

# Multiplicity and ‘The International’ as Critique – A Forum

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## Abstract

This forum reconsiders the standing of ‘the international’ in relation to ‘critique’. Is this relation best understood in ways reminiscent of the ‘Fourth Great Debate’, where the international,

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associated with political realism, was targeted for deconstruction by critical approaches drawn from outside International Relations? Or is the international, on the contrary, itself a source of potential critique needing to be excavated and utilized, as recent debates on ‘societal multiplicity’ and Uneven and Combined Development have suggested? In this forum, seven international theorists debate the latter question from a range of intellectual perspectives.

## Keywords

the international, critique, multiplicity

## Introduction

Recent debates – including those on ‘multiplicity’ and on ‘Uneven and Combined Development’ – have explored the significance of ‘the international’ as a distinctive dimension of the human world.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to premonitions of ‘the end of international theory’,<sup>2</sup> these debates have asserted an important voice for International Relations (IR) in the interdisciplinary conversation of the social sciences and humanities, offering to resolve the widespread problem of ‘methodological nationalism’. Thus far, however, the discussion has been largely causal and explanatory in its orientation. It has asked: what are the emergent consequences of societal multiplicity for the constitution of social reality and how should we analyse these? But does reflection on ‘the international’ defined in this way also bring with it a distinctive *critical* potential of its own? That is to say, does *this* subject matter help reveal constitutive limits of our dominant modes of thinking? If so, how does this relate to the existing tradition of critical theory in IR, and how can international theorists work to reveal and develop this potential of ‘the international as critique’?

These questions contrast strongly with a more familiar way of casting the relationship between international theory and critique which was exemplified in the so-called ‘Fourth Great Debate’. There ‘the international’, above all in its realist guise, was seen as providing ideological legitimation for political and economic structures of domination – structures which could be exposed only by the importing from outside IR of poststructuralist,

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1. *International Relations*, ‘Rethinking International Relations – Again’, Forum on ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’, *International Relations* 31, no. 1 (2017): 68–103; *New Perspectives*, Forum on ‘Multiplicity and/as IR’, *New Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (2019): 145–175; *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, Forum on ‘Was ist IB? Zum Selbstverständnis einer Disziplin’, no. 2 (2019): 106–153; *Globalizations*, Special Issue on ‘Multiplicity: A New Common Ground for International Relations?’, edited by Milja Kurki and Justin Rosenberg, *Globalizations* 17, no. 3 (2020); *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Special Issue on ‘New Directions in Uneven and Combined Development’, 34, no. 2 (2021), edited by Justin Rosenberg, Jack Brake, and Tatiana Pignon; *Millennium*, ‘Debating Uneven and Combined Development/Debating International Relations: A Forum’, *Millennium* 50, no. 2 (2022): 1–37; *Cooperation & Conflict*, Special Issue on ‘IR, Multiplicity and the Problematique of Difference’, edited by Justin Rosenberg and Benjamin Tallis, 57, no. 3 (2022); Viacheslav Morozov, ‘Uneven Worlds of Hegemony: Towards a Discursive Ontology of Societal Multiplicity’, *International Relations* 36, no. 1 (2022): 83–103.
  2. Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, and Colin Wight, ‘The End of International Relations theory?’, *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013): 405–425.

feminist, post-colonial and, most recently, post-humanist perspectives. These perspectives have hugely enriched the field. But in doing so, they have also de-prioritized the idea of the international. Indeed, as Ole Wæver has noted, '[t]oday, articles use lots of theory and apply or test it – only it is not IR theory!'.<sup>3</sup>

What are the implications of this situation for critical theory in IR? If the idea of the international focuses specifically upon the *multiplicity* of the human world – its states, its societies and its cultures – is this specialized viewpoint rightly seen as a *target* of critique due to its selective remit and reifying liabilities? Or should it also be seen as a potential *source* of critique which reveals a dimension of social reality neglected by other viewpoints? Could it be that the discipline of IR, so deeply mistrusted and even rejected by so many of its non-mainstream practitioners, possesses an under-utilized critical potential all of its own? Or must the discipline instead be reconceptualized in post-colonial or post-humanist ways in order to overcome its inbuilt limitations? In this forum, seven international theorists debate these questions from a range of intellectual perspectives.

Justin Rosenberg argues that the critical potential of 'the international' is real. And yet, curiously, it is not fully intrinsic to the subject matter of IR. It derives rather from the prevalence of 'methodological nationalism' in popular media and academic debates – a fallacy to which existing critical theories themselves, even within IR, have not always been immune. Against this, 'the international' provides the means to combat three resultant scourges – denialism, essentialism, internalism – which continue to afflict public discourses and academic knowledge production alike. This makes sense of two otherwise puzzling aspects of the case: how an apparently neutral descriptive property of the social world – the fact of the international – can become a *critical* resource; and how political realism can exhibit persistent critical potential despite being itself the target of more critique than any other approach in the field. In a final twist, however, Rosenberg suggests that the prevalence of 'methodological nationalism' arises from the condition of the international itself, without which exclusivist *national* identities would not exist. In important ways therefore, the critical potential of the international can be fully released only when it reaches also to a moment of *self*-critique.

Ole Wæver agrees that the idea of the international (conceived as societal multiplicity) holds considerable critical potential. But he warns that this potential is being squandered by looser conceptions which invoke multiplicity to describe 'any non-unitary phenomenon'. 'Strict multiplicity' is being blurred by 'mushy multiplicity'. There is a double irony here. On the one hand, these less exacting definitions lose the critical edge of the international and instead point back to the well-worn formulae of liberal-pluralist IR theory of the 1970s, which 'is as uncritical as IR gets'. On the other hand, in doing so they neglect the real power of 'strict multiplicity': its provision of a conception of the international that is both richer than neorealism and yet more rigorous than realism's liberal-pluralist opponents. But is it also critical? Wæver argues that a re-tightened definition of the international as societal multiplicity can supply three key elements of critique: recognition of 'constitutive conflict among powers' which avoids liberal 'illusions

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3. Ole Wæver 'Still A Discipline After All These Debates?', in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 5th ed. eds. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 322–44, 335–6.

of rational control' in global affairs; an 'always-already-international' perception of the importance of multiplicity in shaping many aspects of society that are normally considered beyond the remit of IR; and an ability (deriving from the roots of the multiplicity approach in the theory of Uneven and Combined Development) to account for material, gendered and racial hierarchies in the structuring of the human world as a whole.

For Wæver, a key unfinished strand of the multiplicity programme lies in the need for further clarification of how to define these 'societies' that make up the nexus of societal multiplicity. This challenge, among others, is taken up by Viacheslav Morozov. Morozov proposes a social ontology in which the human world is made up of numerous 'hegemonic formations' – communities of meaning whose inner space contains shared understandings and rules which gives them 'identity and agency'. Entities of this kind, each with its own resources of authority and solidarity, exist at many scales. They include nation-states, but can be as large as 'the international community' and as small as 'a village'. The world of societal multiplicity is thus 'an uneven multi-scalar space organised by a plurality of conflicting and overlapping inside–outside divisions'. The key question then becomes: how do these communities of meaning relate to each other? Morozov's answer – drawing on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (and, secondarily, Carl Schmitt) – is that the interaction of hegemonic formations varies along a spectrum defined by degrees of closure/openness. Extreme openness brings dissolution, while extreme closure fixes the other in 'a relationship of pure negativity' and enmity. In reality, however, most international interactions are situated between these extremes, with hegemonic formations relating to each other in various ways, by cooperating, conflicting, nesting or separating, while nonetheless seeking to preserve their inner identity and agency. And it is this combination – this mundane condition of the international as societal multiplicity – which creates the possibility of critique. Hegemonic systems of meaning always seek to naturalize or even universalize themselves. But in a world of multiple interacting formations, this process can never be finally completed. These formations are always confronted by the existence of others – always already 'dislocated' (to use Laclau and Mouffe's term). 'The very possibility to say "They do it differently out there!" is a crucial precondition for any critical discourse'. Of course, that possibility can be mobilized by reactionary as well as progressive critical voices. But this lack of guarantees only deepens the moral of the international as critique. As Morozov puts it: 'If multiplicity is a fundamental condition of human history, any universalist project must start from acknowledging this fact. This in turn implies recognition of other universalisms alongside one's own. . . .'

Like Morozov, Charlotte Epstein argues that 'the international holds the key to critique – no less'. Instead of being rejected due to its associations with an uncritical mainstream, it is 'the concept that we critical scholars need to reclaim and recover' for our own work. Indeed, doing so 'overturns the established hierarchy that casts IR as a second-rate locus and mode of political analysis'. In making this case, she too, like Morozov, draws partly on the thought of Laclau and Mouffe. But her emphasis differs from his. For Epstein, the defining quality of critique lies not directly in the provincializing of universalisms, but rather in uncovering the radical indeterminacy of all modern politics. It is this which reveals the possibility of alternative presents (and futures), and with them the responsibility of agents for their political choices – and for the consequences of those choices too.

But why should the international have a privileged role in this business of critique? Epstein's answer has two steps. First the very absence of centralized order in IR renders this sphere of action chronically and explicitly indeterminate – it is thus 'the space of politics *par excellence*'. And second, she follows RBJ Walker's claim that the traditional relegation of the international to a realm 'outside' the law-governed space of domestic politics is in fact constitutive of the 'inside' itself. In this way the international reaches, in its consequences, far beyond the external sphere postulated by disciplinary IR. It 'beckons the work of critique to draw out the contingency underwriting politics, at all levels of analysis'.

