
After the Interregnum: Sovereignty and International Relations in Flux

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Email: d.chandler@westminster.ac.uk
Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War few academics in the field of International Relations have been prepared to defend International Relations as a political discipline. In fact, the dominant trends have been those which seek to overcome the binary division of the domestic and the international. This short review of the state of the discipline seeks to understand the reasons for the rejection of the traditional rationale for International Relations and to reassert the importance of International Relations as a distinct political discipline in the face of post-positivist or post-rationalist approaches which conflate the politics of the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’.

Introduction

It is difficult to think back to what was the ‘mainstream’ understanding of the rationale of International Relations as an academic discipline, which became established in the Cold War era. It is almost impossible to imagine trying to justify to students the once dominant realist and neo-realist perspectives that sovereignty marked the limits of ethics, political progress and the debate about the ‘good life’ and that beyond the territory of the nation-state lay the international sphere where the highest ethical aim was peaceful co-existence and progress was not possible beyond cycles marked by shifting balances of power.

It was, of course, this crude distinction that marked out the international as a strategic sphere of interaction, of power politics and self-help. A sphere separate from that of domestic politics and therefore in need of its own distinct discipline. Nevertheless this
sphere was understood as a political one – there was a domestic analogy – states were equal political and legal subjects under the post-World War Two UN Charter framework (Bull 1966; Suganami 1986). States were analogous to individuals in a political society, understood to be rational, autonomous and self-governing entities. The international was a sphere of political subjects but, crucially, without a centralised government - without an institutional framework which operated independently of power relations. This was a unique sphere of realpolitik – neither empire, the formalised hierarchy of pre-inter-national relations, nor institutionalised political and legal equality, as found within the domestic sphere.

International Relations was a political discipline and therefore understood to be open to the methodological frameworks of the social sciences which, in the early years of the discipline, were dominated by behaviouralist and positivist approaches, based on the believed constancy or predictability of human interaction. International Relations was understood to be a sub-discipline of Politics: a sub-discipline which could never set the research agenda itself, but was open to the techniques and methodologies of the broader discipline. This inferior status reflected the lower level of political development in the international sphere. As long as international bodies lacked supranational characteristics, as long as there was no power independent of and standing above nation-states, the political character of the international sphere was limited by the need for informal consensus and agreement between the legal and political subjects – sovereign states. The international sphere lacked a shared political community and therefore there was no framework for cohering different viewpoints. No discussion of ‘the good life’ could not take place.
International Relations sought to understand the politics of this very different sphere of political interaction. In other words, the discipline sought to explain how political subjects - states - interacted without a government. Its answers involved ethics, power and economics to explain the mediation between these state-subjects and their socially constructed international society. The pluralists of the English School focused on ethics and shared moral norms based on shared interests in international order, liberals stressed shared interests and co-operative ties, especially those enforced by the need for trade and economic interconnectedness, realists emphasised the balance of power as the core mediating link between states. These three dominant strands of thought all sought to understand the international sphere as one politically distinct from the domestic one. Even the dominant liberal and neo-liberal strands of thought focused on states as the political subjects of the separate and politically distinct international sphere (see for example, Keohane 1986; Keohane and Nye 2001; Baldwin 1993).

States were the key political subjects of International Relations because there was understood to be no formalised political realm, no global political framework, which could constitute individuals rather than states as political subjects. In the sphere of ‘anarchy’ the formalised political sphere stopped at the boundaries of the nation-state: political relations were therefore inter-national.

This much is history. In fact, today International Relations as a political discipline is better taught as the history of ideas. Rather than patronise undergraduates with crude attempts to apply Martin Wight’s ‘3 Rs’ of realism, rationalism and revolutionism to contemporary examples (Wight 1991).¹ The pretence that the traditional International Relations theories of state-interaction are timeless, or that different theories fulfil
different needs, is either lazy or dishonest. More importantly, this approach fits ill with more academically rigorous demands for critical analysis, which brings in history and sociology to explain the socially-constructed nature of political concepts and theoretical approaches.

