themselves, thus preferring a mad freedom, so, one would think civilized peoples (each united in a state) must hasten to leave such a depraved condition, the sooner the better.

Kant ontologically divides the world into ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’ categories. Not only was his conception of the world locked into the historical specificity of the time; it was also predicated upon the construction of ‘non-liberal’ others, whose miserable lives could be redeemed only by enlightened liberal states. I wish now to introduce some of the major developments in IR peace studies that are based on this assumption.

**Democratic peace theory**

Kant’s views regarding perpetual peace and the ‘pacific’ nature of relations between liberal states would be resurrected in the 1980s. Michael Doyle, a great
admirer, emphasised that the liberal democracies of the West rarely engage in warfare or even threaten to do so.\textsuperscript{39} Two of Kant’s key assumptions provide the basis for this view: ‘the restraint among liberal states’ and ‘international imprudence in relation to non-liberal states’.\textsuperscript{40}

Doyle’s position would become the foundation of ‘democratic peace theory’. Those scholars who later elaborated upon his ideas would claim that liberal democracies never go to war with one another, almost never experience civil war or internal conflict,\textsuperscript{41} and generally do not engage in genocide or other extreme human rights violations.\textsuperscript{42} Within this context, ‘coercive democratization [becomes] one distinct path’;\textsuperscript{43} that is, a humanitarian project directed at liberating the ‘non-democratic others’. The democratic peace project thus seeks out and employs means that will justify the establishment of perpetual peace.

**Humanitarian intervention**

In the 1990s, in the wake of the horrors being perpetrated in Kosovo and Somalia, among other conflict zones, the concept of liberal peace acquired a humanitarian dimension. This new variation recapitulates the Kantian-inspired understanding of peace. In the first Preliminary Article, entitled ‘Toward perpetual peace’, Kant asserts that ‘no peace settlement which secretly reserves issues for a future war shall be considered valid’.\textsuperscript{44} The notion of juridical pacifism, which holds that ‘non-intervention’ is a priority that ultimately separates states from one another, is central to this claim. Kant declares that ‘no state shall forcibly interfere in the constitution and government of another state’.\textsuperscript{45} For Kant, states are very much like persons: individuals have a moral autonomy that protects them from coercion by others, and so do states, which are treated like a society of human beings residing under common laws.\textsuperscript{46} Kant proclaims: ‘No independently existing state (irrespective of whether it is large or small) shall be able to be acquired by another state through inheritance, exchange, purchase, or gift’.\textsuperscript{47} This normative statement asserts that a state, as a moral being, must be respected by other states. Kant, however, provides a loophole in the form of ‘an unjust enemy’:

> It is an enemy whose publicly expressed will (whether by word or deed) reveals a maxim which, if it were made a universal rule, any condition of peace among nations would be impossible and, instead, a state of nature would be perpetuated.\textsuperscript{48}

Kant’s preoccupation with unjust states, moreover, indicates that he considers them antithetical to ‘peace’. For Kant it follows that unjust states render coercive measures against another state valid:\textsuperscript{49} ‘[an unjust enemy is] a concern to all nations whose freedom is threatened by it [and] they are [then] called upon to unite…to deprive the state of its power to do it’.\textsuperscript{50} In other words, the principle of non-intervention is invalidated in the absence of an ‘effective contract to constitute a state as a moral person[;] outside states are free to assist any party they want with the use of force’\textsuperscript{51}. In advancing this claim, Kant constructs ‘a justification, [and] indeed a possible requirement…for humanitarian intervention on his roadmap’.\textsuperscript{52}
Humanitarian interventions are justified on the grounds that, though most often conducted as military operations, they are nonetheless humanitarian because their aim is to ‘rescue[e] foreign people’ from authorities who, though ‘responsible for their protection’, have failed in this regard. In such circumstances sovereign liberal democratic states deem it morally justifiable to enforce a global, cosmopolitan law, casting themselves in the role of saviours of the innocent and suffering. As David Chandler explains:

The dominant discursive framings were those of abusers and victims—and the insertion of international interveners in the role of external saviours and external judges, with the moral duty of bringing security and the rule of law to the benighted borderlands.55

Hence, it is the sovereign liberal state that is assigned, or assigns itself, the responsibility to act as the guardian of those residing in non-liberal states, which is willing to use sovereignty as a warrant to persecute or even kill. Thus, during the 1990s humanitarian intervention would become the catalyst for, and manifestation of, liberal peace.

Responsibility to protect

In a 2001 report by the UN International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) the UN proclaimed a new era of humanitarianism to be ushered in by the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect. In emphasising the principle of ‘sovereignty as responsibility’, the report signalled a departure from the principle of humanitarian intervention, which holds the traditional concept of sovereignty to be antithetical to human rights. In its place the ICISS report offered up a human rights-based view of sovereignty. According to the R2P principle, protecting civilians from genocide, civil war or gross violations of human rights is primarily the state’s responsibility. It is only when the state falls short of fulfilling this responsibility that the ‘international community’ is obligated to take action.56

Whereas, previously the right to deploy military forces had been deemed fundamental to humanitarian interventions, R2P now focused on the state’s responsibility to assist those in need.

The ICISS holds that the international community is morally responsible for promoting ‘peace and the rule of law in the world’.57 This position reflects the dichotomous Kantian vision of peace. In describing duty, Kant states that ‘our self-love cannot be separated from our need to be loved by others as well; we therefore make ourselves an end for others’.58 Kant claims that the duty to respect others can be fulfilled through universal law and established through ‘our will’ to make others’ ends our own. It follows that every rational being has dignity, and that human dignity is reflected in humanity. Dignity is ‘a worth that is above all price that must always be respected and cannot rationally be sacrificed in exchange for any other value’.59 R2P is thus closely aligned with the Kantian code of ethics, in that it constitutes a duty to protect others from being plunged into misery. According to this principle, each liberal state, and particularly the community of liberal states, is obligated to use whatever means are appropriate
and necessary to fulfil its moral responsibility with regard to protecting foreign nationals and assisting non-liberal states in fulfilling their own responsibility vis-à-vis their citizens. Again, what is being constructed here is an inferior ‘non-liberal’ other, in this case a state(s).