A quite different way of exploring the relationship between the international and critique is pursued by RBJ Walker. Walker begins by noting that mainstream international theory contains, even if in 'ideologically reductive forms', an inbuilt dynamic of critique: 'realisms still mobilise pluralist critiques of universalizing ideals, while idealisms. . . mobilise universalising critiques of pluralization'. This is no disciplinary idiosyncrasy. Rather, the antagonism expresses a tension internal to the structuring of the modern international political order – 'a pattern of delimited universality and specific particularities'. In turn, that pattern itself reflects early modern and Enlightenment attempts to respond to 'the gradual collapse of universalising empires' by innovating a new conception of the human condition – especially 'the relationship between humanity in general and humans in particular'. The emblematic figure here is Immanuel Kant. Kant produced not only the modern conception of critique and its association with emancipation, but also (and relatedly) an intellectual schema in which freedom/universality is attainable at each of the three 'levels' – individual, state, state system – into which modern thought divides human existence. What he did not do, however, was to bequeath a formula in which this goal could be achieved 'simultaneously within all these "levels"'. Thus '[i]dealism dances with realism, inside and outside, but also up-side and down-side'. As a result, the international 'now constitutes a site at which the limits of a specific account of critique are thoroughly exposed'. For it is here that the boundaries are set (and the 'cuts' made) which separate humanity from world and humans from citizens – boundaries which no critical theory has yet been able to abolish.

All five contributions discussed so far have agreed that the international is an important site and source of critique. In a sharp turn away from this consensus, Arlene Tickner argues that 'the concept is not worth its weight'. On the contrary, it is weighed down by 'its rootedness in Western-centric bias, Eurocentrism, imperialism, and colonialism'. And this applies as much to 'societal multiplicity' as it does to more traditional state-centric conceptions. Both, after all, seek to occupy 'the false throne of universalism', and both thereby 'conceal the existence of a pluriverse, a world of many worlds or of multiple internationals'.

What is the way forward? Tickner applies Robbie Shilliam's three-step method of decolonizing: contextualization, reconceptualization and re-imagination. The first of these locates disciplinary IR concretely in relation to the wider set of 'modern, Western, Eurocentric, patriarchal and racist foundations' on which its conception of the international has been based. The second provides alternative concepts such as 'dependency and like-minded world system thinking'. These reveal how 'peripheral or post-colonial states experience world politics differently', and how they generate forms of community and

solidarity beyond those ‘typically associated with the Westphalian world’. And finally, re-imagination involves ‘unlearning the international’ by bringing previously suppressed ways of ‘knowing, being and doing’ into international theory and practice. The key resource here is relationality: an ontology which asserts the pluriversal nature of human existence, embraces the co-production of self and other, and seeks alternative ways of relating and living together. Only by being reimagined in this way, Tickner concludes, can ‘the international be ripened for critique’.

Finally, if Tickner charges ‘the international’ with imposing a ‘one-world’ definition on a pluriversal human reality, Milja Kurki goes even further. For her, the concept occludes, by its overt anthropocentrism, the inter-species nexus within which the human variety itself is ultimately constituted. This places her in alignment with those (like Burke et al.) who argue that the climate crisis heralds ‘the end of IR’ and the necessary emergence of ‘planetary politics’. And yet not entirely. For Kurki agrees with those critics who have charged that the idea of planetary politics tends towards a singularizing vision of ‘nature’ (and indeed of the ‘humanity’ to which it is then counterposed). The danger of this vision lies in the very thing that makes it so attractive: ‘it allows a singular God or a special Mankind to hold a privileged place in a unique universe’. The problem, in short, lies in singularity itself. And this leads Kurki to a dramatic conclusion. The concept of ‘the international’ per se must indeed be rejected. However, buried within it, trapped in a stunted anthropocentric form, is an ontological premise that must be released and allowed to assume its full potential: multiplicity. Multiplicity is the core premise of pluriversal thinking. It disrupts all emergent visions of ‘wholes’ and focuses reality in a quite different (dialectical) way: ‘multiplicity names the relationality of becoming where the idea of bordered objects or actors, of identity, is undone’.

In conclusion, what do these seven contributions tell us about the relationship between the international and critique? The authors speak from a variety of intellectual traditions, including Uneven and Combined Development (UCD), history of ideas, the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe, poststructuralism, postcolonialism and posthumanism. Not surprisingly, they reach widely differing judgements of ‘the international’ and its connotations, ranging from those who see it as a key to critical analysis to those who reject it outright as a pernicious and superannuated liability. Strikingly, however, and despite these differences, there is one element common to all of them. All fix in one way or another upon the ontological premise or condition of multiplicity – whether of societies, hegemonic formations, polities, ‘particularities’, ‘worlds’ or even species. All suggest that this premise and condition can be mobilized as a powerful antidote to the problems of theoretical internalism, liberal complacencies, hegemonic ideologies, false universalisms and anthropocentric cosmologies. In short, they see it as a powerful lever of critique. But multiplicity – unlike many of the critical ‘turns’ that have been imported into our field in recent years – is written into the very definition of IR (and arguably *only* IR) as a discipline.<sup>4</sup> Thus the conclusion we can draw about the international and critique may turn out to be an unexpectedly bold one: it is that we should not, after all, reject IR and ‘the international’, despite their many liabilities; on the contrary, we should drill down inside them in order to uncover the critical potential buried beneath the layers of mainstream

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4. Justin Rosenberg, ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’, *International Relations* 30, no. 2 (2016): 127–53.

naturalizations and ideological appropriations. After all, we critical theorists too *are IR*. Its premises belong to us too. And as Charlotte Epstein suggests, they lie waiting for us ‘to reclaim and recover away from a rationalist, atomised mainstream’. In this way, and because they converge on the significance of multiplicity, the contributions to this forum point to a vibrant future for critique in our field – not only *despite* the disciplinary identity of IR, but also in part *because* of it.

## IR’s Unavoidable Vocation of Critique

**Justin Rosenberg**

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Is there something intrinsically critical about ‘the international’? Is the very fact of societal multiplicity pregnant with implications that can disrupt our everyday understandings in politically significant ways? Perhaps – and yet any attempt to develop this claim faces two immediate puzzles.

First, the international is just a particular aspect of human life. It is ‘that dimension of social reality which arises specifically from the co-existence within it of more than one society’.<sup>5</sup> This makes for a fascinating and important study, but why assume a special relationship to critique – the identification of constitutive limits to a given historical form of thought? After all, Sociology analyses the specifically ‘social’ dimension of human life. And while we know that there are critical social theories, we also know that there are uncritical ones too. It would therefore be hard to say that there was something *intrinsically* critical about the discourse of ‘the social’. Why should the international be any different?

The second puzzle is political realism. In the history of IR, realism has functioned as the commonest *target* of critique. Almost every new theory in IR has used a critique of realism to establish its own credentials. And yet, *somehow*, realism has also itself functioned as a language of critique. In EH Carr’s analysis of the ‘harmony of interests’, Morgenthau’s dissection of ‘scientific man’, and Wight’s answer to the question of ‘Why is there no international theory?’, the international has been invoked as a counter to the dominant self-understandings of modern Western societies.<sup>6</sup> And these self-understandings in turn have been held to distort reality and to generate fundamental contradictions in practice as well as theory. Surely, this kind of exposure – *Ideologiekritik* – is the very *ideal-type* of how we understand critique to function. And yet here it is, being delivered by realism which, of all discourses, has itself been the target of more critique than any other.

Can we make sense of ‘the international as critique’ in the face of these two puzzles – the objective neutrality of the international and the peculiar double life of realism? On

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5. Justin Rosenberg, ‘Why Is There No International Historical Sociology?’, *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 308.

6. E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1981). Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). Martin Wight, ‘Why Is There No International Theory?’, *International Relations* 2, no. 1 (1960): 35–48.

reflection, there *is* a possible world in which all this coheres. It is a world in which the fact of the international and its implications have somehow been neglected or even repressed in everyday modes of thinking. Under those circumstances, reflection on the international would indeed be full of critical potential. Why? Because in such a world, one would expect to find that public discourses and even academic knowledge production would recurrently exhibit three major problems which we can call denialism, essentialism and internalism. But this strange world is of course the one in which we actually exist. We should therefore spell out exactly what these problems are.

What is denialism? The existence of the international has many positive effects, such as the rich variety of human cultures, and the deep creativity that arises from their continuous interactions and fusions. But it also has less welcome consequences. As realists never tire of re-iterating, a multiplicity of sovereigns means there is no central authority to keep the peace, deliver justice or even provide a unified cognitive narrative about the world of events. Thus at its highest organizational level, the human world is not law-governed in the way we expect our existence within national societies to be. And this has uncomfortable consequences. It means, for example, that all societies are not equal in their freedom to determine their alignments with other countries. Instead they have to reckon with the fractured and highly uneven distribution of power in the world, navigating it as best as they can. As a 19th century Mexican dictator famously put it: 'Poor Mexico: so far from God; so near to the United States'. And who would not say something similar today about Ukraine? We may tell ourselves that every country has a sovereign right of self-determination. That is an assertion of our political values, and perhaps a legally valid statement too. But we should be careful not to assume that this is in fact, or even potentially, the operating principle of world politics. That would place us in denial about the consequences of societal multiplicity and uneven development – in 'utopian' denial, that is, about the nature of the international. Is not the genuinely critical position here the one that tries to think through what different form political judgement takes in such a situation, rather than denying that the situation exists?

