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# INSIDE/OUTSIDE: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AS POLITICAL THEORY

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# 1 INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AS POLITICAL THEORY

Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of *yes* and *no*, which decides everything. Unless one is careful, it is made into a basis of images that govern all thoughts of positive and negative. Logicians draw circles that overlap or exclude each other, and all their rules immediately become clear. Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being. Thus profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry which – whether we will or no – confers spatiality upon thought; if a metaphysician could not draw, what would he think? ... The dialectics of *here* and *there* has been promoted to the rank of an absolutism according to which these unfortunate adverbs of place are endowed with unsupervised powers of ontological determination.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

if it will kindly be considered that while it is in our interest as tormentors to remain where we are as victims our urge is to move on  
Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*

## Historical moments

Attempts to come to terms with the complexities, contradictions and opportunities of contemporary political life participate in a widespread sense of accelerations, disjunctions and uncertainties. The swift succession of events is already enough to induce vertigo, even among journalists, policy-advisors and other mediators of the moment. Moreover, passing events draw much of their significance from broader readings of the twentieth century – and of modernity more generally – as an age of unprecedented innovations and transformations. ‘All that is solid melts into air’, observed Marx in his paradigmatic account of the increasing dynamism of the modern world.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, perhaps, this remark has become more prescient than ever, despite, or perhaps even in part because of evaporating

hopes for an alternative to the capitalism that has so completely transformed human life over the past half-millennium.

The most trenchant reminder that ours is an age of speed and temporal accelerations has been the simultaneous dissolution of Cold War geopolitics and rapid entrenchment of a globally organised capitalism across the territorial divisions of Europe. The year 1989 is now firmly enshrined as a symbol of historical ruptures that have been felt everywhere. Structural rigidities and ideological certainties have given way to social revolutions and territorial fluidities. Ritualised attitudes and postures have atrophied, scholarly literatures have been declared redundant and policy-making elites have been forced to regroup. Even the most up-to-date cartographies have acquired the antique aura of mid-century maps of a world carved into formal colonies and empires.

No doubt there are still suspicions that beneath the surprises and contingencies lies a fundamental continuity of human behaviour, some hidden hand of utilitarian efficiency or tragic necessity that must soon reappear. The eternal return of power politics or the decisive confirmation of established teleologies: these, it might be argued, offer a more appropriate interpretation of contemporary trajectories than wild claims about innovation and transformation. The latest news of geopolitical aggression or the arrogance of great powers readily inspires old memories. Claims about the vindication of favoured philosophies of history – about the slightly delayed end-of-ideology and the final supremacy of capitalism and/or modernity and/or liberalism – have become a central motif of contemporary political debate. Established orthodoxies still retain the courage – and self-righteousness – of their convictions.

Focusing upon dramatic events, it is undoubtedly tempting to exaggerate the novelty of novelty. Dissolutions of Cold War and the re-writing of Europe seem misleadingly momentous when interpreted only in relation to the entrenched expectations of a world carved up at Yalta and Bretton Woods. An old order may be giving way to the new but, it might be said, we are likely to see the emergence of a new order that looks suspiciously like the old. The players or the polarities may change but the rules of the game are likely to stay more or less the same. This, after all, is the lesson that continues to be taught in so many appeals to a canonical tradition of political realism and to be reinforced through claims about the core principles of an international balance of power.

Even so, neither the drama of apparently familiar geopolitical conflict nor the celebration of ideological victories have been able to erase

a pervasive sense that the search for a lasting and stable order – for a resilient architecture that might withstand the assaults and erosions of temporal change, unexpected dangers and volatile fortunes – is increasingly tenuous. The demolition of the Berlin Wall may have signalled an opening across territorial space, but it equally signalled an awareness of temporal velocities and incongruities. Ancient memories and burnished resentments have meshed simultaneously with expanded credit and a sharp eye for the main chance. Nineteenth-century nationalisms thaw while geopolitical inertia gives way to an all-consuming global economy. Yalta may have established a settled order at the architectonic centre of world politics for almost half a century, but the speed of dissolution is more in keeping with the accelerative tendencies that have been charted by almost every account of modern economies, technologies and cultures as the most distinctive characteristic of the century itself. Dissolutions in Europe may have been followed by the concerted reassertion of great power dominance in the Persian Gulf, but even the imposition of a global military order by the greatest of great powers has seemed unlikely to restrain the unpredictable volatilities of regional antagonisms or the aspirations of oppressed peoples.

As a grand cliché about modernity, the claim that we live in an era of rapid transformations has even become a form of continuity among diverse currents of contemporary social and political thought. Ever since the possibility of a progressive history was elaborated during the European Enlightenment, modern thinkers have struggled to grasp the succession of events as an unfolding of a more or less reasonable, even rational process.

For early-modern writers like Hobbes, reason and order – both cosmological and socio-political – could be envisaged in relation to the discovery of permanent principles, the secular guarantees of a geometry that seemed to offer at least as good a bet as the increasingly dubious guarantees of Heaven. From the late eighteenth century, the guarantees of Reason were converted into the promises of History. For some, like Rousseau, these promises were distinctly ambiguous. For others, like Hegel, they were magnificent. Whether as Comtean positivism, Benthamite utilitarianism, Marxian revolution or Weberian disenchantment, subsequent social and political thought and practice has been articulated around powerful claims about change, novelty and transformation that have been common intellectual currency for at least two hundred years. Contemporary sociological research, for example, remains deeply indebted to the concern – shared by all the classical sociologists like Durkheim, and echoing Hobbes in a more

historically minded age – with how a stable modern society can exist at all given the transformative quality of modern life.