In ‘Kant, liberal legacies and foreign affairs, Part 1’, Michael Doyle celebrates the Kantian concept of peace and explores its relevance to both liberal and non-liberal states. The author agrees with Kant that the relationship between the two is a catalyst for a realist understanding of world politics, one grounded in the Hobbesian view of a hostile, anarchic state of nature. In contrast, the relationship between liberal states is inherently peaceful, thanks to the ‘pacif’ nature of liberal democracies. A Kantian-inspired vision of democratic peace not only effectively divides the world into a liberal, democratic ‘us’ and troublesome, non-democratic ‘others’; it also overlooks historical factors that inform the relationship between liberal democracies and non-liberal states. Michael Mann points out, for example, that however democratic the mother country, colonial regimes suppressed the democratic aspirations of their subject peoples, on the grounds that ‘those excluded [were] not actually seen as eligible to be considered free individuals’. Mahdavi and Knight cite the additional example of the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup in Iran, which ousted the first democratically elected government in the region, replacing it with the pro-US Pahlavi dynasty. Kant’s particularist understanding of peace thus provides the basis for a democratic peace discourse wherein sovereignty constitutes a virtue only for the ‘enlightened’ Western, liberal states.

As the Kantian understanding of peace constitutes the normative basis for humanitarian intervention, it harbours a contradiction resting on who has the right to decide whether sovereignty is to be violated. An even starker dichotomy emerges when it becomes acceptable to kill some in order to preserve the rights of others. This is not to say there are no humanitarian crises that require a state(s) to provide aid, but rather ‘that the existence of human suffering [alone] cannot explain the phenomenon of humanitarian intervention’. This is part a result of the normative assumption that interventions are a catalyst for liberating and empowering citizens residing in ‘non-liberal’ zones.

The normative justification that synthesizes sovereignty and responsibility is also ripe for contradiction as it functions, in the same fashion as its predecessors, along the lines of the familiar Kantian-inspired dualities, the most illuminating of which is the construction of a class of ‘racialized, vulnerable “others” residing in the Global South who are in dire need of protection, to be provided by an international community comprised ‘of “civilized” Northern states’. The latter exercise a self-assigned heroic and civilizing duty, whereas the former are signified as troublesome and doomed, as well as wholly dependent upon the West for ‘sustain[ing] bare life’. To this end, R2P imprints on our memory, once again, just how narrow are the Eurocentric normative assumptions upon which rest global interventionist measures, and clearly, ‘reveals the failure of the West to generate…a [comprehensive] moral consensus around questions of intervention’.
Sovereignty and dominant IR discourses

With regard to the modern state system the Treaty of Westphalia is commonly regarded as the foundational document. This agreement concluding the Thirty Years War formalised the principle of rex est imperator in regno suo, which made each European king and queen an emperor in his/her own realm. As a result of this watershed agreement, Europe would be transformed into a complex of independent states, each with an autonomous ruler who held exclusive authority over all state territories and their inhabitants. The principle of exclusive authority invested in the ruler implied another principle: ‘non-intervention’ in the domestic affairs of foreign countries. All this would give rise to the modern understanding of sovereignty and its implications, two of which are particularly salient: first, that sovereignty ‘defines the ultimate or highest authority within a state’; second, ‘the recognition by other similarly recognized states that [an] entity is “one of them”’.69

The exclusionary discourse of Westphalian ideology

Historical events do not occur in a vacuum; they are very much the product of dominant ideas, forces and actors extant in any given period. The Treaty of Westphalia is no exception to this rule and, as such, it must be interrogated beyond the series of events that culminated in its passage. As Charles Tilly aptly reminds us, ‘real history, carefully observed, does not fall into neat, recurrent chunks; it winds and snarls like a proliferating vine…In real history time and place make a difference to the way that ostensibly universal processes…unfold’.70 Tilly’s statement shows that an analysis of Westphalia cannot be divorced from the ideologies—ie those world views that emerged in relation to context and time-specific conditions, allowing sovereignty to emerge as a hegemonic discourse—underpinning it. It is here that assessing the work of a political philosopher who arguably has directed the most ‘systematic attention to the puzzle of sovereignty’, namely Thomas Hobbes, is critical to illuminating the ideological aspects of Westphalia.71 This is not to claim that Hobbes’ ideas inform the treaty in its entirety, but rather to suggest that his ideas are representative of its broad lineaments.72 After all, not only did Hobbes’ ‘publication of his justification for the modern state coincide with what is often regarded as the birth of the “Westphalian system”’,73 he is also regarded as ‘one of the most remarkable theorists of the Westphalian order’,74 that ‘international order of independent sovereign states which was inaugurated by the Treaty of Westphalia’.75 As a result, by interrogating his ideas, we can map out a way to understand precisely how the exclusionary practices that have given rise to the modern notion of sovereignty were naturalised, how they were sustained as a form of political authority, and how they were advanced as a mode of knowledge, underpinned by scientific authority, all of which would have profound consequences for how the West would come to order its relations with the non-Western world. Hobbes is thus an authentic representative of the Westphalian order.

Hobbes crafted Leviathan as a response to both papal hegemony and the English Civil War (1642–51) that tore England asunder. For Hobbes, ‘the
Papacy, is no other, than the Ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof: For so did the Papacy start up on a Sudden out of the Ruins of the Heathen Power.76 Central to his position is the imperative that spiritual authority must be subordinated to civil power. He elaborates on this point by citing Matthew: ’Thou art Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my church’.77 In this declaration of intent by Jesus, Hobbes discerns no devolution of power (spiritual or otherwise) to the benefit of St Peter, and, therefore, no basis for papal authority in either spiritual or worldly matters.

