How does the impact of inequality in international relations affect theorizing in International Relations (IR)? I use “international relations” to refer to the subject of our analysis and “International Relations” to describe the discipline that aspires to study the subject. International Relations reflects and reproduces the inequality present in the disposition of material capabilities in the international system. Power translates into domination in the sphere of the manufacturing and reproduction of knowledge. Domination in the arena of knowledge further legitimizes inequality in the international system because it augments the capabilities at the command of dominant states and societies by adding “soft” power to “hard” power. Breaking the monopoly that controls knowledge demands that we seriously attempt to present conceptual alternatives to the dominant theories in IR. Leading academic institutions in powerful countries have produced these theories and thus cater to the perceived requirements of the policymaking communities in major capitals. I attempt to provide an alternative, or at least a supplement, to make a dent, however modest, into the inequality that pervades the field of IR.

This essay makes several pleas and presents a perspective, but it does not claim to furnish a paradigm capable of explaining the entirety of international relations to the exclusion of all other perspectives. It pleads for greater inclusivity in terms of the phenomena that are observed for the purpose of drawing generalizations in International Relations. In social science terms, it argues for broadening the universe from which data are selected to generate theoretical propositions. At the same time, it is a plea for less “theory” (especially in the

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1 An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the International Studies Association convention in Chicago in February 2001 as one of the featured presentations on the key theme of the convention.
singular) and more perspectives. It is, finally, a plea against mindless “science,” which attempts to find law-like generalizations on the model of the physical sciences, and for more explicit reliance on the exercise of judgment and, therefore, greater modesty in our claims for our favored perspective. This does not mean that scholars should eschew rigorous and careful testing of alternative explanations. All it denotes is that we must desist from making claims about finding timeless universal laws divorced from historical context.

Simultaneously, I attempt to put forward a perspective that is inadequately emphasized and barely discussed in IR theoretical literature. As I shall explain below, such a perspective has enormous capacity to explain two of the most important issues that any IR theory must satisfactorily explain to be credible: (1) the origins of the majority of current conflicts in the international system, and (2) the variables determining the domestic and external behavior of the majority of members of the international society regarding conflict and order, as well as matters of war and peace. The two issues are inextricably intertwined with each other.

A perspective by definition does not exclude other perspectives because unlike “theory,” it does not claim to be the sole repository of “truth.” “Perspective” thrives by building upon earlier insights, while modifying and adapting earlier perspectives to fit contemporary situations. It is historically shaped and does not lay claim to universality across time. Yet it does argue that it is relevant to a particular epoch because it can provide meaningful explanations about important issues that are relevant to that epoch. My perspective, which I call “subaltern realism,” sets out to do exactly this. It does not claim to be timeless, nor does it profess to supplant other perspectives in IR. It does maintain that it has the capacity to fill important gaps in the IR conceptual literature that currently dominant theories, especially neorealism and neoliberalism, are unable or unwilling to fill.

I shall build upon three scholarly traditions and then attempt to integrate the insights gleaned from them with the international and domestic contexts within which the majority of states operate currently. First, I build on the insights of classical realist thinkers, like Thomas Hobbes, who were primarily domestic order theorists, writing in a context of domestic as well as international anarchy. Second, I build on the insights of the historical sociological literature that relate to state formation in modern Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries and have contemporary relevance. Third, I build on the normative insights of the English School about providing order to an international society.

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based on a fragile consensus among its members. In this context, I especially engage Hedley Bull’s attempts in his later years to reconcile the norms derived from a European international order with the expansion of international society after World War II, an expansion that had its roots in what Bull characterized as “the revolt against the West.” Finally, I attempt to marry the cumulative insights of these scholarly traditions to conclusions deduced by observing the behavior of the majority of states in the contemporary system and by deciphering the causes of most of the current and recurrent conflicts in the international system.

To achieve these multiple objectives, we must begin by grappling with the issue I first stated. Put simply, we can sum up this issue as follows: not only is knowledge power, but power is knowledge as well. In IR theory, dominated as it is by American scholarship, the production and reproduction, construction and reconstruction of conceptual assumptions, as well as theoretical conclusions that have now come close to being accepted as “truths” (even if competing “truths”) worldwide, depict this phenomenon most clearly. These theoretical assumptions and conclusions may diverge from each other, some marginally and others more dramatically. Yet all of the contesting truth claims have one thing in common: they privilege the experiences, interests, and contemporary dilemmas of a certain portion of the society of states at the expense of the experiences, interests, and contemporary dilemmas of the large majority of states. This limitation does not render such theories completely irrelevant as explanatory tools. These theories successfully explain important aspects of how the international system works. Yet it does restrict radically their explanatory power because they fail to reflect fully the totality of the phenomena they purport to explain and aspire to predict.

The monopoly over the construction of theoretical knowledge depicts fundamentally the problem of inequality in both international relations and International Relations. It shapes the thought patterns of policymakers and analysts alike across much of the globe. This knowledge monopoly is intimately related to the monopoly over what forms the legitimate subject of study in IR, as well as, more substantively, “who gets to make the rules within which international relations proceed and who decides how and where to enforce them.”

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4 Stanley Hoffmann captured this reality clearly a quarter century ago in “An American Social Science: International Relations,” _Daedalus_ 106, No. 3 (1977), pp. 41–60.

