

A Critical Reflection on Sovereignty in International Relations Today

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This essay will argue that the intellectual history of sovereignty has created a hierarchical international system maintained by an implicit understanding of the West as the epistemic authority in international relations. In this way, global material and ideological inequities can be genealogically traced to an a priori affection for European ontological positions on the criterion for statehood. International relations, in this sense, has always been, and continues to be 'colonised' through conceptualising the West as the dominant actor in theory and practice. The argument will proceed as follows: firstly, I intend to undertake a brief literature review, outlining the genealogical methodology which I borrow from Bartelson (1996), along with introducing the academic debates surrounding the history, theory and practice of sovereignty. To that end, I intend to establish the thought of Thomas Hobbes as the principal source of sovereignty as experienced today. Having done this, a postcolonial critique of the thought of Hobbes will be undertaken, highlighting the implications of an ontologically hierarchical binary opposition between the 'sovereign' Europeans and those in the orient who implicitly exist in the Hobbesian state of nature. I claim that the ontological backing for state sovereignty in international relations underwrites a normative hierarchy in which the West assumes the role of the custodian of civilisation, allowing for intervention in states in the global south. Having analysed the implications of the ontology of sovereignty, I will analyse the theoretical epistemological implications of sovereignty, arguing that sovereignty as a conceptual apparatus maintains a spatial epistemic hierarchy, in which the West is cast as the site of knowledge in international relations. In practice, I claim that this hierarchy leads to an understanding of the conditions for legitimate statehood in essentially Western, ethnocentric terms. The essay will conclude in surmising the overarching claim, that is the economies of knowledge inherent to our understanding of sovereignty 'colonises' international relations through affording primacy to Western knowledge in both theory and in practice.

Literature Review

A prevailing fallacy in the literature is to place the Peace of Westphalia at the centre of the emergence of the international sovereign state system. For example, Morgenthau (2006, p 294) states that "the rules of international law were securely established in 1648". Similarly, Boucher (1998, p 289) supposes that Westphalia "provided the foundation for, and gave formal recognition to, the modern states system". This narrative is so ubiquitous that quotes such as these can be "multiplied at will" (Osiander, 2001, 261). However, it is factually problematic. On one level, as Osiander (ibid, p 261) points out, there is nothing explicit in the treaties of Munster and Osnabrück which codify the principles that we know as Westphalian Sovereignty, and it is certain that the participants of the negotiations "did not see themselves establishing a new political entity called 'the state'" (Havercroft, 2012, p 122). Similarly, the narrative that the post-Westphalia world was one defined by a reification of the principle of non-intervention (that is, that the treaties were a 'watershed' moment in the history of international relations) is pure fallacy. As Finnemore (2003, p 10) notes, "there was plenty of military activity across border to change rulers in this period, but people called it war". Considering the inconsistencies in the "Westphalian narrative", and the fact that it is somewhat intellectually dubious to attribute such a wide reaching principle to a singular set of treaties, it is more credible to conceptualise the emergence of the sovereign state order as an ideological struggle rather than as a discrete epiphenomenon of the Peace of Westphalia. With respect to that, the prevailing ideological underpinnings of sovereign principles can be traced to fifteenth and sixteenth century European political thought.