In this context, contemporary vertigo has already acquired its own trusted antidote. The sense of acceleration that impressed so many thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is easily turned from a problematic into a celebration. History, it can be said, is simply working out as it should. Development is evolutionary and progressive. The end of ideology is undeniably at hand. Modernity shall indeed be our salvation. If full-blooded Hegelianism or a crude theory of Progress seem to have too many side-effects, too much of the chauvinistic arrogance of nineteenth-century empires, a more benign treatment of rational choice theory, utilitarian ethics and the freedom of the market will suffice. And for those not wanting to seem too naive or trusting, the antidote may be swallowed with an appropriate coating of Rousseauian or Weberian scepticism. Modernity brings both emancipation and loss: not heaven on earth but the struggles of Sisyphus, the boring of hard boards, the demands of responsibility and community in a world in which secular principles have lost their heavenly glow.

Claims to novelty, in short, already have an appropriate location within the established conventions of contemporary intellectual life. Even the startling dissolutions and reconstitutions of 1989 can seem like business as usual once one is sedated by contemporary philosophies of history, by scholarly procedures that, no less than established political interests, are ready and willing to put novelties and uncertainties in their proper place.

Nevertheless, philosophies of history that depend on an affirmation – even a highly qualified affirmation – of the European Enlightenment or nineteenth-century theories of progress have themselves come to appear as artifacts of a world that has transformed beyond the imagination of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prophets. Those philosophies of history are still captivated by a pervasive sense of space and territoriality. They promise to take us from here to there, from tradition to modernity, from modernity to postmodernity, from primitive to developed, from darkness into light. In this sense, they reproduce the fixing of temporality within spatial categories that has been so crucial in the construction of the most influential traditions of Western philosophy and socio-political thought. Whether moving from the dangers of sophistry to the eternal forms, from the sins of earth to the redemptions of eternity or from the vagaries of individual subjectivity to the objective certainties of nature, modern accounts of history and temporality have been guided by attempts to capture the passing

moment within a spatial order: within, say, the invariant laws of Euclid, the segmented precision of the clock or the sovereign claims of territorial states.<sup>2</sup>

Interpretations of momentous events have again begun to sediment into manageable routines. Speculations about grand civilisational transformations have become more familiar as the blinkers of Cold War fade and a new millennium beckons. But the experience of temporality, of speed, velocity and acceleration, is more and more bewildering.

Despite the bewilderment, this experience is now richly inscribed in the contemporary imagination.<sup>3</sup> Discourses of military strategy express worries about contracting response times and instantaneous decisions rather than about the logistics of extended territorial spaces. Discourses of political economy speak about the enhanced mobility of capital compared with territorial constraints experienced by governments and labour. The language of probabilities and accelerations now familiar from astrophysics contrasts sharply with the restrained dynamics expressed in the great Newtonian synthesis of cosmic order. A popular culture of freeze-frames, instant replays and video simulations is widely interpreted as an expression of a rapidly changing world of speed and contingency that increasingly eludes the comprehension even of all those theories, those one dimensional echoes of Durkheim, Weber and Marx, that once captured the unprecedented dynamics of modernity with such conviction.

Whether in the context of traumatic events, of accounts of modernity as variations on the themes of spatial extension and historical progress, or of more recent readings of what has been characterised variously as a posthistorical or postmodern condition, contemporary claims about novelty pose a range of fundamental problems for contemporary political thought and practice. In this book, I am concerned to explore some of these problems by examining how they have come to be expressed by contemporary theories of international relations.<sup>4</sup>

Theories of international relations, I will argue, are interesting less for the substantive explanations they offer about political conditions in the modern world than as expressions of the limits of the contemporary political imagination when confronted with persistent claims about and evidence of fundamental historical and structural transformation. They can be read, as I will read them here, as expressions of an historically specific understanding of the character and location of political life in general. They can also be read, as I will also read them here, as a crucial site in which attempts to think otherwise about political possibilities are constrained by categories and assumptions that contemporary political analysis is encouraged to take for granted.

Theories of international relations are more interesting as aspects of contemporary world politics that need to be explained than as explanations of contemporary world politics. As such, they may be read as a characteristic discourse of the modern state and as a constitutive practice whose effects can be traced in the remotest interstices of everyday life. To ask how theories of international relations demarcate and discipline the horizons beyond which it is dangerous to pursue any political action that aspires to the rational, the realistic, the sensible, the responsible or even the emancipatory, is to become acutely aware of the discursive framing of spatiotemporal options that has left its mark in the quiet schism between theories of political possibility within and theories of mere relations beyond the secure confines of the modern territorial state. To ask how theories of international relations manage to constrain all intimations of a chronopolitics within the ontological determinations of a geopolitics, within the bounded geometric spaces of here and there, is to become increasingly clear about the rules under which it has been deemed possible to speak about politics at all. As discourses about limits and dangers, about the presumed boundaries of political possibility in the space and time of the modern state, theories of international relations express and affirm the necessary horizons of the modern political imagination. Fortunately, the necessary horizons of the modern political imagination are both spatially and temporally contingent.

### **Historicity and spatiality**

The problematic character of modern theories of international relations has been widely discussed, especially in relation to the presumed bankruptcy of established intellectual traditions, the untidy proliferation of research strategies, an unseemly dependence on the interests of specific states and cultures, and the hubris of empirical social science. In the readings to be developed here, however, I want to show how this general sense of dissatisfaction must become especially acute when the historically specific understandings of space and time that inform the primary categories and traditions of international relations theory are challenged by speculations about the accelerative tendencies of contemporary political life.

The most important expression of these understandings, indeed the crucial modern political articulation of all spatiotemporal relations, is the principle of state sovereignty. They are also apparent in persistent debates about the validity of claims about political realism in relation to equally persistent claims about historical and structural trans-



formation. Consequently, much of my analysis is explicitly concerned with the specific spatiotemporal valorisations that may be traced in claims about state sovereignty and political realism. I will argue that, as they have been articulated as theories of international relations, claims about political realism are an historically specific consequence of contradictory ontological possibilities expressed by the principle of state sovereignty, and not, as is so often asserted, an expression of ahistorical essences and structural necessities.