This leads to a major problem that could be potentially self-defeating, even for those who are the primary exponents of such theories and for their natural constituencies among the policymakers and commentators in the capitals of the major powers. Since much of the theoretically sophisticated IR analysis is based on premises that are of limited relevance, it does not reflect many of the major realities in the contemporary international system. As a result of this limitation, neorealism and neoliberalism, the dominant paradigms in International Relations, and the research that builds upon their basic assumptions are unable to satisfactorily meet the challenge that Michael Mann has posed to IR theorists: “What we outsiders really want from IR is substantive theory on its most important issue of all: the question of war and peace.”

Since questions about war and peace cannot be addressed without referring to the context in which conflicts occur and are managed and resolved, theorizing on the basis of inadequate knowledge of the historical and geographic contexts can be misleading and counterproductive. Neorealism and neoliberalism suffer from two problems in this regard. First, they neglect a major part of the political universe that must form the basis of observation (the source of “data,” as scientifically oriented scholars would aver) to provide answers to the question of war and peace. Second, the predominant theories in International Relations try to portray themselves as “scientific” and encourage the misleading conclusion that they are the repositories of “universal” laws that transcend time and space. Such a portrayal of “theory” defies the basic logic of theorizing in the social sciences, which Robert Cox sums up succinctly. Cox notes that in the social or human sciences, “All theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space.” Cox argues further: “There is, accordingly, no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space. When any theory so represents itself, it is the more important to examine its ideology, and to lay bare its concealed perspective.”

In their pursuit of “scientism,” neorealism and neoliberalism, and the neosynthesis that captures the increasingly expanding common ground between them, have lost substantially the sense of both geography (limited as their universe is in terms of geographic locale) and history (including the history of the

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geographic area from which they draw much of their data).\(^8\) This shortcoming deprives much of the theorizing done under the rubric of the two paradigms of historical depth and geographic comprehensiveness. In other words, it restricts their potential to accommodate and explain change in the international system, for we can explain change only if we have a vision of historical continuity (including the discontinuities embedded in the historical record) and spatial inclusiveness.

The contrast becomes particularly clear when we juxtapose the “scientific” approach of neorealism and neoliberalism against what Hedley Bull called the “classical approach” to International Relations.\(^9\) Imbued with history, philosophy, and law, and acutely conscious of its temporal and geographic context and the limitations accompanying it, the classical approach especially as employed by the English School, does not make false “scientific” claims.\(^10\) Nor does it lay claim to methods of analysis popular in the natural sciences. Bull described the classical approach as “a scientifically imperfect process of perception or intuition [that is] characterized above all by the explicit reliance upon the exercise of judgement.”\(^11\)

It is this “explicit reliance on the exercise of judgement” that provides the clue to the fact that scholars in the classical tradition are better able to expand

\(^8\) According to Ole Waever, “During the 1980s, realism became neo-realism and liberalism neo-liberal institutionalism. Both underwent a self-limiting redefinition towards an anti-metaphysical, theoretical minimalism, and they became thereby increasingly compatible. A dominant neo-neosynthesis became the research programme of the 1980s. . . . No longer were realism and liberalism ‘incommensurable’—on the contrary they shared a ‘rationalist’ research programme, a conception of science, a shared willingness to operate on the premise of anarchy (Waltz) and investigate the evolution of co-operation and whether institutions matter (Keohane). . . . Regime theory, cooperation under anarchy, hegemonic stability, alliance theory, trade negotiations, and Buzanian security analysis can all be seen as located in this field.” Ole Waever, “The Rise and Fall of the Inter-Paradigm Debate,” in Smith, Booth, and Zalewski, eds., *International Theory*, pp. 163–164. For an example of the scholarship attempting to bridge the neorealist-neoliberal gap and create a neo-neosynthesis, see David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).


\(^10\) One of the leading lights of the English School, Martin Wight, claimed that there cannot be an “international theory.” See Martin Wight, “Why Is There No International Theory?” in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966). The English School did not propound a theory. It developed an approach that may have turned into a tradition or even a school (although the latter term may be too strong), but it certainly did not become a theory.

their horizons and select material from wider geographic locales and historical sources. This awareness made Bull realize during the last decade of his life that the universe from which he had drawn his material for his magisterial work, *The Anarchical Society*, was even more limited than he had been willing to concede until the mid-1970s. In addition, he recognized that this universe was shrinking further in importance because the major empirical source for generalizing about the future of the international system had moved beyond the original European homeland of the modern system of states.

As Bull’s last works, which emphasized the expansion of international society, demonstrate clearly, the classical approach provides a sense of history and is open to the idea of change and movement. It does so not merely because it can take into account unfolding events and the emergence of new social forces, but also by permitting its practitioners to learn, as Robert Jackson points out, from “the long history of observation and reflection on international relations and from the many theorists who have contributed to that tradition.” Such reflection inclines them to accept the idea that change and movement are not only possible, but also inevitable. Furthermore, this reflection leads scholars in this tradition to realize that the crux of historical analysis reflects the maxim that “Theory is hostage to practice and not the other way about, as is often assumed.”

My own recent work has attempted to combine the historical grounding of the classical tradition—in terms of both the history of institutions, including those that embody international norms, and ideas formulated by the great thinkers of the past, which I find to be relevant to the contemporary situation. I

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12 For example, see the works of R.J. Vincent, Robert Jackson, and K.J. Holsti, among others. A valuable addition to this genre is Jacinta O’Hagan’s book, *Conceptualizing the West in International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).