In advancing these views, Hobbes aims to prescribe a solution for bringing to an end the religious wars that had plagued Europe since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. He advocates that the Catholic Church be stripped of its traditional right to intervene in the domestic affairs of states and that each state establish its own church, exercising full civil and religious authority. To this end, Hobbes proposes the principle of non-intervention as a precondition ‘for establishing order [and] developing logic and justification for a norm of political authority capable of stemming bloodshed’.78 Seen in this light, state sovereignty is a prerequisite for the kind of political authority that is capable of mastering and taming the nasty and brutish ‘state of nature’ that characterises humankind and human environments. That is, the ontology of ‘nature’ and ‘man’ must be opposed by a naturalised condition of sovereignty. Hobbes imagines a homogeneous locus of equality wherein all men are seen as ‘similar in [their] needs and desires’.79 Sovereignty is naturalised because, in its absence, all humankind is condemned to live in a condition of misery.

In Leviathan Hobbes contends that his ontology of humankind can be objectively observed and that his assumptions are the result of what he calls ‘knowledge of fact’, which is a form of knowledge production that involves sense and memory. It is ‘absolute knowledge’, Hobbes asserts, in the same fashion ‘as when we see a Fact doing, or remember it done’.80 His ontology also functions to exclude sovereignty from the domain of the political, as it is seen to be a natural and necessary precondition for security and for the good life (ie the satisfaction of one’s desires and needs). Hobbes’ understanding of authority reorients it ‘along the parallel of axes of the subject who knows and the sovereign state that expresses and authorizes this knowledge’.81 This exclusionary maxim is precise, apolitical and non-transcending in that it excludes many other ontological frameworks and alternative ways of living that are evident in the world. The ontological and epistemological positions that Hobbes advocates, while clearly particular to ‘some people’, have come to be accepted by many as the true political condition of all men. His, however, is a narrow Eurocentric and one-size-fits-all perspective that has inspired and replicated the practice of sovereignty as an absolute and enduring feature of the modern state.

The discourse on international law: sovereignty and the construction of otherness

As international law governs the legal relations between and among nation-states, it has had profound implications for the practices and policies pertinent to state sovereignty. Although the practice of international law can be traced as far
back as the 15th century,\textsuperscript{82} its emergence as a universal concept is a ‘relatively recent development’.\textsuperscript{83} I wish to focus therefore on international law as it existed during and following the 19th-century period of colonialism.

In the 19th century international law was concerned with establishing a universal legal order predicated upon the Westphalian notion of state sovereignty. Drawing on a positivist interpretation of the law, and with a particular emphasis on the primacy of the state as the principal IR actor, it was determined that the state could be viewed as sovereign. Within the context of colonialism, this meant that the concept of sovereignty, along with the international law predicated upon it, could be applied only to European states, which represented the civilised community of nations, colonised states being deemed ‘unfit’ for sovereignty or, at best, capable of exercising it only in a partial sense. This framework clearly established colonialism and positivism as the key determinants of whether a state could become a ‘legal sovereign’ entity.\textsuperscript{84} Cultural rhetoric became the driving force that would universalise this framework. At the heart of this project lies the notion that the key to understanding the politics of peoples who are neither modern nor civilised lies in interpreting their culture. As the latter is inherently static and, by implication, resistant to change, they do not make their culture; rather, it is their culture that makes them. This view, as will be shown here, would come to underwrite the European mission to civilise those considered uncivilised; it would also entrench a formidable West-centric ideology that was to inform legal analyses of state sovereignty conducted by the League of Nations and later the UN.

In the aftermath of the First World War, the newly established League set about designing a mandate system for administering the Middle Eastern, African and Pacific possessions of the defeated powers, specifically Germany and the Ottoman Empire. Subsection 1 of Article 22 of the League’s Covenant states:

\begin{quote}
To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant.\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

Subsection 1 would have significant implications for how the colonial world was to be administered during the inter-war period. The territories in question were, with only a few minor exceptions, to be governed by British and French-appointed administrative regimes whose powers were mandated by the League. Ostensibly the mandate system was to be ‘opposed’ in both spirit and substance to 19th-century international law, which had entrenched cultural distinctions between European and non-European peoples. Indeed, League discourse would focus on the interests of ‘backward’, ie non-Western, societies. These were to be safeguarded and advanced under the auspices of caretaker administrations, again almost exclusively French or British. The phrase ‘not yet able to stand by themselves’ clearly suggests that non-European peoples were not yet equipped to
exercise full sovereignty. To achieve such a capability would require that they be transformed politically, morally, economically and socially. The aid provided by the League was intended to facilitate this transformation, while at the same time strengthening economic relations between the mandated territories and the European trustees charged with administering them. As Lord Lugard of the Permanent Mandates Commission observed, ‘the democracies of today claim the right to work, and the satisfaction of that claim is impossible without the raw materials of the tropics on the one hand and their markets on the other’. The civilising project upon which the mandate system was predicated represented a powerful, multidimensional force whose implications extended beyond the merely political, social and economic, for what this project or mission signified was the superiority of the West. The dichotomy between advanced European states with a liberal–humanist mission of progress and backward non-Western societies would henceforth become even more pronounced. European culture came to be seen as a pillar of the modern state, whereas non-European societies were characterized as backward and lacking in civilisation to a greater extent than ever before. The mandate system aimed at eliminating 19th-century international law embedded in cultural rhetoric but, in so doing, reconstituted that rhetoric in the context of a European mission to civilise and culturally transform non-European societies.