At the very least, I am concerned to show that much more is going on in the construction of claims about state sovereignty and political realism than is usually apparent from even the most theoretically and methodologically sophisticated literature in the field. If it is true, as so many have concluded on the basis of diverse research strategies, that claims about state sovereignty and political realism simply fail to grasp the dynamics of contemporary world politics, then it is necessary to be clear about the conditions under which it has been assumed to be possible to engage with contemporary rearticulations of spatiotemporal relations. Familiar controversies about whether states are obstinate or obsolete, or whether so-called non-state actors play a significant role in contemporary world politics, or even whether states are becoming caught within networks of interdependence or functional regimes, do not take us very far in this respect. On the contrary, a large proportion of research in the field of international relations remains content to draw attention to contemporary innovations while simply taking a modernist framing of all spatiotemporal options as an unquestionable given. While it is not surprising that a discipline largely constituted through categories of spatial extension should experience difficulties coming to terms with problems of historical transformation and temporal acceleration, the implications of these difficulties have remained rather elusive.

Part of my aim in reading persistent claims about state sovereignty and political realism as attempts to resolve, or more usually to forget about, the spatiotemporal conditions of contemporary political practice, is to explore some of the implications of recent attempts to canvass the possibility of an explicitly critical attitude within the theory of international relations. Few would argue that such an attitude is now flourishing. Many even seem to feel that such an attitude would be undesirable. Certainly, the absence of a moment of critique in this context has provided one of the conventional measures by which to distinguish international relations theory from most other areas of contemporary social and political analysis. In fact, I will argue, the absence of a critical edge to most theories of international relations is a

rather special case. The distinction between theories of international relations and other forms of social and political analysis is itself an expression of the limits of a political practice that seeks to be other than what it has already become within the spatial horizons of the territorial state.

While my analysis draws upon ideas and strategies of investigation that have become familiar from broad and still controversial literatures about postmodernity and poststructuralism, I am primarily concerned to show how moments of critique that are already present in modern theories of international relations have been lost or forgotten through textual strategies that conflate, polarise and reify specifically modern accounts of spatiotemporal relations. In this context, for example, I am interested not only in the pervasive discourses in which political realists constantly confront idealists and utopians, but also the manner in which the possibility of a critical theory of international relations has been erased by a privileging of epistemological and methodological prescriptions that simply take historically specific–modern–ontological options as a given. The spatial framing of the relation between an autonomous subject set apart from the objective world is especially crucial, for it resonates with the same modernist dichotomies that have been reified so smoothly within claims about state sovereignty and political realism. Epistemologies that simply affirm these dichotomies are not obviously the most appropriate place from which to investigate a world in which boundaries are so evidently shifting and uncertain.

As a theory, or complex of theories, constituted through claims about sovereign identity in space and time, international relations simply takes for granted that which seems to me to have become most problematic. I prefer to assume that any analysis of contemporary world politics that takes the principle of sovereign identity in space and time as an unquestioned assumption about the way the world is – as opposed to an often very tenuous claim made as part of the practices of modern subjects, including the legitimation practices of modern states – can only play with analogies and metaphors taken from discourses in which this assumption is also taken for granted: hence much of the contemporary appeal of utilitarian micro-economic theory as a way of explaining patterns of conflict and cooperation between states. For all that they have been advanced under the banner of an epistemologically rigorous social science, utilitarian stories about rational action remain explicitly literary devices and carry enormous ontological and ideological baggage. Shifting allusions from that which is assumed to be known – the rational action of sovereign individuals in a market – to that which has to be explained – the

rational/irrational action of sovereign states in an anarchical system/society – they especially have encouraged the uncritical affirmation of claims to sovereign identity in space and time that might be better placed under rather more critical suspicion.

While my explicit focus is on modern Anglo-American theories of international relations, and on attempts to develop a critical posture towards them, I am also concerned with broader theoretical analyses of the rearticulation of spatiotemporal relations in late or postmodernity, and with what the specific experiences of international relations theory might tell us about the limits of our ability to comprehend and respond to contemporary spatiotemporal transformations more generally. Reading theories of international relations as a constitutive horizon of modern politics in the territorial state, I want to clarify some of the difficulties besetting attempts to envisage any other kind of politics, whether designated as a world politics encompassing the planet, as a local politics arising from particular places, or as somehow both at once – the possibility that seems to me to be both the most interesting but also the one that is explicitly denied by modernist assumptions about sovereign identity in space and time.

In this broader context, especially, it is difficult to avoid two sources of controversy that have become apparent in the contrasting meanings now assigned to modernity and to the designation of the present as either post or late. Both the character and contemporary fate of modernity are difficult to pin down in this respect. On the one hand, modernity has been characterised as either a privileging of space over time or as a culture of historical and temporal self-consciousness. On the other, contemporary accelerations have been understood as a reassertion of either temporality or spatiality.

As they have descended from claims about the ancients and the moderns, claims about modernity usually refer to a form of life associated with the emergence of those autonomous subjectivities and unbridgeable chasms charted by Descartes, Galileo and Hobbes, celebrated by Kant, and reified in popular characterisations of Enlightenment reason. As they have descended from various cultural movements over the past century or so, they refer more to a sensitivity to the fragility of those autonomous subjectivities and the impossibility of those chasms between subject and object, language and world or knower and known. The theme of modernity as an era not only of rapid socio-political, economic and technological transformations but also of a new consciousness of temporality and the contingency of specifically modern experiences, has been especially familiar since the late nineteenth century. In fact, much of the recent literatures on the

dynamics of late or postmodernity, as on late capitalism, may be read as a recovery and extension of ideas once associated with, say, Baudelaire, Bergson and Nietzsche as well as Marx.<sup>5</sup> Many of these ideas have long been explored in relation to literature and aesthetics under the rubric of modernism, although they have been largely erased from the dominant currents of social and political thought in favour of the progressivist teleologies of modernisation theory. Where many of the characteristic themes of postmodern and poststructuralist thought seem strange and even dangerous in the context of ideologies of modernisation, they are more likely to seem quite familiar to those who understand modern cultural forms precisely as responses to the renewed appreciation of temporality and contingency that was so characteristic of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century intellectual life in Europe.