15 The historical and intellectual depth of the English School becomes clear when we compare its definition of institutions with the neoliberal one. “For English school theorists, institutions are practices embedded in the fabric of international society. . . . With Wight and Bull, the institutions of international society have a longer history than the proliferating regimes of the late twentieth century; moreover, English school scholars equate institutions with practices such as sovereignty, balance of power, international law, the diplomatic dialogue, and war. In order to understand the institution of sovereignty, for example, an English school approach would advocate a historical sociology of the term and the meanings given to it by state leaders at particular historical junctures. Such an investigation is not amenable to the ‘neo-neo’ requirement of framing testable hypotheses across like cases. [Furthermore,] the crucial contention of the neoliberal model is that cooperation can be understood without recourse to com-
have tried to combine this with a keen sense of, and particular emphasis on, the transformations that have taken place in the society of states during the past fifty years. My approach is historically grounded but makes no claim to timelessness, while asserting at the same time its pertinence in terms of unraveling the current mysteries of war and peace, conflict and order.

My perspective is particularly influenced by the normative tensions created by two major factors operating in the international system during the past half century, but whose importance has been inadequately recognized in IR theoretical literature. The first of these is the unprecedented increase in the number of new states as a result of rapid decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, repeated in a smaller measure in the early 1990s. The second factor is the continuing attempt by these new members of the system to replicate the European trajectory of state making and nation building in a vastly different international setting where the postcolonial states are much more vulnerable to physical and normative intrusion from outside. A combination of these two interrelated factors holds the key to explaining the behavior of the majority of states, as well as the origins of the majority of conflicts in the international system.

To meet Mann’s criterion for successful theorizing in International Relations, it is important to concentrate on these two factors as explanatory variables. Any perspective that claims to provide an intellectually satisfactory explanation in the field of IR must be able to explain adequately the behavior of the primary units constituting the international system. Furthermore, the perspective must explain adequately issues of war and peace. To retain its significance, the perspective must be able to explain why the majority of conflicts occur when and where they do. The latter function may also indicate how such conflicts can be managed and diffused, thus helping the policymaking community.

Neorealism and neoliberalism fail to perform these twin tasks because neither can explain adequately why the majority of states behave the way they do internationally and domestically. They also fail to explain sufficiently the origins, both as beginnings and causes, of the majority of conflicts in the international system today. They fall short in performing both these tasks adequately because they pay insufficient attention to the preeminent transformation arising from the numerical expansion cited above.

A principal reason why IR theorists in the West and especially in the United States neglected the importance of this factor from 1950 to 1990 was their preoccupation with the bipolarity that emerged in the wake of World War II. The analysts’ fascination with bipolarity became an obsession with superpower

mon beliefs or shared values. But . . . a core assumption of Hedley Bull’s is the way in which international cooperation is rooted in the sense of being bound by intersubjectively created rules.” Tim Dunne, Inventing International Society: A History of the English School (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), p. 186; emphasis in original.
rivalry following the introduction of nuclear weapons. Not only the strategic studies discourse, but also a great deal of the IR literature came to be dominated by nuclear concerns, spawning deterrence theories based upon the notion of Mutual Assured Deterrence (MAD). As two defining elements of the Cold War, bipolarity and nuclear weapons not merely overshadowed all other post-World War II developments as far as IR theorists were concerned, but they also added to the ahistorical nature of much of the theorizing in the field. This was the case because bipolarity and nuclear weapons were perceived to be novel features by both theorists and practitioners.

Yet when seen from a long-term historical perspective, these two developments, while unquestionably important, did not make a fundamental difference to either the workings of the international system or the norms of international society. Bipolarity was but one, albeit the latest, transitory manifestation of the balance of power mechanism that had helped order great power relations in the international system for some four hundred years. The development of nuclear weapons was a part of the continuing saga of the revolutions in military affairs that have rendered weapons more lethal and accurate. Such revolutions have been a consistent feature of the modern system of states. The nuclear revolution may have ruled out direct confrontation among nuclear powers with second-strike capability, but it ended neither competition among the great powers nor their rise and fall. The last was clearly demonstrated by the events of 1989–1991. More important, it failed to end war and conflict in the international system.

We can argue that bipolarity and nuclear weapons were second-order changes, especially when compared to the unprecedented expansion of the system’s membership. This expansion of the international society led to the entry into the system of postcolonial states with certain shared characteristics, which set them

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16 Lawrence Freedman states that the revolution in military affairs, of which the nuclear revolution is a part, has manifested “three basic trends over the past century. First, the reach of military power has been steadily extended. . . . [Second,] as the range has been extended so all aspects of civil society have become steadily more vulnerable to attack. . . . [Third and paradoxically,] the degree of dependence upon society as a whole seems to be declining when it comes to waging war. Manpower has become less important, economic mobilization less relevant, and accumulations of raw power unnecessary as precision replaces brute force.” Lawrence Freedman, “Revolutions in Military Affairs,” in Gwyn Prins and Hylke Tromp, eds., The Future of War (Boston: Kluwer Law International, 2000), p. 230. The nuclear revolution fits this description of revolutions in military affairs (RMA) well. The current phase of RMA, which is manifested in conventional high-tech weapons and linked to the information and communications revolutions, is the latest stage of this revolution and complements the nuclear one.