The second problem which arises when awareness of the international is repressed is essentialism – above all in the form of nationalism. Nationalism includes two impulses that refuse the international constitution of the social world. The first is an essentialist belief in identity which imagines, at the extreme, a pure national community which must be protected against corruption by foreign elements – whether that corruption occurs through immigration or trade dependence or international organization or policy imitation. And the second is a disposition to support one's country in its disputes with other countries. Of course, we all have our commitments as citizens. But arguably the *first* principle of international theory is that it must rise above any partisan affiliation if it is going to conceptualize international conflict – otherwise, it cannot grasp the multiplicity of the international as a sphere of social action and moral judgement. As Morgenthau once put it, '[p]olitical realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe'.<sup>7</sup> And that too should make international theory critical almost by its very nature, and in ways that will often feel unwelcome because they will clash with our patriotic instincts.

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7. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 13.

Finally, the world we are describing would be not only denialist in its political discourses and essentialist in its identity forms. It would also be *internalist* in its knowledge production. Its dominant ways of understanding things would be by reference to factors internal to the society (or kind of society) where they occur. It would be a world in which ‘methodological nationalism’ has a deep, invisible hold on the intellectual imagination, and in which unilinear thinking shapes both our social theories and our historical narratives about ourselves. As RN Berki once showed, even Marxism has from the start laboured unwittingly under this constraint, leading to dubious compromises with nationalism and deep tensions in Marx’s own vision of a socialist future.<sup>8</sup> Here the international reveals itself as critique in relation to the very archetype of critical theory itself. And in such a world, more generally, the international would be pregnant with critique because it would reveal again and again that internalism is an intellectually false and politically regressive dogma.

Thus the critical potential of the international lies in its threefold ability: to problematize the grounds of our political judgement; to counteract the operation of our national identities and to uncover the cognitive distortions fostered by our existence inside the individual fragments of a divided, but nonetheless interactive, human world.

Where the international is repressed in this triple sense, the two puzzles noted earlier become much easier to understand. What we called the ‘objective neutrality’ of particular branches of study can indeed be rendered critical by attempts to repress the reality of what they analyse. In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher achieved this almost singlehandedly for Sociology in the United Kingdom when she declared ‘there is no such thing as society’. In the 1630s the Catholic Church even did it for Astronomy by forcing Galileo to recant his belief that the earth moves around the sun. (‘And yet it moves!’: even empirical science can become a wellspring of critique.) And a discipline of IR cannot avoid being a critical resource against the trends of denialism, essentialism and internalism – even if we fail much of the time to live up to this potential.

Even the paradox of realism having its own history of critique starts to make sense. For sure, realism’s relation to the international has been unsteady. Both Carr and Morgenthau implied at times that the international was merely a sub-set of ‘the political’, with no emergent properties of its own. Yet this went against the direction of their wider analyses. Meanwhile, neorealism does centre the international through its focus on anarchy; but it confines this to a political-military definition, abjuring the wider investigations that more rounded conceptions like ‘societal multiplicity’ or ‘Uneven and Combined Development’ pursue. Still, shifting and unsteady though it is, the presence of the international per se within realism has no clear parallel within liberalism or orthodox Marxism – or indeed in any of the ‘critical’ contributions to the Fourth Debate. And if our argument about denialism, essentialism and internalism is sound, then this presence would indeed help explain realism’s ambiguous standing as both a target and a source of critique.

Where then does the impulse to repress the international originate? Here lies a final irony, for it comes, at least in part, from the international itself. Without the international there would be no *national* identities, which are always framed as morally, politically and cognitively self-regarding in relation to others. The very multiplicity of societies pushes them into this egoistic posture, a posture which simultaneously obscures their

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8. R. N. Berki, ‘On Marxian Thought and the Problem of International Relations’, *World Politics* 24, no. 1 (1971): 80–105.

real, interactive conditions of being. Ultimately, therefore, the potential (and the vocation) of the international as critique lies simply – and this is its unique contribution to all the human disciplines – in its realized consciousness of itself.

## How To Save Multiplicity Research From Re-enacting 1970s Liberal IR – By Centring ‘The International’

**Ole Wæver**

University of Copenhagen

The idea of multiplicity is a success. That is a danger to its core strengths. Currently, success threatens to not only dilute the research program, but worse: to turn it into a revival of 1970s IR liberalism. In the context of critique, this is particularly unfortunate because that is as uncritical as IR gets.

I will answer three questions in order to spare the multiplicity program from a pyrrhic victory:

- (1) How does this time travel happen?
- (2) What is the critical edge of ‘the international’? and
- (3) What should be done by multiplicitists to sharpen its core concepts?

In the original formulation by Rosenberg, ‘multiplicity’ designates ‘that human existence is not unitary but multiple. It is distributed across numerous interacting societies’.<sup>9</sup> While many have worked constructively with this idea, it is increasingly common to see ‘multiplicity’ deployed in a much more loose sense. Any non-unitary phenomenon is taken to represent multiplicity, without being traced back to *societies* being several. At recent conferences, the number of multiplicity papers sky-rocketed, but the ratio of generalized to specific usages accelerated almost as steeply. ‘Multiplicity’ is observed whenever domestic politics matters or non-state actors appear: anything beyond a world of only and unitary states. Naturally, it is tempting for the leaders of the movement to cash in the citations and smile politely at the devaluations of the core concept. (I am familiar with the dilemma.)

Explanans and explanandum are conflated. On a good day, the approach demonstrates that the fundamental, societal multiplicity (in the specific sense) has wide-ranging effects. Thus, the analysis is not narrow or polity-centric. It shows, for example, how literary studies and history of religion benefit from taking into account multiplicity. However, this is demonstrated *from* the analytical concept ‘multiplicity’ narrowly defined as multiple societies, that is, a quality at the systemic level, a feature of how humanity is structured: not in unity.

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9. Rosenberg, ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’.

In the 1970s, most critique of the until-then dominant realism took (especially in the United States) the form of radical disaggregation. The (allegedly) rationalist unitary state actor in realism was challenged by both adding other actors (International Organisations (IOs), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), companies, individuals) and by decomposing the state, zooming in on competing agencies (bureaucratic politics) and domestic sources of foreign policy like interest groups. Think: Keohane and Nye before *Power and Interdependence*, that is, their 1972 book on transnationalism<sup>10</sup>; and Burton in the same year replacing the billiard-ball model with ‘cobwebs’.<sup>11</sup>

Andrew Moravcsik rightly pinned the essence of liberal IR on an aggregative view, where individuals have preferences and thereby interests, they form groups and their bottom-up struggle determines what becomes state interest and policy.<sup>12</sup> This approach is atomistic and individualistic to the degree that it blocks any conception of the whole. And that is the point! Liberalism is the most powerful ideology of the international, or rather: preventing any conception of the international.<sup>13</sup>

Currently, ‘methodological liberalism’ rears its head in odd places. Critical IR has become structured around a vague hierarchy of what sounds more progressive than its opposite (new > old, wide > narrow, concrete > abstract)<sup>14</sup> and multiplicity is easily hijacked in this mood. Breaking up unities becomes a quality in itself. Celebrations of difference and variegated lived experiences turn multiplicity into both starting and end-point as a pervasive self-affirming social ontology. Tragically, this removes the important critical tools of conceptual and theoretical work. Ironically, multiplicity in the stricter sense and its accompanying conception of the international is a powerful way to lift exactly this burden.

What then are the critical edges of ‘the international’? The three most important are:

- *Avoiding a naïve ‘we’*. The corollary to an atomistic, individualistic view is that every global challenge becomes a cooperation problem. This liberalist de-politization can be countered by recognition of constitutive conflict among powers. Persuasive illustrations have been made by Olaf Corry in several articles on climate change in general and geo-engineering in particular: dangerous pathways might be chosen due to illusions of rational control if ‘the stark multiplicity of the international’ is ignored.<sup>15</sup> To be able to point this out without reproducing static and essentialist state-centrism *à la* neo-realism is the risky balancing act

10. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, ‘Transnational Relations and World Politics’, *International Organization* 25, no. 3 (1971): 329–49.

11. John W. Burton, *World Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

12. Andrew Moravcsik, ‘Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics’, *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513–53.

13. Beate Jahn, ‘Liberal Internationalism: From Ideology to Empirical Theory – and Back Again’, *International Theory* 1, no. 3 (2009): 409–38; Charlotte Epstein, *Birth of the State: The Place of the Body in Crafting Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

14. Charlotte Epstein and Ole Wæver, ‘The Turn to Turns in International Relations’, under review.

15. Duncan McLaren and Olaf Corry, ‘The Politics and Governance of Research Into Solar Geoengineering’, *WIREs Climate Change* 12, no. 3 (2021): 1–20.

attempted by the multiplicity program. (I return to this in the last section.) The international in this role challenges liberal definitions of global or transnational issues.<sup>16</sup>

- *Already-international politics.* An important operation pioneered by dependency theory and continued by other critical structuralisms replaces reductionist comparativism with relational or systemic analysis. ‘Developing states’ are not laggards on the same path as previously travelled more competently by the ‘developed nations’ – no, they are actively under-developed by the latter. For instance: militarization in Africa should not be studied by measuring up to some abstract made-in-the-US conception of civil-military relations or a Tilly-derived idea that a lack of textbook interstate war hampered state-building, but by analyzing the post-colonial and neo-colonial dynamics that condition politics here.<sup>17</sup> Always-already-international is especially powerful as critique of depoliticizations that work through domestic reductionism.
- *Specification of hierarchies.* While vague versions of multiplicity might relativize dominant conceptions, they are not good at identifying the exact shape and sources of hierarchical relations of domination and exploitation. This is where ‘the international’ in the multiplicity approach differs most dramatically from that of realism: it is not a flattened world of ‘like units’. In contrast, the international *derives* from multiplicity in the sense of a plurality of societies, but it has *evolved* as a differentiated formation including hierarchies of gender, race and class. More in line with the concept of ‘Uneven and Combined Development’ – from which this approach derives – this conception of the international holds the ability to account for hierarchies.