Today’s consensus is that the domestic analogy - in other words, the distinction between the political sphere ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the state - is no longer relevant. States are not seen to be analogous to individuals as legal and political subjects who constitute political relationships: within the state, individuals constituting the domestic sphere of political hierarchy, outside the state, inter-state relations constituting the international sphere of anarchy. In leading undergraduate textbooks this approach is classified, derogatively, as rationalism or positivism. Today any approach that seeks to clarify the international as a distinct political realm, where states rather than individuals are the political subjects, is condemned as realism.

Rather than limiting the ‘politics’ of International Relations to traditional approaches centred on the mediation of inter-state relations, Steve Smith, for example, argues: ‘defining politics as limited to [this] empirical domain is a very restricting move, and you may think a political one (i.e. a move designed to support certain, that is the existing, political arrangements)...[which] naturalizes existing power divisions’ (2001:229). In the same major text, Nicholas Wheeler and Alex Bellamy contend: ‘Realism purports to describe and explain the “realities” of statecraft but the problem with this claim to objectivity is that it is the realist mindset that has constructed the very practices that realist theory seeks to explain.’ (2001:490)
Today’s dominant approaches to the discipline argue that theories of two distinct types of politics – one domestic, the other international - did not just reflect the lack of global political institutions, they were also responsible for reproducing this situation. Given the assumption that ideas and norms structure identities and practices, realism becomes, in Alexander Wendt’s words, a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ rather than a legitimate demarcation of two spheres of political relations (1992:410). Critical theorists such as Robert Cox and Andrew Linklater also argue that realist theory has helped to reproduce the very structures that it argued were central to understanding the distinction between the domestic and the international (Cox 1981:128-9; Linklater 1998:21). As Richard Falk notes, international theory of ‘political realism’ has allegedly merely reflected elite attitudes:

The realist mindset…forecloses the political imagination in several respects: it dismisses moral and legal criteria of policy as irrelevant for purposes of explanation, prediction, and prescription; it grounds speculation on an assessment of relative power as perceived by rational, even ultrarational, actors, essentially states, and is therefore unable to take account of passion, irrationality, and altruistic motivations as political forces, or of the impacts of nonstate actors.(1995:37)

The struggle against what is now described variously as realist, rationalist or positivist theory, with its privileging of state-subjects and its truncated vision of the political in the international sphere, is held to be central to progressive approaches to International Relations theory. Explaining what is distinctive about the politics of the
international sphere is no longer considered to be the task of the discipline of International Relations.

**The Interregnum: The US and the ‘Return of the Outside’**

While many commentators celebrate the new cross-disciplinarity of International Relations or assume that it was always a mistake to have seen International Relations as a narrowly ‘Political’ discipline, this paper seeks to highlight just how rapid and untroubled the passing of the defining distinctions, which demarcated the subject as a separate academic discipline, have been. It is always difficult to understand a process when one is in the middle of it. I suggest that today we have come out of the other side. One starting point for understanding the death of International Relations as a political discipline is the ‘interregnum’.

The ‘interregnum’ is a term taken from Mary Kaldor’s 2003 book *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*, which was then taken up by Martin Jacques in his February 2004 review article in the *London Review of Books* (Kaldor 2003; Jacques 2004). Kaldor asks: ‘Will we look back on the last decade as the ‘happy nineties’? Was it an interregnum between global conflicts when utopian ideas like global civil society, human rights, a global rule of law, or global social justice seemed possible?’(2003:149)

The discussion of the ‘interregnum’ begs the question of whether *inter-national* relations have been overcome, with the end of the Cold War, the rise of globalisation and the development of global civil society, or whether the recent consensus that
nation-states are no longer the key actors, nor national interests the key explanation for foreign policy, was merely a matter of academics in the field being taken in by superficial appearances. For Jacques, the answer is clear:

After the end of the Cold War, there followed what now seems nothing more than an interregnum before the beginning of another defining epoch, the emergence of the US as the global hyperpower… Yet during this interregnum – the 1990s – it didn’t appear like that… the future seemed a cornucopia of possibilities. (2004:8)

Instead: ‘The central dynamic of global politics since 11 September 2001 has been the profound shift in the nature of American foreign policy.’ (2004:8) US post-Cold War multilateralism based on ‘the West’ has now been replaced by unilateralism. September 11 has lifted the veil from the re-emergence of a new set of international power relations. Jacques suggests that the post-Cold War possibility that there would be a new post-national, post-modern global – not international – agenda can now be seen to be a European-based chimera, an illusion of Euro-centrism. While Europeans may have seen the world differently after 1989, their lack of influence has made little impact on the new international order. This argument reflects Robert Kagan’s in Paradise and Power (2003) where he contends that Europeans can afford to play the Kantian Venus to the US’s Hobbesian Mars because they lack the global capacity and responsibilities of the ‘world’s policeman’.

Mary Kaldor similarly pins the blame on the US for the possible ‘return’ of the international rather than the further development of post-national politics. The
assumption is that the dichotomy between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ is returning post-September 11. In her reading it is ‘the global unilateralism of the US… [which] undermines both the concrete achievements of global civil society as well as its norms and values; it marks a return to geopolitics and the language of realism and national interest’ (2003:148). In a later piece, she writes that President George W. Bush’s response to September 11 ‘has been an attempt to re-impose international relations; that is to say, to put the threat of terrorism within a state framework’ (forthcoming). She argues that the US can attempt to do this only because of its exceptional international dominance: ‘The US is the only country not hemmed in by globalisation, the only state able to continue to act as an autonomous nation-state: a “global unilateralist” as Javier Solana puts it, or the last nation state.’ (forthcoming)

If this is the ‘return of the outside’ it seems to be very far from the ‘return’ of the traditional distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’. The debate on the ‘interregnum’ demonstrates clearly the death of International Relations as a distinct political discipline. Even when there is a discussion about the distinction between the domestic and international political realms, the division between the two is no longer accepted. Firstly, the assumption is made that the domestic and the international were no longer distinct prior to September 11 and the alleged shift in US foreign policy. Secondly, the US is held up as the exception which proves the rule – the US is ‘the last nation state’.

This position is pretty much the dominant consensus today. Robert Cooper, for example, argues that while the other Western states have achieved postmodern outlooks, no longer concerned with national interests, the US lags behind and is
between the modern and postmodern (2003). European statesmen, such as Solana, as well as government leaders, are keen to promote their foreign policies as based on ‘post-national’ values and interests (Solana 2003).

Here there is, in fact, no possibility of a return to international relations as understood in the political terms of the domestic analogy. At the most there is a suggestion of a new division which replaces that of sovereignty and anarchy: the US and the rest. Implicit in the argument of the ‘interregnum’ is the assumption that the sovereignty/anarchy divide has no relevance for understanding the international sphere. Here the only barrier to truly trans-national, global institutions of governance which can ‘domesticate’ the international sphere, for example the International Criminal Court or the Kyoto Protocol, is US policy, not the lack of an institutionalised political framework which stands above the plural and conflicting interests of nation-states. Quite explicitly, the only change that needs to happen for the international and domestic to become properly one type of political sphere of action and involvement is for the Democrats to win power in Washington. The death of the distinct understanding of the ‘political’ within International Relations is highlighted best by those who forward concerns about its ‘return’.