When the UN was created midway through the course of the Second World War, one of its goals was to place colonies on the path to achieving self-determination and ultimately full independence. The concept of self-determination was embraced with a view to ‘legally effect[ing]...the transformation of colonial territories into sovereign states’. That the UN took seriously its responsibility in this regard is clearly evinced in General Assembly Resolution 1803 (1962) and in a series of opinions handed down by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (established in 1945 by the UN Charter), all of which held that colonised states had the right to pursue self-determination. Applying this principle would, however, prove problematic during the cold war era because the West adhered to the Westphalian principle of sovereignty, and particularly to corollaries such as non-interference, viewing these to be essential to averting another global conflict. The West opted, therefore, to pursue an economically motivated and socio-politically and culturally driven path to development that conformed to the new discourse of modernisation as a mechanism for circumventing universally binding laws on sovereignty. This discourse on modernisation was ‘a manifestation of [an] American post-war liberalism’ predicated upon objectivity, scientism and evolutionism. It further rested on the assumption that ‘modern society was cosmopolitan, mobile, controlling of the environment, secular, welcoming of change, and characterized by a complex division of labour’. In comparison, ‘backward’ or ‘traditional’ societies (a category that included all the countries of Latin America, Asia and Africa) were assumed to be in dire need of change because they were introspective and economically underdeveloped, among other shortcomings. This dichotomous distinction between modern and traditional societies meant that postcolonial states had to undergo economic development both as a condition for sovereignty and to achieve socio-political progress. To do so, they had to follow a West-centric linear path of development that would equip
them to become independent sovereign states and allow them to join their Western counterparts as members of a scientifically advanced and technologically progressive world order.\textsuperscript{94}

The international development programmes that were so central to the modernisation project prescribed as a panacea for backwardness rapid economic growth based on industrialisation, along with massive infrastructure projects. Traditional societies were to adhere rigorously to a West-centric concept of development, precisely because their values, culture and ways of life married them to backwardness and underdevelopment. That modern Western states and societies would serve as ‘role models’ for development and progress implied, moreover, a superiority on their part that translated into a wilful neglect of non-Western societies’ values and wishes. This is in part because the label ‘traditional’ connotes that these societies suffer from relatively similar shortcomings and that their values, culture and ways of life pose, almost automatically, a barrier to a better life.\textsuperscript{95} Thus, the dichotomous culture rhetoric at the core of the new discourse remained much the same as that of its predecessor in viewing the cultural practices of underdeveloped, traditional nations as barriers to development and modernity. Underdeveloped nations were to modernise and develop, and to achieve cultural progress through various means, including mass education and economic restructuring, all of which were aimed at equipping them to become dignified and competent members of the community of nations.\textsuperscript{96} Within this context development intersected with international law to ‘crudely [employ] the concepts of development and modernization [as] a means of transcending cultural particularity and justifying [legal] intervention’, the purpose being to ‘manufacture’ sovereignty among postcolonial states.\textsuperscript{97} Although, for the West, the postcolonial state represented an end to colonialism, the asymmetrical power relations underwritten by 19th-century international law, which were essential to preserving its economic and political domination \textit{vis-à-vis} non-Western societies, were reproduced.

\textit{Globalisation discourse and the global rift: the post-cold war period and state sovereignty}

Any discussion of globalisation is likely to prove a daunting task for the simple reason that as a concept, it has acquired multiple interpretations, which reflect its dynamic, wide-ranging and expansive character. As a result, the term ‘globalization’ is often invoked ‘to explain everything at a cost of leaving nothing that is not still shrouded in haze and mystery’.\textsuperscript{98} This is the reasoning underlying Richard Falk’s assertion that globalisation has become ‘the most satisfactory descriptive label for the current historical era…for better or worse’.\textsuperscript{99} In this section I specifically examine globalisation with a view to providing the reader with a framework for understanding its impact on state sovereignty. In doing so, I shall delineate its dimensions as a West-centric, universalising discourse that masks the far-reaching subordination of the rest by the West.\textsuperscript{100} As will be explicated here, with regard to the non-Western world, its impact has been \textit{bi-directional} in the sense that, while globalisation has \textit{maintained} some aspects
of the approach to sovereignty extant during the Cold War, it has also brought about significant change to that approach.

With the fall of the Berlin wall and subsequent demise of ‘real existing socialism’ as a dominant sociopolitical and economic mode, the architecture of the world was redesigned, signalling a change in the art of state rule from ‘government’ to ‘governance’. As Bislev et al explain:

[The notion of governance replaced an old ruling model of] supreme and sovereign state government, [by] hierarchically organizing the role of society, towards the acceptance of a multilevel, transnational governance system, consisting of many different and interacting participants in a network, with partially overlapping and segmented domains.101

The new model had a number of important global consequences, including deregulation and the growth of non-state sectors, private enterprises and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). At the same time the end of the Cold War ushered in another significant change when the Second World (the former Soviet bloc states) was relegated to the status of the Third World.102 In this context the new world order that emerged became less predictable and increasingly more fragile vis-à-vis the old, as the increasing number of ‘failed states’ demonstrates. In this sense the new world order was divided between a ‘liberal zone of peace’ and a troublesome ‘realist zone of conflict’.103 Thus, the failed state can be understood to have emerged as a consequence of the ideological battle that characterised the Cold War, the capitalist victory in that war and the expansion of the Third World.

Both Third World and failed states were expected to adopt (the latter with far less hope of success) the governance model of state rule as a sine qua non for becoming sufficiently ‘strong and [well prepared] to join the “liberal” world’.104 This imperative reflected the liberal mentality of modernisation that had persisted since the start of the Cold War, but would, with the end of that struggle, be subsumed within the new framework of neoliberalism, which embraces trade liberalisation and liberal democracy, to the exclusion of any alternative. Within this framework the West must carry out its historic mission to liberate and transform non-liberal societies.

The foundational assumption informing neoliberalism is that a self-regulating free market unencumbered by any form of state interference will ‘generate an optimal allocation of investments and resources’.105 To this end, neoliberal doctrine called for ‘policing policies’ that would enforce “global governance” and for market regulation to be implemented by such entities as the IMF and World Bank.106 These institutions were charged with fundamentally reforming the structures and institutions of national economies throughout the world with a view to promoting the privatisation of public services and public assets, in addition to trade liberalisation and labour deregulation. Thus, for example, the IMF has used conditional structural adjustment loans as an instrument to integrate non-Western states into the global marketplace and to intervene in their internal affairs.107 There is nothing really ‘global’, however, in such strategies, which aim exclusively to advance the policy agenda of the G7, an exclusive club of
Western powers that provides Third World states little opportunity to play a meaningful role in the decision-making process that decides their respective fates. As a result, they have become the victims of a top-down neoliberal process of globalisation that serves the interests of the G7 by exercising disciplinary and coercive forms of ‘state intervention in order to impose market rule on all aspects of social life’. 108 Ironically this type of coercion is most visible ‘at precisely the key moments of “global governance”, ie, during the meetings and summits of international financial institutions (IIFS) and the G7’. 109 Indeed, it is the latter, that exclusive club of Western states, that functions as the self-appointed architect of global trade, and by implication, of globalisation discourse. It is the G7 countries that offer the non-West neoliberal prescriptions as a panacea for misery and backwardness. This ultimately validates the coercive power of Western states, without which neoliberal globalisation would be impossible.