While much of the contemporary concern with speed and acceleration may be found in intellectual currents that are modern in this latter sense, as well as in currents that are more convinced that modernity is an evaporating condition, theories of international relations remain deeply informed by the ontological horizons of early modernity, although many elements of the late-nineteenth-century crisis of historicism are readily visible in some versions of the claim to political realism. In fact, I will argue, reiterated appeals to political realism simply obscure contradictions that have long been troublesome to theorists of modernity. This is especially the case with recently influential attempts to articulate a so-called structural or neorealist theory of international relations, attempts which I read as yet another attempt to avoid serious ontological difficulties through a gratuitous appeal to epistemological necessities.

The double diagnosis of modernity as a field of spatial separations or of historical consciousness encourages a double diagnosis of contemporary trajectories. Some writers identify modernity in relation to characteristic claims about evolutionary teleology and progressive history. Impressed by the speed and accelerations of the contemporary era, they speak of a new spatial awareness, characterising postmodernity as a transition from time to space, from temporal continuities to spatial dislocations. Others, focusing more on the constitutive moments of early-modern thought, analyse modernity primarily in spatial terms, notably in relation to the spatial separation of the self-conscious ego from the objective world of nature, the aesthetics of three dimensional perspective, and the demarcations of the territorial state. Contemporary conditions are then understood as a revalorisation of temporality.

The historical and theoretical problems posed by these contrasting conceptions of the spatio-temporal character of modernity are obviously very complex, and pose serious difficulties for the analysis of contemporary political life. They are implicated, for example, in an important tension within the literature on modern political economy. Much of this literature has inherited Marx's insight that the dynamic character of capitalism implied the inevitable destruction of space by time: all that is solid melts into air. Analyses of the capitalist state, however, have had to explain the ability of political structures to preserve a sense of spatial integrity, whether in the name of territoriality or national identity. This tension is felt in the continuing rift between international relations and international political economy as forms of enquiry, a rift that is often, and not very helpfully, characterised as one between base and superstructure or between high and low politics.<sup>6</sup> They are also implicated in analytical procedures and disciplinary boundaries that simply reproduce obsolete distinctions between space and time in a world that seems more appropriately characterised by patterns of intricate connections. Nevertheless, especially because my explicit focus is on a discipline that has been constituted as an analysis of relations between states conceived primarily as spatial entities, I treat the primacy of space in the cultural and intellectual experience of the early modern era as crucial, as setting the conditions under which later accounts of temporality – including those given by Marx – could be articulated as a linear and thus measurable progression.

For my purposes here, contemporary claims about novelty and transformation in political life give rise to three groups of problems in particular.

One group concerns the interpretation of those structures and processes through which modern political identities have been constituted historically. Such interpretation is sometimes marked by a concern with culture, especially in relation to the emergence of nationalism as the most powerful expression of collective solidarities. Sometimes it is informed by various kinds of political economy, especially in relation to the state as an expression of particular interests. Sometimes it is informed by a multiplicity of perspectives on the development of individual subjectivities, especially in relation to the social construction of class, race and gender, to ideologies of possessive individualism and to the micro-politics of childhood. As I emphasise in the final chapter, however, analyses of culture, state, class, gender, race or individual subjectivity as expressions of modern political identity have been systematically marginalised in this context, primarily because the

character and location of modern political identity is already taken for granted in the claims of state sovereignty. Consequently, I am primarily concerned with the constitution of modern political identities in relation to the claims of state sovereignty, and thus to the early-modern resolution of competing claims to a universally conceived humanity, on the one hand, and to the particularistic claims of citizens on the other.

A second group of problems concerns the categories within which accounts of historical change have been framed in modern social and political theory. In this context, I am especially interested in the continuing impact of familiar tensions between philosophies/ideologies of Enlightenment and Despair:<sup>7</sup> between universalising accounts of progress and the end of history and the countercurrent of Romantic or disenchanted pluralism that has come to both challenge and affirm our most influential accounts of where we have come from, where we might be going to and, consequently, who in fact 'we' are. For my present purposes, the still elusive figure of Max Weber is especially important in this respect. It is through Weber, I will contend, that it is possible to see how these tensions have been insinuated into modern theories of international relations, and insinuated in such a manner that both the philosophical issues at stake in, and the political consequences of, these twin readings of historical possibilities have been more or less forgotten.

A third group of problems concerns those contemporary forms of theoretical critique – especially those that have been fixed under the eminently unsatisfactory labels of postmodernism, poststructuralism and so on – which seek to engage with the discursive horizons that still sustain and legitimise both the prevailing accounts of political identity and our most influential philosophies of history.<sup>8</sup> Here I want to insist that many of the themes that have been introduced into contemporary social and political theory under these labels have already been at play for most of this century. They have even been at play in theories of international relations, despite the reluctance with which the modern discipline of international relations has explicitly engaged with theoretical or philosophical questions of any kind.

It is in this context, especially, that I want to explore the successful marginalisation of almost all forms of critical scholarship in international relations through a rhetorical appeal to accounts of novelty and continuity that are rooted in specifically modern claims about sovereign identity. On the one hand, I will argue that this discipline has been marked by a systematic forgetting of the conditions under which it has been able to sustain both its knowledge claims and its

ideological reach. On the other, I will suggest that perspectives now emerging under the rubrics of postmodern and particularly poststructuralist critique do permit some clarification of what these conditions are. They do so primarily by engaging with claims about modern political identities and philosophies of history that are deeply inscribed in the central categories, debates and discursive rituals of the discipline.<sup>9</sup> As so many political analysts have said so often, power is often most pervasive and effective amidst the silences of received wisdom.