**Dismissing the Binaries of International Relations**

The death of the key binary political divisions of International Relations has been loudly announced by every ‘post-positivist’ approach, from English School ‘solidarists’ to critical theorists, constructivists, poststructuralists and feminist theorists. Ironically, the clamour to announce the end of the political divides at the
heart of the discipline of International Relations appears to have drowned out the need for critical explanation of what exactly has changed. The end of the dominance of realism has been welcomed, in fact celebrated, and the division of ‘inside/outside’ condemned from a variety of normative standpoints. While critical theorists and post-structuralists have led the normative charge, supported by historical sociologists, the explanation for the sea-change in academic opinion is less obvious.

Like me, you have probably come across post-graduate students in the discipline who argue that the fact that sovereignty is a social construct or that the state-system has constantly changed invalidates the timeless nature of neo-realism, as if condemning, or rather ‘deconstructing’, the straw man of ‘the naturalness of the nation state’ was all that was necessary (Keane 2002:42; see also, for example, Bartelson 1995; Onuf 1991; Edkins et al 1999). Realism was essentially based on the view that international politics was qualitatively different to domestic politics: that in one sphere progress and ethical judgements were possible and in the other they were not: that there was a difference between a political community and an ‘anarchical society’. The fact that this system and the binary divide were premised on reciprocal relations of sovereignty, relations of political equality and autonomy, was clearly a social and historical product. In fact, *Inter-national* Relations could never have developed as a political discipline without the decline of empire and the constitution of sovereign equality as the dominant pattern of external relations.³

International Relations was specifically a post-World War Two discipline, despite the claims of the academic community to appropriate political theorists of the past. The crude misreadings of Kant, Hobbes, Machiavelli and others that were forced into the
sterile ‘traditions’ of International Relations meant that undergraduates often came out of International Relations courses with less understanding of politics (and international relations) than they started with. But rather than focus on the ahistorical limitations of realist approaches, would it not be better to concentrate on the core claims? Has the political divide between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ actually disappeared? And if so how? When? These are the questions that are never asked by those keen to dismiss the understanding of the ‘political’ on which this distinct discipline was based.

There are two dominant explanations for why academics in the field have rejected the divide between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’. I suggest that these are, in fact, little more than assertions. Either it is argued that the end of the Cold War has discredited realism and led to the dominance of other approaches, which emphasise the importance of ideas, identities and culture rather than the purely materialist drives of the narrow national-interest for power, or it is suggested that globalisation has undermined the nation-state, and meant that the distinction between the domestic and the international is less relevant.

It would be nice and convenient to be able to explain the death of the politics of International Relations as a product of the end of the Cold War – but the post-positivist theoretical approaches pre-dated the events of 1989; international relations changed but were hardly transformed with the collapse of the Soviet Union; and although realism may not have predicted or explained the fall of the Berlin wall no other theoretical approaches did either.
Constructivist approaches often claim to be the best analytical, rather than normative, guide to international changes in 1989 and beyond. However, the replacement of material interests with ideas can only offer alternative descriptions not explanations. As Ronen Palan notes:

It is, of course, one thing to begin from the premise that ideas and norms are the principle agent of change; it is an entirely different proposition to demonstrate the inherent necessity of this to be the case, and in addition outline the specific form by which the ‘construction’ of the international environment, on its opportunities and constraints, takes place… [G]eneral theories of interactionist order cannot provide an explanation for the specificity of an order… (2000:577 & 592-3; see also Chandler forthcoming a)

The alternative explanation for the end of the divide between sovereignty and anarchy, and therefore the end of International Relations as a distinct political discipline, is a largely empirical one. Globalisation has undermined the ‘inside’ as a political realm distinct from the ‘outside’. According to this analysis, states are no longer sovereign entities. They can have little influence on world market relations let alone trans-national phenomena such as climate change, pollution, HIV/AIDS and refugees or the threat from failed states and international terrorism. This argument largely misunderstands the meaning of sovereignty, which is a juridical-political concept referring to self-governing autonomy – the lack of a higher level of political authority. Sovereignty has not been undermined by globalisation and greater social, economic and technological interconnectedness. Sovereignty could be undermined if this greater interconnectedness facilitated the creation of global legal and political
institutions which were constituted independently of the power of nation-states. This however has not happened and does not look likely in the near future.