Like the earlier modernisation model the neoliberal framework adheres to a West-centric view of non-Western societies as homogeneous, backward and fated to follow the West’s lead and example in becoming prosperous and dynamic societies. Neoliberalism is founded upon what Albert Hirschman calls a ‘mono-economics’ of neoclassical theory for which there is, and can be, no competition, as with, for example, modern physics or chemistry. 110 Further, the neoliberal approach is rooted in the rational-deductive method of positivist science, which assumes that the behaviour of individuals ‘is predetermined by a set of universal rational rules that are deductively posited’. 111 For example, it is a given that private producers and consumers are utility and profit maximisers, who respond rationally and efficiently to correct market signals, chiefly because markets generate rational behaviour that efficiently reflects market signals based on principles of scarcity and choice. However, this idealised, theoretically driven view of the market fails to factor in the realities of Third World markets, namely their socio-economic and political diversity, as well as the cultural and historical specificities that distinguish them both from Western markets and from their counterparts in the Third World.

Neoliberalism, however, can be seen to have a darker rationale for ‘modernising’ backward societies, namely to advance the global ambitions of a predatory capitalism. Indeed, neoliberalism provides the intellectual framework required to rationalize and justify an addictive greed directed at profit accumulation through geographical expansion, economic restructuring, wage reduction, cuts to social programmes, the outsourcing of production, and privatisation of public goods. 112 David Harvey calls this phenomenon a ‘spatial fix’, a catalyst for a ‘market orthodoxy’ that underpins neoliberalism, which continuously and paradoxically fragments international relations as it harmonises them. 113 Thus, neoliberal globalisation underwrites a form of global trade that confers advantages upon some in the West, while oppressing and marginalising others, chiefly those in the Third World. This cycle creates in the rest of the globe what Jalal Al-e-Ahmad calls ‘Gharbzadegi’ or ‘Westoxification’, 114 in the process reproducing a global hierarchy of winners and losers. 115

It is clear that in the post-cold war period the West’s approach to the non-West has become even more interventionist. The uneven dynamics of globalisation reflect neoliberal assumptions about economic and political progress and
have assigned the Third World, yet again, to an inferior zone of otherness. In the post-cold war period, again not surprisingly, sovereign Third World states on the periphery of ‘the capitalist global division of labour’, including failed states, have failed ‘to achieve sovereignty substantially’.\textsuperscript{116} While the Western conception of sovereignty and global governance has required states to relinquish some of their traditional authority to non-state actors in some spheres in the so-called ‘liberal zones’ (e.g., human rights, security and economic benefits),\textsuperscript{117} states in the non-liberal zone of otherness have become the undisputed victims of neoliberal globalisation.\textsuperscript{118} This is a situation in which ‘the sovereign territorial state of Westphalian methodology is undergoing rapid transformation in the context of globalization…[while] at the same time, it is being reinforced as a major locus of policing practices’.\textsuperscript{119} Neoliberal globalisation and sovereignty thus neatly reproduce the category of ‘Otherness’ in the non-Western world as the actors in the vanguard of neoliberal globalisation pursue geographical expansion in order to attain political dominance and accumulate profit.

Mainstream IR theories: sovereignty and implications for R2P

As is evident from the genealogy of some of the dominant IR discourses, the West-centrism that has mediated the encounter between the colonised and coloniser has, from the very outset, given rise to the modern notion of sovereignty, and in a way that hardly undermines its colonial underpinnings. This section will draw on the theoretical dimensions of sovereignty to investigate dominant IR theories. By interrogating the full range of these theories, I hope to show how they work together to validate a Eurocentric conception of sovereignty. It is against this backdrop that an assessment of the latest construction of sovereignty in IR—R2P—can most effectively demonstrate that, in practice, the latter reproduces the very tendencies that mainstream IR theories work to promote. Thus, the objective here is to illuminate the constitutive relationship between theory and practice,\textsuperscript{120} and, in so doing, to map out how theoretical ideas are not confined to the world of abstractions, but have the power to profoundly shape the practices of international politics, in the process reproducing marginalisation and oppression.

According to the classical realist account of IR, state sovereignty is a fixed concept, one whose genesis can be traced to the Treaty of Westphalia. According to the latter, the attributes of the sovereign state are readily discernible and can be objectively quantified: it is territorially bound, politically independent and functions separately from its counterparts.\textsuperscript{121} All such states, moreover, are formal units equal to all other sovereign states. From this perspective sovereignty is most certainly an absolute condition for statehood; indeed, the Westphalian understanding of the concept emphasises that ‘a polity either is or is not sovereign’.\textsuperscript{122} The nature of state sovereignty has been the subject of heated debate between neo-realists and neoliberal institutionalists. For the former sovereignty is conceptualised in relation to the anarchic nature of international relations. Kenneth Waltz, for example, posits that the international system is based on ordering principles that reflect the hierarchy of domestic politics and the anarchic attributes of international politics. Waltz subscribes to the classical realist view
of an absolute Westphalian sovereignty, arguing that ‘although...pure orders do not exist, to distinguish [state] realms by organizing principles is nevertheless proper and important’. In his view, international anarchy must be understood chiefly in reference to the great powers: ‘so long as the major states are the major actors, the structure of international politics is defined in terms of them’. This framework reproduces the classical realist absolute vision of sovereignty in a shift ‘from unit- to system-level theory’, which means that the behaviour and ability to act on the part of power-maximizing sovereign states are both facilitated and constrained by the structural condition of anarchy.