With each of these three groups of problems and questions, all of which may be understood as aspects of our contemporary puzzlement about the historicity of human existence, I am concerned with the degree to which an increasing preoccupation with speed, temporality and contingency undermines established categories of analysis in what has conventionally been one of the most spatially oriented sites of modern social and political thought. Most specifically, I am concerned with the degree to which contemporary transformations can be understood as challenges to the spatial resolution of claims about the possibility of meaningful political community within states and the impossibility of anything more than transient modes of accommodation between them. This resolution, expressed in the claim to state sovereignty, is the crucial condition that both permits and encourages the constitutive distinction between two traditions of thought about, and analysis of, modern political life: a tradition of properly political thought on the one side and a tradition of international relations theory on the other. This distinction between inside and outside, whether made explicitly, as it usually is in the theory of international relations, or tacitly, as it usually is in texts about political theory, continues to inform our understanding of how and where effective and progressive political practice can be advanced.

The sovereignty of states is, of course, often taken to be the most important fact of life in a world of more or less autonomous authorities. Indeed it is so important that it is usually taken for granted, left as an abstraction or a technical venue for legal squabbles. But claims to sovereignty involve very concrete political practices, practices that are all the more consequential to the extent that they are treated as mere abstractions and legal technicalities. Moreover, these practices are exercised quite as much within disciplinary discourses about international relations as they are in the routines of state-craft.<sup>10</sup>

To pursue speculations about the transformative quality of contemporary trajectories with any theoretical rigour, I will argue, is

necessarily to put in doubt the spatial resolution of all philosophical options that is expressed by the principle of state sovereignty – a resolution which is in any case always in doubt and subject to constant deferral, as well as subject to constant attempts to affirm its natural necessity. To put the point as succinctly as possible: if it is true that contemporary political life is increasingly characterised by processes of temporal acceleration, then we should expect to experience increasingly disconcerting incongruities between new articulations of power and accounts of political life predicated on the early-modern fiction that temporality can be fixed and tamed within the spatial coordinates of territorial jurisdictions.

This point is often lost in endless controversies about whether states are here forever or are about to disappear into some global cosmopolis. Indeed, the discursive form of these controversies is often much more interesting than the constructions of empirical evidence deployed to decide whether the head or the tail of this particular red herring should be swallowed first. What is at stake in the interpretation of contemporary transformations is not the eternal presence or imminent absence of states. It is the degree to which the modernist resolution of space–time relations expressed by the principle of state sovereignty offers a plausible account of contemporary political practices, including the practices of states.

Furthermore, to the extent that contemporary accounts of temporal accelerations evade the familiar clichés of modern philosophies of history, they also put in doubt the manner in which challenges to the principle of state sovereignty are conventionally advanced; that is, on the ground of universalising claims about peace, justice, reason and humanity in general. This ground is precisely the condition under which claims about state sovereignty were advanced in the first place. It cannot offer the possibility of effective critique.

This is one of the key insights that have been sustained by at least some contributors to the postmodern turn in twentieth-century social and political theory.<sup>11</sup> It is an insight that I want to pursue here in a series of meditations on the discursive rituals through which modern theories of international relations have been constructed as a clearly defined but only intermittently problematised horizon of modern political thought and practice. Approaching questions about political identity and historical change by reflecting on the implications of the postmodern turn for theories of international relations, I want to explore how we are now able, or unable, to conceive of other possibilities, other forms of political identity and community, other histories, other futures.



## **International relations and the horizons of modern political theory**

The sense that modern political life and thought is severely constrained within inherited intellectual horizons is fairly widespread. This sense of constraint is felt in popular scepticism towards established political ideologies. It characterises influential currents of contemporary social and political theory.<sup>12</sup> It finds a particularly interesting and important articulation in modern theories of international relations.

In this context, theories of international relations appear less as a set of variations on the theme of power politics – undoubtedly their most popular guise – than as a celebration of an historically specific account of the nature, location and possibilities of political identity and community. As a celebration, however, they are also a warning. They specify the limits within which the celebration may be conducted. They express authoritative reservations about how far and under what conditions this particular account of political identity and community can be sustained in either space or time. As a discipline concerned with the delineation of borders, the inscription of dangers and the mobilisation of defences, the analysis of international relations offers a particularly clear account of what it means to suggest that modern political thought is somehow endangered, in crisis, in need of repudiation, reaffirmation or reconstruction.

For the most part, accounts of the limits of modern political thought echo familiar rhetorical and critical strategies. Prevalent theoretical perspectives, it is often said, are out of touch with contemporary trajectories. Calls to dispense with the old and bring in the new become a chorus of reassurances that progress is indeed possible. Alternatively, dominant modes of thought are said to express the special interests of particular groups, classes or societies: so away with the parochial and ideological in favour of greater openness and universality. One of the most striking aspects of contemporary political analysis, however, has been an increasing concern with the limits of these familiar analyses of limits. The preoccupation, even obsession, with transcending inherited horizons has itself come to be seen as a characteristic aspect of the traditions that must now be regarded with suspicion.

This particular suspicion is in part what has made the postmodern turn and the scholarly strategies of post-structuralism so disconcerting to established forms of critical analysis. They involve not only a certain scepticism about inherited intellectual, ideological or ethical claims but

also about the possibility of moving to lusher pastures on the other side of the hill. The claim that the grass is in fact greener elsewhere, whether mapped as some realm of transcendent universals or inscribed in the essential qualities or rational capacities of humanity as such, has long been the explicit or tacit ground on which critique of inherited traditions has been deemed possible and legitimate. Without this possibility, this way out that is so often expressed in simple spatial metaphors of a journey to somewhere else, it is frequently assumed that we are left only with a conservative idealisation of the present as the best of all possible worlds or a merely nihilistic or relativistic deconstruction of any ground on which to engage in a progressive politics at all. This assumption is profoundly misleading.<sup>13</sup>

There is no doubt that theories of international relations express the limits of modern political thought in ways that are open to conventional forms of critique. These theories can be understood as the product of specific historical conditions that have now passed.<sup>14</sup> They can also be understood as ideological expressions of the parochial interests of particular societies.<sup>15</sup> They can even be understood in relation to the institutionalisation of specific academic disciplines and especially to the characteristic controversies of political science, the discipline that has had the greatest influence on the development of international relations as a mode of enquiry.<sup>16</sup> Yet while there is undoubtedly room for further critique of this kind, it remains exceptionally difficult to specify either the political grounds on which such a critique can be made or what its practical implications might be.