17 Hedley Bull argued that the “balance of terror” was but “a special case of the balance of power” (The Anarchical Society, p. 112).
apart from most other established members. Astute observers of the international system should have perceived this expansion as possessing the potential for major long-term normative and empirical impact, since it had the ability to generate changes that would outlive the temporary fascination with bipolarity and nuclear deterrence. Yet this was not the case during the past half century because postcolonial states were generally weak, vulnerable, and poor. Therefore, these states were vastly unequal to those seen as the “movers and shakers” within the international system. The neglect of this variable in theorizing about international relations was a glaring demonstration of how inequality works in both international relations and International Relations.

This neglect persisted, despite the fact that in the realm of security—the major preoccupation of neorealist thinkers—the new states redefined the very notion of the security dilemma by making it primarily a domestic rather than an interstate phenomenon. Their security predicament also demonstrated that the external security concerns of the majority of states could not be easily separated from those of internal security. Such preoccupation with internal security would have been perfectly intelligible to Hobbes but eluded the understanding of contemporary neorealist thinkers. In the realm of economics, the postcolonial states stood the logic of interdependence on its head, upsetting much of the validity of the neoliberal argument. Dependence, not interdependence, defined the pattern of their economic relationship with the established, affluent, and powerful members of the international system, thus rendering absurd the concept of absolute gains—the leading neoliberal assumption with regard to cooperation under anarchy.

Kenneth Waltz’s and John Mearsheimer’s arguments about the superiority of bipolarity over multipolarity in terms of providing order and stability to the international system expose more clearly than others the inability of the dominant paradigms to address most states’ security issues and to capture the dynamics of the overwhelming majority of conflicts in the international system. In making this case, they ignore the fact that stability in Europe was achieved at


the expense of stability and order in much of the rest of the world. The unwillingness of the superpowers to challenge the status quo in Europe was more than compensated by their eagerness to choose sides and fight intrastate and interstate proxy wars in the Third World. The result exacerbated conflict in the periphery both within and among states, thus intensifying disorder in the international system.21

Similarly, the neoliberal thesis on cooperation under anarchy skews the data in favor of affluent, industrialized democracies of the global North that form a small minority of the total membership of the international system.22 The conclusions do not correspond to reality when applied to the international system as a whole but are the result of several factors. First, the neoliberal emphasis on absolute gains as the primary beneficial outcome of cooperation within an anarchical system assumes much interdependence and a high degree of identification with each other among actors engaged in cooperation. It also assumes economic affluence and societal cohesion within these units and, above all, territorial satiation (whether voluntary or enforced by the outcome of two “world” wars) in their relationship with each other.23

These assumptions generate a false sense of mutuality. They neglect the fact that most Third World states are economically and militarily far too dependent on their external benefactors to benefit substantially from relationships based on the notion of absolute gains, especially if we put such gains in a long-term perspective. Many of these states, and especially their regimes, indeed reap some immediate benefits, like International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank loans or military hardware by cooperating with the industrialized states. Yet much of this comes at great cost, including premature economic liberalization, which often leads to deindustrialization and structural adjustment, with frequent major negative political and social effects and exacerbation of intra-


23 The democratic peace thesis, possibly the most influential offshoot of neoliberalism, suffers acutely from confusing cause with effect. Instead of recognizing democracy as the dependent variable that results from long periods of territorial satiation, economic affluence, and societal cohesiveness, it assigns to it the role of the independent variable that makes interstate interactions among democratic states peaceful. It refuses to recognize that these same independent variables determine both democratic outcomes and pacific relations among mature liberal democracies.
state and interstate conflicts. These costs raise doubts about the notion of absolute gains in terms of North-South relations.

Moreover, the overwhelming majority of economic interactions, which lead to interdependence in a “globalizing” world, take place among the triad of North America, Europe, and Japan. As Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson point out, “Capital mobility is not producing a massive shift of investment and employment from the advanced to the developing countries. Rather foreign direct investment (FDI) is highly concentrated among the advanced industrial economies and the Third World remains marginal in both investment and trade, a small minority of newly industrializing countries apart.”

Bruce Scott has pointed out the following:

The total stock of foreign direct investment did rise almost sevenfold from 1980 to 1997, increasing from 4 percent to 12 percent of world GDP during that period. But very little has gone to the poorest countries. In 1997, about 70 percent went from one rich country to another, 8 developing countries received about 20 percent, and the remainder was divided among more than 100 poor nations. According to the World Bank, the truly poor countries received less than 7 percent of the foreign direct investment to all developing countries in 1992–98.

Such statistics make much of the “interdependence” and “absolute gains” arguments appear irrelevant as far as the majority of states are concerned.

Equally, if not more important, the concept of absolute gains fails to capture the reality of interstate relationships among Third World countries themselves. Most of these states are neither economically affluent nor socially cohesive, and many suffer from the impulse of irredentism and the threat of secessionism. Since much of the interaction of Third World states—especially in the security sphere—is limited to their immediate neighborhood, they interact with other states that possess similar characteristics. Although there have been some attempts at building institutions to promote security cooperation and increase economic interactions among regional states (including ASEAN, SAARC, and ECOWAS), they have met with limited success. The relationship among contiguous and proximate states has been mostly one of suspicion, if not outright conflict. Many regional cooperation arrangements have been bedeviled by the covert if not overt hostility among members of regional institutions.