Neoliberal institutionalists, while acknowledging that economic and political interdependence between states has grown, insist that this is a matter of policy choice. Such reasoning, when applied to analysing institutions, implies that states might ‘choose policies or adopt institutions that would tie their hands’. But if economic interdependence is the outcome of policy choice, then it can hardly be said to place constraints upon, or to be antithetical to, state sovereignty—on the contrary, it must be seen as its expression. Leading neoliberal institutionalists such as Robert Keohane, accept, and by implication adhere to, the classical view of sovereignty as the foundation for their theorising. Both neorealist and neoliberal institutionalist theories can be viewed as ‘system maintainers’ because ultimately they favour preserving the status quo with regard to IR, including its core values and traditional assumptions. Consequently, they ultimately reproduce the fixed and absolute conception of sovereignty held by classical realists.

Constructivism has contributed to the debate between these two schools by providing an understanding of sovereignty as a social construct with distinct interpretations and meanings across different historical epochs. This view is predicated on the key assumption that concepts of sovereignty are informed by the dominant social norms and practices extant in a given society at a given point in time, a notion consistent with Alexander Wendt’s description of anarchy as ‘what states make of it’. From this perspective concepts of sovereignty and anarchy are socially constructed and dynamic and thus can never be assumed to be givens in IR.

However, the recognition that sovereignty is a dynamic social construct and that its interpretation varies over time, underrates, indeed subordinates, the power dynamics that characterise the international system. Although constructivism is well equipped to explicate how social variables inform various interpretations of sovereignty, the current conception of sovereignty is resistant to change. Owing to its conceptual genesis and development in Europe, sovereignty has been the catalyst for a narrow, Eurocentric conception of world politics, while simultaneously functioning as a mode of political domination (as was shown to be the case in the discourse analysis presented above). Sovereignty has thus become an instrument of domination that has been ‘institutionalized as a global norm’—a universal virtue endorsed by powerful states that works at distinct junctures of history—to legitimise the asymmetrical and discriminatory power relations that characterise the West–non-West duality. As such, the socially constructed understanding of sovereignty preserves its status as an absolute condition. This limitation is inherent to constructivism because of the way in which it
distinguishes between material practices (eg the exercise of power) and ideas (eg social conceptions or interpretations). In so doing, it ultimately overemphasises the significance of the latter while undermining that of the former. As a consequence, constructivists have grown biased, such that they neglect the interrelationship between material practices and ideas.¹³³

It is thus clear that leading IR theories in no way challenge the classical Westphalian understanding of sovereignty but rather reproduce it as an absolute condition. This understanding is, however, more than a mere reference point for the modern notion of sovereignty, which represents the status quo, for it has also decisively shaped ‘the history of modern international relations...[whose roots lie] in the European state system’.¹³⁴ Put differently, that mainstream IR theories subscribe to this framework amounts to a testimonial that IR’s ‘Westphalian common-sense’,¹³⁵ as evinced by ‘the spread of European forms of state [and] sovereignty...to non-European peoples’,¹³⁶ constitutes an integral aspect, indeed an enduring feature, of global reality. This means that, however generally conceived, IR status quo theories are ultimately predicated upon, and indeed function to (re)produce, a narrow, Eurocentric ontology that views the world as ‘universal’, ie as ‘descended from [the] universalized European system’,¹³⁷ and thus to be weighed against European trajectories, institutions and concepts (sovereignty, the state and democracy) and experiences (war, peace, and social conflict). Thus IR theories serve to naturalise what Eurocentrism has produced.

More than three decades ago Robert Cox famously opined that ‘a theory is always for someone and for some purpose’.¹³⁸ This notion is particularly illuminating in that theories are not confined to the world of abstractions; rather they are ‘very much views from somewhere [that function] to justify a particular reading of...history’.¹³⁹ Conceived as such, the Eurocentrism embedded in IR status quo theories informs, and indeed projects, a set of practices based on ‘a historically very peculiar, temporally very thin, and spatially very narrow slice of human history’.¹⁴⁰ Here the question is no longer one of how each status quo theory illuminates a particular practice associated with international relations, but rather of how the Eurocentrism embedded in these theories, as a unifying force, naturalises colonial practices right here before our eyes. And finally, it is here that the ‘questions of war and peace raised by great power competition’ become more than mere ideas locked within the confines of mainstream theories,¹⁴¹ for in a very real sense they inform the very practices of global politics.

Against this backdrop, R2P showcases how that which is reproduced so artificially and narrowly in the world of ideas as given truth—namely the Westphalian common sense and its particularistic assumptions regarding great power competition and the conditions of war and peace, among others—are made manifest in the world of reality, where they reproduce colonial trajectories between the fine line separating theory and practice. For this to be illuminated, we need look no further than the practice of R2P. As is indicated in the ICISS report, the UN possesses the ultimate authority to order, implement and manage interventions, a mandate that includes determining if and when the ‘international community’ should rescind a state’s sovereign status. Ever since its founding in 1945, however, the UN has ‘left the building block of the Westphalian order largely intact, namely: the hierarchy between the great powers and the rest’.¹⁴²
Westphalian order that the UN has so assiduously preserved very much informs the deliberations and actions of the Security Council, its executive decision-making body, whose permanent members, the great powers, decide if and when the ‘international community’ is responsible for safeguarding those facing imminent peril. Traditionally the Council has, consistent with the rigid, Eurocentric structure of the UN and its doctrine of collective security, performed two key interrelated tasks: 1) establishing and maintaining a liberal peace and security; and 2) preserving sovereignty and maintaining a realist-type chain of command among powerful states, the purpose of which is to prevent another world war. These two responsibilities, which represent a hallmark of the Council, render R2P a project rooted in a ‘Western imagination [that] tells us little or nothing about “the rest” but everything about the West’. It does so precisely by drawing on the entire “modern history of colonialism”; that is, by constructing, yet again, a passive and inferior zone of otherness marked by conflict, the parties to which are reduced to no more than ‘recipients of a charity’, and treated as no more than victims and wards of the great powers. In sharp contrast there stands a familiar zone of peace, occupied by Western countries which, imbued with a sense of their historic and paternalistic mission, view themselves as duty-bound to liberate the pitiful victims who inhabit those troublesome ‘areas of darkness’. And so it is that those occupying the zones of otherness become the ‘passive beneficiaries of an external “responsibility to protect”’, their only hope of redemption lying in the hands of the ‘civilised’ community of states. Thus, in manifesting the Eurocentric tendencies that the IR status quo theories preserve, R2P neatly reproduces the exhausted colonial legacies of the past and, like new wine in old wineskins, reconstructs the same colonial underpinnings that have historically made sovereignty a conditional and discriminatory virtue for the non-West.

