

# Locating 'the Everyday' in 'the International': An Exploration

Written by Rizky Alif Alvian

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RIZKY ALIF ALVIAN, OCT 3 2019

The dominant literature in the discipline of International Relations (IR) is premised on a specific spatial framework about the international: that it is composed by states with exclusive territories in which their respective sovereignty could be fully exerted. While the state is sovereign with regard to its 'inside', domestic space, the state competes with each other in the 'outside', international space.<sup>1</sup> In contrast with the domestic space, in which the presence of a sovereign power would allow the maintenance of progress and order, the international space is characterised precisely with the absence of such an authority. IR theory, as a theory about this international space, is concerned with how these sovereign states maintain their survival in such an anarchic environment.<sup>2</sup>

This essay argues that the discipline's conception of the international as a collage of territorial states is problematic. As the discipline naturalises the territorial state system, it disarticulates everyday processes of appropriation and violence through which territorial states are maintaining their self-reproduction. This position brings two important implications. First, the definition of the international as conceptualised by the discipline is arbitrary, for it has systematically excluded everyday practices that sustain the existence of the international in the first place. Second, due to this arbitrariness, the discipline has become a science for the powerful. By systematically omitting the everyday from its analysis, the discipline is incapable of grasping the everyday experience of ordinary people who have been subjected to various forms of appropriation and control. In this regard, IR appears more as a science for state elites who wish to manage their interactions with each other rather than as a discipline that desires to comprehensively understand how the world actually works.

The disjuncture between the dominant spatial framework and the everyday experience of ordinary people constitutes one of the most critical challenges for the discipline. This essay argues that this problem could be addressed if the discipline is able to integrate the everyday into its framework of analysis. However, it suggests that this task could not be accomplished simply by replacing existing conceptualisation of the international with other spatial frameworks that recognise individuals as possible actors, such as global networks or global space. This response would be inadequate because the problem with the idea of the international as a collage of territorial states does not simply lie in the fact that it is unable to recognise that there are everyday processes that are closely intertwined with it. Rather, the core problem with this particular understanding of the international lies in its implicit affirmation of territorial states as the ultimate political authority and, consequently, to their logic of territorial control, broadly defined as the state's strategies to control objects within its territory so as to making states' self-reproduction possible. In this regard, the everyday subjugation of ordinary people through appropriation and violence is actually an effect of this rationality. It is a part of states' attempts to regulate population, resources, and strategic terrain and to optimise them to enhance states' power.<sup>3</sup> The fact that IR continues to privilege territorial states in its conceptualisation of the international is therefore troubling, for it reveals the discipline's indifference to the state's everyday subjugation of its people.

This line of argument would imply that the discipline needs to adopt a spatial framework which no longer privileges the state and its territorial rationality. By taking this move, it is argued that the discipline could address its systematic indifference to the everyday life of the people. To accomplish this, this essay would explore a provocation by David Harvey to think about space in a relational manner. In general, Harvey argues that space does not exist prior and independently from 'things' that it 'contains'. Instead, processes define their own spatial frameworks.<sup>4</sup> This

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formulation has important consequences. If territorial states rely on the everyday subjugation of ordinary people to preserve their presence, then it would be completely arbitrary to exclude the people from the conception of the international, for such a conception does not follow from the actual relationships in which states are intertwined. In this regard, it is possible to imagine the international not as a collage of territorial states, but as a complex combination of states and ordinary people. This argument could be advanced further by taking into account various processes in which the state or the people are participating: capitalist accumulation, colonialism, global reproduction of patriarchy, and so on. This would result in a very complex depiction of the international that comprises various relationships that work in this planet (even beyond). The state would not vanish in this international. However, it certainly does not occupy a privileged status as granted by the existing conceptualisation of the international.