Furthermore, intrastate and interstate conflicts have become intertwined in the Third World for numerous reasons. These include the arbitrary nature of the colonially crafted boundaries of postcolonial states; the fact that they cut through


groups that can be considered to have primordial ties to each other; the nature of many of the regimes within these countries that promote exclusionary rather than inclusionary nation building projects; and, above all, the reality that some violence inevitably accompanies early stages of state making. As most contiguous and proximate states are usually at similar stages of state and nation building and their populations overlap with each other, these processes often have transborder impact.

As the history of early modern Europe clearly demonstrates, concurrent state building among neighboring political entities is usually a recipe for conflict and leads to the search for relative rather than absolute gains. This search is based on the simple logic that favorable regional balances, which can be constructed usually at the expense of neighboring states, aid the state-making projects of particular states, and unfavorable ones obstruct such efforts. It would take a very farsighted political leader to visualize the benefit of absolute gains in such a politically charged context, where the security and sometimes the survival of states and regimes hang in the balance.26

The inability of the dominant paradigms to address these realities, let alone capture them, results in their incapacity to explain the origins of most conflicts in the international system. It also illustrates their inability to explain the behavior of most states in the international system. It is essential to posit a supplementary, perhaps alternative, perspective to the currently dominant IR theories. Such a perspective must surpass the simplistic structural assumptions of neorealism. It must investigate above all the nature and internal dynamics of most states in the international system. By doing so, it will be able to expose the interconnections among domestic and international order issues. This has been a subject of perennial importance in politics, as any reader of Hobbes or Niccolò Machiavelli would divine. Also, I believe the perspective also must demonstrate the capacity to provide intellectually satisfactory explanations for the origins of the majority of contemporary conflicts in the international system.

In addition, such a perspective must be able to transcend the ethnocentrism of neoliberalism that limits its universe largely to one corner of the globe. Moreover, it must be able to demonstrate the illusory nature of the broader liberal agenda and especially of its maverick offspring, globalism, which attempts to impose a set of normative constraints on state action that are largely inapplicable to the state-making stage where most states find themselves. Most states that have emerged into formal independence within the past fifty years are currently struggling to approximate the ideal of the Westphalian state by acquiring effectiveness and legitimacy within a drastically shortened time frame and in highly unfavorable normative and practical circumstances. To demand that they transcend the Westphalian model and open themselves to unbridled

26 For details, see Ayoob, The Third World Security Predicament, esp. ch. 3.
economic and political penetration by powerful external forces, while attempting to provide domestic order, defies all political logic.

I believe that an alternative perspective with sufficient explanatory power can be fashioned successfully by drawing upon the insights emanating from various sources identified above. These include: (a) the penetrating observations of classical realist thinkers, principally Hobbes; (b) the astute analysis of historical sociology, especially the literature that pertains to state formation in Europe when states there were at a similar stage of state making that most Third World states find themselves today; and (c) the normative perspicacity of the English School, especially Hedley Bull’s analysis of the expansion of international society and its impact on international norms, a tradition currently represented by, among others, Robert Jackson in his latest book, *The Global Covenant*.

These insights then must be combined with a judicious interpretation of the current domestic and external, normative and practical predicaments facing the postcolonial states. The latter task is essential because it is these problems, many of them related to early state making and late entry into the states system, that generate most conflicts in the international system, as well as determine the external and domestic behavior of most states.

We must begin this exercise by reiterating that despite the proliferation of nonstate actors and their increased capacity, in relative terms, to influence international and national outcomes, the state continues to be the principal actor in the international system. Although this could change in the future, as human society progresses and develops to a “higher” stage, it is clear that the state, as the exclusive repository of legitimate authority, is now the sole and indispensable provider of order within territorially organized polities. Since no other institution can provide this order, which is essential for routine societal interactions to be stable and predictable, the state forms the cornerstone of tolerable political life within discrete territorial communities. Without it, life would be truly “poor, nasty, brutish and short.” A cursory glance at the cases of state collapse or “state evaporation”—Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Congo, among others—will be sufficient to recognize the verity of this proposition. Globalization does not so much marginalize the state as make it transparent that only those states that possess the capacity to ade-

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28 I am grateful to Keith Krause for introducing me to the term “state evaporation,” which captures the phenomenon of state failure in many cases better than “state collapse.”

quately regulate intrasocietal and intersocietal interactions can prosper and thrive in the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{30}

Consequently, the road map for weak states is not to transcend the Westphalian state and adopt post-Westphalian characteristics (whatever that may mean for polities struggling to establish themselves), but to create political structures that approximate to a much greater degree than at present the Westphalian ideal type by increasing both their effectiveness and legitimacy. It is true that to be effective over the long haul states must be legitimate; it is equally true that to be legitimate over the long term, states must be effective. Only by approaching the Westphalian ideal more closely can the postcolonial states provide stable political order domestically and participate on a more equal footing in writing and rewriting the rules of international order.

