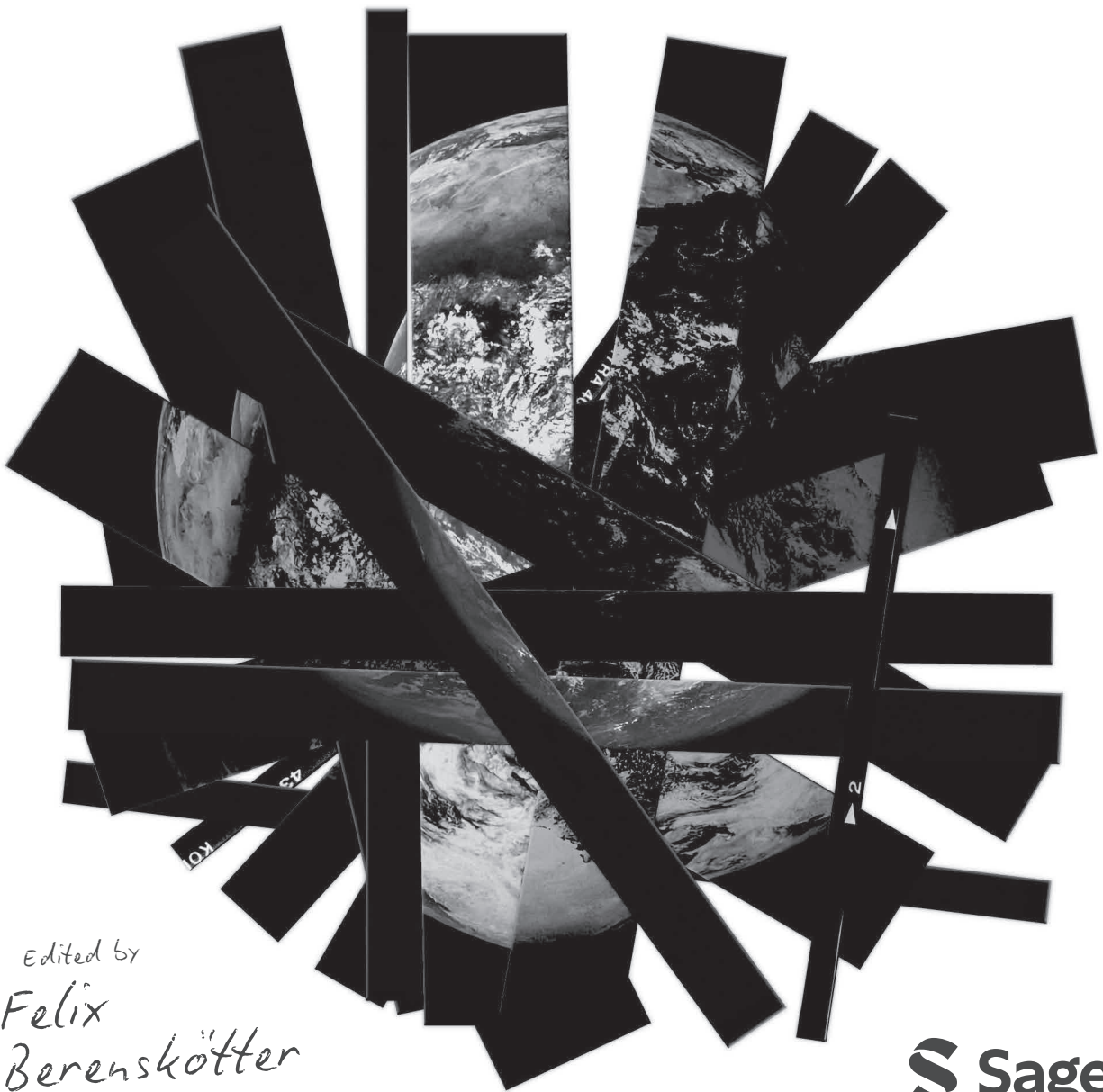


CONCEPTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



CONCEPTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

A NEW INTRODUCTION



*Edited by
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Preface

Felix Berenskötter

This book is an introduction to International Relations, with a difference. It shows concepts as windows into world politics. Like everyone else, scholars of International Relations (IR) use concepts to make sense of the world, to organise and navigate a complex and messy reality and identify its core features. Concepts provide mental shortcuts that allow us to cluster and categorize the multitude of ‘stuff’ we encounter into something manageable and meaningful. In doing so, concepts guide thought and provide a language that enables scholars to communicate their theoretical arguments and empirical findings. And by guiding thought, concepts also guide action. Too often, this important role of concepts in academic analysis and everyday life is taken for granted. Traditionally, students learn about world politics – the subject of the academic field of knowledge we call IR – through major theories and global problems. Most textbooks present world politics as something that can be understood with the help of seemingly sealed and simple theoretical paradigms, or through issues supposedly jumping at us from the real world, without much reflection on the concepts embedded in these accounts. When key concepts like ‘power’ or ‘the state’ are discussed, they often float uneasily between the two pillars of isms and issues. This book is different. Starting from the premise that concepts are the building blocks out of which theories are formed and the frames through which we see the world’s problems, it puts concepts front and centre.

Such an approach does not sideline theories or global problems but offers a powerful avenue to both. Focusing on concepts makes theory accessible. Students who want to learn ‘how the world works’ and how to make a difference often do not immediately see the relevance of theoretical frameworks. The assumptions and logics of IR theories and the debates within them can appear overly abstract and divorced from the issues students care about. Starting with concepts helps overcome this skepticism. It offers an accessible entry point for understanding the heuristic and analytical importance of abstract frames. First, the book shows that our concepts impact how we see the world. IR textbooks exploring real-world issues tend to downplay the interpretive work conceptual frames do in bringing those issues to light. Yet problems of war, order, or colonialism are not simply ‘out there’ and easy to see – they are complex phenomena of interactions, experiences, and expectations bundled together in concepts that make them intelligible. Second, the book introduces theoretical arguments and debates through the concepts around which they revolve. This not only invites students to explore different theoretical traditions, it also makes them aware that theory impacts the way we understand concepts. For instance, the meaning of ‘peace’ or ‘power’ is shaped by the theoretical narrative these concepts are embedded in, which has important analytical and normative implications. Third, the approach asks students to explore how concepts guide political agendas and action. Focusing on concepts and their

constructed nature sharpens the eye for how practitioners (want us to) see the world and its problems, how this influences their priorities and practices. Thus, it shows that concepts are powerful tools not just for understanding but also for *making* worlds.

By revealing their analytical and political power, the book highlights the stakes of using a concept in one way or another. It shows that definitions are not innocent: Whether you are a first-year student or a political leader, how you understand and use a concept matters. In that sense, the approach encourages students to see concepts as sites of both intellectual debate and political contestation. It shows that academia and the ‘real world’ are not isolated from each other but that our conceptual language moves across these two domains and impacts them both.

Concepts in International Relations: A New Introduction is part of a broader trend in IR that puts concepts at the centre of attention in both research and teaching. To be sure, the study of concepts has never been absent from IR and has been prominent among historians, philosophers, and social scientists for many decades. Yet the emergence of a wider research and pedagogical agenda that explores world politics through concepts is a relatively recent phenomenon born out of three overlapping developments. Most obviously, the so-called linguistic turn has made it increasingly difficult to ignore that our perception of, and engagement with, the world is structured by language(s). We need to pay attention to the terms we use. In addition, IR scholars have grown disillusioned with grand theories as analytical devices. Even if we cannot quite let go of them, there is dissatisfaction with the suitability of established paradigms to explain important phenomena in international politics. Perhaps most importantly, there is a sense that we are living through a period of significant social and geopolitical transformation, including challenges to structures of Western dominance that have shaped knowledge production in IR for a long time. Consequently, much of the established conceptual language feels outdated, prompting modifications and creation of new concepts.