Despite the talk of global civil society, universal human rights and the powers of the International Criminal Court, there has been little blurring of the boundaries between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’. While the sovereignty of states of the European Union may be voluntarily pooled on selected questions, the boundaries of the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ have been strictly drawn and immigration and refugee criteria regularly tightened. The debates of the 1990s on humanitarian intervention and human rights merely revealed the impossibility of rewriting the UN Charter to enshrine a legal right of humanitarian intervention even when rephrased in the language of the ‘responsibility to protect’ (ICISS 2001). If anything the rights of sovereignty seem to be returning to the pre-1945 world of unlimited sovereignty with the formal restrictions on Great Power aggression being lifted and a return to the pre-Nuremberg right of sovereign states to declare and wage aggressive war (Rabkin 1999; Chesterman 2001; Chandler 2000). The International Criminal Court, like its ad hoc predecessors, will be reliant on the major powers to enforce its judgements making ‘justice’ dependent on power rather than independent of it (Robertson 1999:300-341).

It is clear that egalitarian legal and political rights remain restricted to the ‘inside’ - to the citizens of territorially-demarcated sovereign states. The divide between ‘man’ and ‘citizen’ may be normatively abhorrent to many in the field but it is nevertheless the reality of political relations as currently constituted (Linklater 1981; 1988; Falk 1995). It would seem obvious that international law has a very different character to domestic, or municipal, law (Chandler 2002). In the much the same way, it would
seem clear that the rights of the ‘global citizen’ are very different from those of citizens of nation-states, who can hold governments to account through the ballot-box (Chandler 2003a).

International institutions are established on the basis of nation-states. Whether it is the WTO, the UN, NATO, the EU, the OSCE, the IMF or the World Bank, international institutions are constituted by their members – sovereign states. International law, where it is still of relevance, is drawn up by treaty by - or based on the customary acceptance of - nation-states. Nation-states are the ‘individuals’ of international society because they are the legal and political subjects on which international society - in so far as this is a system of political relations - is constituted.\(^6\) Individuals may have a moral claim to universal human rights, but these claims depend on the action of nation-states individually or collectively. Some states may make a moral claim to have the ‘right of intervention’ or, as in the war on terror, of pre-emption on behalf of the ‘civilised world’ or the ‘global community’ but this does not substantially challenge (in fact, it would tend to support) E. H. Carr’s perspective in 1939, at the birth of the discipline, that in the international sphere morality could not be disassociated from power: ‘Theories of international morality are…the product of dominant nations or groups of nations.’(2001:74)

If the divide between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ has not disappeared, it seems reasonable to seek the implosion of the political discipline of International Relations in the changing subjectivity of the academic community rather than in the world of external affairs. It would seem that rather than ‘sovereignty’ and the fixed antimonies of International Relations being ‘mere’ social constructions, it is the lazy view that
either globalisation or the end of the Cold War can explain the rejection of ‘realist’ approaches that is the much more concerning ‘social construct’.

**The Missing Link between the ‘Inside’ and the ‘Outside’**

One could argue that the domestic analogy that made International Relations a political discipline is being undermined with the decline of the UN Charter framework. The informal, mutually constituting relations of equal sovereignty, whereby states had an equal say in treaty-making regardless of the inequalities of power, have been put to question in the post-Cold War era. The expansion of ‘international society’ through the international recognition of the sovereign rights of states that did not have the power to defend themselves, from the Versailles settlement through to the post-World War Two decolonisation process, was dependent on the balance of power (Jackson 1990). After World War One and in particular after World War Two there was international agreement on the need to prevent competition between major powers, over less powerful territories, leading to global conflagration.