Some might see a contradiction between the third bullet (as argued more fully by Tickner, this Forum) and my re-focusing of multiplicity on societies, but that would miss the power of dialectics. As Tickner points out, it is a sign of superficiality when calls for decolonizing something become embraced too easily – then it is because the targets have not been named properly.

An excruciating feature of IR events is the amount of papers arguing truisms like ‘there is no sharp distinction between domestic and international’ or ‘sovereignty is an illusion because states do not have full control of everything’. These are ‘illusions’ that

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16. At the same time as ‘the international’ in this multiplicity sense explains variations, it also implies that ‘the international’ is experienced and conceptualised differently around the world. See: Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney, eds., *Thinking International Relations Differently* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2012) and *Claiming the International* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2013) – and for the narrower question how the IR discipline does the international differently conditioned geo-epistemologically by the international itself, include the first volume of this ‘Worlding Beyond the West’ Trilogy: Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Wæver, eds. *International Relations Scholarship Around the World* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2009).

17. Sylvie Namwase and Ole Wæver, ‘Introduction: Should We Militarize a Little More? Questions, Definitions and Theories for This Volume’, in *Militarising More to Develop Faster? Uganda’s Difficult Questions on Human Rights, Governance and Economy*, eds. Sylvie Namwase, Ronald Naluwairo, Zahara Nampewo, and Ole Wæver (Kampala: African Studies Bookstore, 2023).

have been killed and killed and killed – and yet: will be killed again. What the statements are getting at is true and relevant, but we only gain real insight if the target is less of a strawman. Sovereignty as structuring principle, for instance, always worked as an effective abstraction, not as an empirical generalization.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, critique needs to attack at the right level of abstraction.

This is exactly what makes multiplicity and its version of the international such an important intervention. Too important to be swept up in a general turn to disaggregation, which furthermore strengthens the grip of the dominant liberal ideology. And yet, some important clarifications remain to be made.

The most important has to do with the concept of plurality of societies. What societies? Multiplicity theory is simultaneously close to realism and different in important respects. This is why Waltz gets so much attention in the foundational article(s) by Rosenberg. Not because they are opposites. Neorealism manages to demarcate a distinctive international, but at too high a price. The international becomes defined negatively (anarchy) and it exacts an ontology of static state-centrism ('like units'). Can that be avoided without opening the gates to descend into liberal disaggregation? While seemingly an unnecessary either/or, disciplinary history shows few examples of escaping it. In the current climate among critical scholars, it is hard to avoid that a sharp analytical multiplicity<sub>1</sub> is celebrated as mushy multiplicity<sub>2</sub>.

This can be secured by specifying: (1) how the basic multiplicity that *constitutes* the international is the co-presence of multiple interacting societies, and what societies mean in this context; (2) how the infinitude of divisions, distinctions, hierarchies and inequalities of the world are conditioned by (1); and (3) how the international therefore *is* immensely diversified but not unstructured, and therefore is a social reality in its own right, not reducible to bottom-up understandings.

The specific forms of critique we can provide as International Relations derive from our ability to mobilize the international as a structured social world. While this was historically precluded primarily by a simplistic atomism at the level of states, the flight from this currently – as in the 1970s – points towards a radical disaggregation with similar effects at the level of individuals. Loose usage of the appealing concept of multiplicity is increasingly caught up in this stream. Ironically, the best remedy is strict multiplicity.

## The International, Multiplicity and Meaning

### Viacheslav Morozov

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Like most of the other contributors to this forum, I believe that the international comprises an essential, even if often implicit, condition of possibility for any critique. Its significance, in my view, consists in foregrounding the multiplicity of human worlds,

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18. Ole Wæver, 'Identity, Integration and Security: Solving the Sovereignty Puzzle in E.U. Studies', *Journal of International Affairs* 48, no. 2 (1995): 389–431.

each rooted in a certain way of giving meaning to human existence. I argue, firstly, that the international is populated by multiple hegemonic formations, each with its own understanding of right and wrong. Secondly, their co-existence implies knowing that any universalist claims are necessarily rooted in particular experiences. The co-existence of disparate universal orders produces dislocation in each system of meaning. This enables critique in the first place, but also accentuates its limits.

A reservation is in order: I do not unconditionally valorize critique as a category distinguishing good and bad scholarship and creating what Nicholas Michelsen calls ‘a romanticised scholarly identity’ of Critical IR.<sup>19</sup> I agree with Michelsen that critique must not aspire for the status of a major theory – a dominant scholarly idiom structuring the discipline as such. Rather, it plays a minor role by highlighting blind spots of major theories, giving voice to the voiceless and advocating situated knowledge in the face of sweeping generalizations. Critique is a necessary component of any scholarly endeavour, but it can also be ‘effectively mobilised by reactionaries, racists and gender absolutists’.<sup>20</sup>

The primary question, then, is not whether the international somehow facilitates – via critique – progress, emancipation or any other normatively defined pursuit. Rather, I argue that the international forms an essential, even if often implicit, background to any critical stance by pointing out to the multiplicity of human worlds, each rooted in a certain way of giving meaning to human existence.

I follow Justin Rosenberg in defining the international via multiplicity.<sup>21</sup> The latter, however, must not be confused with difference: rather, the international deals with the multiple ways humans organize difference practically and politically. In and of itself, difference is trivial and meaningless: everything is different from everything, but also identical *in being*. Multiplicity, on the contrary, is full of meaning. As Alain Badiou would say, it is the result of a count: humans impose meaning on the flow of difference by identifying entities and their relations.<sup>22</sup> Hence, contrary to Rosenberg,<sup>23</sup> I view difference not as a consequence, but as an ontological ground from which multiplicity emerges.

Hence, meaning is key to the ontology of multiplicity. Still, at this level we are dealing with a multiplicity of objects, rather than with anything specific to the international. The latter, as Rosenberg points out, is a domain of *societal* multiplicity. In an earlier article, I describe the international as an uneven, multi-scalar space organized by a plurality of conflicting and overlapping inside–outside divisions. My proposal is to conceptualize ‘society’ as a hegemonic formation, whose inner space is created by a shared understanding of right and wrong, good and evil. This, in turn, is translated into rules, order and solidarity that endow societal units with identity and agency. A hegemonic formation can coincide with a nation but can be as large as ‘the international community’

19. Nicholas Michelsen, ‘What Is a Minor International Theory? On the Limits of “Critical International Relations”’, *Journal of International Political Theory* 17, no. 3 (2021): 505.

20. *Ibid.*, 503.

21. Rosenberg, ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’; Justin Rosenberg and Benjamin Tallis, ‘Introduction: The International of Everything’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 57, no. 3 (2022): 250–67.

22. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London; New York, NY: Continuum, 2005).

23. Rosenberg, ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’, 137.

and as small as a village.<sup>24</sup> This answers Ole Wæver's (this Forum) call for an ontology of multiplicity that can account for multi-layered hierarchies without reducing societies to individuals.<sup>25</sup> In this ontology, a 'society' is an intersubjective reality emerging from discourse, a space of shared meaning which, importantly, includes representations of identity, of Self and Others. Rooting multiplicity in discourse and acknowledging that any entity is always incomplete and dislocated helps to avoid state-centrism and other forms of internalism (Rosenberg, this Forum) or substantialism – the presumption 'that entities precede interaction'.<sup>26</sup>

It follows that the international is an aspect of the social defined by interaction of hegemonic formations, each representing a relatively autonomous cognitive and moral order. Note that this definition is not state-centric: it suggests an understanding of the inter-*national* that goes back to the original meaning of the word 'nation' as a community of birth and, later, a community of opinion. Moreover, since it used to refer to communities of foreigners in the Roman empire and later to medieval students, it also points to the experience of cultural borderlines, of one's otherness.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps this could be a way of disentangling the concept of the international from its connection to state and modern nationalism (Tickner, this Forum).

Interaction between hegemonic formations is often conflictual, as the differences in meaning on the two sides of the border impede mutual understanding, which is essential for cooperation. Moreover, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have shown, a fully constituted border can only establish a relationship of pure negativity: if the inside is identical with itself, the outside cannot be imagined as yet another difference and has instead to be thought of as the limit of all signification – that is, antagonism.<sup>28</sup> This brings us to Carl Schmitt's definition of the political as based on the distinction between friend and enemy.

However, even as antagonism is 'given within the social itself' as its limit,<sup>29</sup> not every inside–outside relationship is warlike. Speaking historically rather than theoretically,<sup>30</sup> the very multiplicity of hegemonic formations, each with their own ideas of right and wrong, makes openness and dislocation much more common than existential conflict. Humans are generally quite adept at navigating multiple worlds of meaning both as an everyday experience and as part of political engagement. Save for extreme settings, living next to a stranger is part of everyone's experience, both individual and collective.

24. Morozov, 'Uneven Worlds of Hegemony'.

25. Brian Epstein, 'Ontological Individualism Reconsidered', *Synthese* 166, no. 1 (2009): 187–213.

26. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (1999): 293.