Against this backdrop, the book treats concepts as social constructs that influence how we see, analyse, and act in the world. This broadly constructivist approach revolves around two principles, namely that (i) concepts are powerful ordering devices and guides, and that (ii) we have the power to question and alter the meaning. Thus, rather than presenting concepts as mere structural forces, the book highlights the importance of human agency in using, challenging, and changing conceptual meanings. In doing so, it seeks to foster both critical and creative sensibilities that will enable students to not only understand what concepts are and what they do, but also to *work with* concepts. This builds on my earlier volume *Concepts in World Politics* (Berenskoetter 2016), which tried to show that key concepts in IR have multiple meanings and make students aware of their open and contested nature. However, while *Concepts in World Politics* broke new ground, it was not designed as a textbook. In many ways it was an experiment that lacked a clear pedagogical framework, with contributions pitched at different levels. Its framework chapter, presenting three approaches to concept analysis, was developed during the project and did not shape the contributions. *Concepts in International Relations: A New Introduction* is quite different. Its treatment of concepts as windows into world politics, including to theory (isms) and real-world problems (issues), follows a carefully conceived framework and structure from the start. It is designed specifically for use in introductory IR courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate level,

but is written in such a way that makes it a valuable resource for students at all levels, and anyone who is interested in understanding global affairs today. Let us, then, have a quick look at how this book is organised and the main pedagogical features it offers.

The introductory chapter gives an overview of the academic field of International Relations by presenting a summary of influential theoretical traditions, debates, and their evolution. This serves three purposes. First, it gives students a broad understanding of different world angles, types of theory, and their place in the study of world politics. Second, it outlines how theoretical assumptions and arguments organise IR as an academic field of knowledge, and how these are formed in response to a wider geopolitical environment. Together, third, this provides a picture of the context in which IR concepts are formed, used, and debated. It introduces students to the relationship between theories and concepts, and to the link between the production of knowledge in IR and developments in the 'real world'. Students with a background in IR theory may want to skip the introduction and jump straight to **the framework chapter**, which explains the approach and presents the pedagogical features applied in this book. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's notion of *basic concepts*, it lays out that each basic concept in IR can be defined in different ways and, hence, can have different meanings. It argues that students need to pay attention to how these meanings are stabilised. To help with this, the chapter introduces the *concept web*, a visual tool that shows how a concept gains meaning through attachment to other concepts. The chapter then outlines two domains in which IR concepts operate: (i) the analytical frameworks employed by academics, and (ii) the discourse of political practitioners. This is to show that concepts have two functions by serving as *categories of analysis* and as *categories of political practice*. Moreover, in both domains, concepts can be (and are) used in conservative, critical, creative, or coercive ways. All chapters in this book are organised around these two domains and corresponding functions, without treating them as strictly separate.

The bulk of the book features 20 chapters written by academic experts, each taking a close look at one basic concept in IR and bringing them to life with concrete examples. The shared framework mentioned above ensures coherence across chapters, making it possible for students to follow the angles and insights from one concept to another. That said, the framework was not designed as a rigid template. It gives authors some flexibility to discuss the concept in ways they consider most effective. Thus, the sequence in which the two domains – academic and 'real world' – are engaged, and how this is done, varies a little from one chapter to another. Similarly, while all chapters discuss the usefulness of concepts for understanding today's world, some focus more on drawing out links to IR theories, whereas others point to historical examples. Students will appreciate these variations in emphasis, as they demonstrate the richness of the approach and the range of perspectives IR scholars have on world politics.

The first two chapters discuss the concepts of rationality and emotions, which capture fundamental assumptions about human nature. While perhaps not immediately associated with the study of world politics, they play an important role in how IR scholars explain decisions and (inter)actions. Moreover, while traditionally rationality and emotions were often cast as opposites, we now know that the two are intertwined. Thus, these two chapters are best read together. The next chapter on international order zooms out to discuss thinking about the configuration of world politics at a macro level. This is followed by a chapter on

colonialism, which directs attention to hierarchies and violent practices, past and present, in the international system. In a way, these four chapters open a space for thinking about agency, structure, and political relations in which other concepts in this book can be read. That said, there is no strict logic when it comes to the order of chapters. Some adjacent pairs or clusters like (sovereignty, nation), (war, peace, gender), (security, terrorism), (market, development), and (justice, international community, climate change) probably make intuitive sense. But readers will notice that there are also strong links between chapters not placed next to each other, such as (colonialism, race, development), (democracy, war, peace), or (diplomacy, international community). Moreover, the concept of power plays a role in all chapters. While chapters are cross-referenced, readers are encouraged to draw their own links, including with concepts that do not have a dedicated chapter but still feature in several places throughout the book. Quite possibly, you may end up seeing the chapters forming one giant concept web.

The decision which concepts (not) to include in the book was difficult. There is no scientific formula behind the final selection, which was made in conversation with the publisher taking into account suggestions from colleagues, contributors, and anonymous reviewers. While the 20 concepts covered here are deeply relevant for students and practitioners of world politics, my intention is not to declare them as the most important ones. It would have been easy to add others. Indeed, readers may wonder why a concept like ‘anarchy’, which grounded mainstream theories for a long time, or ‘globalisation’, which was hotly debated in the 1990s, are missing from the book. Especially as these and other concepts not included here – identity, revolution, intervention, integration, capitalism, religion – did have dedicated chapters in my previous volume (Berenskoetter 2016). The simple answer is that they had to make way for concepts like emotions, justice, international order, race, the market, gender, and terrorism, which ideally should have been included in the first book! Every list is incomplete. But if the book succeeds with its broader aim to demonstrate the advantage and appeal of exploring world politics through concepts, it should inspire and guide students to investigate the concept(s) *they* are most interested in.

Putting together a textbook is a lot of work, and this one was a truly collective effort. Working with Sage was, once again, a very good experience. Andrew Malvern approached me during the height of the Covid pandemic to probe the possibility of such a book, and his enthusiasm, persistence, and patience were instrumental in guiding this volume from start to finish. Jess Morgan, as well as Dan Price and Clara Landgren, smoothly supported the project in the development phase, and Nicola Marshall expertly steered it through the production phase. To everyone who worked on this book for Sage, from designing the cover to copyediting and marketing – thank you.

My deepest gratitude goes to the contributors, whose commitment to the project and enthusiasm to sharing their expertise with a student audience made this book possible. As any editor will know, getting 22 academics to write chapters that adhere to a particular approach and a given schedule is not easy. Yet even when I tested the patience of some authors with repeated editorial interventions, our interactions remained cheerful. One reason for this, and for the collaborative spirit accompanying this volume more generally, was a shared conviction in the power of concepts, and the opportunities we had to discuss how

to best convey this to students. Two online workshops in 2023 and an in-person workshop in London in 2024 enabled us to discuss the purpose and the pedagogical approach of this book, and to exchange thoughts on individual chapters. Conversations during these and other occasions were crucial for finding the balance between the authors' approaches and the overall framework. This process also benefited from critical and constructive feedback provided by peer-reviewers of both the initial proposal and draft chapters. Positive reactions from audiences at ISA and EISA conferences, where the idea of the book was presented, confirmed the demand for the approach. Last, but not least, the discussions all of us had with students over the years in classrooms across the world shaped the contents of our chapters in ways that are hard to pinpoint but tangible. My hope is that future students, and their teachers, will find this book a valuable resource for their own conversations about world politics.

For financial support that made the in-person workshop possible, I am grateful to Sage, Zeppelin University and the German Research Foundation (DFG), the Research Council of Norway through the research project *A Conceptual History of International Relations* (project number 288639), and the Standing Group on International Relations of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR). The most precious support in life is immaterial. I started this project at the tail end of holding a role in senior management at a university facing deep and multiple crises, which was tough. Working on the book helped me re(dis)cover my academic persona and my passion for teaching. But I could not have done any of these things without my partner, Caroline, who reminded me (sometimes sternly) that nothing beats spending time with family. This volume is dedicated to her.



1

Introduction

Felix Berenskötter

Setting the stage with theory

This book introduces students of International Relations (IR) to concepts as windows into world politics. It shows that concepts are powerful analytical devices for understanding political issues, events and relations, and that concepts work as political tools used by actors in world politics. We will explore these functions in the next chapter 'Studying (with) Concepts', which also provides the framework for this volume. Before we do so, this chapter sets the stage by looking at the theoretical environment in which concepts are formed, used and debated in IR. It tells you why we need theories for studying international politics and provides an overview of influential theories used by IR scholars. It outlines how theoretical assumptions and arguments organise IR as an academic field of knowledge, and how these are formed in response to a wider geopolitical environment. Together, this equips you with important background knowledge when working with concepts.