There was a perceived need, in Barry Buzan’s terms, to ensure stability through creating a more ‘mature’ anarchy (1991). It was the desire to ‘defeat the scourge of war’ that impelled the creation of the United Nations, which was based on the outlawing of war and the concomitant defence of sovereign rights of non-intervention. In today’s unipolar world there is neither a consensus on the importance of the prevention of aggressive war nor the threat that such interventions will lead to a wider conflict between major powers. One could argue that the international sphere is
returning to the pre-political era of empire and direct relations of hierarchy and domination.

I have some sympathy with this perspective. The fact that the political subject at the centre of the discipline was no longer central to the constitutional framework of international society would potentially undermine the domestic political analogy. If the international sphere was no longer a plural ‘anarchy’ but instead a new ‘hierarchy’, then the post-1945 ‘blip’, whereby it appeared that the international could be intellectually appropriated through political analysis and the borrowing of the methods and approaches of political science, would indeed be over. Maybe the days of the sovereign state as the political subject are numbered as a new age develops of both formal empire - of protectorates and trusteeships - and of informal or ‘voluntary’ empire - of Great Power regulation through extensive conditionality agreements - is being established (Bain 2003; Cooper 2003). It could be argued that the international sphere is returning to hierarchical relations based on power rather than plural mutually-constituting rights.

This may look like a neat, and at least an intellectually tenable, explanation for the rejection of the defining problematique of the discipline, but it is not at all an adequate one. Firstly, it underestimates the extent to which the political relations of reciprocity still dominate the international sphere. Secondly, and much more importantly for the purposes here, the disillusionment with the political division at the centre of the discipline predates the end of the Cold War. In fact, even today there is no consensus that we have entered a world in which power relations are exercised much more directly. Until September 11 2001 many of the commentators most keen to announce
the death of International Relations actually welcomed the changes that saw the attenuation of international law and the informal mutual relations of sovereign equality. The calls for the abolition of the distinction of the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ make the exact opposite point to that made above. Their advocates insist that the ‘outside’ is becoming more like the domestic sphere rather than losing its political nature entirely.

It may be that those of us engaged in the discipline and concerned with these questions had been looking in the wrong place for the source for the end of International Relations as a political discipline, and for the reasons for the rejection of the divide between the domestic and the international. The rest of this short paper suggests that rather than the ‘outside’ changing - through the reassertion of hierarchical relations of power or, in the dominant perspective of post-positivist critics, through the impact of globalisation or new ‘norms’ arising from global civil society - it is the academic community’s understanding of the ‘inside’ that has been transformed.

As the post-structuralists, like Rob Walker, have always highlighted, there is an intimate connection between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ (1994). In fact, they are mutually self-constituting, in much the same way as sovereignty and anarchy are. As Buzan emphasises, this ‘binary divide’ refers to one and the same phenomenon, the end of empire and the rise of self-government and political autonomy (1991:146-7). If political communities are to be sovereign their international relations will be mutually constituted as there is no political framework, or hierarchy, above them. This intimate connection between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ marks the distinct sphere of
formalised political and legal equality out from the sphere of informal political relations between states.

Just as the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ were mutually constituted, so the decline of that distinction has to be understood through a consideration of both sides of the ‘political’. The intellectual appropriation of one side of the divide - the ‘outside’ - has been transformed because the understanding of the other side - the ‘inside’ - has radically changed. I want to forward the suggestion that the framework for analysing International Relations has changed because, today, much less importance is attached to the ‘inside’ - to the formally institutionalised framework of legal and political equality.

Let’s go back to the beginning. In old ‘political’ International Relations the sphere of sovereignty was the sphere of progress and political transformation, of debate and struggle over ‘the good life’. In contrast, the international sphere of anarchy was one of strategic interaction without a shared collective framework of the political beyond a mutual interest in co-existence. In today’s post-positivist and post-political International Relations it appears that the sovereign sphere is one of exclusion and conflict where the state dominates or ‘colonises’ the political, preventing political progress and marginalizing critical voices (Lipschutz 1992:392). William Connolly, for example, writes that Western mass politics are a form of ‘imprisonment’ because progressive demands can be derailed by national chauvinist sentiments (1991:476).