The rest of this essay is structured as follows. First, it will examine the prevailing spatial framework in the discipline of IR and justify the necessity of including ordinary people in this framework. Second, it will examine some responses that have been devised to address problems pertaining to IR's spatial framework. It will argue that adequate responses should not simply replace the territorial states system with other frameworks. Instead, they have to be cautious so as to not replicate the logic of control that is intrinsic in the concept of territorial states. Third, it will propose a relational conception of space as proposed by Harvey as a possible foundation to develop alternative frameworks and draw some implications if this concept is applied to IR.

## The Reification of the Territorial States System and the Omission of the Everyday

As a discipline about 'the international', the discipline of IR appears to be reluctant to explicate the definition of its subject matter. Instead, major schools in the discipline simply postulate from the outset that sovereign territorial nation-states are their fundamental unit of analysis; and that they are mainly concerned with interactions among these states. Although these schools might be in dispute with regard to the characters of the states and the nature of their interactions, it is apparent that the dominant literature equates, often implicitly, the international with this domain of inter-state interactions.

This tendency is apparent in neorealism, arguably the most influential school in the discipline. According to Krasner, the statement that "sovereign states are the constitutive components of the international system" is an "ontological given".<sup>5</sup> Within this school, states are characterised as rational actors who are mainly concerned with their relative gains. Relative gains are crucial for these states because they operate in an anarchical international system which, due to the absence of ultimate authority, compels them to rely on themselves to secure their survival. Therefore, states would try to reap more benefit compared to their competitors in order to maintain their advantage (or avoid disadvantage) in the international system.

This line of thinking reveals that neorealism is largely concerned with interactions among self-interested territorial states. In *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz further tries to sanitise this domain from the influence of factors coming from the domestic sphere by arguing that a theory on international politics should not be 'reductionist'. This statement means that a state's behaviour cannot be 'reduced' to its domestic specificity. Rather, Waltz argues that it should be understood as a state's response to dynamics in the international system.<sup>6</sup> By taking this conceptual move, Waltz and neorealists in general isolate inter-state interactions from domestic politics, in which ordinary people reside. Consequently, the international appears as an independent system with its internal logic that could be examined in its own right.

The claim that the domain of inter-state interactions constitutes a distinct, autonomous space animated by its internal logics has been widely deemed to be problematic. One of the most crucial weakness of this conceptualisation is that it would inevitably lead to the reification of territorial states system. As argued by Rosenberg, this reification occurs because neorealism arbitrarily introduces the distinction between the domestic and the international and claims that the international is the proper subject matter for its analysis. By pursuing this strategy, neorealism postulates territorial states as its foundational unit of analysis without examining the processes through which these states are produced and reproduced, for such an examination would be considered to be falling outside the domain of neorealist analysis (or even the discipline of IR).<sup>7</sup> This is precisely where reification occurs. As neorealism is unable to recognise territorial states as a historically contingent phenomenon and to acknowledge the processes through

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which these states reproduce themselves, neorealism naturalises the existence of territorial states.

However, territorial states are not natural. While this essay does not intend to delve into debates on the emergence of modern territorial states, it is worth mentioning that Teschke argues that the modern states proliferated only after the rise of post-1688 revolution in England, when dynastic states in Europe changed their economic and political systems to match the power of capitalist England.<sup>8</sup> In the context of mainland Southeast Asia, Scott argues that states were created through historic incorporation of population into the state space. Despite repeated attempts, these efforts were successful only when colonial states were able to accumulate adequate resources to violently eliminate non-state spaces that surrounded the state.<sup>9</sup>

Even when states have been successfully constituted, there are efforts that are required to ensure their self-reproduction. As argued by Lefebvre, the state has to continuously pacify its population and counter every effort that aims to rearrange the political organisation of state space.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Enloe offers an interesting assessment when she argues that the state has to constantly instill a certain mode of manliness into its population (particularly its male segment) in order to justify the practice of inter-state (military) rivalries.<sup>11</sup>