If theories of international relations express, say, spatial and temporal assumptions about political community that crystallised in early-modern Europe, as I believe they do, then it is not at all clear what it might now mean to ground critique in some other kind of political community, unless, for example, we invoke some purely abstract conception of humanity as such. Fortunately or unfortunately, and despite influential claims advanced by certain philosophical, ethical and religious traditions, humanity as such is not a meaningful political category. This is, after all, precisely the dilemma that was recognised by all those early-modern theorists who had to come to terms with the collapse of universalistic accounts of political, religious and metaphysical hierarchies.<sup>17</sup> It is for this reason that texts by Machiavelli and Hobbes remain significant for contemporary thinking about world politics, and not because these texts capture eternal verities about *realpolitik* or international anarchy.

Similarly, if theories of international relations can be understood as expressions of the *Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana* in which they have

largely been constructed, it is again not clear how it might be possible to specify some less parochial and hegemonic way of speaking about an alternative or more inclusive community. Even if early-modern conceptions of political identity and community are beginning to lose much of their plausibility, as again I believe they are, convincing accounts of alternative possibilities are notoriously difficult to find. They are difficult to find because the spatiotemporal resolutions through which early-modern accounts of political community were constituted, and then formalised by the principle of state sovereignty, have become so firmly rooted in modern thought and practice. They are often just as firmly rooted in aspirations for radical critique as they are in the most self-satisfied forms of conservative apologetics.

It is this presumed impossibility of even conceiving an alternative to the account of political community that emerged in early-modern Europe that is expressed by the most influential forms of international relations theory under the hyper-elastic label of political realism. Conversely, the pressing need for some alternative to realist tales of doom and gloom has become the common ground – usually designated as idealism or utopianism – of most of those who seek to criticise theories of international relations as obsolete and parochial ideology. In both cases, the historical specificity of this rendering of historical options is systematically obscured by philosophically trivial but discursively effective claims about, for example, inherited intellectual traditions, the relation between truth and power, and essentialistic theories about the state on the one hand and human nature on the other.

It is for this reason that suspicions about modernist philosophies of history and the imperatives of universal reason are so important for contemporary attempts to understand the horizons of the modern political imagination. They are especially important, for my purposes in this book, because they put into critical relief the assumptions about identity/difference, self/other, inside/outside, History/contingency and imminence/transcendence that have permitted theories of international relations to be constructed as a discourse about the permanent tragedies of a world fated to remain fragmented while longing for reconciliation and integration.

When placed in relief in this way, the characteristic debates of the discipline of international relations can be seen to confirm the established horizons of modern political discourse in general. Against those who are fearful of the postmodern turn because it undermines the possibility of escaping from the dangers of a fragmented world, therefore, I want to draw on poststructuralist suspicions of the conditions under which such an escape has been deemed desirable in

order to show how this very hope of escape has itself made effective critique more or less impossible.

Theories of international relations are a particularly interesting context in which to pursue the implications of poststructuralist suspicions of attempts to transcend inherited intellectual and political horizons because, at least as much as any other modern intellectual discipline, they are explicitly concerned with the politics of boundaries. They seek to explain and offer advice about the security and transgression of borders between established forms of order and community inside and the realm of either danger (insecurity, war) or a more universalistically conceived humanity (peace, world politics) outside. To be concerned with the implications of the postmodern turn for theories of international relations, therefore, cannot be simply a matter of importing the latest intellectual fad from elsewhere, in the way that certain forms of micro-economics or systems theory have been imported to provide models, metaphors and professional legitimacy for specific theoretical orientations and methodological strategies. It must, rather, involve trying to understand how theories of international relations – theories of relations across borders – have been constituted on the basis of historically specific and increasingly contentious claims about what it means to establish, defend or transgress borders, whether territorial or intellectual.

In focusing on the horizons of modern political theory, however, I do not wish to deny that for many or even most students of political life, established principles and assumptions remain more or less adequate to contemporary conditions. Still less do I want to deny a certain continuity between some forms of a critical affirmation of modernity and perspectives opened up by the postmodern turn. What is at stake here is not another grand schism between modernity and postmodernity, despite the recent prevalence of this seductive but profoundly misleading rendition of the alternatives before us. To construct an account of contemporary debates in this way would be to remain well within the established conventions of modernist discourse and their distinctive construal of what is normal or pathological, conventional or radical, legitimately identical or subversively different. While admitting continuity, however, I do want to challenge those affirmations of modernity that have degenerated into dogmatisms of one kind or another.

Claims to political realism, I will argue, have especially assumed this role, though in a distinctively ambivalent and therefore interesting fashion. Much less ambivalently, and much less interestingly, claims about modern social science have often taken on a similar quality.