From today’s vantage point it seems to be apparent that the state-level focus of old political movements limited their progressive potential. For Kaldor: ‘it was through
the state that “old” movements were “tamed”. This was true both of workers’ movements, which became left political parties and trade unions, and anti-colonial struggles, which were transformed into new ruling parties.’(Kaldor 2003:86) Radical theorists, Hardt and Negri, write that sovereignty is a ‘poisoned gift’, where ostensible revolutionaries ‘get bogged down in “realism”’, resulting in ‘the opposite of the nationalist dream of an autonomous, self-centered development’ as new structures of domestic and international domination become established (Hardt and Negri 2001:133). Their critique of national sovereignty is essentially a critique of the formal sphere of the ‘political’: the liberal democratic process:

The entire logical chain of representation might be summarized like this: the people representing the multitude, the nation representing the people, and the state representing the nation. Each link is an attempt to hold in suspension the crisis of modernity. Representation in each case means a further step of abstraction and control.(Hardt and Negri 2001:134)

Unlike the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th century theorists of politics, who celebrated the possibilities inherent in the autonomy of the state-based political framework, the achievements of the sovereign sphere are today considered rather differently. ‘Seen from the other side of the twentieth century, the trust in the state as a civilisational force is hard to uphold, because the price that individuals and groups had to pay for state excesses turned out to be infinitely higher than [they] envisioned….’ (Neumann 2004:265) In contrast, the international sphere appears to be one of progress and opportunities, where new political movements and approaches are being experimented
with through global civil society and non-state actors, which have injected new 
‘ethical’ norms and practices into the moribund world of state-centred politics.

Under these conditions, it is the international rather than the domestic sphere which appears to be the source of political purpose and transformation. For International Relations theorists today, the political dichotomy at the heart of the discipline assumes much less importance. For some, the understanding of the distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ has been completely reversed. Now the consensus is that political activity at the level of the state is inherently limited and restricted. The liberal democratic discourse which championed a formally constituted sphere of political and legal equality, is seen to be illusionary; a fiction maintained by exclusion and war. According to Linklater, International Relations theorists need to challenge the ‘totalising project’ of the state which is based on ‘accentuat[ing] the differences between citizens and aliens in order to meet the challenges of inter-state war’ (1998:6). For Kaldor, the relationship is inversed, following Carl Schmitt, she suggests that an external enemy needs to be manufactured in order to manage and constrain domestic politics (2003:36). Either way, it is the sphere of state-based politics which is seen to be inferior to political practices within the international sphere, where global civil actors are freed from the constraints of territorial politics. These critical theory perspectives are fully supported by postmodern International Relations theories, which assert that war, ethnic cleansing and genocide, are not exceptional policy choices for nation-states but rather an essential part of their make-up (for example, Campbell 1998; see also, Foucault 2003).
It seems that the more limited the possibilities appear for change at the domestic level the more it seems possible to ‘make a difference’ at the international one. Leading governments seek to cohere their authority and create a sense of purpose through the international sphere, as do all political institutions from international bodies down to local authorities (Chandler 2003b). Claire Fox, writing about the burgeoning international activities of British local authorities, ranging from multiple twinning, to capacity–building partnerships as far a field as Indonesia, Vietnam and Kosovo, notes that it seems that easy-sounding solutions to problems elsewhere are more attractive than engaging with domestic difficulties (2003). It is not just the political elites who seek to avoid the difficulties of connecting with the public through turning to the international sphere.