It is against this background that analysis of the everyday life of ordinary people becomes necessary, for the people always play crucial roles both in the constitution and the preservation of territorial states. For example, as indicated by Scott's analysis on states in Southeast Asia, the constitution of the state is identical with the incorporation of free populations into the state space. This is necessary because the state needs concentrated manpower for the purposes of rice-field cultivation and military mobilisation which would enable the state to maintain its capacity for exerting violence.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, to exist, the state has to intervene in the life of the population and to shape their everyday behaviour in a way that is supportive of state interests. The everyday thus does not simply mean activities that people do in their daily life. Instead, it is about repeated activities that are programmed by the state to reproduce relations of domination.<sup>13</sup> Far more than being trivial and pre-political, the everyday is infused with "the kinds of power that [...] were causally connected to the forms of power created, wielded, and legitimised in the national and inter-state public spheres [...]"<sup>14</sup>

This section has demonstrated that the conception of the international as a space of interactions among sovereign territorial states has concealed complex everyday processes of domination through which states are maintaining their primacy. At this stage, it is interesting to see how the discipline shares a similar attitude with the state in terms of rendering the experience of ordinary people irrelevant. While IR neglects the people by isolating the international as an independent space, the state dismisses the people by reducing them to mere objects that are subjected to the state's programming. In this regard, IR appears as a discipline that actually replicates the logic of territorial states. Consequently, building on an argument that Walker seeks to advance in *Inside/Outside*, this essay suggests that IR is actually writing *from* the standpoint of sovereign territorial states, rather than writing *about* them.<sup>15</sup> IR and territorial states appear to form a dangerous collaboration to perpetuate the primacy of territorial states (and people's subordination). Against this position, this essay argues for integrating the everyday life of the people into existing frameworks of analysis. Such integration would make the discipline capable of grasping the relations of domination intrinsic in the constitution of territorial states, thus enabling it to produce a more comprehensive representation about how international politics actually work.

## Territory and Control

The next two sections are concerned with revising IR's explanatory framework so as to give the everyday the place it deserves in the discipline. The basic argument of this essay is that the integration of the everyday would be possible if the discipline leaves its current conceptualisation of the international and replaces it with alternative spatial frameworks. The essay, however, has to be careful in taking this step. As will be made apparent in this section, the idea of territory is intrinsically political. It is implicitly built on a very specific assumption about the relationships between space and control. Replacing territorial states with other spatial frameworks without replacing this assumption about space would put this essay at risk of replicating the problems that it seeks to overcome in the first place.

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Although the spatial framework of the discipline has been widely considered to be problematic, scholars diverge in terms of their strategies to overcome this difficulty. Two responses are particularly interesting for discussion in this essay.

The first response: The discipline of IR needs to examine the emergence of alternative geographies of power in contemporary international politics. According to this line of thinking, political power operates through various geographies of power throughout history, in which territory is only one of the possible spatial expressions of power.<sup>16</sup> The problem that IR currently confronts stems from the inability of the discipline to recognise this insight. Not only is it unable to acknowledge varieties of geographies of power, it also treats the intertwinement between territory and the state as a transhistorical fact.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the discipline needs to broaden its spatial horizon, so as to integrate other spatial frameworks that have been excluded by the primacy of territorial states. Agnew, for example, identifies the 'hierarchical network' as an alternative spatial framework. In contrast with territorial states, the network is constituted by flows of people, capital, information, and goods that are connected to each other, traversing the traditional boundaries of territorial states.<sup>18</sup> For some, as these flows make borders increasingly permeable, and they are believed to undermine the primacy of territorial states system, thereby enabling the rise of an integrated global space.<sup>19</sup>

At this point, it is possible to construct an argument for restoring the place of ordinary people in international politics. In contrast with territorial states system, it could be argued that an integrated global space is constituted by individuals across the planet who participate in a complex global network. When the global space completely unfolds, the people would acquire greater importance in the analysis of IR. This essay will argue that this argument is not sustainable. However, it is important to understand the second response to fully comprehend why this argument might be problematic.