27. Guido Zernatto, 'Nation: The History of a Word', *The Review of Politics* 6, no. 3 (1944): 351–66.

28. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 122–32.

29. *Ibid.*, 127.

30. Cf. R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 65–7.

Yet this also means that any society, understood as a hegemonic formation, is always already dislocated. The ways of experiencing sociality are always multiple and decentred. Hegemony universalizes a particular way of relating to the world, but its particularity can always be revealed. A stranger living next door, economic and cultural change affecting local communities or entire continents, a memory of the past that was better or worse than the present – all this points to the potentially infinite multiplicity of collective experiences and inside–outside divisions, thus bringing back the indeterminacy that is otherwise covered over by hegemonic common sense (Epstein, this Forum), and throwing doubt on any universalist claims.

Critique is the name of such doubt when it is articulated as a consistent argument. By questioning a part of the existing order, critique is directed towards the future, to the world that is yet to come. However, pure imagination is insufficient: to be credible, critique needs references to real worlds located either in the past or in a different place. The very possibility to say, ‘They do it differently out there!’ is a crucial precondition for any critical discourse. It does the quintessentially critical work of thwarting the universalist ambition of hegemony, confronting it with its own particularity. If other communities organize their life differently, our way must be one of many.<sup>31</sup> The international, understood through the prism of multiplicity, thus becomes a source of inspiration for any critical mind.

Needless to say, academic critique requires imagination no less than any other. Indeed, the persistent romanticization of the identity of a ‘critical scholar’, pointed out by Michelsen, derives from the commitment ‘to emancipation as a core scholarly concern’.<sup>32</sup> Critical scholarship strives to bring to light knowledge that is repressed by the mainstream (Rosenberg, this Forum). As a rule, this implies invoking the multiplicity of human history. Even classical comparative research, in as much as it has a critical edge, is premised on multiplicity of collectivities evolving through time and aware of each other’s existence (otherwise, what is the point of comparison?). In foregrounding the particular, local experiences and knowledges, post-colonial theory perhaps comes closest to the take on multiplicity developed here.<sup>33</sup> It tends, however, to reduce colonial difference to ‘culture’ – a notion that is then easily essentialized.<sup>34</sup>

Viewing the international as a precondition for critique takes Michelsen’s warning to a new level. Even if political imagination cannot be reduced to the inductive logic of prototypes,<sup>35</sup> a critical intervention typically involves bringing up particularity against universalist claims. It is for this reason that any critical theory can be appropriated by reactionary forces, with their militant essentialism and the assertion of particularity per se as a universal value. Indiscriminate valorization of critique does open the door to relativism. At the same time, the international also offers a remedy, even if tentative and without guarantees. If multiplicity is a fundamental condition of human history, any

31. The fact that other communities are hegemonic formations that are, in their turn, also dislocated, does not have to play any major role in the way we imagine them.

32. Michelsen, ‘What Is a Minor International Theory?’, 490.

33. Charlotte Epstein, ‘The Postcolonial Perspective: An Introduction’, *International Theory* 2, no. 2 (2014): 294–311; Tickner, this Forum.

34. Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York, NY: Verso, 2013).

35. Jean-Claude Passeron, *Sociological Reasoning: A Non-Popperian Space of Argumentation* (Oxford: The Bardwell Press, 2013).

universalist project must start from acknowledging this fact. This in turn implies recognition of other universalisms alongside one's own, as well as respect for people's right to seek truth, and sometimes to err on that way. As critique, the international highlights both the contingency of any particular order and the innate human need to ground one's existence, individually and collectively, in a certain shared understanding of the universal.

## The Space of Politics: To Re-spatialize the International

**Charlotte Epstein**

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With this contribution I would like to suggest that the international holds the key to critique (no less), once it is reckoned with, not merely as a secondary space relegated beyond, and defined by, the domestic, but rather as the space of politics itself.

Politics is the art of rendering certain the uncertain through a series of decisions that work to hide its own condition of possibility – this very uncertainty.<sup>36</sup> It is the practice of determining a course of action by cutting through the indeterminacy *and* of covering the latter over. Restoring it into view is instead the task of critique. Critique consists in, for example, showing that an exclusionary migration policy is not a necessary response to an objectively 'threatening' high number of migrants, but a specific choice. Only by taking the measure of the indeterminacy out of which the choice or determination takes shape, and which it also serves to obfuscate (since a choice excludes others), does it become possible to begin to take responsibility for the courses of action that follow from the choice – and to change them. To recognize that politics is the fact of contingent decisions, not a natural necessity, is to see that any course of action or policy can also be altered. Rendering this contingency visible, as opposed to further obfuscating it, and thereby further entrenching the power relations invested in the status quo, is what differentiates a critical from an uncritical, or as Robert Cox (1981) once called it 'problem-solving' IR.<sup>37</sup>

The international lends itself especially well to this critical task, once it becomes understood, not merely as a discrete level of political action and analysis, but as the space that lies beyond the sovereign determination, hence the space of indeterminacy itself.

Critical international relations (CIR) has long invested 'the international' as the concept that we (critical scholars) need to reclaim and recover away from a rationalist,

36. This is not a timeless definition of politics that would seek to capture the concept's essence or lawlike workings; it refers instead to the distinctive form that modern politics has taken, begat by 'democratic revolution' and where 'power, knowledge, and the law experience a radical indeterminacy' (Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 1). This indeterminacy is both constitutive and an on-going source of instability, that which needs to be fixed by political decision-making.

37. Robert Cox, 'Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory' *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126–55.

atomist mainstream that has remained persistently blinded to the relationality of IR.<sup>38</sup> IR was both founded and legitimized by the domestic versus international binary, which established it as the discipline that studies the international. This, however, has borne important costs for the possibility of doing critique in IR, as Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfus have shown.<sup>39</sup> The binary established the international as the negative image of the domestic order, as an *absence*, of government if not of order *tout court*, and thus as the locus of a constitutive lack. From there, any behavioural regularity that may nevertheless happen to be observed in the relations between states becomes an anomaly. In the circular logic of IR's founding, patterns of regularity in an anarchical international system become the intellectual problem that beckon and require a discipline to elucidate it. Thus, the discipline was born of the epistemological act of taking the domestic as the referent for the study of order. This is what Edkins and Zehfuss called 'domesticating the international'. Instead, to ready the international for critique, they flipped the discipline's epistemological-historical choreography on its head and proposed 'generalizing the international'. Their 'generalized international' is 'a realm in which the provision of security [would be] recognised as a political decision once again', thus restoring into view and as a subject of democratic debate that 'the cost of provision of security for one person [comes] at the expense of an increased insecurity for another'.<sup>40</sup>

Edkins and Zehfuss's helpful move is to have mustered for CIR what I have called 'the productive force of the negative'.<sup>41</sup> They reclaimed the negative space by which IR was defined as the space of indeterminacy, and thus as the space of politics *par excellence*. This overturns the established hierarchy that casts IR as a second-rate locus and mode of political analysis, the belated addendum to political science, which is where all the respectable thinking happens – not least because, in a persistently US-centric disciplinary division of labour,<sup>42</sup> the latter also houses political theory. However, Edkins and Zehfuss fall short of underscoring the Mouffian focus on indeterminacy as the condition of possibility of *all* politics.<sup>43</sup> Edkins and Zehfuss have thus productively tabled for CIR an 'international' that bristles with potential for critique. My suggestion, to put it in their language, is to internationalize the Mouffian insight that indeterminacy is the stuff that politics is made of; hence also the necessary focal point of critique, even if holding this focus is by definition more difficult than focussing on the positive determinations that patch it over (and that form the

38. See, among many others, Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, 'Generalising the International' *Review of International Studies*, 31, no. 3 (2005): 451–72; David Blaney and Arlene Tickner, 'Worlding, Ontological Politics and the Possibility of a Decolonial IR', *Millennium* 45, no. 3 (2017): 293–311; or Charlotte Epstein, 'Seeing the Ecosystem in the International: Ecological Thinking as Relational Thinking', *New Perspectives* 30, no. 2 (2022): 170–9. On CIR, see Epstein and Wæver 'The Turn to Turns in International Relations'.

39. Edkins and Zehfuss, 'Generalising the International'.

40. *Ibid.*, 468.

41. Charlotte Epstein 'The Productive Force of the Negative and the Desire for Recognition: Lessons From Hegel and Lacan', *Review of International Studies* 44, no. 5 (2018): 805–28.

42. Ole Wæver, 'The Sociology of a Not so International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations', *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 687–727.

43. Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*. See also Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

object of positivist work).<sup>44</sup> Chantal Mouffe, for her part, honed her insight with the domestic, not the international, as her spatial referent. Yet the international is the space of politics par excellence that beckons the work of critique to draw out the contingency underwriting politics, at all levels of analysis. My argument, then, is that it is the locus of indeterminacy itself, we, as students of politics, ought to hold in our sights.

The argument I put forward here rests on the fundamental insight, first articulated not just for IR but for political science at large by RBJ Walker with his (literally) groundbreaking *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, that the work of critique is always necessarily spatial.<sup>45</sup> This harks to the fundamentally spatial nature of modernity itself. That is, the advent of modernity, that which made possible both the state and the subject of rights, is a spatial revolution.<sup>46</sup> In what I consider to be the foundational gesture of CIR, RBJ Walker inverted the domestic versus international divide by showing that what is habitually relegated to the outside (to the international), in political science's traditional spatial framework (which is also Mouffe's), is in fact constitutive of the inside. There is no Inside without an Outside to make it one. He showed that modernity's conceptual categories, on the one hand, *like* the state and the subject of rights, but also disciplinarity itself, on the other, or that which organizes its study, turn on this constitutive role played by the Outside. Reconceptualized thus, the international is constitutive of the spatial (and temporal) ordering of politics itself. And this is why, as both Morozov and RBJ Walker also show in this forum, the international is the necessary epistemological and political condition for critique. It is where the indeterminacy of politics is revealed; and therefore what can and ought to be mined to open up alternative futures.