Whether drawing on a positivistic distaste for metaphysics or simply starting from assumptions about rationality, objectivity and individual autonomy that have become hegemonic within modern liberal societies, modern social science has been prone to reduce all awkward questions to difficulties of method and technique. I am especially concerned here with the extent to which distinctions between fact and value, about the logic of empirical explanation and, above all, about the presumed priority of epistemology over ontology and axiology, have systematically obscured the highly contentious character of claims about sovereignty and political realism.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, the unself-critical character of so much social science, especially in the analysis of international relations, should not detract from the significance of attempts to understand modern political life as a positive historical achievement or to extend established principles in a more emancipatory direction. In the specific context of international relations theory, for example, emerging literatures express a growing interest in a more ethically inspired form of liberalism, one that aspires to some kind of Kantian republicanism or even a perpetual peace between autonomous political communities.<sup>19</sup> More significantly, perhaps, several attempts have been made to elaborate critical theories of international relations which seek to fulfil the promises of modernity rather than to call them into question.<sup>20</sup>

These attempts clearly resonate with a broader tendency within recent social and political thought. Perhaps the best-known project here has been Jürgen Habermas' ambition to rewrite Enlightenment aspirations for a universal reason while acknowledging at least some of the contradictions inherent in those aspirations that had so depressed Weber and Habermas' predecessors in the so-called Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.<sup>21</sup> Comparable projects are to be found in Hans Blumenberg's celebration of the capacity for self-assertion that he sees as modernity's great achievement<sup>22</sup> or in Charles Taylor's attempt to clarify contemporary moral dilemmas through an historical grasp of the achievement of self-identity.<sup>23</sup>

What makes much of this literature interesting, however, is not the simple affirmation of modernity, of the kind that is all too common in modern social science, but a careful even if sometimes reluctant acknowledgment of the highly problematic status of modernity. It is a sensitivity to this problematic character, in fact, that sustains the attempt to recapture or elaborate achievements – autonomy, freedom, rationality – that are known to be very fragile. Much of the same might be said, of course, about many of those who have been turned into rather simple-minded advocates of progress and universal reason.

Indeed, in my view, it is often just as helpful to engage with, say, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Hume, Kant, Hegel and Marx in order to appreciate the problematic character of modernity as to those who have absorbed the lessons of Nietzsche, Foucault and Derrida. Those who would confidently lay claim to modernist epistemologies in order to discipline contemporary eruptions of scepticism might usefully remember, say, Hobbes' reflections on language or the difficulty such early-modern thinkers had in responding to the demands of a purely secular political order.

This is one reason why many of the recent debates that try to force a rigid division between modernity and postmodernity are so misleading, no matter what important insights such a distinction can sometimes convey. Much of the postmodern turn can be understood as a series of attempts to reclaim or reconstruct or even to finally create some practical space for, say, a Kantian concern with the conditions of the possibility of knowledge or the meaning of autonomy in a world in which the secular guarantees of Reason and History can no longer console us for the death of God. It can also be understood as a multifaceted struggle to come to terms with the possibility of a critical or emancipatory political practice given the extent to which the great secular substitutes for God in modern political thought – Reason, History, the sovereign state, the sovereign individual and the universal class – have themselves come to seem so problematic.<sup>24</sup>

Most specifically, I want to suggest that many of the intellectual perspectives opened up by the postmodern turn can be understood as a way of trying to make some sense of what it might now mean to speak of world politics rather than just inter-state or international relations.

Despite the extent to which the terms international relations and world politics have come to be treated as synonyms, they also suggest a radical incompatibility. The early-modern resolution of all spatio-temporal relations expressed by the principle of state sovereignty implies a fundamental distinction between a locus of authentic politics within and a mere space of relations between states. While it is easy enough to ignore this distinction by reducing all social action to some crude common denominator – the struggle for power, instrumental rationality, universal ethics – most serious political analysis has been forced to respond to the difficulty of simply translating assumptions established in relation to statist forms of political community into that realm in which such community is assumed to be absent. Hence the constant warnings about the dangers of the 'domestic analogy' or the special antipathy reserved for utopianism that have been so much a

part of modern theories of international relations.<sup>25</sup> But hence also the distinctive silence of prevailing political traditions when confronted with claims about the need for some more cosmopolitan response to the collective experiences of a global economy, a planetary ecology or a technology specially designed for species suicide.<sup>26</sup>

The conditions under which we are now able – or unable – to conceive of what it might mean to speak of world politics, and thus of the spatiotemporal rearticulation of political community, are largely defined in terms of assumptions enshrined in the principle of state sovereignty. It is precisely these assumptions that are put into question, though not for the first time, by the convergence of philosophical critiques that have informed the postmodern turn. Again it should be clear that to engage in a postmodern exploration of what it might now mean to speak of world politics cannot involve a simple dismissal of all that has gone before. It does, however, require a re-engagement with the historically constituted limits of prevailing discourses about international relations/world politics without simply assuming that the historically specific resolutions of all spatiotemporal options expressed by the principle of state sovereignty are the only ground from which critical thought and emancipatory practice can be generated.

### **Meditations on the disciplinary practices of a discipline**

As a sequence of meditations on a discourse about the horizons of modern politics, this book has no straightforward thesis or conclusion. It is motivated more by a sense of the difficulty of speaking coherently about politics at this historical juncture than by any confidence that anyone or any one theoretical orientation offers a clear way forward. It most certainly rejects the notion that the postmodern turn offers some new research paradigm as these have come to be conceived within modern social science. But it does have a loosely articulated guiding theme, one that remains exceptionally difficult to specify except at a very general level.

If the early-modern principle of state sovereignty that still guides contemporary political thought is so problematic, as these meditations suggest, it is necessary to attend to the questions to which that principle was merely an historically specific response. While there is undoubtedly some difficulty in claims about the continuity of questions over time, it does seem to me that questions about political identity, and thus about the legitimation of various forms of inclusion

and exclusion, are no longer adequately answered in the territorial terms we have inherited from early-modern Europe and reproduced so readily in the name of state and nation. This has always been a contested answer, although the terms of contestation may have now become more complex and insistent. Questions about political identity, however, do seem to be increasingly central to attempts to specify some content to a term like world politics. They also seem increasingly resistant to the entrenched research strategies deployed both in the name of the discipline of international relations and of forms of political theory that are content to treat the sharp distinction between political theory and international relations as an implicit premis.