Theories provide a specialised language, powerful arguments, and intense debates that shape the content and the boundaries of the field of IR. This is an important function, as the subject matter of 'international' or 'world' politics is incredibly broad and, you might say, rather vague. We regularly find IR scholars discussing the identity of their discipline: Where does IR start, where does it end? What is the international? Some try to answer this question by determining the main topics IR scholars should be concerned with. For a long time, a prominent answer was 'the study of war' or 'conflict and cooperation between states'. These seem sensible priorities, but they don't capture the range of topics IR scholars are interested in, such as the power of global financial institutions, the political nature of outer space, or transnational solidarity between grass-root activists. Indeed, if today you look at the work presented at major IR conferences or published in respected journals, there is no simple or single answer to the question what 'IR' is about. Just ask three students why they chose to study IR and you are likely to get five different answers! The diversity is expressed not only in a wide range of issues and questions, but also in where we look for intellectual inspiration to fuel our research. Sometimes, IR is treated as a subfield of political science, but if you look closely it does not have clear disciplinary boundaries. It is more of a cross-disciplinary field that draws on insights and debates from

across the social sciences and the humanities: history, sociology, economics, geography, philosophy, law, psychology, media studies and so on. Therefore, this book refers to IR as a field of knowledge rather than an academic discipline.

The rich and diverse landscape of IR makes exploring its conceptual vocabulary all the more relevant and rewarding. This vocabulary is, to a large extent, organised in theories. In theories we find concerted efforts to develop (more or less clear) accounts of who and what matters in world politics, and it is theories that provide IR scholars with a specialised language through which they conduct and communicate research. In fact, it is more accurate to say theory provide us with multiple languages, as there are quite a few IR theories out there. This chapter helps you navigate all this in two parts. The first part introduces key *functions* (or layers) of theory, different *types* of theory you might encounter in the literature, and questions regarding the possible *scope* a theory might have. The second part presents a brief history of the academic field of IR through its major theories and associated concepts. The purpose here is not to give an overview of *all* the theories that exist in IR. Plenty of textbooks offer such overviews, and you are encouraged to consult them. Instead, the chapter will give you a sense how IR developed since it emerged about 100 years ago, and how its content and blind spots are shaped by prioritising certain theories and sidelining others. It concludes by turning our attention to concepts.

Understanding theory

Theory is an abstract mental construct that helps us to understand the world around us. For scholars of IR, it is an inescapable part of knowledge production. Whether we call it framework, approach, model, or paradigm, theory influences the questions we ask and how we address them. It helps us to see and explain big and small issues of the world, and it guides our thinking about what might happen in the future. Are wars between ‘great powers’ inevitable? Is it possible to make the world more just? Frameworks that fall under the label ‘IR Theory’ give us a vocabulary and pathways to systematically explore such questions. They not only inform our analytical endeavours, but they also provide a specialised language in which we communicate our findings and arguments across thematic or geographical areas of interest. Because they do all that, theories have always played an important role in defining the very content and boundaries of the field of knowledge we call ‘International Relations’. Moreover, theories feed the worldviews of political practitioners and help them to navigate, evaluate and act in the world. In that sense, we might say that theories ‘sing our world into existence’ (Smith, 2004).

Due to its specialised language and abstract nature, theory has the reputation of being difficult and a distraction from real world problems. This scepticism is understandable, but for reasons outlined above and discussed in more detail below, we cannot afford to turn our back to theory. Rather, we need to learn about and appreciate its basic functions and the different forms it can take, as only then will we be able to understand the power of theory and ways of using, building and criticising it. In the context of this book, theory influences how we read and use concepts. In fact, the influence goes both ways: concepts draw their

meaning partly from the theoretical context they are embedded in *and* they play a pivotal role in creating theoretical knowledge. With that in mind, let's take a closer look at the key functions of theory.

Functions of theory

Whatever their content and scope, each theory has three purposeful layers: First, it gives us an **ontology**, that is, a picture of *who* and *what* is out there. It interprets and organises the world in a meaningful way: Theory enables us to see **actors**, **structures**, events, dynamics and problems, thereby also guiding us to ask certain questions. As discussed in the next chapter, concepts are central to this process of making the world intelligible and enabling us to see relations in terms of 'inequality' or 'war'. What picture emerges in front of our eyes depends largely on what concepts a theory builds on and how it uses them. Second, theory offers an explanation, or what is also called a **causal argument**: It helps us understand how and why things happen, why certain (inter)actions, events, dynamics etc. occur. It provides answers to our questions and does so by logically connecting key concepts into an explanatory narrative. This provides a story that explains, for instance, *why* inequality exists or *why* wars occur by offering an argument that points to factors that create inequality or lead to war. Such a causal narrative, or statement, is generally considered the core function of theory, although the way these explanations are constructed and presented varies significantly from one theory to another.

Although we may see it that way, theory is not a neutral analytical tool. Rather, third, every theory is informed by an idea of how lives and relationships on our planet can be improved. That is to say, its ontology and causal argument(s) have a **normative dimension**: they translate into advice about what we ought to be doing to reduce inequalities or prevent wars in the future. They offer pathways to influence the course of events with an eye towards making the world – more precisely, the world(s) a theory shows – a better place. It is worth noting that not all scholars foreground this aspect of theory. In fact, they might hide or ignore it, because it appears in tension with the explanatory purpose of theory and with the ambition of social science to be objective and value-free. These layers and functions make theories powerful devices in shaping and directing research, arguments and debates. Concepts are implicated in all three: they are central for providing an ontology and for constructing a causal argument, and they carry normative outlooks. We will look at this more closely in the next chapter.

Types of theory

The way IR scholars use theory depends in large part on their views about the purpose of scholarship and what constitutes useful knowledge. These views are not so much concerned with the content of theory but with the more general question of the kind of knowledge that is possible and desirable. That is, they deal with fundamental questions of **epistemology** and are informed by debates in the philosophy of social science, including 'whether we derive theory from the real world or whether the real world is derived from some or other

theory' (Dunne et al., 2013, p. 407). How we answer these questions influences how we view the nature and purpose of theory.

Most theories used by IR scholars resemble one of the following three types. First, there are **grand theories**, sometimes also called paradigms, traditions, or schools of thought. As the name suggests, a grand theory seeks to present a big, encompassing picture. It offers a philosophically grounded, historically informed and theoretically nuanced narrative aimed at capturing something important about world politics, and often draws on insights from a range of disciplines, including history, philosophy, sociology and psychology. Grand theories are characterised by a careful engagement with key concepts, a complex and evolving explanatory narrative that situates the ontology of actors and their drives in an account of the human condition (Berenskötter, 2018a). It also articulates an idea of international or world order. This type of theory is difficult, if not impossible, to reduce to a simple causal statement. The most prominent theories in IR, including Realism and Liberalism, fall in this category.

The second type of theory is less ambitious and 'only' aims to provide a specific argument in response to a concrete problem. It has been referred to as problem-solving theory (Cox, 1981), empirical theory (Guzzini, 2013), or **middle-range theory** (Lake, 2013). It is informed by the view that theories should be designed to explain a given problem, tested empirically against an independent reality, and thereby generate predictive and progressive knowledge about the world. Rather than offering a complex explanatory narrative, middle-range theory tends to reduce concepts to variables and arguments to simple causal statements, or hypotheses, of the kind 'if A then B' (or slightly more elaborate 'causal mechanisms'). Because of its focus on testability, this type of theory is in close conversation with method, the procedure of data collection and verification. In fact, some applications even run the risk of conflating theory and method (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2013).