## Critique at the Limit

### R.B.J. Walker

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The extent to which analyses of IR are subjected to critical traditions imported from elsewhere is disturbing. It is as if the international could never be a source of critical

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44. Methodologically this means identifying the key moments in a field of policy-making area where alternative courses of action are revealed in by contestations (see my own *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of an Anti-Whaling Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), for example) or because of an unexpected event, like a global pandemic.

45. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Hence also why IR has a lot to learn from and with critical geography; see John Agnew, 'Continuity, Discontinuity and Contingency: Insights for International Political Sociology from Political Geography', in *International Political Sociology: Transversal Lines*, eds. Tugba Bassaran, Didier Bigo, Emmanuel Pierre Guittet, and R. B. J. Walker (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017). Along with spatiality, the temporality or historicity of critique is also Walker's focus, but it is not mine here (But see my *Birth of the State: The Place of the Body in Crafting Modern Politics* (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).)

46. See Epstein, *Place of the Body*.

possibility, even a necessary condition for critique as we know it. Nevertheless, if IR still demands critical resources from elsewhere, that elsewhere will already be caught up in international relations in some way, and subject to its critical interventions. What may appear as a shady one-way street in an institutionalized discipline is better understood as a dark and dangerous spatiotemporality with dense traffic in many directions. Even so, much depends on what we mean by 'international', by 'critique' and, I would say most urgently, by 'relations'.

International often directs attention to a specific discipline, influential in some places, less in others. Critical opportunities seem plentiful and easy; too easy, and easily neutralized. Conversely, if we turn to whatever that discipline disciplines, the already extensive dynamics of relations among sovereign nation-states potentially include everything shaping such relations. In this case we must engage less with a specialized even if interdisciplinary discipline than with the entire social sciences, with histories, geographies, political economies, technologies, theologies and much else. What it might mean to make claims to knowledge in this broader context, let alone to critical knowledge shaping other political possibilities, is not obvious.

Nevertheless, I want to affirm that it is this broader understanding of international that needs to be juxtaposed with claims about critique. This is partly because this understanding resonates with so many contemporary empirical trends. It is especially because our most pervasive understandings of critique are already rooted in an historical account of an international political ordering of subjectivities and spatiotemporalities understood as a specifically 'modern' formation far exceeding external relations among states.

Here it is useful to consider one principled dilemma animating the discipline. It is clear that the 'first great debate' between political realism and political idealism homogenized the variety and minimized the contestability of conflicting commitments caught in these capacious nets. They also converted a complex and mutually productive double-act into a simplistically irreconcilable antagonism. Yet even in their most ideologically reductive forms, relations between them worked as a systematic mobilization of mutual critique. In their statist/nationalist forms especially, realisms still mobilize pluralist critiques of universalizing ideals, while idealisms, whether internationalist or cosmopolitan, mobilize universalizing critiques of pluralization.

There is nothing surprising about this. Both the homogenization of positions and the conversion of mutually productive relations into a polarized antagonism express – before they explain – the structuring of the international political order as a pattern of (delimited) universality and (specific) particularities. Its horizontal arrangement of singularities and pluralities is organized as an internal/external ordering of subjectivities, both macro and micro, with always complex and often problematic boundaries between and among macros and micros: between and among subjects, states and a system of states, as both Kenneth Waltz and Immanuel Kant conveniently codified them. The pattern of critique here works as an expression of what is being criticized. In Kantian terms, it works immanently, within the limits set by a modern structuring of internalities and externalities. This is why, whatever his contemporary status as a philosopher, Kant still offers the sharpest account of the intimate connection between critique and IR despite his own brutal reconstitution within dogmatic divisions between realists and idealists, in his case among the idealists.

On the one hand, Kant articulated our exemplary – epistemological – account of critical possibility: the insistence on resistance to dogmas of many kinds through careful attention to the conditions under which any claim to authoritative knowledge can be sustained. In this sense, all knowledge is critical and all else is dogma. Within the conditionalities/limits of knowledge, it became possible to play out sociopolitical and axiological relations of universality and particularity within potentially autonomous subjects as these subjects, macro and micro, are driven to increasing consciousness of their potential universality as subjectivities, internalizing a universal moral law within their otherwise (in)dividuated and self-determining selves. It is on this ground that critique could be associated with struggles for emancipation and the capacity to judge past, present and future through a Historicization of teleological/eschatological temporality. Hegel, Darwin, Marx and many others could then spin impressive variations on the theme; at least until various catastrophes undermined their optimism in ways expressed not least by Max Weber. Weber's position, combining Kant with both Nietzsche and Luther, was then absorbed by influential forms of political realism but also by the officially designated Critical Theorists of Frankfurt, who in turn helped shape mild critiques of IR many decades later. This same ground also permitted subjectivities to be splintered into the multiple identities, interests and the neo-Kantian 'perspectives' through which critique has been captured within disciplinary routines.

On the other hand, this ground enabled Kant to delineate the international as a formation within which the workings of History, as Nature, are understood to involve the realization of universality-within-particularity and particularity-within-universality simultaneously among (in)dividualized subjects, particularized communities (republics, not democracies) and a community of communities (both a system of states and a very minimalist cosmopolis). The obvious difficulty is how to understand this historical enactment of human freedom within autonomous and self-determining subjects simultaneously within all these 'levels': levels expressed horizontally, affirming liberties and equalities, rather than vertically, and qualitatively, as in the empires of old. While he may have left us with the critical possibilities of the regulative ideal of an internalist/externalist account of freedom and equality reconciling universalities with pluralities/particularities understood in terms of a specific conceptualization of space and time, he also insisted that perpetual peace is to be found only in the graveyard. Idealism dances with realism, inside and outside, but also up-side and down-side. Kant thus articulates a problem. In Waltz's case, idealism masquerades as realism, the levels return to their old scalar subordination and the problem is instantly depoliticized, a tempting but completely untenable grounding for critique, or even for credible political analysis.

Kant was one of many thinkers struggling to articulate the consequences of an innovative account of Humanity, usually as Man, driven by the gradual collapse of universalizing empires. He was especially responding to questions about the relationship between humanity in general and humans in particular, a legacy not least of Renaissance humanisms and Protestant reformations. What disciplinary convention now calls an international is, in Kant's reading, only part of a more extensive answer to this question. Segregating *Perpetual Peace* from, especially, his *Critique of Pure Reason*, attention is focused on his struggles with just some consequences of his critical, anthropological and historical cartography of human possibilities. While *Perpetual Peace* may indeed be

concerned with questions about war and peace, it also offers a devastating legitimization of violence in the name of a specific account of humanity and its subjectivization of freedom and equality as an historical project at all three 'levels'. The constitutive limits of critique thereby match the constitutive limits of the modern international in its broadest sense, and of both its virtues and its vices. Unsurprisingly, critique easily degenerates into celebrations of the virtues and hopes for the elimination of the vices enabling them.

Many critically inclined scholars rightly wish to add other things to IR: gender, economy, ecologies, class, race, society, colonialisms, histories, geographies and so on. They encounter a common difficulty: whatever is to be added is already present in an unsatisfactory but primordial form, usually in depoliticized claims about humanity and planet, universalism or pluralism, enlightenment and/or romanticism, History as Development or the statist-nation. These offer many even if not always decisive counter-critical resources. Co-optations certainly abound, transcendentalisms seduce, immanence reproduces, other traditions and other ontologies become alluring even while the status of humanity and politically qualified humans become radically uncertain in many settings.

Critique is especially difficult to add to something international because it is already present as the outer limit dividing Humanity from World, the historically specific dogma within which a specific distinction between dogma and critique can be sustained. Regulative ideals of liberty, equality, self-determination and emancipation remain understandably attractive to those drawn to critique. Others prefer to transcend these limits, even though the rules of immanent critique count this as a dogmatic tendency. Either way, immanence or transcendence, criticizing the very possibility condition of critique is a tricky business; even if one has in mind a somehow very different understanding not only of critique and, the core problem, both humanity and its political subjectivities.

At the very least, the international now constitutes a key site at which the limits of a specific account of critique, and a political anthropology articulated within specific spatiotemporal limits, are thoroughly exposed. Familiar complaints about methodological nationalisms and methodological individualisms require modification in the light of the quieter but even tighter grip of methodological internationalisms. Channelling one of Weber's interventions, we might want to ask about what kind of person is still capable of critique under contemporary conditions. Self-identifications as critic clearly betray a troubling innocence. In the meantime, critique still demands sustained diagnosis and appreciation of what is being criticized. The discipline is certainly not the problem, even if it does encourage all too many superficial claims about how the problem is to be solved.

My own response to this condition is to worry less about critique or international, or even about other universalities and pluralizations, productive as some of these may be, than about the third term I have left hanging: relations, and thus, necessarily, boundaries.

Attempts to apply concepts of critique to international relations can have little force unless they are predicated on a clear recognition that international relations already express both deeply rooted critical practices and the basic conditions under which prevailing concepts of critique have been established. Attempts to understand these conditions through indiscriminate references to liberal, Western or other essentialized and dehistoricized formations may sustain polemical debate but little scholarly or politically relevant diagnosis. Claims that pluralisms offer a solution to hegemonic universalisms, or that temporalities offer an alternative to static spatialities work well within the established routines of an internationalized political order.