Radical political critics, like George Monbiot, assert that ‘until citizens can seize control of global politics, we cannot regain control of national politics’ (2003). This desire to solve the problems of politics at the global level, before addressing questions at the national or local level, and the perception that problems are easier to negotiate globally, where we can ‘make a difference’ (rather than nationally where we allegedly cannot) are unique aspects of our deeply estranged political times. Rather than engage in domestic political processes, leading critics of the political discipline of International Relations tend to celebrate the progressive nature of global, or post-national political engagement. Richard Falk describes this process in glowing terms:

…transnational solidarities, whether between women, lawyers, environmentalists, human rights activists, or other varieties of ‘citizen pilgrim’ associated with globalisation from below…[who have] already transferred
their loyalties to the invisible political community of their hopes and dreams, 
one which could exist in future time but is nowhere currently embodied in the 
life-world of the planet. (1995:212)

The interconnectedness which is celebrated is, in fact, the flip-side of a lack of 
connection domestically. As Kaldor states: ‘Air travel and the Internet create new 
horizontal communities of people, who perhaps have more in common, than with 
those who live close by.’ (2003:111-12) What these ‘citizen pilgrims’ have in common 
is their isolation from and rejection of their own political communities. The transfer of 
loyalties to an ‘invisible political community’ is merely a radical re-representation of 
their rejection of a real and all too visible political community – the electorate.

This estrangement from our own political circumstances is crucial to any explanation 
of the current theorising of politics and of International Relations today. In the 
twenty-first century it appears that the ‘global sphere’ has the answers to the 
existential political vacuum left by the lack of certainty, mission, political ideologies 
and ‘big ideas’, which has been particularly deeply felt by governments and 
individuals since the start of the 1990s (see further Chandler forthcoming b).

**Conclusion**

This short paper has suggested that the ‘idealist turn’ in international relations, and the 
rejection of the distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’, stems largely from 
the difficulty of finding shared meaning though the domestic political process. It is the 
malaise of domestic politics and the projection of political hopes for change onto the
international sphere which has created a sense of the end of the ‘inside/outside’
dichotomy. When the academic community’s subjective hopes for change are
projected outside the formal political sphere of state-based politics there is little
inclination to look too closely, or critically, at whether the international sphere is, in
fact, open to these aspirations. International Relations practitioners are in this way
reflecting the broader political trends in Western society.

However, the challenge is not merely that of attempting to suggest an alternative
explanation for why the death of the political binaries of International Relations has
been so vociferously proclaimed. I would argue that the intellectual task of those
involved in the discipline is to reassert the importance of International Relations as a
specific political discipline. By this I do not mean defending ‘realism’, ‘rationalism’
or ‘positivism’ but changing the terms of debate and establishing a set of intellectual
tools and approaches which can establish International Relations as a vital and vibrant
political discipline. One which can challenge not only the attempts to import into the
international sphere, and in the process ‘hollow-out’, the ‘inside’ political concepts of
democracy, citizenship, and individual legal and political rights but also draw out the
flip-side of this process, the degrading of the political gains of the domestic political
sphere. Rebuilding International Relations as a political discipline is vital to inform
and to explain political engagement with both the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’.

References


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**Notes**

1 For textbook attempts to apply these see, for example, Jackson and Sørenson (2003), pp.139-174.
2 This is highlighted by the concluding chapter to *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War?*, titled: ‘September 11: The Return of the “Outside”’.
3 See, for example, Justin Rosenberg’s *The Empire of Civil Society* (1994).
4 This point is well drawn out in Rob Walker’s *Inside/Outside* (1994).
5 As Hedley Bull noted even if, in a highly unlikely scenario, the states of the European Union completely gave up their national sovereignty the consequences would merely be the creation of a larger nation-state (1995:255).
6 This is why the question of whether the state is a ‘person’ is not answerable as a question of sociology or psychology, despite the recent attempts of International Relations theorists to try. See for example P. T. Jackson et al (2004).
7 I’m grateful to Professor A. J. R. Groom for pointing out in discussion that the post-1945 era was a ‘blip’ rather than the norm, at the 2001 International Studies Association Convention held in Hong Kong.