Third, there is **critical theory**. Proponents of this type emphasise the political dimension of theoretical knowledge. That is, they note that theory is not simply an analytical tool used by academics, but something that is embedded in society and shapes how we think and act. They are wary of 'reification', whereby theories turn into belief systems that appear normal or natural, akin to ideology. A particular focus is on how the meaning of core concepts is naturalised in the assumptions of a given theory. Critical theorists also maintain that the problems and explanations presented by theories are part of the same belief system and, thus, self-referential (Cox, 1981). In that sense, the approach is *critical of* theory practised in 'grand' and 'small' forms, and of producing theoretical knowledge that caters to political practitioners and their agendas. Critical theorists are explicit about the normative purpose of their work, namely, to expose the forces upholding the status quo and to create conditions for **emancipation**. In IR, this stance, or attitude, informs theories with Marxist, Poststructuralist, Feminist, Queer and Postcolonial sensibilities.

Scope of theory

Some may dream of a theory that captures everything and works everywhere. But no theory can show and explain the totality of actors, relations, processes and events in world politics. Even in simplified form, given the multi-layered and complex nature of social life on our

planet, that is impossible. Consequently, the picture of the world presented by a theory is *partial*: It highlights only a selection of actors, relations, processes and issues – namely those it considers important. On this basis, it offers a particular set of insights and arguments, interwoven with a normative outlook specific to the theory. For instance, a theory explaining the causes of inequality in the world, guiding our thinking about how to reduce (or exploit) that inequality in the future, is quite different from a theory explaining the causes of war and giving guidance on how to prevent (or wage) war. Within their respective area of concern, however, theories often claim to be able to explain inequality or war everywhere. In other words, they have the ambition to be *universal* in scope.

Yet, theories are subjective creations. They are developed and used by people in a specific historical, geographical and social location, and whose theoretical accounts of the world are motivated by their specific experiences, interests and concerns. This is what is called the *situatedness* of theory, which has two implications. First, it implies that no IR theory can be treated as a sterile model divorced from the real world. Rather, theories are created in and mobilised to make sense of political concerns and struggles within the real world, which is why they have a normative layer. They are formed out of practical knowledge and with the ambition to feed back into and influence what happens in the real world, which makes them politically relevant (Jahn, 2016). Second, it means that each theory offers its own perspective on the world and its problems. We may find that there are many theories about inequality, or war, which are developed from different historical, geographical and social positions, informed by different experiences and interests. Consequently, their insights, arguments and even normative commitments might not match, indeed they might clash.

Theories and the evolution of the IR ‘discipline’

Because theories are so influential in directing research and how we debate world politics, they shape the content and the boundaries of IR as a field of knowledge. An overview of the theories developed and used by IR scholars therefore provides a good understanding of the character and history of the academic field we call IR (Booth & Erskine, 2016; Onuf, 2016). In fact, an account of the major IR theories and how they developed is also an account how we want to see that field. Cultivating a particular mainstream is always also an attempt to discipline an undisciplined field. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind the last point above regarding the situatedness of theory, which directs attention to the fact that the development and popularity of IR theories cannot be disconnected from geopolitical dynamics and major events in the real world. Or, for that matter, from access to resources that allow us to theorise about it. This matters when we consider the status a particular theory has in IR.

So, what does the contemporary picture look like? If you browse through textbooks on the subject today, you will find over a dozen theoretical approaches that try to make sense of world politics: Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, Constructivism, English School, Theories of International Political Economy, World Systems Theory, Game Theory, Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Feminism, Postcolonialism and Green Theory (Berenskötter, 2018b). More could be added. While not all enjoy the same attention and popularity, this list indicates theoretical pluralism

and diversity of contemporary IR. Some find this confusing and hard to keep track of, but it should be welcomed. A look back at how the field of IR developed over the last 100 years or so shows that this was not always so.

Most accounts locate the emergence of English-speaking IR as a distinct field of knowledge in early 20th century Europe. That was a time of empires. So not surprisingly, a key concern among those observing, thinking and writing about practices of world politics was **imperialism** – the management of colonies, the competition between empires and the challenges to them. In the words of one careful observer, ‘the problem of empire and imperialism... was what preoccupied the first self-identified professors of international relations’ (Vitalis, 2015, p. 1). Closely linked to this subject matter was the view of international relations in terms of ‘race relations’, which from the perspectives of those writing in European metropolises was seen in terms of racial hierarchies. The first academic journal in the US dedicated to international politics, founded in 1910, was aptly called *Journal of Race Development*. A few years later the name was changed to *Journal of International Relations* and then, in 1922, to *Foreign Affairs*, the name it has carried since. The observation that ‘questions of race and racism were... integral to the birth of the discipline’ (Anievas et al., 2015, p. 2) applies not just to scholars who supported colonial projects with theories justifying racial subjugation. Theories were also formed in opposition. Between the 1920s and 1950s, a group of Black American scholars – which Robert Vitalis (2015) termed the ‘**Howard School**’, named after Howard University in Washington, DC, where many of them were based – developed theoretical outlooks critical of empires and racial hierarchies. Indeed, Black anti-colonial thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic – in the US, the Caribbean, Europe and parts of Africa – formulated and debated alternative theories of world order well into the 1960s (Getachew, 2019; Younis, 2022).

With the end of the Second World War, theorising about international relations in terms of imperialism and racial hierarchies became unpopular among White scholars in the US and in Europe. This mirrored developments in the real world. Although it took until the 1960s for the UN to formally declare colonialism illegal under international law, from 1945 imperial projects lost their status as acceptable forms of conducting international relations. And with formal decolonisation picking up pace, empires came to be seen as historical artefacts not worth studying anymore (for an exception, see Doyle, 1984). Similarly, defining relations in terms of racial hierarchies became morally problematic. Although such thinking did not disappear, it was rarely expressed openly by IR scholars. In addition, attention in Western metropolises now focused on the Cold War, the geopolitical conflict with the Soviet Union. In this context, the theories produced by the Howard School and thinkers of the Black Atlantic were disregarded by White scholars in the US and in Europe.

Forming the mainstream

The conventional and unapologetically Eurocentric account of the emergence of IR as a professional academic field in the 1920s and 30s highlighted a different set of grand theories. In those accounts, the stage of IR was set with a debate between **Realism** and **Liberal Internationalism**, sometimes also referred to as Idealism. A prominent example of this

account can be found in the book *The Twenty Years' Crisis* by the British diplomat-historian E. H. Carr (1939/2001). On one side was the realist view that knowledge derives from a reality of conflict driven by power politics. Realists routinely pointed to a history in which wars were an inevitable and recurring phenomenon of international relations, which they explained by arguing that human nature is dominated by a lust for power shaping the national interest of states. Attempts to ignore this would end in tragedy. On the other side were liberal theorists, who disagreed with the pessimistic realist reading of both human nature and the possibilities for international relations. In their view, humans are capable of overcoming antagonism and form cooperative relationships by finding and focusing on their shared interests. As such, liberals placed emphasis on the possibility of progress through the human ability of imagining better, peaceful worlds, and discussed the conditions supporting these possibilities.

Realists 'won' this intellectual battle largely because the liberal approach was discredited with the outbreak of the Second World War. The return of war to Europe allowed realists to claim that they were presenting a timeless wisdom and, in turn, to dismiss liberal theories as utopian. Thus, most theorists during the professionalisation of IR in universities in the 1950s and 60s adopted a realist outlook and are known today as 'classical realists'. A prominent voice among them was Hans Morgenthau, whose textbook *Politics Among Nations* became a standard reference for the realist approach and its principles (Morgenthau, 1948/1985). With two major wars fresh in collective memory and in the context of the immediate experience of the Cold War – the ideological and material competition between the 'great powers' of the US and the Soviet Union – realist theories appeared persuasive. But liberal theories did not go away. Knowledge production in IR was dominated by academics in the United States, and with Liberalism being the central political ideology of the West, liberal frameworks continued to attract.

In the early 1980s, Kenneth Waltz's influential book *Theory of International Politics* offered a new version of Realism as a discipline-defining paradigm (Waltz, 1979). In this book, Waltz developed a realist theory that emphasised a logic of anarchy as the defining condition of international relations: A realm of states driven by security concerns who, in the absence of an overarching authority, must balance each other's power. Because this theory grounded its account of state behaviour in the structure of **international anarchy**, it was called Structural Realism. In response, scholars like Robert Keohane (1989) put forward a liberal theory that emphasised the role of international institutions, or regimes, in mitigating this anarchical structure and facilitating cooperation between states. Whereas realists focused on state interests in terms of security, Keohane and others developed their theories by adding transnational actors and the realm of political economy. Their common baseline of seeing states as rational actors situated in an anarchical international system put '**Neorealism**' and '**Neoliberalism**' into a lively conversation over, for instance, the question of whether international institutions matter (Baldwin, 1993; Keohane, 1986). Phenomena of imperialism and colonial violence were absent from these discussions (Barkawi, 2010).