Moreover, only effective statehood can help solve the economic underdevelopment and poverty problems that plague much of the Third World. “The state’s crucial role is evident in the West’s economic development. European economic supremacy was forged not by actors who followed a ‘Washington consensus’ model but by strong states.”\textsuperscript{31} It is disingenuous to advise Third World states to remove all barriers to external economic penetration and reduce the role of the state in formulating economic policy in the hope that foreign trade and investment will solve their underdevelopment and poverty problems. As Dani Rodrik points out, a “version of priorities” results when “openness to trade and investment flows is no longer viewed simply as a component of a country’s development strategy,” but becomes synonymous with that strategy.\textsuperscript{32} Moreover, economic liberalization appears irrational when, in exchange for opening their economies, most poor states receive but a pittance in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI) from the multinational corporations (MNCs) based in the global North.

I call this alternative perspective “subaltern realism” because it draws upon the experience of subalterns in the international system. These subalterns are largely ignored by the elitist historiography popularized by both neorealists and neoliberals as a result of their concentration on, respectively, the dynamics of interaction among the great powers and the affluent, industrialized states of the global North. The dictionary definition of “subaltern” denotes those that are weak and inferior. Yet it is the common experience of all human societies that these are


the elements that constitute the large majority of members in any social system. Although borrowed from the subaltern school of history, my use of the term does not conform strictly to the usage by that school. Third World states, rather than subaltern classes, form the quintessential subaltern element within the society of states, given their relative powerlessness and their position as a large majority in the international system. This is a deliberate application of the term, emanating from my position that, despite the emergence of a plethora of nonstate actors, the contemporary international system is essentially a system of states. Therefore, states should still form the primary unit of analysis in International Relations.

At the same time, this perspective is a part of the realist tradition because it accepts the three fundamental elements of “essential realism”—statism, survival, and self-help. I refer to realism as a tradition rather than as a theory or school because the term “tradition” does greater justice to the richness and variety of realist thinking. The subaltern realist perspective attempts to go beyond the narrow structural confines of neorealism and examine the essential nature of the subaltern category of states. It does so by adopting a historical sociology approach that conforms to Theda Skocpol’s prescription: “Truly historical sociological studies . . . most basically ask questions about social structures or processes understood to be concretely situated in time and space. . . . They address processes over time, and take temporal sequences seriously in accounting for outcomes.”

In situating the Third World state in time and space, subaltern realism borrows from the insights of classical realist thinkers sensitive to both domestic order and international order issues. Hobbes is the foremost example of such thinkers, for, as Bull has pointed out “Hobbes’s account of relations between sovereign princes is a subordinate part of his explanation and justification of government among individual men.”

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35 Michael Oakeshott notes: “It belongs to the nature of a tradition to tolerate and unite an internal variety, not insisting upon conformity to a single character, and because, further, it has the ability to change without losing its identity.” In *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Press, 1991), p. 227.


Hobbes’s writings also highlight the tension between liberty and authority. For him, the solution was to concentrate power in the person of the sovereign, but, equally important, to insist that the sovereign be legitimate (the product of a contract) and legal (bound by laws). “Hobbes conceives the Sovereign as a law-maker and his rule, not arbitrary, but the rule of law. . . . What . . . is excluded from Hobbes’s civitas is not the freedom of the individual, but the independent rights of spurious ‘authorities’ and of collections of individuals such as churches, which he saw as the source of civil strife of his time.”

Anyone familiar with the problem of competing “authorities” in multiethnic and multireligious societies, which make up most of the Third World today, would immediately understand Hobbes’s basic predicament and his attempt to overcome it by creating an institution—the sovereign—based on the “master-conceptions of Will and Artifice.” Similarly, anyone familiar with the legitimacy problem of many Third World states will recognize the need for a social contract between citizens and citizens and citizens and the state. Such a contract would free the state from challenges to its authority. Hobbes’s social contract was obviously abstract, if not mythical, based as it was on deductive logic. Nonetheless, it captured the essential dilemma of modern state making and the fundamental departure this entailed from the multiple overlapping authority structures of the medieval period that lay at the root of much of the violence and chaos of Hobbes’s time.

In uncanny ways, the domestic context in which many Third World states function today resembles that of the late medieval and early modern period in Europe. This explains the relevance of Hobbes’s conclusions to our times. Unless the insights provided by Hobbes’s deductive reasoning are accompanied by the historical sociology of the modern state based on inductive reasoning, our perspective will remain incomplete. Historians of state making in early modern Europe provide the best source for these additional insights based on inductive reasoning since Europe was the original home of the modern sovereign state. Above all, such historical explanations debunk the neoreal-

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38 Oakeshott, Rationalism in Politics, p. 282.
39 Ibid., p. 227.
ist claim that all states are the same. “The central feature of historical sociology has been an interest in how structures we take for granted (as ‘natural’) are the products of a set of complex social processes. . . . Historical sociology undercuts neo-realism because it shows that the state is not one functionally similar organization, but instead has altered over time.”  

This insight lies at the base of Janice Thomson’s assertion that “international relations specialists would do well to abandon the notion that the state is the state is the state. The national state that emerged in 1900 was fundamentally different from its predecessor.”  

The historical sociology literature about state formation in Europe also relates to another fundamental aspect of the current dilemma facing Third World states—namely, that violence inevitably accompanies the process of state formation and consolidation. Tilly’s famous dictum that “war made states and states made war” captures this reality in a nutshell. Tilly’s conclusion is based on the European experience, which must be read in its proper historical context. This should lead us to recognize that what we now call “internal war” contributed to state making equally, if not more so, than interstate war. Constructing and imposing political order is by necessity more a domestic than an international activity. This becomes clear by Tilly’s own admission that “Early in the state-making process, many parties shared the right to use violence, the practice of using it routinely to accomplish their ends, or both at once. . . . The distinctions between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ users of violence came clear only very slowly, in the process during which the state’s armed forces became relatively unified and permanent.”