A postcolonial critique of state sovereignty revisited

As a European construct the modern notion of sovereignty developed and evolved together with a set of formidable colonial discourses that vigorously and repetitively, and by means of a reductionist motif, consigned the Oriental world to an inferior zone of otherness, which has made sovereignty a naturally conditioned practice. However, once we question the assumption that sovereignty is objective and ahistorical, problematising it as a concept that has emerged and developed during the course of a long historical engagement with the constitutive colonial ‘Other’, and upon interrogating its normative, ideological and theoretical components, we come to realise that, far from being natural, it is artificial in every respect, including its emergence, development and endurance. This artificiality connotes unequal power relations that make conditional its practice, ie the discriminatory and exploitative mechanisms that draw their legitimacy from the acute knowledge dichotomy underpinning world politics—mechanisms that continue to drive the ‘grand redeeming project of bestowing sovereignty on the dark places of the earth’. The result is a ‘bifurcated system’ wherein the asymmetrical power relations existing between the West and ‘the rest’ are replicated. It is at this point that, far from signalling the end of colonialism, postcolonialism...
emerges as the enduring struggle of our time; for what it constitutes is a history of the present, a ‘means of defiance by which any exploitative and discriminative practices, regardless of time and space, can be challenged’. It confers upon the peoples of the Orient a powerful instrument with which to forge an ‘epistemic disobedience’ directed against all that shapes, motivates and reproduces coloniality.

Conclusion

This paper has conducted a genealogical examination of state sovereignty with a view to foregrounding how this principle has been applied across a broad range of IR discourses, theories and debates. The analyses presented here have shown that, as a discipline IR is dominated by a narrow West-centric perspective that eschews ontological and epistemological pluralism, in the process restricting its scope as an academic discipline. When IR scholars fail to question the ontologies of ‘man’ and the ‘state of nature’, as well as the epistemological stances that inform the field, our globe becomes the product of—and indeed is measured and weighed against—a narrow Eurocentric normative standard. Within IR a dichotomous and discriminatory Eurocentric ontology of humanity has informed the genesis of the very knowledge upon which understandings of state sovereignty are based. As a result, IR subscribes to a very narrow understanding of what constitutes peace. Conceptions of sovereignty based on a highly circumscribed historical experience and intellectual life—that of Europe and in particular the European Enlightenment and its trajectories—continue to reflect a universal vision based on the West’s perceived mission to bring peace and prosperity to the non-West at distinct points in history. Western liberal democratic entities and actors retain the right to impose their values and goals on the non-West, in part, in the name of equipping them to take on the role of sovereign state, even though historically their efforts in this regard have had mixed or controversial results.

The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate, by means of a postcolonial critique, that IR analyses grounded in dualities represent cause for alarm. Presenting facts in a way that divides the world into oppositional categories—us and them, modern and pre-modern, civilised and uncivilised—serves only to exacerbate existing divisions. This will ultimately provoke future conflicts that can neither be avoided nor resolved by an unquestioning acceptance of the knowledge dichotomy that currently frames world politics. Today the world is at a critical juncture in history, one marked by rapid socio-political mobilisation and transformation in the Middle East, North Africa, South America and elsewhere, by human rights violations on a grand scale and by the spectre of failing states. Now, more than ever, IR is in dire need of new and innovative approaches to addressing the unprecedented challenges facing humankind today as well as looming on the horizon. The discipline needs to be awakened from a complacency born of the very success of West-centric doctrines and prescriptions, which, though they have stood the test of time, today show distinct signs of failure. Both IR and the principal actors on the global stage should demand much more of themselves, and the world should demand much more of both.
Notes

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3 Following the lead of Mgonja and Makombe, I use the term ‘West-centrism’ interchangeably with ‘Eurocentrism’. See BES Mgonja & IAM Makombe, ‘Debating International Relations and its relevance to the Third World’, African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, 3(1), 2009, pp 27–37. While the two terms, in particular Eurocentrism, have different variances, they are used here merely as umbrella terms referring to a Western perspective, one that connotes a binary and asymmetrical opposition between Western and non-Western epistemologies and the pre-eminence of Western culture, values, trajectories and experiences. For a discussion of various conceptions of Eurocentrism, see M Hall & JM Hobson, ‘Liberal international theory: Eurocentric but not always imperialist?’, International Theory, 2(2) 2010, pp 210–245.


7 Ibid, p 1304.


10 S Elbe, ‘“We good Europeans...”: genealogical reflections on the idea of Europe’, Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 30(2), 2001, p 262.


17 Elbe, ‘“We good Europeans...”’, p 260.


23 Vucetic, ‘Genealogy as a research tool in International Relations’, p 1298.

As Grovogui insists, at the time Kant was writing, ‘slavery was both the reality and the most potent metaphor for the absence of liberty’. Grovogui, ‘Postcolonialism’, p 242.

Ibid. Note that in construing states as moral beings, Kant is implying that any denial of basic moral rights or acts of extreme political wrong-doing on the part of a state, whether directed at its own citizens or at other states, is a threat to the society of states. On this basis one can view gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity like genocide as a threat to all states. As Kant proclaims, ‘A state (civitas) is a union of a multitude of human beings under laws of right’. Kant, The Metaphysics of Morals, p. 90.