Of course, the evolution of the field of IR in this period cannot be reduced to an intellectual struggle between realists and liberal thought. There were other theories. One was articulated by the so-called **English School**. Its perhaps most prominent representative at

the time was Hedley Bull (1977/2012), who combined realist and liberal ideas to present a picture of states forming an international society based on shared ideas, norms and rules. Others focused on the economic dimension of international relations. Important works by Robert Gilpin (1981) and Susan Strange (1988) directed attention to hegemonic relations formed through and maintained by the world economy. In a similar vein, **Marxist-inspired World-Systems Theory** showed a hierarchical structure shaped by the logic of capitalism, consisting of (i) political centres that control or benefit from this system and (ii) political peripheries that are exploited by it. Adapting Marx's notion of classes to a global scale, the groups populating centre and periphery are seen as cutting across state boundaries and embedded in something akin to empire (Wallerstein, 2004). Each of these accounts attracted a dedicated group of scholars. And yet, realist and liberal assumptions, logics and concepts formed much of the field's theoretical canon, supported by links to prominent philosophical traditions, worldviews and values in Western societies, and by their political usefulness. If you wanted to be heard as a theorist, you had to engage their core concepts of anarchy, rationality, security, power, hegemony, regimes etc., and the arguments formed out of them.

Openings and alternatives

Over the last three decades or so, new theoretical approaches have emerged and begun to reshape the field of IR in important ways. The end of the Cold War, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union two years later, had a significant effect in this regard. To start with, it undermined the appeal of realist theories, because Neorealist logic could not make sense of the end of superpower competition: It did not foresee and could not explain this momentous geopolitical event in the real world. In contrast, the perception of the liberal US-led West as having won the Cold War breathed new life into liberal arguments and agendas. Carried by a mood of Western triumphalism and optimism, the 1990s saw lively conversations among IR scholars about the promises of spreading democracy and economic globalisation, which resonated with political projects and foreign policies pursued in Western capitals. The liberal enthusiasm gradually faded, however. In the meantime, the field saw a revival of realist voices combining concepts from Classical Realism, foreign policy analysis and Structural Realism under the label 'Neoclassical Realism' (Lobell et al., 2009). While creative, these accounts ultimately are variations on a familiar theme.

More significantly, the 'opening of the "iron-cage" of Cold War mindsets' (Booth & Erskine, 2016, p. 3) saw three theoretical conversations enter the IR stage that offered stark alternatives to the realist-liberal playbook. First, there is **constructivist theorising**. Inspired by the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences in the 1970s and 80s, IR scholars like Nicholas Onuf, Friedrich Kratochwil, John Ruggie and Alexander Wendt picked up the philosophical insight that our understanding of, and engagement with, reality is socially constructed and applied it to international relations (Hopf, 1998). Rather than anchoring ontologies and motivations in human nature or in our material environment, these theorists emphasised the power of language, norms, culture and identities in creating international relations. It was an invitation to theorise, as Onuf phrased it, a 'world of our making'. Some,

like Wendt (1999), tried to build a bridge to the mainstream and developed a social constructivist theory of how states could transform their relations from enmity to friendship, captured in the memorable phrase ‘anarchy is what states make of it’. More critical scholars, following in the footsteps of ‘dissident’ theorists like Richard Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, and drawing on social theorists like Michel Foucault and his work on the power of **discourse**, adopted what is known as a **poststructuralist approach**. Among other things, this approach highlighted the political nature of concepts and asked IR theorists to be reflexive about the vocabulary they use to study the world (Lapid 1989). It also prompted sophisticated analyses of, for instance, how governments understand and present ‘national security’ interests and justify violent practices through identity projects (Campbell, 1998).

The 1990s also saw **feminist theories** gaining visibility in IR, building on Western feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s and their critique of patriarchy and agenda to empower women. Feminist IR scholars faced an academic field dominated by men, where women were rarely acknowledged as either creators of, or actors within, IR theories. Recognising this as both an analytical and an ethical problem, Cynthia Enloe’s (1989/2014) book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* and work by J. Ann Tickner (1992, 2014) and Christine Sylvester (1994) confronted IR with new perspectives and hitherto ignored voices to develop lenses for seeing world politics differently. They critically diagnosed the gender-neutral tone of mainstream IR theory and its focus on state competition and lust for power as a masculine lens; gave political **agency** to women in seemingly marginalised spaces and positions, highlighting practices of solidarity and subversion; and adopted postmodern sensitivities to replace the maxim of theoretical parsimony with frameworks that embraced tensions and contradictions. Building on Judith Butler’s (1990) ground-breaking book *Gender Trouble*, feminist IR theorists problematised the political construction of gendered identities and explored their impact and contestation, which also inspired the emergence of queer theory (Weber, 2016). Another approach focused on directing attention to the contributions women theorists made to the academic field of IR, yet which had been rejected by the canon and written out of IR’s intellectual history (Hutchings & Owens, 2021).

It is not only feminist work that directed attention to important perspectives ignored by mainstream IR theory. The last two decades also saw the emergence of **post- and decolonial approaches**, which called out a field dominated by English-speaking academics based or trained in the United States and Western Europe. They articulate trenching critiques of the ‘White’ nature of much of IR theory, pointing to ideologically biased and racist underpinnings that fail to engage political dynamics in non-Western worlds and marginalise non-White voices (Anievas et al., 2015; Jones, 2006; Sabaratnam, 2020). To counter this provincialism masquerading as universal knowledge about the international, scholars put forward new frameworks highlighting the nature and legacies of empire and colonial relations, as well perspectives and agencies of people in the so-called **Global South** (Acharya, 2011; Seth, 2013). These pictures show world politics as a space structured by racial stereotypes and imperial violence, their impact on socio-economic relations, as well as strategies and practices of resistance. Again, an important aspect of this agenda is the recovery and reconstruction of alternative theories of world politics. This includes directing attention to Black thinkers ‘forgotten’ by mainstream accounts of the emergence of IR noted earlier, or

looking for Indigenous perspectives and conceptualisations of world politics grounded in non-Western traditions (Shilliam, 2010; Tickner & Blaney, 2013). The latter approach also overlaps with ongoing efforts to build a Chinese international relations theory (Qin, 2011).

These three theoretical conversations were carried by a critical attitude towards the categories and terminologies used in mainstream IR theorising and the thinking underpinning them. Scholars revisited core concepts such as 'security', 'power' or 'regimes' that had been monopolised by realist and liberal theories, giving them new meanings and locations. More importantly, they built theoretical interventions around concepts like identity (Constructivism), gender (Feminism) and race (Postcolonialism) that had been ignored by the mainstream. In doing so, these theories worked with different ontologies, different political spaces, relations and problems, pursuing one of two strategies: either building their new theoretical houses in dialogue with existing ones, with a bridge to the mainstream, or deliberately constructing a separate building on entirely new terrain.

(Re)turn to concepts

Against the backdrop of this rich theoretical landscape of IR, why should we approach world politics through concepts? The simple answer is that they are the building blocks out of which theories are built. There is no theory without concepts. But there are more 'IR-specific' reasons for why we need to focus on concepts now. This chapter hinted at some of these reasons, so in conclusion let us carve them out more explicitly. A good vehicle is the 2013 special issue of the *European Journal of International Relations* (EJIR), which explored whether IR theory had come to an end (Dunne et al., 2013). The journal editors' note that the answer depends on what we mean by 'IR theory' and by 'end' already shows you the importance of scrutinising key concepts in the questions we ask. But the case for concepts can be found in three observations that prompted the question in the first place.