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There is no prevailing consensus within the literature of the intellectual origins of sovereignty in political thought, although most tend to emphasize sovereignty emerging as a product of the Protestant Reformation challenging a hegemonic Catholic Church (Onuf, 1991; Philpot, 1995; Havercroft, 2012; Merriam, 1990). I claim that sovereignty as it exists today is most consistent with the work of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Whilst Onuf (1991), and Merriam (1990) understand sovereignty as emerging from Jean Bodin (with Onuf (1991, p 427) going so far as to say that the history of sovereignty "begins, and all but ends, with Jean Bodin"), ontologically this account is insufficient, as Bodin's theory of sovereignty still conceptualises sovereignty in ecclesiastical terms with the state being a secondary manifestation of religious authority. In book one of his six books of the Republic he states that the "sovereign prince is only accountable to God" (Bodin, 1576, in Dickerson et al, 2013, p 29). This is therefore inconsistent with the modern conception of sovereignty in so far as today there is no non-positivist authority superior to the sovereign. In contrast, Hobbes understands the 'Leviathan' as being superior to any religious authority, born out of fear of religious war stemming from the religious dimension in the English Civil War. In Havercroft's (2012, p 130) words, Hobbes realised that, "in order to avoid such conflicts in the future, not only must civil authority be autonomous from religious authority... but religious authority must also be subordinate to the secular authority of the sovereign". Hobbes is thus the closest classical intellectual representation of the sovereignty which we experience today, in that the 'Leviathan' embodies both ecclesiastical and domestic authority such that "No authority other than the civil sovereign could exercise power within the state" (Havercroft p 130). This is conceptually consistent with the idea of internal and external sovereignty, in the sense that in the absence of an inherently superior religious authority a sovereign can claim external sovereignty. It is upon these grounds that I claim Hobbes to be the chief intellectual authority with regards to sovereignty, in the sense that his political theory presents itself as the closest representation to contemporary sovereignty.

Having established Hobbes as the principal intellectual architect of sovereignty in international relations, the principal task of this essay becomes to analyse the way in which Hobbesian political theory has historically created an explicit normative hierarchy in global politics predicated on the assumption of the West being in intellectual authority in the context of the political. That is, all a priori ontological assumptions about the benchmarks of statehood have latent ethnocentric premises. A corollary of this is that all knowledge of international relations inherently privileges the culture and experiences of the West. This is *the* central critique raised by the postcolonial paradigm, in that insofar as the positivist state remains the primary actor in international relations and remains a European construct, "there is an a priori knowledge of *how to be*" (Capan, 2017 p 6) in international relations. I intend to trace the hierarchy that exists in global politics today to the thought of Hobbes through the method of genealogy, not claiming that sovereignty as a conceptual apparatus inherently creates a 'colonised' hierarchy, but that the Hobbesian knowledge assumptions that the order of global politics is arranged on (as was historically built on) has "allowed the present to become logically possible" (Bartelson, 1996, p 8), through endowing the West with an epistemological privilege underpinned by an imagined geography casting the Orient as deviant, irrational and ultimately subservient.

Implications of the Ontological Groundings of Sovereignty

The ontological backing for the sovereign state as elucidated in the thought of Hobbes has created an explicit normative hierarchy in international relations by casting the role of the Orient as a deviant "zone of otherness" (Pourmokhtari, 2013, p 1782). This then legitimises a hierarchical relationship between the inherently sovereign, rational West and the irrational ignorant Orient. The ontological roots of a state in Hobbesian political theory conceptualises life outside of a sovereign state as perpetual war, with sovereignty emerging as a rational contractual institution to avoid a condition of life that is "nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes, 2016, p 86). In conceptualising the sovereign state in this way, Hobbes creates a normative binary opposition in which those who exist in the European state meet the criteria for civilization and those who do not. There is an explicit relationship between the discursive construction of the state and civilisation in this way and the colonial nature of international relations. At a theoretical level, if one accepts Hobbes's premise of a civilized sovereign state emerging as an epiphenomenon to the state of nature, this implies that those who exist outside of the European zone of 'enlightenment' (who have escaped said state of nature) are by their very nature devoid of rationality, civility, and by extension sovereignty. The ontological construction of what is 'out there' outside of the European zone legitimises the superiority of the West in terms of political organisation, and it is this ontological idea that the 'white man's burden' and 'civilizing missions' were predicated on in the formal colonial era. It was precisely because the colonists thought of themselves as bestowing

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the virtues of civilisation on the colonised that they took no issue in their imperialism. To invoke Bartelson's (1996, p 8), comment on what "allowed the present to become logically possible" is useful in this context, as it was the conceptualisation of an axiomatically superior European model of political organization born from the ontological construction of the West as the forefathers of civilisation which predicates such 'civilising missions'. The ontological backing for sovereignty is thus hierarchical, constituting the Orient as a non-sovereign, non-civilised entity.