Based on this definition, it is apparent that the idea of a state denying its citizens basic moral rights or humanity ‘is not only inconceivable but conceptually impossible for Kant’, as such conditions render perpetual peace unimaginable. Franceschet, ‘Kant, international law and the problem of humanitarian intervention’, p. 11. Thinking otherwise, that is, asserting that Kant would prohibit intervention in such extreme scenarios, ‘is surely to be guilty of anachronism’. See P. Laberge, ‘Humanitarian intervention: three ethical perspectives’, Ethics & International Affairs, 9(1), 1995, p. 18.


The Kantian understanding of the state as a moral being and his conceptualisation of some states as an ‘unjust enemy’ present another variation on the familiar dichotomies between civilised and non-civilised zones that Kant is at such pains to establish. To be precise, in describing the community of states as a ‘society of human beings’, Kant is comparing it to persons with moral worth. However, taking the Kantian relationship between states and persons into account, his conception of states becomes a bizarrely racial category given that, for him, some persons are inherently inferior to others. This is clearly evident in the
following assertion, which Kant makes in ‘Physical geography’; ‘Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of A. whites. The yellow Indians do have a meagre talent. The Negros are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples.’ I Kant, ‘Physical geography’, in EC Eze (ed), Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, p 63. Thus, for Kant, the moral worth of non-white persons is as low as the moral worth of the states they inhabit, and vice versa.

64 Cunliffe, ‘A dangerous duty’, p 64.
66 M Mamdani, ‘Responsibility to protect or right to punish?’, in Cunliffe, Critical Perspectives on the Responsibility to Protect, p 126.
72 See also J Havercroft, ‘Was Westphalia “all that”? Hobbes, Bellarmine, and the norm of non-intervention’, Global Constitutionalism, 1(1), 2012, pp 120–140. In addressing the question of whether or not Westphalia gave birth to the modern notion of sovereignty, Havercroft demonstrates that it has to be analysed in relation to an ideological and political struggle between the papacy and European monarchs. In this regard, as I will also demonstrate here, Leviathan contributed to problematising the traditional authority of Rome. It is for this reason that Havercroft demonstrates that Hobbes’ theory of sovereignty was developed, in part, to advance a theory of non-intervention.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
77 Ibid, p 379.
80 Hobbes, Leviathan, p 60.
81 Ibid, p 12.
82 Francisco de Vitoria, for example, describes international law as applied to the relations between Spaniards and North American Indians, creating a sovereign order based on the social and cultural practices of the two peoples. F de Victoria, Francisci de Victoria de Indis et de Iure Belli Recessiones, Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1917.
86 See ibid, pp 452–455.
89 Anghie, ‘Nationalism, development and the postcolonial state’, p 455.
Note that the doctrine of self-determination had been developed in the inter-war period, primarily with the Eastern European states in mind. The UN would use this doctrine to facilitate the transformation of colonial territories into independent, sovereign states. For a detailed discussion of this debate, see Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law*, pp 196–197.


For a detailed discussion of globalisation, two of whose principal features are a time–pace compression and technological revolution that have had the effect of accelerating the restructuring of socio-political space and economic spheres. In this new environment non-state actors, eg transnational corporations (TNCS) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs),

118 The so-called process of time–space compression marked by electronic and other flows such as money transfers, computer data, capital and merchandise trade, along with the increasing prominence of non-state actors, such as TNCs, has had a distinct impact on the Third World in the sense that, while TNCs have shifted some production to various locations around the globe, only low value and labour intensive activities are located in the Third World, whereas strategic operations, like research and development remain in Western states. For a further discussion of these points, see K Singh, *Questioning Globalization*, London: Zed Books, 2005, pp 164–166.


120 Note that elucidating the constitutive relationship between theory and practice is a major concern within postcolonialism. See, for example, B Bowden, *Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp 8–11.


124 Ibid, p 94.


129 Both neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists ultimately concur with the IR view that states are chief actors, concerned mainly with mechanisms of cooperation and conflict, and that state interests, determined by the state’s position in the international political system, drive foreign policy behaviour. These ontological similarities lead both theories to adopt the same view of world politics, and further, to imagine a West-centric understanding of sovereignty as an enduring feature of the modern state. For a compelling discussion of the commonalities that mark the two theories, see Smith, ‘The discipline of International Relations’, pp 381–383.


133 Bruno Latour demonstrates this deficiency within constructivism by arguing that, while all objects are constructed through language, they have no meaning without inscription, which is a material element that helps to make elusive social processes observable and tangible. By relying on what Latour labels ‘writing and imagining craftsmanship’, which is the way that thought is bound up with eyes, hands and inscription tools, eg prints, documents, diagrams, charts, we engage with the material and technical dimensions of thought. To this end, inscription facilitates the material practice of making distant events and processes visible, mobile and calculable. B Latour, ‘Visualisation and cognition: drawing things together’, *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture and Present*, 6(21), 1986, pp 1–40.


In order to clarify the two chief responsibilities outlined here, it needs to be acknowledged that the doctrine of collective security is predicated upon two paradigms: that of the traditional balance of power derived from the great power hierarchy of the ‘Concert of Europe’ and the ‘Peace Project’ tradition inspired by Kant’s notion of perpetual peace. The ‘Peace Project’, which was originally designed to prevent war between European states, advocated the establishment of a federal assembly. This subsequently became the basis for the universalised understanding of peace incorporated in the mandates of both the League and the UN. The concept of the Concert of Europe rested upon the assumption that the Great Powers would exercise great responsibility in managing the international system. This responsibility was grounded in their common interests and could be exercised even at the expense of less powerful states. Although the two paradigms are mutually exclusive and antithetical, both represent enduring features of the UN and serve its chief imperative, which is to maintain international peace and security. For further discussion, see C Brown & K Ainley, Understanding International Relations, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp 134–137.

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