To begin with, the EJIR editors observed that IR scholars were increasingly bypassing theoretical debates to focus on 'real world' issues. However, we know that the identification and interpretation of any 'real world' problem happens through a conceptual frame. Of course, we cannot expect every researcher wrestling with the problem of, let's say, building peace after violent conflict to have a grand theory at hand. What we should expect, however, is that they reflect on what they mean by 'conflict' and 'peace' and, thus, consider the meaning of key concepts that enable them to grasp the problem in the first place. Second, concerns were raised that the proliferation of theories has led to the loss of a common language among IR scholars, with members of a theoretical family mainly talking among themselves. Fostering conversation across theoretical camps requires learning of two (or more) theoretical languages and the ability to translate between them. That skill cannot be acquired overnight, but there is no better place to meet and start that conversation than our key concepts.

Finally, the question posed by the EJIR editors reflects the view that established IR theories may be outdated, developed in and for a bygone era, and therefore ill-suited to make sense of some of the most urgent political issues of our times, such as poverty, migration, climate change or the rapid development of digital technologies. This is coupled with a sense that we

are living through a period of social and geopolitical transformation. The last two decades have seen a reorientation in terms of what IR is about, where world politics takes place, and how to talk about it. At the heart of this reorientation is a shift away from a Western, US-dominated perspective and towards a more diverse and 'global' field of knowledge. This does not spell the end of IR theory, however. The process of building new IR theories that help us navigate new planetary challenges from different perspectives is well underway. Such theoretical innovation requires engagement with key concepts. In fact, they take centre stage.

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2

Studying (with) concepts

Felix Berenskötter

Learning outcomes

- Familiarity with the idea of a basic concept and why we need them.
- Understand how basic concepts gain meaning through 'concept webs'.
- Awareness of the analytical and the political relevance of basic concepts.
- Understand the implications of defining a concept and the importance of studying different ways concepts are used by academics and by practitioners.

Introduction

The central aim of this book is to help you see and explore concepts as windows into world politics. The introductory chapter reviewed the development of the academic field of International Relations (IR) through its major theories. Against that backdrop, this chapter places concepts at the centre of attention to give you a framework for the 20 chapters that follow. As noted in the Preface, concepts play an important role in analyses and the conduct of world politics, connecting the domain of academic knowledge and the domain of practical knowledge. The book shows this by taking a close look at a variety of important concepts, from 'rationality' to 'climate change'. In preparation, this chapter discusses *why* and *how* concepts matter, and the different ways they can be used and studied. It presents general insights regarding the analytical and political relevance of concepts, their place in academic debates and their operation and impact in the 'real world' that apply to all chapters. This equips you with a framework to guide your reading of the different concepts discussed in this book and your exploration of other concepts not covered here. The chapter starts with a discussion on what concepts are and what function they have in our lives. This is followed by an overview of how concepts are constructed, with a particular focus on the purpose and pitfalls of definitions, and the notion of the 'concept web', which helps you to see how concepts become meaningful. The last part of the chapter outlines how concepts are used in academia and in the real world, as categories of analysis and of political practice.

Why concepts?

Let us start with two seemingly simple questions: What are concepts, and why do we need them? The answers to those two questions are connected. Generally put, concepts are devices that order and make sense of a messy reality by reducing its complexity and by giving meaning to a bundle of practices, experiences and expectations. They are mental shortcuts through which we make the world knowable. They enable us to cluster, classify and categorise the multitude of 'stuff' we encounter into something manageable and meaningful. They give us what philosophers call an *ontology* – an understanding of what exists in the world. This is especially important for phenomena that cannot be reduced to a single observable thing. While we can associate a concept like 'chair', 'table' or 'car' with a single material object, this is not the case for prominent concepts in IR, such as 'the state', 'power' or 'war'. These designate broad and complex phenomena that are experienced in various ways, take multiple shapes and forms that can change from one moment to another. Concepts allow us to coalesce each of these phenomena into one real thing – they enable us to see, communicate and deal with phenomena we call 'the state', 'power' or 'war'. As such, one could describe concepts as frames or lenses. They function as frames because they help put in place a picture of the world, give it shape and boundaries, and direct attention to key features. Concepts also function as lenses because they give focus and make us see the world in a particular light. In combination, these two analogies provide a good understanding of concepts as cognitive devices that orient our attention. Yet, these analogies only carry so far.

The composition and configuration of a picture is not only determined by how it is framed or how the light is refracted. There is more going on. Each concept is a complex configuration, or composition, and this chapter provides a guide to understanding this configuration and its uses among academics and political practitioners.

An important source of insight here is the work of the historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006), who in the 1960s oversaw an ambitious project that traced the emergence and evolution of over 100 **basic concepts** (*Grundbegriffe*) in Germany (Koselleck et al., 1972/2004). For Koselleck, a concept qualifies as *basic* if it is central to how we speak about the world. In his words, ‘basic concepts combine manifold experiences and expectations in such a way that they become indispensable to any formulation of the most urgent issues of a given time’ (Koselleck, 1996, p. 64). They are leading terms in our everyday vocabulary that grasp important structures, processes and events; they are keywords and slogans used by social, economic and political organisations and movements, and by analysts who study them; and they are the core terms embedded in theories and political ideologies (Koselleck, 1972/2011, p. 8). As such, they do not merely exist as specialised terms in academic circles but are also central to our everyday language. They are fundamental codes of a culture (Foucault, 1966/1970). For our purpose, basic concepts are fundamental to the language scholars and practitioners use to make sense of, and act in, world politics. The concepts discussed in this book are only a small selection – there are many more!

Basic concepts are politically relevant because they provide a meaningful picture of the world in the two central dimensions of human existence: space and time. First, *they describe fundamental features of political space* and organise relations within it. Whereas Koselleck and his colleagues primarily explored concepts operating in German society, IR scholars use basic concepts to identify the actors, structures, relations and events that populate and shape our world at a global scale. One prominent IR concept is ‘the state’, often considered the most important political structure and central to mainstream IR theories (Hobson, 2000). While IR scholars like to classify states in terms of their power, or political systems, in the first instance the concept of the state organises the world in spatial terms: it shows a map in which the world is carved up into territorial entities of varying size and shape that are separated by borders. This picture is so common (have a look at the images that come up when you put ‘world map’ into an internet search engine) that it can be hard to imagine the political organisation of our world differently. Some have spoken of a ‘territorial trap’ (Agnew, 1994).

Second, basic concepts organise political space not just in the present, but also in the past and in the future. That is, they organise *how we think about world politics in time*. Koselleck argues that a concept gains meaning from the ‘experiential content’ it has accumulated and from the ‘innovative expectations’ it raises: On the one hand, concepts are formed out of, and are associated with, past experiences and practices, which give a concept historical depth and lend meaning to historical worlds. On the other hand, concepts carry an image of what could be and, thus, something to look forward to. They help us to imagine possible future worlds and enable us to articulate aspirations and expectations accordingly. Again, the concept of the state nicely illustrates this temporal dimension. It is often said that the idea and concrete form of the modern state developed in Europe in the 17th century, which makes the concept an integral part of European history. This reading is contested, with some arguing that the state can be traced back to China’s Qin dynasty that existed around 200 BC

(Fukuyama, 2011). Which account is more accurate depends in part on how we define 'the state'. The general point here is that the concept has a history or, as it were, multiple histories. And it does not just feature in the broad stream of human history but also exists in our personal pasts: for instance, when we recall experiences of showing our passport at the border, of paying taxes, or when someone we know is drafted into military service. These and other encounters make the state historically meaningful on a personal level. The concept of the state also organises futures and raises expectations. For instance, we may expect that a state will provide basic services, such as healthcare, for its citizens in the future, or that its police apparatus will come after us when it classifies our actions as criminal. The idea of the state may also be an aspiration for populations that do not have their own state and see in it a promise of independence, self-determination and protection.