The normative hierarchy underwritten by the casting of the Orient as an essentially non sovereign deviant entity exists today, legitimising intervention by Western states in the global south. Due to the intellectual history of sovereign lying in the West, sovereignty is cast as being essentially Western, creating a system in which the benefits of sovereignty are assumed to be natural to Western, societies, but not to others. It is in this way that international relations today is 'colonised', such that colonial mind-sets serve as an "ordering mechanism of the contemporary state system" (Epstein, 2012, p 299). For example, doctrines such as the Responsibility to Protect are grounded in colonial mind-sets, operating under the assumption that the West is the sole custodian of human rights due to the historical conceptualisation of the West as inherently civilized, theorising deductively that "Western liberal democracies are constantly treated as the only entities capable of bringing any order to the system" (Kayaoglu, 2010, p 213). There exists an uncritical acceptance of the fact that the doctrine essentially legitimizes "legal normalization of certain types of violence (such as Western counterinsurgency efforts) while arbitrarily criminalizing the violence of other states as 'genocide'" (Mamdani, 2010, p 53). It is once again useful to invoke Bartelson (1996, p 8), in that how the situation that Kayaoglu (2010, p 213) describes has come to be "logically possible" is through the existence of economies of knowledge containing the imagined ontological construction of civilization being inherent to the West, such that the West endows itself with manifest authority to enforce the standards of civilization. In accepting this construction, there is a tacit understanding of a normative order in international relations predicated on the fact that the 'backwards' Orient is perpetually in danger of returning to a Hobbesian state of nature, in need of Western assistance to meet the benchmarks of statehood. International relations today is thus hierarchical, in the sense that the criteria for sovereignty and civility are assumed to be essentially European, maintaining a normative ranking in global politics.

Implications of the Epistemology of Hobbesian Sovereignty

Sovereignty as the chief ordering principle in world politics establishes the West as the overarching intellectual authority in international relations such that an explicit epistemological hierarchy exists that conditions the entirety of the relations between the Orient and the Occident. To the extent that sovereignty is reified positivistically as *the* mode of political organisation, this assumes a priori the superiority of Western enlightenment thought. The epistemology of international relations is thus articulated in Western terms, with the centres of knowledge in international relations being cast as inherently Western, constituting the performative role to be played by the colonial/colonising subject, insofar as one's intellectual authority is defined in relation to their geographical proximity to the spatial zones of knowledge. To the extent that this 'colonises' international relations, the assumption that political organization is defined on Western terms creates a hierarchy between the knower and the known; Capan (2017, p 4) notes that "the production of knowledge and who gets to be the knower and who the known is an important component of reproducing the coloniality of international relations". The history of international relations in terms of sovereignty is thus pedagogical, in which the Orient is only defined in terms of 'lack', in the sense that access to modernity is assumed to be a quality only discovered by the West. 'Knowledge' of modernity is assumed to be reserved for Western thought, such that political institutional arrangements are organized with "a universality that derives from the conferred ontological primacy of the European self" (Jabri, 2013, p 13), with this primacy emerging from the construction of the West as the epistemic source of political organisation. In relation to the 'coloniality' of international relations, it is useful to invoke Fanon's (2007) idea of the colonial subject existing in a physiological state of having a 'black face' but 'white mask': due to institutional arrangements in international relations being predicated on European understandings of political organization, there exists an implicit economy of knowledge on "how to be" (Capan, 2017, p 6), which is defined on Western terms such that colonial subjects have to bear a 'white mask' after undergoing the disciplinary pedagogical process of conforming to this idea of 'how to be'. In generic terms then, the hegemony of sovereign statehood as a mode of political organisation thus reinforces an epistemic hierarchy in international relations, in which the West is assumed to be the singular referent of knowledge in politics. It is in this way that international relations is hierarchically 'colonised', in that the epistemic centres of global politics are

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assumed to be axiomatically Western. In theoretical terms, this bears relation to the postcolonial paradigm generally, in that the intellectual hierarchy of international relations contributes to, and maintains the colonial identity of the 'other' in relation to the 'known' West.