Calls to recognize other claims about universalities and pluralities have been made for a very long time in many different contexts, as civilizations, cultures, theologies, economies, histories, practices, technologies, post-Newtonian cosmologies and much else. There is much to learn from how such challenges have been absorbed and deflected, and much to think about if critique is to do more than reproduce the dualistic options through which political possibilities have been circumscribed in internationalized as well as statist and individualized forms. There is certainly an urgent need to generate other ways of responding to relations between humanity and world, and other ways of thinking about relations between humanity in general and politically qualified humans in particular. These are the two key relations shaping both the modern international political order, and our most basic understandings of critical possibility. Engaging with these probably means struggling yet again with the legacies of the classical Mediterranean world – all those footnotes to Plato – as well as with the earlier shift to the fateful monotheisms that still encourage us to reproduce a constant repetition of dualistic options while claiming that we are somehow critical. Less speculatively, it does imply some coming to terms with what it means to live *within* an international rather than *under* an imperial political order. Neither of these options is obviously suited to a planetary orbit in which both up-and-down and in-and-out are now so dramatically unsettled.

Even so, in politics as we have come to understand it, even if not in some possible ontologies, axiologies or sociologies, relations lead to forms and practices of limitation, distinction, discrimination and bounding: to ‘the cut’, as a root of ‘critique’, as of ‘crisis’; to Kant’s first cuts and their conditions of possibility; to the cuts enabling both Human and Citizen in forms shaping both critique and international; and thus, I would say, to other ways of cutting, and relating, that might at least minimize the damage. There is a lot at stake in how we presume to draw the line, how we assign responsibility for the lines that are drawn, where, when, how, for what and for whom, and how we come to terms with the limitations of our most cherished but also terrifying limits. Perhaps this is why so many claims to critique have become so resolutely apolitical.

## Decolonizing The ‘International’

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IR’s conception of the ‘international’ has long been disputed for its narrowness, the dichotomy it establishes between (liberal) political community and state sovereignty on the inside and the lack thereof on the outside<sup>47</sup>, and its rootedness in Western-centric bias, Eurocentrism, imperialism and colonialism. As scholars such as Vitalis<sup>48</sup> have shown, the very ontology of the international was linked from the onset of the field of IR

47. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*.

48. Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

to unequal, hierarchical relations structured along colonial and racial lines of difference, as well as those of gender and ethnicity, more than to competition or interaction between sovereign states (and eventually societies).

Such a reading drives home the point that the critical bandwidth of the international is not just severely limited, but essentially impossible unless it is somehow delinked from its existing onto-epistemic moorings. I am strongly inclined to think, along with Kurki (this Forum) that the concept is not worth its weight, given its allegiance to state, human centric and one might add, masculinized and racialized frames. In consequence, nothing short of ‘decolonizing the field by challenging the colonial treatment of difference and multiplicity that has characterized the study of the “international”’<sup>49</sup> is required if the international is to be retooled for meaningful critique.

Calls to decolonize the university, pedagogy, science and the concepts through which we make sense of the world have become increasingly fashionable worldwide and in most areas of the academy. And yet, doing and thinking decolonially continues to be an elusive goal, largely because the coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being<sup>50</sup> in which recognizable and allegedly ‘universal’ categories such as the state, religion, culture, society or the international are anchored feed the engines of the ‘one-world world’.<sup>51</sup> Specifically, one-world world logics derived from modern Western metaphysics and its atomistic ontology customarily act to invalidate alternative forms of existence via othering or to appropriate and assimilate them through translation or saming. By way of illustration, ‘inclusion politics’ that are purportedly designed to grant voice to marginal actors tend regularly to reinforce exclusion by producing commensurable spaces within which expressions of difference can be tamed, rather than working to dismantle economic, political, ontological or epistemological domination and violence.<sup>52</sup>

So, what might decolonization entail? Shilliam<sup>53</sup> offers three interrelated moves: contextualization, reconceptualization and reimagination. *Contextualization* entails, not only exposing the modern, Western, Eurocentric, patriarchal and racist foundations on which IR and its understanding of the international are anchored but also considering how the international when construed as singular and universal has acted to reject and conceal the existence of a pluriverse, a world of many worlds or of multiple internationals.

*Reconceptualization* consists of rethinking existing concepts and categories, or in the words of Layug and Hobson<sup>54</sup> shifting from a ‘thin’ conception of the international derived from its parochial narrowness and bias, towards a ‘thick’ one that genuinely recognizes

49. David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, ‘International Relations in the Prison of Colonial Modernity’, *International Relations* 31, no. 1 (2017): 71–5.

50. Anibal Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2012): 168–78.

51. John Law, ‘What’s Wrong With a One-World World?’, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 16, no. 1 (2015): 126–39.

52. Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

53. Robbie Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

54. A. Layug and John M. Hobson, ‘On the Road Toward a Globalized International Theory’, in *Globalizing International Theory*, eds. A. Layug and John M. Hobson (London: Routledge, 2023), 1–8.

heterogeneity and that engages with non-Western, global South sensibilities. An analogous agenda has been pushed within IR in several distinct ways. First, dependency and like-minded world system thinking have long maintained that peripheral or post-colonial states experience world politics differently. By highlighting the role of global capitalism, imperialism and colonialism in creating the international system, they show how the division of labour effectively negates the sovereignty of such states and establishes hierarchical relations of domination and exploitation with core ones. Global IR<sup>55</sup> too is premised on the need to integrate varied representations of the international with the goal of achieving greater dialogue and pluralism in the field. However, the metaphor of a multiplex that hosts numerous and potentially divergent interpretations of the world that are nonetheless housed within a single overarching structure might be perceived less benevolently as an expression of one-worldism and its penchant for commensuration.

Second, diverse experiences of community within and between states have also been identified as potential sources for understanding the international multiply. For example, the normative philosophy of *ubuntu* informs specific types of political practice and relations in Southern Africa (and elsewhere) in which mutual responsibility towards one another operates alongside or even transcends the us-them, friend-enemy dichotomies typically associated with the Westphalian world.<sup>56</sup> Similar observations have been made with regards to the Bandung Conference, the Tricontinental Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement and the New International Economic Order, all projects of the ‘third world’ that shared an anti-imperial ethos of solidarity and mutual obligation.

Third, *ubuntu*, along with numerous other cosmological traditions that traverse the Americas, Asia, Africa and Oceania, are all rooted in relational ontologies that share key assumptions that underwrite a potentially broader conception of the international as pluriversal. Notwithstanding important distinctions, all forms of relationality uphold similar existential principles, including those of interconnection, co-becoming and mutual complementarity, as well as the premise that relations are constitutive of distinct beings, both human and other-than-human as they relate, and of worlds.<sup>57</sup> As such, the pluriverse comprises multiple realities or worlds that are *both* incommensurable and apart *and* interrelated and always co-becoming.

Ultimately, without *reimagination* or unlearning the international with an eye to placing front and centre ways of knowing, being and doing that have been customarily ignored or subsumed by colonial science,<sup>58</sup> decolonization can become an empty gesture. Tuck and Wayne Yang<sup>59</sup> warn that the enthusiasm with which its language is deployed within

55. Amitav Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies’, *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2014): 647–59.

56. Karen Smith, ‘Contrived Boundaries, Kinship and Ubuntu: A (South) African View of the International’, in *Thinking International Relations Differently*, eds. Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney (London: Routledge, 2012): 301–321.

57. Tamara Trowsell, Navnita Behera, and Giorgio Shani, ‘Introduction to the Special Issue: Pluriversal Relationality’, *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022): 787–800.

58. Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics*.

59. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

academic lexicon as a synonym for critique risks its domestication and (mis)appropriation. Given that ‘decolonization cannot be easily grafted onto preexisting. . . frameworks, even if they are critical. . .’ the ease with which it has been absorbed is indicative of the move to ‘settler innocence’.<sup>60</sup> Such willful forgetting has also been described by Mills<sup>61</sup> in terms of ‘white ignorance’, an unwillingness to recognize that ‘sexism and racism, patriarchy and white supremacy, have not been the exception but the norm’.

Although not per se decolonial, mobilizing relationality may help to unsettle such innocence and ignorance. The modern Western colonial one-world mindset preaches commensurability and ‘universal’ knowledge and ways of being and enforces these through distinct disciplining logics. Therefore, one-worldism essentially works to same and tame those differences that are deemed assimilable and to repress or maim those that are not. In contrast, relational ontologies are predisposed to embrace incommensurable difference given the complementarity and codependence that exist between alleged opposites. The corresponding ethic of pluriversal incommensurability<sup>62</sup> rejects the fiction of liberal inclusivity and the search for common ground as simply another ploy of coloniality while it embraces the need to devise alternative ways of relating and living together despite potentially deep-seated differences.

Paraphrasing Hutchings,<sup>63</sup> such experiments in ‘being and becoming with’ can never be fully known beforehand as they are only revealed as they are practiced. Similarly, from a relational and pluriversal perspective the international is always multiple, in relation with other internationals and necessarily in flux. In consequence, recrafting it with an eye to unleashing its critical potential demands first and foremost that we relinquish any pretense of agreement upon a particular or fixed meaning. Rather, the provocation posed by the prompt to decolonize is no less than this: to abandon our power-laden claims to knowledge and existence, and to devise a means by which none of the incommensurable internationals that (co)exist under circumstances of acute inequality are granted precedence to adjudicate knowledge claims or allowed to seize the false throne of universalism, with the goal of making something new, together. Viewed in this light, the international might indeed be ripened for critique.