The second response largely agrees with the importance of strengthening IR's sensitivity to alternative geographies of power. However, it cautions the discipline that displacing the territorial states system with other spatial frameworks is not an adequate response. This is because the problem lies not only in the primacy of the territorial states system, but also in the particular conception of space that enables the notion of territory to exist in the first place.<sup>20</sup>

To understand this argument, it is necessary to examine in some depth the idea of territory. While a territory is basically a bounded space, the act of bounding this space is political. At the very least, the creation of territory would entail "a violent act of exclusion and inclusion".<sup>21</sup> By creating boundaries, actors would be able to manipulate the content of the territory.<sup>22</sup> Most importantly, the establishment of boundaries enable the emergence of territories as "an object of governance".<sup>23</sup> It becomes possible to map, measure, calculate, and control territories in the pursuit of actors' interests.

While these examples illustrate that territory is closely intertwined with power, this essay advances this argument by suggesting that the instrumentalisation of territory by power is possible insofar as space is conceptualised as an "abstract space".<sup>24</sup> As argued by Harvey, absolute space is the conception that space functions as a pre-existing grid in which objects occupy a location. However, precisely because space is fixed and independent from the objects that it contains, it could be used as a frame of reference for mapping, measuring, and intervening with the objects.<sup>25</sup> The conception of absolute space is very essential for the notion of territory. With absolute space functioning as a static frame of reference, it becomes possible to, first and foremost, determine the location of a state's territory and distinguish it from other states' territories. It is also possible to map the distribution of a state's population and resources within its territory as well as strategic locations that the state has to militarily occupy in order to maintain its security.<sup>26</sup> This information would in turn assist the state to formulate the best strategy to maintain its self-reproduction, including through the everyday subjugation of ordinary people.

The philosophical root of this argument could be traced back, at least, to the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* in Descartes.<sup>27</sup> In this conceptualisation, *res extensa* is defined as objects that extend in space, whose essence could be grasped by the mental faculty of the subject who desires to know them. Understood in this context, the absolute space therefore functions as a frame that does not only enable the subject to individuate and master the objects, but also reinforce the division between subject and object.

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The systematic omission of the everyday experience of ordinary people could be explained with reference to the absolute conception of space. From this point of view, the people within a territory are considered as mere objects for interventions by the state which acts as the subject. Subsequently, the experience and perspective of the people hardly matter, for the main purposes of the state's engagement with the people is to instrumentalise them. For example, in Waltz's formulation, population is treated as a factor that could contribute to the power of a state,<sup>28</sup> thus reducing them to a mere statistic of states power. The lived experience of being subjugated to states control (or even being instrumentalised for the state's military purposes) is completely absent from his analysis.

At this stage, it becomes possible to revisit the first response explicated earlier in this section. Recognising varieties of spatial frameworks would not necessarily resolve the discipline's systematic omission of the everyday. Insofar as these frameworks are unable to move beyond the absolute conception of space, there would be a risk that the people would be treated as mere objects again. For instance, the idea of global space has been criticised for replicating the territorial logic of sovereign states, for it treats the terrestrial earth as if it is a territory for global governance.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, what is required is not simply the displacement of the conception of the international as a collage of territorial states, but also of the logic of control that is so pervasive in such a conceptualisation.

### Exploring Relational Space

This essay does not intend to develop in detail alternative spatial frameworks. However, it can provide some parameters to determine how alternative frameworks are supposed to look like. This essay seeks to explore the potential of Harvey's "relational space" as a basis for such alternative conceptualisations.