Consequently, it also seems necessary to attend to the most fundamental assumptions about the relation between unity and diversity and between space and time through which the early-modern answer was fixed and permitted to enter into the most pervasive practices of modern political life. Against those who would continue to preserve international relations as a discipline of dogmatisms and reifications, I want to suggest that claims about contemporary world politics necessarily engage with the most fundamental questions about contemporary political life. Rather than continue to be a site at which the characteristic interrogations of political theory are marginalised and deferred, it ought to be a site at which such interrogations are conducted most persistently. And against those who would insist that fundamental questions can still be resolved within modernist assumptions about the relationship of unity and diversity in space and time, I want to suggest that it is precisely these assumptions that make it so difficult to envisage any kind of meaningful political identity in a world of profound temporal accelerations and spatial dislocations.

These meditations have both a more and a less explicit focus. Of most immediate concern are specific moments of controversy within the discipline of international relations since 1945. The most important of these have occurred under the guise of the grand antinomy between political realism and political idealism or utopianism. I read the former as a plurality of discourses about difference in both space and time, and the latter as the discourse that makes claims to political realism possible in the first place. Contrary to almost all the conventional wisdom, I will suggest that the dominant tradition of thinking in this discipline is not political realism, which is in any case best understood as a highly mobile and diversified strategy of theoretical evasions. It is, rather, that constitutive claim to universality that has come to be both known and ridiculed as idealism and utopianism. Those



other controversies that are usually placed at the centre of accounts of the development of the discipline – about state-centrism and globalism or about socio-scientific methodologies – I also read as variations on this central antinomy. I read this antinomy, in turn, as a specific articulation of philosophical options expressed by the principle of state sovereignty. Concurring with supposedly realist claims about the significance of the principle of state sovereignty, I argue that theories of international relations tell us less about the character and consequences of state sovereignty than the principle of state sovereignty tells us about the categorical structures of international relations theory. Beginning with typical or influential statements about research options that have been made by contemporary scholars, I try to destabilise the assumptions these statements take for granted and then to show how other ways of thinking might be opened up.

Less explicitly, I am concerned to set in motion a range of ideas which respond to the dilemmas of political identity, historical change and the possibility of critique given an awareness of contemporary accelerations and uncertainties. One line of analysis begins with those early-modern theorists who managed to articulate a new – modern – account of autonomous subjectivities in the wake of the dissolution of medieval hierarchies. In this context, I am especially concerned to know how it is still possible to treat Machiavelli and Hobbes as critical thinkers despite the ferocity with which they have been reduced to mere cyphers in a supposed canon about the necessities of power politics.

A second line of analysis is indebted to a range of thinkers who sought to respond to the critique of Enlightenment rationalism at the turn of this century. Because of his direct influence on some of the best-known theorists of international relations like Hans J. Morgenthau and Raymond Aron, I focus especially on the legacy of Max Weber.

The third set of ideas is associated with the heterogeneous entanglement of postmodernists, poststructuralists and interpretive theorists who have developed searching critiques of the claims to autonomous subjectivity that were worked out in the early-modern era and tenuously reaffirmed by Weber. Here my main inspiration comes from Michel Foucault, but only because I have found him to be a particularly challenging and sensitive entry into ways of thinking about language, identity and power that seem to me to be indispensable for thinking about politics in the late twentieth century. While I do not wish to overemphasise the connections that might be drawn between Weber and Foucault,<sup>27</sup> I have found it useful to think of these

two extraordinarily complex thinkers as fertile sites for engaging with the relationship between claims about modernity, on the one hand, and about sovereign identity on the other. As broad sites of philosophical and political controversy, they have provided me with a context in which to draw upon some elements of the specifically deconstructive critique of sovereign identities associated with Jacques Derrida as well as an even broader – but here rarely explicit – intellectual heritage marked especially by the names of Kant, Marx and Nietzsche.

Like many books on international relations, I begin with Machiavelli; or, rather, with what it has come to mean to claim that one should begin with Machiavelli. I then work my way through problems that have been posed by the three 'great debates' that are generally acknowledged to mark the development of the discipline – debates about realism and idealism, about appropriate method and about the obstinacy or obsolescence of the state. I engage with realism by puzzling about the continuing influence of claims about a tradition of international relations theory in which the name of Machiavelli has retained a prominent role. A parallel puzzlement informs my discussion of claims about the need to bring ethics more forthrightly into contemporary discussions of international relations.

Themes raised in these discussions of realism and idealism are then recast in relation to more recent controversies arising from attempts to privilege certain modes of empirical and rationalistic enquiry. I am especially concerned to highlight the extent to which ontological, axiological and ideological problems are pushed aside in favour of a more epistemologically conceived understanding of social inquiry, and the extent to which claims about political realism manage to elide fundamental contradictions between structuralist and historicist commitments.

In chapter 6, I address the spatial framing of the primary disciplinary categories more explicitly, focusing especially on the characteristic opposition between claims that the territorial state will be ever-present or is now imminently absent, and on the transformation of horizontal territorialities into apparent hierarchies in the so-called 'levels of analysis' schema, undoubtedly the key classification of explanatory options encouraged by this discipline. In chapter 7, I try to move across the boundary between inside and outside in order to develop a reading of modern theories of democracy in the context of international relations. The very attempt to make such a move, however, merely accentuates an awareness of the limits of modern political thought and practice inscribed by boundaries of the state, and

especially of the limits of the particularistic communities within which it has become possible to articulate specifically modern accounts of universality.

In all of these readings of key debates, conceptual options and methodological injunctions, my concern is to destabilise seemingly opposed categories by showing how they are at once mutually constitutive and yet always in the process of dissolving into each other. The nice straight – spatial – lines of demarcation between inside and outside or realism and idealism turn out to be shifting and treacherous. Unsurprisingly, I end up at that other conventional starting point, the principle of state sovereignty. Concurring with the judgment that it is indeed necessary to take this principle as the key feature of modern political life, I seek to show how this judgment tells us more about the constitutive imagination of *modern* political life than about the determinations and possibilities of the political worlds in which we now live.