## The One and The Many: Multiplicity, The International and The Planetary

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60. Ibid., 3.

61. Charles W. Mills, ‘White Ignorance’, in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 17.

62. Tuck and Yang, ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor’; Kimberly Hutchings, ‘Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse’, *Ethics & International Affairs*, 33, no. 2 (2019): 115–25.

63. Ibid., 124.

It has been suggested that there is a ‘revolution’ afoot across the sciences and arts in response to shifting cosmologies, the Anthropocene, decolonization of knowledges and evolving quantum and complexity sciences.<sup>64</sup> In IR too, we have seen the development of important new, often cross-disciplinary, concepts: from assemblages, posthumanism and pluriversality to inter-species politics, earth systems governance and participatory ontologies. I explore here one novel concept in the field, the idea of ‘planet/planetary politics’<sup>65</sup> in the context of another: ‘multiplicity’.<sup>66</sup>

I do this *not* for the purpose of demonstrating the critical power of the ‘international’ but rather to demonstrate the critical potential of the idea of *multiplicity*. I explore how an expanded notion of multiplicity – but only when liberated from the frame of reference of the ‘international’ – might allow us to understand the importance of the idea of planetary politics while also undoing the tendency – apparent even amongst the promoters of planetary politics – to treat the planetary as a ‘singular whole’. Important political and ethical implications follow.

*The International and the Planetary.* Planetary politics seeks to directly challenge the idea that we should unquestioningly work with what is referred to as the ‘Holocene’ notion of ‘international’ politics.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the ‘international’ – its conceptual premises, its institutions, its political practices – is increasingly seen as complicit in not only environmental destruction but also a ‘humanist’ ‘lifting’ of the ‘political’ into a ‘human-only realm’.<sup>68</sup>

In other words, planetary politics has sought to challenge the limitation of our political imagination caused by the very idea and practice of the ‘international’ as the locus of politics. The international locks us into not only a statist frame but also a human-only frame: politics is where human communities interact. It is this conceptual locking which explains why we can’t see how borders are in fact multispecies spaces<sup>69</sup> or social conflict is more-than-human.<sup>70</sup> In this frame, even climate politics encounters ‘nature’ as external to ‘us’: it is about human populations tackling a ‘climate crisis’ ‘out there’, with ‘nature’ seen as a ‘background’ to be managed. Breaking the nature-society division, planetary politics emphasizes that humans are made *in and of* ecological relations.

While a fruitful proposition, there are two important senses in which the meaning of the planetary remains potentially problematic. First, this meaning seems ambiguous and unclear: undefined. *This*, as we will see, might not be so much of a problem (from our

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64. Many thanks to Justin Rosenberg for helpful comments on an earlier draft of the piece and to the reviewers. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) arising from this submission.

65. Anthony Burke et al., ‘Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR’, *Millennium* 44, no. 3 (2016): 499–523.

66. Rosenberg, ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’.

67. John Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering, *The Politics of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: OUP, 2019).

68. Burke et al., ‘Planet Politics’; Milja Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

69. Rafi Youatt, *Interspecies Politics: Nature Borders States* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

70. Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, ‘The Posthuman Way of War’, *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 6 (2015): 513–29.

angle). What seems more problematic, however, is that among those who evoke the planetary, it can often become understood as something *singular*, an ‘object’ ‘beyond’ ‘us’. Burke et al’s ‘Planet Politics Manifesto’<sup>71</sup> for example was called out for claiming that the ‘planet’ is a kind of a singular agent, ‘telling us’ that we need to attend to it.<sup>72</sup> Arguably, whether seen as Mother Earth, a hyperobject or an Earth System, the planet often starts to – inadvertently – appear as a singular ‘whole’ in much of the recent discussions on planetary politics. In Marsili’s recent *Planetary Politics* book for example, planetary politics is evoked as a kind of an object invoked ‘to liberate our world and our common humanity’.<sup>73</sup>

A singular ‘world’ and also, curiously, a singular ‘humanity’ can emerge from the evocations of planetary politics.

To counter these trends, I believe the notion of multiplicity holds an important critical potential. Drawing on an ‘expanded’ notion of multiplicity, not reducible to the international or indeed the human spheres,<sup>74</sup> I want to suggest that we can gain a better sense of how and why the planetary should be not conceived as one, but as multiplicitous, as ecologically pluriversal.

*Planetary, via Multiplicity.* Mary Jane Rubenstein reminds us that the relationship between the ‘one’ and the ‘many’ has a complicated history.<sup>75</sup> Rubenstein draws attention to how even in cosmologies where a ‘one world’ is invoked, ‘many worlds’ often hide. What appears at first glance a singularity ‘both reveals and covers over what one might call. . . constitutive plurality’.<sup>76</sup> Through analysis of thinkers from Plato and Descartes to modern cosmologists, Rubenstein shows how the idea of a ‘one world’ – so attractive because it allows a singular god or a special Mankind to hold a privileged place in a unique universe – nevertheless, almost always hides, indeed necessitates, a multiplicity.

Perhaps the attractive ‘oneness’ creeping into discussions of the planetary also hides and necessitates a multiplicity?

I have argued elsewhere that we can take multiplicity as a sense of vulnerability or precarity to others in relations: a sense of being made with or in ‘collaboration’/‘contamination’ with relationalities around us.<sup>77</sup> If so, then nothing by definition requires that the theory of multiplicity is relevant only for ‘the international’ or ‘inter-societal’ even though this has been Rosenberg’s focus.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps we need to *keep our eyes open for multiplicity in the planetary frame*.

71. Burke et al., ‘Planet Politics’.

72. David Chandler, Erika Cudworth, and Stephen Hobden, ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene and Liberal Cosmopolitan IR: A Response to Burke et al.’s “Planet Politics”’, *Millennium* 46, no. 2 (2018): 190–208.

73. Lorenzo Marsili, *Planetary Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

74. Milja Kurki, ‘Multiplicity Expanded: IR Theories, Multiplicity, and the Potential of Trans-Disciplinary Dialogue’, *Globalizations* 17, no. 3 (2020): 560–75.

75. Mary Jane Rubenstein, *Worlds Without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 2014).

76. Rubenstein, *Worlds*, 36.

77. Kurki, ‘Multiplicity’.

78. Rosenberg, ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’.

In the frame of ‘multiplicity expanded’, the singular planetary whole that we find so attractive – ‘the planet’ – in fact reveals itself as a multiplicity which does not ‘add up to’ a ‘whole’ at all.

Bruno Latour gets at the importance of this idea of planetary as not ‘a whole’ but as ‘many’ most directly and powerfully.<sup>79</sup> For him the planetary is precisely not a singular beautiful sphere, to be visualized as if ‘from the outside’. It is in fact exactly the planetary that blows up the idea of a ‘whole’, a ‘Globe’, a sphere which encloses and can be related to as an ‘it’. The planetary is relational, plural. It is in other words a multiplicity: an openness to being made, precarity, always in relation to others, always in relations, conceived not just ‘internationally’ but beyond also the human and species boundaries. Multiplicity names the relationality of becoming where the idea of bordered objects or actors, of identity, is undone.

Interestingly, this comes close to what those working on pluriversality and pluriversal relationality in IR<sup>80</sup> also get at: the idea that we need to challenge the ever-lingering backdrop of the idea of a ‘one world’. ‘One worlds’ evoke special roles for (certain conceptions of) ‘us’ but they are also often colonial, and hide other worlds within worlds.<sup>81</sup>

Instead, planetary as a pluriversal multiplicity is a kind of precarious becoming with, made in relations, where ‘we’ or ‘the world’ is never a whole, but always relational, multiple, open.

So what? the reader might wonder.

To conceive of the planetary as multiplicity matters intensely, ethically and politically. This is because the planetary is then never ‘beyond us’, nor a singular ‘agent’, nor is it a ‘backdrop’. The planetary breaks both the idea of ‘scales’ (e.g. national, international) and the idea of a ‘whole’.

This matters because we cannot do politics and ethics as we thought we could when we were just concerned with understanding ‘humans’ on ‘the planet’. Politics and ethics as developed for example by Haraway<sup>82</sup> and in an IR context by Zanotti<sup>83</sup> are *precisely not to be done in relation to the ‘whole’ or in relation to ‘abstract’ principles*, but always in *concrete* relations (of multiplicity): planetary multispecies politics is about facing others and being response-able in these engagements.

If we then do planetary, multispecies politics ‘on the ground’ we are also denied the kinds of grand theories that IR so loves: theories of the international or even the planetary as wholes. We are landed on the ground: in concrete relations, without God’s-eye perspectives on the ‘international’ or indeed the ‘planetary’; in uncomfortable yet meaningful encounters with the many, human and non-human, in the lifeways that reside in the ‘interstices’ hidden by the abstractions and grand theories of IR.

79. Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on a New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

80. Townsell et al., ‘Introduction to the Special Issue: Pluriversal Relationality’.

81. Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2020).

82. Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chtulucene* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016).

83. Laura Zanotti, *Ontological Entanglements, Agency and Ethics in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2019).

Paradoxically, then, in so far as IR theories such as Rosenberg's help bring forth critical attention to the idea of multiplicity, they may indeed secrete a critical resource – the idea of multiplicity. But this is a critical resource that cannot be contained in IR or at the level of the human – otherwise it may inadvertently lead us back to the ever-attractive idea of the 'one' world, hiding the many.

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