If you think about it, it is remarkable that something as complex as the state can be captured in a single word. Of course, a concept is more than a word. The state is expressed in images (such as the maps mentioned earlier), it takes material form in the architecture of government buildings, and we see its practices such as border controls. Yet, we articulate and share basic concepts mostly through language, because that is the dominant social structure through which humans form, share and debate ideas. As philosophers and linguists have long pointed out, language is not just a vehicle for communication but also shapes our thinking and influences what ideas occupy our minds in the first place. This insight underpins George Orwell's famous novel *1984*, a story about a man struggling with a totalitarian regime that tries to control what can be said and thought by controlling language, including core concepts. By eliminating some words and changing/determining the meaning of others, the 'Ministry of Truth' tries to control the conceptual repertoire of a society and shape what the members of that society see and consider possible. This includes imposing slogans such as 'war is peace' and 'freedom is slavery' (Orwell, 1949). In Orwell's dystopian story, resistance to the regime is futile and leads to a tragic end. Not so in the social sciences, where the so-called 'linguistic turn' invited academics to grapple with the power of language and explore how the language we use to represent social reality also interacts with – some would say produces – this reality (Fierke, 2002). Building on this invitation, we need to understand how concepts are formed and operate in the languages of people who analyse and practise world politics.

The power (and problem) of definitions

We commonly make a concept intelligible by defining it. Crudely put, a definition is an attempt to temporarily stabilise the meaning of a concept. It goes beyond a single word and specifies the concept in a sentence (or two) to clarify *what the word means*. For instance, when writing an essay, students are often told to define key terms at the outset to clarify how those terms are understood and used in the analysis. They then borrow definitions from what they consider to be a source of authority without paying much attention to potential alternatives. In fact, most academics stabilise the meaning of their core concepts with definitions so they then can go on with their research.

One reason for locking a concept into a definition is the belief that there actually is one true meaning, which can be found through careful research and continuous refinement of the definition. And once that ‘true’ meaning has been found, there is no need to elaborate or question it further. This belief is grounded in the view that it is possible to accurately describe social reality by observing that reality carefully. In other words, we can read the meaning of a concept off reality. Most philosophers of science take issue with this view. They argue that no object has an intrinsic meaning embedded in it. Rather, we give meaning to objects. For instance, we may all know that the word ‘chair’ refers to an artefact with a surface we can sit on. Even if we take the meaning behind this word for granted, it still is socially agreed and not an independent property of that artefact we call ‘chair’. Indeed, two people may come across an object they can sit on and disagree about whether it is a chair. Most importantly, as mentioned earlier, the basic concepts we use in IR to understand world politics cannot be reduced to a single object. They are bundles of practices, experiences and expectations which the concept brings together. Every basic concept in IR is a social construct. This does not make it less real, but it raises the question why we would choose one definition over another. We may do so simply because the chosen definition is popular. Perhaps we lack the confidence to question it, we think that doing so and coming up with an alternative would only create unnecessary confusion and create more work. We may adopt a definition simply for pragmatic reasons because we think it is useful.

However, one central message of this book is that students of world politics must pay careful attention to how concepts are defined. This starts with recognising that all basic concepts can be, and indeed have been, defined in various ways. Multiple definitions often exist simultaneously – and which definition we choose matters. Take, again, the concept of the state. Over 100 years ago, the German social theorist Max Weber defined the state as ‘The community which holds the monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force within a particular area [*Gebiet*]’ (Weber 1946 [1919]). This conception features prominently in IR’s understanding of the state as a territorially bounded entity in which the authority to use force is hierarchically organised. It also links up with how the state is understood and practised in the real world: the monopoly over the legitimate use of force is widely seen as a key feature of the state, central to the principle of internal and external sovereignty (see Chapter 7: Sovereignty).

Yet, we cannot take this definition for granted, for two main reasons. First, we may associate the state with experiences and expectations other than ‘monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force within a particular area’. This should prompt us to look for a definition that emphasises different features. For instance, we could define the state as an institution with the authority to make laws and distinguish friends from enemies, or with the responsibility to provide healthcare and education for its citizens, or an environment that enables economic prosperity – and so on (for different conceptions from an IR perspective see Epstein, 2020; Hobson, 2000; Schuett & Stirk, 2015). Second, even if we stick with Weber’s definition, a closer look reveals that it can be taken in multiple directions, because the meanings of ‘community’, ‘legitimacy’ and even ‘area’ – the German *Gebiet*, normally translated into English as territory – are not self-evident. In fact, books have been written discussing different meanings for each of these! The point here is that even a seemingly clear definition

is still vague and can be read in different ways, depending on our understanding of its key terms. As Koselleck noted, concepts cannot be given definite meaning, they can only be interpreted (Koselleck, 1972/2011, p. 20).

We now can see that adopting and interpreting a particular definition is a choice, and this choice has analytical and political consequences. It informs how we classify, compare and evaluate the world. For example, if we want to count the number of states across the world and rank them from 'strong' to 'weak', how we define the state and draw empirical indicators from this definition determines what we see. It not only tells us what a state *does* look like, but also what it *should* look like – what properties a state should have – which then informs how we measure state strength and weakness. As Chapter 19 on the concept of development shows, such normative rankings entrench a reading of international relations in hierarchical terms, which not only shapes policies but also identities, that is, how we see ourselves and (behave towards) others. Another example for the practical implications of different definitions is the concept of peace: When different actors are involved in peace-building operations, the first question we should ask is whether they agree on the meaning of peace. Because if they do not, that is, if their work is informed by different views of what peace is, then they may not be building the same thing – indeed, they may be in each other's way.

Thus, we must look carefully at how basic concepts are defined and ask why certain aspects are highlighted rather than others, and who makes that decision. We need to remember the stakes. As noted, basic concepts are indispensable for a meaningful picture of the world in space and time. They are not just cognitive orientation devices that guide behaviour, they also have the power to shape reality. And because they are open to interpretation, there will always be attempts to control the meaning of a concept, just as there will always be attempts to question an established meaning and to advocate an alternative.

The concept web

Let us take a more systematic look at how concepts gain meaning. This book starts from a reading of concepts as images that are socially constructed to meaningfully organise our reality. The organisational effort that brings together different elements to form such an image can be displayed in a concept web. This is similar to what linguists call a semantic field, a term prominent among analysts influenced by structural linguistics going back to the French philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). The notion of a semantic field suggests that a concept gains meaning by being placed in a group of terms and symbols that relate to each other in a particular way. It asks analysts to look at where and how a term is situated within a phrase or paragraph, the function it has within it, and how its meaning is shaped by it. Conversely, we might ask how the term shapes the meaning of the phrase or paragraph in which it is embedded. Yet, studying how concepts gain meaning in linguistic structures and semantic fields is not enough. As mentioned earlier, concepts are expressed not only in language. They can also take on non-linguistic form, that is, it can be expressed visually (for instance, through pictures), materially (for instance, through architecture), or through actions (for instance, through symbolic gestures).

Whatever the medium, a basic concept gains meaning through relations with other concepts, and these relations can be seen as forming a web. We can distinguish between three types of concepts that compose a given web: First, there are **contrasting** concepts that are opposite in meaning to the concept in question, and which relate to and (in)form each other through a dialectic. Linguists also call these antonyms. The juxtaposition of ‘war’ and ‘peace’ is a prominent example, which maintains that ‘peace’ is ‘not war’. Contrasting concepts can also take the form of counter-concepts, something that forms in direct response and points in the opposite direction, as for instance in ‘revolutionary’ and ‘reactionary’. Second, there are **cognate** concepts, which share a meaning at a higher level. This includes synonyms but also concepts that are *similar* and bear what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) called a ‘family resemblance’. For instance, football and basketball are both games, and so for someone who does not know the meaning of basketball it helps to know that it is a game of two teams competing for a ball like football but with different rules. Third, there are **supporting** concepts, which fall in neither of the above categories but are integral to the meaning of a basic concept. To return to the example of the state, ‘territory’ and ‘sovereignty’ usually function as important supporting concepts. The number and meanings of supporting concepts can vary, which impacts how we understand the basic concept at hand.