In the case of many Third World countries, most states were initially constituted by juridical sovereignty conferred upon them by departing colonial powers and subsequently endorsed by the international community through membership in the U.N. Yet this did not make them immune to challenges to their authority, their “right to rule,” on the part of recalcitrant elements within their populations or by those who aspired to replace the “successor elites” and take over the reins of state power themselves. In many cases, establishing effective statehood, to whatever extent this was possible, entailed the exercise of


violence and counterviolence by the state and its opponents. The imposition of domestic order became the prime preoccupation of state elites in most countries following decolonization. Despite differences in historical contexts, we can see the similarities in the security predicaments faced by Third World state elites and the state makers in early modern Europe.

As in early modern Europe, in the Third World domestic and international issues became inextricably intertwined with each other. The major difference was that during much of the relevant period in Europe the distinction between internal and external wars was far fuzzier than has been the case during the past half century because territorial domains were continuously contested and changed hands often. This occurred without the notion of legitimacy privileging any one party over the other until quite late in that historical process, thus making it appear that much of the state-making conflict between “princes” was interstate in character. This appearance can be explained by the fact that juridical sovereignty was not conferred as clearly on one of the parties as it is in the case of Third World states today. Also, borders among states were not as clearly delineated as during the past fifty years.

Although classical realism and the historical sociology accounts of state formation in Europe provide subaltern realism with fundamental insights, these are not enough to complete the perspective that must account for both the similarities and differences and continuities and discontinuities between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. One fundamental difference between modern Europe and the context in which Third World states have had to undertake their state-making projects is related to the fact that modern Europe’s state building was largely an autonomous and often unpremeditated activity by early state makers. For the Third World, the geopolitical contours of states were established largely by outside forces. Postcolonial state elites were left with the task of mobilizing human and material resources to effectively administer territories encompassed by colonially crafted boundaries.

In other words, in the Third World, state making is both less of an autonomous activity and more of a directed or premeditated one. In Europe sovereignty followed the establishment of effective state control. In the Third World,

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46 James A. Caporaso points out, “Sovereignty as a claim about ultimate rule within a territory came after the state itself, even if today we confusingly define the state as sovereign. This definitional tangle of separate properties masks a complex historical interaction between states and systems of rule.” “Changes in the Westphalian Order:
juridical sovereignty preceded the establishment of such control. Rather it was a precondition for establishing territorial and demographic control. This makes the task of Third World state makers both difficult and easier—difficult because it makes state elites less legitimate than those in Europe, who had won control of territory by the exercise of superior force; and easier because the trajectory for Third World states is clearly mapped out and unforeseen directions are ruled out.

It is not merely the geopolitical contours of Third World states that have been shaped by external forces. External actors also have determined the normative environment and the distribution of power in the international system. As a result, the history of state creation in the Third World has been subject to major external influences and determinants. The international power hierarchy and its capacity to displace great power conflicts onto Third World states and regions have impinged greatly on the process of state formation in the post-colonial countries. In addition, international norms that define effective and legitimate statehood, as well as those that increasingly encourage international intervention into the affairs of weaker states, have influenced crucially the trajectories of state formation among subaltern states. This has had major consequences for the level of conflict both within and among Third World states.

These states are faced with severe problems related to the operation of international norms and the recent changes that have occurred in that normative environment, largely at the behest of the developed states of the global North. As new entrants into the international system, their state structures lack adequate effectiveness and unconditional legitimacy. Yet international norms compel them to acquire both in a much shorter time compared to their European predecessors or to face international derision. Furthermore, contemporary international norms place contradictory demands on Third World state elites. They enjoin the demonstration of effective territorial and demographic control by the state. At the same time, they require the state elites to treat the domestic opponents of the state humanely. These concurrent but contradictory demands make the task of Third World state makers enormously difficult. European state makers at a corresponding stage of state building did not have Amnesty International and the U.N. Human Rights Commission breathing down their necks.

These problems have been compounded further by the policies of great powers that have traditionally interfered in the process of state building in many Third World countries to advance their own global and regional political agendas. In doing so, they magnify the difficulties inherent in providing political order to emerging polities. Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Zaire/Congo,

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47 Robert Jackson, *Quasi-States*. 

Afghanistan, and Somalia, among others, bear direct testimony to this fact. Consequently, Third World state making has proceeded in a far more difficult international environment than in Europe two or three centuries ago.

Clearly, there are domestic repression problems within many Third World states, as well as actual or potential instances of state failure. Yet use of force and state collapse are integral parts of the state-making saga, especially at early stages of state formation. This is not to condone state repression of selected groups, especially if the repression is systematic and sustained. Nor is the intent to justify repression by predatory regimes for self-aggrandizement. The intent is to invite reflection on two dimensions of this problem.

First, state repression for consolidating state authority should be distinguished from the purely predatory activities of self-seeking rulers who are interested not in consolidating state authority but merely in privatizing the state to enrich and empower themselves. For instance, Indian actions in Kashmir or Turkey’s repression of its Kurdish population should not be equated with the predatory actions of the Mobutu regime in Zaire/Congo or the Nigerian military regime’s suppression of the Ogoni people, who protest against the environmental degradation of their oil-rich lands.