In contrast to absolute space, relational space assumes that spatial frameworks do not exist prior to and independent from social phenomena. Rather, each social process would define its own spatial frameworks. Processes also constitute 'things' rather than vice versa. While it is possible to identify relatively permanent objects in our daily life—ranging from money, cities, to the state—closer examination would reveal that these things are always a part of complex, cross-cutting relationships; and that their nature is determined by those broader processes. Consequently, they do not possess intrinsic properties that would remain constant regardless of the circumstances, for their characters might change as the complex relationships that define them change. The most important consequence of a relational conception of space is that it is not possible to have a fixed, static spatial framework. Rather, the framework would always depend on the processes.<sup>30</sup>

Returning to the issue that this essay seeks to address: how could the relational conception of space enable the everyday life of ordinary people to be integrated into the discipline of IR? First and foremost, it is necessary to follow Harvey's argument that processes define their own spatial frameworks. With this in mind, it is not difficult to problematise the move within the discipline to conceptualise the international as an exclusive domain of inter-state interactions. From the perspective of relational space, this conceptualisation is unsustainable because it does not follow the actual spatial framework of social processes. Instead, the discipline appears to arbitrarily impose its framework on the phenomenon, thus removing some important aspects of the phenomenon from the picture. The everyday subjugation of ordinary people by the state is exactly the aspect that is being dismissed by the discipline. This would mean that the boundary of the international should be extended to include the ordinary people within its space. Consequently, the international would not solely be a domain for territorial states. Instead, the people whose everyday actions are programmed to sustain the existence of the state would be present within the international.

Territorial states might be subjugating ordinary people for the pursuit of their self-reproduction. However, this does not mean that the state would be *analytically* privileged in the analysis of the international. In line with the conception of relational space, the state and the people are 'things' that are in relation with each other. Consequently, it is necessary to pay equal attention both to the state and the people in the analysis. This is different from the existing analytical framework on the international, in which the state is *analytically* privileged. As argued previously, the discipline of IR tends to focus only on the perspective, interests, and behaviour of the state, thus omitting the people from analysis. In turn, such omission reveals IR's status as a discipline that perceives the world *from* the perspective of sovereign territorial states. Relational thinking of space is able to address this issue by decentering the state from the analytical framework of IR. This does not imply that the state is irrelevant. Rather, it means that there would be no

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privileged point from which the discipline should understand the world.

This decentering also defuses the possibility of replicating the rationality of territorial control intrinsic in the existing conceptualisation of the international. Such rationality is premised on a distinction between subject and object, with the state acting as the subject and the population as the object. In the relational approach, the state does not occupy the position of subject anymore. The state and the people are equally things that are in relations with each other. Lastly, it is important not to reify concepts such as the state and the people, for their existence and characters are contingent upon the social phenomena being observed. They would have no meaning outside the social processes within which they are embedded in.

At this stage, it is possible to make some general comments regarding the impacts of applying the relational conception of space to the discipline of IR. In sum, the application of such a conception would imply the erasure of any fixed spatial frameworks within IR. The boundary of the international could never be fixed from the outset. As argued here, the limit of the international should be extended to include ordinary people. The main rationale for this decision is because the spatial frameworks of the international should follow the actual boundary of social processes rather than be arbitrarily formulated from the outset. Because the people are closely connected with the state in the processes of state self-reproduction, it would be unjustifiable to arbitrarily exclude them from analyses. Nevertheless, this argument could be extended to account for other social processes beyond the self-reproduction of territorial states, e.g. capitalist accumulation, mastery over nature, global patriarchy and so on. This would imply that the boundary of the international would be very broad and complex. It should be emphasised, however, that such complexity happens because the world itself is complex. The conceptualisation of the international as a collage of territorial states might appear simple, however, it actually disguises the complexity of the world for the purpose of discreetly affirming the privilege of the state as the ultimate political authority in international politics.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that the dominant conception of the international within the discipline of IR is problematic, for it disarticulates the everyday processes through which territorial states are reproduced. This essay seeks to overcome this difficulty by integrating the everyday life of ordinary people into IR's framework of analysis. In doing so, it argues that the existing framework cannot integrate this dimension of international politics not only because it has been strongly preoccupied with territorial states as its main unit of analysis, but also because the framework implicitly affirms states' perspective which perceive the people simply as objects of control. Considering the life of the people would then be deemed to be irrelevant.