In practical terms, the construction of the West as the spatial epistemic centre of global politics has created a hierarchical stratification in which 'development' of a state is defined only on Western terms. In both theory and in practice, sovereignty is assumed to be an axiomatically universal condition of political organisation through associating Western knowledge structures with universal sociological conditions. In the thought of Hobbes, this is articulated through the statement that his knowledge is "absolute" (Hobbes, 2016, p 57), but exists paradigmatically as a tenant of modern European political thought, in which knowledge is assumed to be ubiquitous (Kramnick, 1995, p xiii). Sovereignty thus becomes associated with positive sovereignty under assumptions of totalised forms of political organisations, that is that the conditions which provide political stability in the West are assumed to be ubiquitous.

A corollary of this is that the prerogatives to articulate what are the 'correct' paths of development lie with the West, underwritten by the assumption that the western state is *the* universalised ontological political structure, and that their historically novel paths of development can be applied in any spatial and temporal context. Conceptually, this provides a good basis to analyse the failings of development theories, as well as the latent ethnocentrism in conceptual narratives on the characteristics of what are taken to be the benchmarks of statehood. For example, in failed state theory, the extent to which a state is considered to be successful is only measured to the extent that it possesses Western ontological characteristics, that is to say that implicit in one's evaluation of whether or not a state has 'failed' is an a priori understanding of what a 'successful' state is. The entitlement to articulate this understanding invariably rests with the West due to idea sovereignty being inherently Western, or in Bartelson's (1996, p 7) terms if we are to tell "the history of the present in terms of its past", we must consider that the knowledge underwriting sovereignty is western, endowing the west with some degree of epistemic authority in creating the benchmarks for statehood.

This epistemic hierarchy structures international relations such that the West is assumed to be superior, legitimising intervention in the development of 'third world' states. Hill (2005, p 139) notes that "like the European colonists of the 19th century and 20th centuries, failed state analysts use the alleged deviancy of African societies to promote and justify their political and economic domination by Western states". Similarly, in the sphere of political economy, state development is assumed to be contingent to the extent to which a state can acquire the pedagogical advice drawn from the West on what constitutes 'good governance'. Brohman (1995, p 124) surmises the evolution of development studies as one in which "western values were universalised and linked with progress, while the traditions of third world societies were denigrated and tied to stagnation and underdevelopment". Sovereignty thus paradigmatically reinforces an affection for positivist approaches to global problems under the premise that historically novel Western experiences can be totalised to ahistorical formulae (this is textually represented in discursive constructions of development), and furthermore the universalised categories of statehood exist as a hegemonic device, ensuring the epistemic dominance of Western thought underwritten by the idea that the capacity to define the ontological characteristics of statehood lie exclusively with the West.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has argued that the intellectual history of sovereignty has created and maintained a hierarchy in international relations, to the extent that the theory and practice of statehood is 'colonised' through latent ethnocentric a priori assumptions. The ontological foundations of sovereign statehood as existing in the thought of Hobbes creates, inherently, a normative hierarchy in which those that exist outside of the zone of European enlightenment are 'othered' and are cast as those that lack the qualities of civilization as defined by the West. In practice, this hierarchy is visible in contemporary and historical intervention in the global south. Historically formal colonialism was justified on the grounds that those in the Orient were in need of the properties of European civilization, and this rests on the ontological assumption that outside of the Western state system exists an anarchical "zone of otherness" (Pourmokhtari, 2013, p 1782) as articulated in the thought of Hobbes. It is worth noting that there has been essential continuity in the construction of the relations between the Orient and Occident with respect to this,

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as interventionism today is justified under the assumption that the West is the sole protector of human rights in international relations. Affording primacy to sovereignty as a mode of political organisation in international relations has established the West as the overarching intellectual authority in global politics, such that the normative benchmarks for statehood are assumed to be solely Western. In theoretical terms, this 'colonises' relations in global politics, as all knowledge of the qualities of statehood, sovereignty and what it means 'to be' a sovereign state is defined in solely Western terms. In practice, establishing the West as the site of epistemic supremacy has led to the evaluations of state development and modernity only in respect of European standards, underwriting myopic applications of solutions to problems which existed in a specific ethnic temporal and spatial context. Overall then, the hegemony of sovereignty as a political concept reinforces colonial identities in international relations, in which the West is conceptualised as being ontologically and epistemological superior to the 'Orient', structuring the global system in terms of a normative hierarchy.

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