Second, in many newly established states, the security of the state and the regime become closely intertwined. Without the security of the regime, the security of the state is likely to fall into utter disrepair, if not disappear altogether. Historians studying Bourbon France, Tudor England, or Kemalist Turkey will immediately recognize the verity of this assertion. Although analysts ought to distinguish among the purely predatory activities of ruling elites and those relating to state consolidation strategies, they must also be aware that sometimes actions to secure regimes in the Third World are essential for the existence and security of the state. Scholars must not shirk from exercising their informed judgment on this issue in relation to discrete cases. One cannot make law-like generalizations in this regard that would fit all cases of state repression and the exercise of violence domestically.

I have deliberately not addressed the issue of the plight of the subaltern classes, groups, and individuals within Third World states. The reason is that the international system has not yet progressed from being an international society to that of a world society. It is only at this latter stage that questions of equity and justice within polities would reach the top of the international agenda and invite concerted international action. Fortunately or unfortunately, we are still stuck at the stage where most people’s primary political loyalties are to their states and nations. Most important decisions about security and welfare

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48 For details, see Ayoob, The Third World Security Predicament, esp. chs. 5 and 7.
49 For the distinction between international society and world society, see Bull, The Anarchical Society, ch. 1.
are made at the state and national level, with state and national concerns determining such decisions. As long as this is the case, we must continue to see states as the primary actors on the international scene.

Treating the international system in normative terms, as if a world society were already in existence, would be self-defeating and counterproductive because it would project a solidarist conception of the international system that does not correspond to contemporary international realities. Conceiving international society in such false terms will permit the dominant powers to act even more arbitrarily by arrogating to themselves the right to act on behalf of the international community. Some cases of so-called humanitarian intervention already point toward this trend. The danger is that repeated arrogation of authority based on a solidarist conception of world order is likely to erode severely the fragile consensus undergirding the current pluralist notion of international society. It is likely to have a major negative impact on the level of order existing within the international system and increase the level of confrontational rhetoric and action.

The subaltern realist perspective is grounded in what it perceives to be the existing realities of the international system. It also exhibits a clear normative preference for the pluralist structure and ethos of international society for reasons repeatedly cited. Its contribution to the analysis of International Relations is likely to come from its capacity to provide more comprehensive explanations for the origins of the majority of conflicts in the international system and for the behavior of most states inhabiting it. It attempts to construct this comprehensive picture by weaving together several different intellectual strands. Again, these strands comprise the insights regarding the creation and ordering of political communities provided by classical realist thought; by historical sociological literature concerning the formation and legitimization of states in Europe; by the intriguing but important role played by the operation of international norms in ordering both domestic and international societies; and by the current predicaments facing weak and vulnerable Third World states that are at the early stages of state making.

As a result of the confluence of these various strands, the subaltern realist perspective assumes that issues relating to the maintenance and creation of domestic order and those of international order are inextricably intertwined, especially in the arena of conflict and security. It also assumes that domestic order issues, primarily connected with the state-making enterprise within states, must receive analytical priority if we are to explain successfully most current conflicts in the international system because they are the primary determinants of such conflicts. In addition, issues of domestic order and conflict are not

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immune to either regional or global external influences, especially given the permeability of the majority of states to external political and economic actors. The subaltern realist position also posits the linkage between domestic and external variables to explain the nexus between intrastate and interstate conflicts. It does so by highlighting the intertwining of the state-making enterprise with regional balance of power issues.

Finally, this perspective takes into account the impact of the international normative framework on state making and nation building in the Third World, as well as the Third World states’ insistence on maintaining the essential norms of the Westphalian system to protect themselves from unwanted external intervention. By integrating these various strands of analysis, this perspective attempts to provide explanations for both the origins of most contemporary conflicts and the behavior of the majority of states currently inhabiting the international system. It is this combination of explanatory capacities that makes it a powerful tool that can be used quite successfully to analyze issues of war and peace, conflict and order in the current era.

Although subaltern realism does not necessarily aspire to supersede or supplant neorealism and neoliberalism as the “theory” that fully can explain how the international system operates, it does go a long way toward filling important gaps in the theoretical literature and correcting the acute state of inequality that pervades International Relations theorizing. It does so by making the experiences and concerns of the majority of states the centerpiece of theorizing in International Relations. Inequality is certainly not new, yet it seems to be intensifying as a result of globalization and the latest revolution in military affairs. There is no doubt in my mind that the issue of inequality in international relations needs to be addressed more seriously at the beginning of the twenty-first century than has been done so far. Otherwise, there is the danger that the “global covenant” that sustains international order may begin to fray beyond repair. As professionals committed to teaching and research in International Relations, we could begin the task of addressing inequality in international relations by incorporating more widely in our discussions the subaltern realist perspective as an analytical device.

One last word about theory: to be elegant and comprehensible, theories attempt to be parsimonious. Yet parsimony perpetuates inequality by providing the opportunity to the more powerful to exclude and occlude the interests and experiences of those who have less power and less voice. Acknowledging the complexity in human affairs—less “theory” and more “perspectives”—opens up avenues for accommodation and adaptation that permit the subalterns to enter the world of ideas, concepts, and, yes, “theory.”