By introducing the idea of relational space, this problem is overcome. The basic idea involved is that instead of following frameworks that are formulated by observers from the outset, one should take into account that social processes define their own spatial frameworks. With this in mind, this essay suggests that the boundary of the international should be extended to include ordinary people, because the state and the people are so closely intertwined in the processes of state self-reproduction.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 13.

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- <sup>2</sup> Martin Wight, "Why Is There No International Theory?," *International Relations* 2, no. 1 (1960): 47-48.
- <sup>3</sup> Stuart Elden, "Land, Terrain, Territory," *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 6 (2010): 804-07.
- <sup>4</sup> David Harvey, "Space as a Keyword," in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader.*, ed. Noel Castree and Gregory D (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2016), 273-74; David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 261.
- <sup>5</sup> Stephen Krasner, "Realism, Imperialism, and Democracy: A Response to Gilbert," *Political Theory* 20, no. 1 (1992): 39.
- <sup>6</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 65, 69.
- <sup>7</sup> Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994), 5.
- <sup>8</sup> Benno Teschke, "Theorizing the Westphalian System of States: International Relations from Absolutism to Capitalism," *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 1 (2002): 8.
- <sup>9</sup> James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Henri Lefebvre, "Space and the State," in *State/Space: A Reader*, ed. Gordon MacLeod et al. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 92.
- <sup>11</sup> Cynthia Enloe, "The Mundane Matters," *International Political Sociology* 5, no. 4 (2011): 448.
- <sup>12</sup> Scott, 64-73.
- <sup>13</sup> Matt Davies, and Michael Niemann, "The Everyday Spaces of Global Politics: Work, Leisure, Family," *New Political Science* 24, no. 4 (2002): 558; Lefebvre, in *State/Space: A Reader*, 88; Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.
- <sup>14</sup> Enloe, 447.
- <sup>15</sup> Walker, 23.
- <sup>16</sup> John Agnew, "Mapping Political Power Beyond State Boundaries: Territory, Identity, and Movement in World Politics," *Millennium* 28, no. 3 (1999): 499, 503-06.
- <sup>17</sup> John Agnew, "The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory," *Review of International Political Economy* 1, no. 1 (1994): 55; Saskia Sassen, "When Territory Deborders Territoriality," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 1, no. 1 (2013): 22-23; Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 322.
- <sup>18</sup> Agnew, "Mapping Political Power Beyond State Boundaries: Territory, Identity, and Movement in World Politics," 506.
- <sup>19</sup> Nisha Shah, "The Territorial Trap of the Territorial Trap: Global Transformation and the Problem of the State's Two Territories1," *International Political Sociology* 6, no. 1 (2012): 57-58, accessed 9/26/2019.
- <sup>20</sup> Elden, "Land, Terrain, Territory," 809.



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<sup>21</sup> Elden, "Land, Terrain, Territory," 807.

<sup>22</sup> P. J. Taylor, "The State as Container: Territoriality in the Modern World-System," *Progress in Human Geography* 18, no. 2 (1994): 151.

<sup>23</sup> Elden, "Land, Terrain, Territory," 810.

<sup>24</sup> Elden, "Land, Terrain, Territory," 809; Harvey, in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader.*, 272.

<sup>25</sup> Harvey, in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader.*, 272.

<sup>26</sup> Elden, "Land, Terrain, Territory," 804.

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 186-87; Harvey, in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader.*, 272, Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Waltz, 131.

<sup>29</sup> Shah 68.

<sup>30</sup> Harvey, in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader.*, 273.

<sup>31</sup> R. B. J Walker, "The Double Outside of the Modern International," *Ephemera* 6, no. 1 (2006): 56.

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