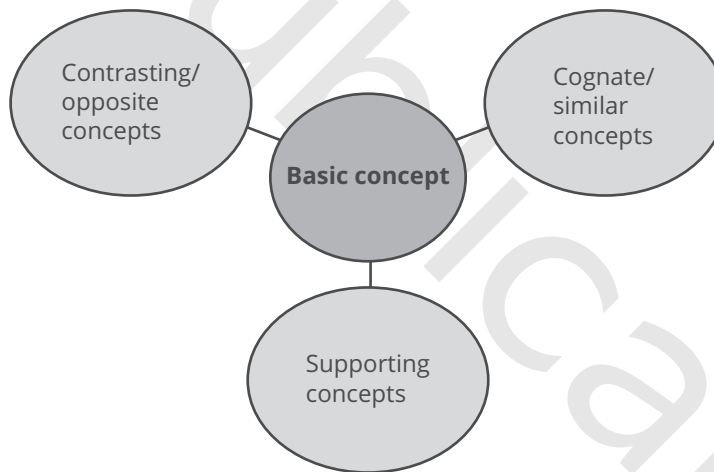


Figure 2.1 Concept web: Studying (with) concepts

The concept web (see Figure 2.1) catches multiple experiences and expectations, relates them to each other and bundles them *within* the basic concept. Picturing the latter at the centre of such a web and thereby holding together a unique configuration of meaning is captured by Koselleck when he wrote that a basic concept ‘is not simply indicative of the relations which it covers, it is also a factor within them’ (Koselleck, 1979/2004, p. 86). It brings together, connects and organises those different elements. *How* they connect, that is, how concepts in a web relate to each other, is another (and important) question. Relations can be grounded in logic (as in war–peace), but they also can be habitual, sentimental or

normative. Furthermore, we need to keep in mind that the meaning of each concept in the web can have a different web of its own! In Weber's definition of the state, 'community' is a supporting concept, yet to understand the meaning of 'community' we would need to look at *its* concept web. Tracing all these links can easily lead down a rabbit hole, and we must draw a line somewhere. However, it is important to be aware that changing the meaning of any of the concepts within a web impacts the configuration as a whole and, thus, how we read the basic concept sitting at the centre.

The meaning of a concept can also change when an adjective is added to it. For instance, as Koselleck pointed out, the concept of 'liberty' takes on a particular meaning when 'civil' or 'economic' is added, or when we apply the distinction between 'positive' and 'negative', as famously suggested by the political theorist Isaiah Berlin. You will find that the use of such qualifiers is quite common in IR, especially for long-standing concepts such as security (national, collective, human, cyber, etc.), power (hard, soft, civilian, structural, etc.) or war (civil, total, old, new, etc.). In all these cases, we should ask why adjectives are added to the concept and how this changes its meaning.

Concepts and histories

A lot of research explores the connection between concepts and history, and there are three ways to look at this. First, we use concepts to make sense of the past. For instance, we might take a particular definition of 'revolution' to identify events over the last 200 years across the world that fit this category, producing a list of how many revolutions have occurred over this historical period. We then could compare them and, perhaps, study if they had similar causes or consequences. Yet, as noted earlier, the way we define a concept impacts what we see, and so different conceptions of 'revolution' will likely produce different lists of events and, thus, a different picture of the history of revolutions. Second, we can flip things around. If every concept has a history, then quite a bit can be learned from studying how a concept web was formed and used in different historical contexts. For instance, we could study what 'revolution' meant to those North American settlers in the late 18th century who sought independence from the British, to the enslaved people in Haiti who rose up against French colonial rule 20 years later, or to the protesters who assembled in Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011 to overthrow the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Do you think they all used the concept of 'revolution' to describe their actions and aims in the same way? This leads to another approach, namely tracing the historical evolution of a concept. Rather than producing rich studies of how its meaning is embedded and operates within a specified historical and cultural context, a third approach would study how the meaning of 'revolution' has developed over time and travelled across space to look for continuities and changes in meaning, and how it arrived at the meaning(s) we give the concept today (for an overview of different ways scholars have conceptualised 'revolution', see Rao, 2016).

The research agendas outlined above, especially those that fall under the second and third approach, belong to scholars working in the field of conceptual history and the history of ideas. Their studies provide valuable insights into the historical complexity and contingency

of the life of our core concepts and, thus, guard against our tendency to ‘naturalise’ a meaning and treat it as eternally stable, as if it were handed down from the heavens. In turn, conceptual history can also expose that simplistic stories you may hear about the origin of a concept are little more than useful myths. For instance, as briefly mentioned above, in the field of IR you can find a popular story which maintains that ‘the state’ was invented in Europe in 1648. More precisely, that it emerged out of the peace of Westphalia, a series of treaties that, following three decades of war, replaced a system of feudal powers with a system of sovereign states. Historians have shown that this story is a myth, as it took much longer for state systems to develop (de Carvalho et al., 2011; Oslander, 2001) and they have argued that the concept of sovereignty had also earlier been practised outside Europe (Zarakol, 2022). Such historical work is important, and the authors in this book are aware of the complex historical lives of the concepts they cover. That said, their chapters are not exercises in conceptual history. All chapters offer brief accounts of how a concept emerged to point out themes relevant for understanding how it entered and influenced the field of IR. Beyond that, they take a historical angle only when it helps to understand the relevance of the concept for contemporary analyses and practices of world politics. That is, chapters provide historical examples to illustrate different academic and ‘real world’ uses of the concept and the stakes involved.

Basic concepts in academia and the real world

This book introduces you to the work basic concepts do in two domains of knowledge, the academic and the ‘real world’. In the first domain, concepts are used by scholars (and students) as **categories of analysis** to enable and guide research. They anchor IR theories and frame global issues, playing a key role in determining how and where analysts see ‘world politics’ in space and time. In the second domain, concepts operate as **categories of political practice** when they are ‘developed and deployed by ordinary social actors... and by political entrepreneurs’ (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 4). Here, they are focal points for political agendas and guide how actors see and interact with each other in the real world. We will take a more careful look at what happens in these two domains in a moment. For now, it is important to know that concepts and their meaning are chosen – concept webs are composed – in a way that is useful for the analytical or practical purposes at hand. This is not to say that concepts are always carefully selected and consciously utilised tools. As noted earlier, it is quite common to use a concept without paying much attention to it – how often do you stop and think about what ‘the state’ means? For the most part, concepts float around our daily lives and are used passively. But academics and political practitioners do pay attention to core concepts and their socially constructed nature, to the fact that meaning can be rearranged, put to work in different ways and for different purposes. Indeed, once we look carefully, we see that basic concepts are mobilised, marginalised and contested quite frequently.

In that sense, concepts can be seen as **sites of interaction** in which academics and practitioners debate how to meaningfully order social relations in space and time. As the chapters in this book show, this interaction can take many forms. It can entail conservative attempts to control the meaning of prominent concepts or critical interventions that contest

taken-for-granted meanings. Some chapters direct attention to hidden concepts working in the background, or revive neglected concepts to highlight practices, experiences and expectations we cannot afford to ignore. They may also point out creative formulations of a concept that open new possibilities for imagining and practising international relations. To be sure, a site of interaction is not necessarily a meeting point for friendly conversation. Basic concepts can also be used as coercive political tools to shut down debates and silence those who think differently. Consider, for instance, the Russian government’s insistence that its attack on Ukraine in 2022 was a ‘special military operation’ and not a war, with severe consequences for Russian citizens who deviated from that official language (see Chapter 11: War). But even when the space to debate and challenge meaning is limited, contestation tends to take place somewhere. Table 2.1 offers a schematic overview of the different ways basic concepts can be used and studied. Each chapter shows you a variety of meanings and uses of a concept within and across these two domains of knowledge, the academic world of IR scholars and the ‘real world’ of political practitioners. In doing so, each chapter is also a site of interaction itself.

Table 2.1 How Basic Concepts Are Used

Basic Concept functioning as...	Category of Analysis	Category of Political Practice
	<i>Keystone in IR theories</i>	<i>Focal point in agendas</i>
	<i>Frame for issues</i>	<i>Guide for interactions</i>
Site of Interaction	conservative, coercive, critical, or creative uses	conservative, coercive, critical, or creative uses

Academic use: Concepts as categories of analysis

Concepts guide how academics read, explain and scrutinise international politics. They do this by serving as building blocks for theories and as framing devices for analysing real world events and practices, including from a critical angle. As noted in the previous chapter, theories need basic concepts because they provide an ontology. If we imagine a theory as a house, then concepts are the bricks out of which the house is built. Even when they are hidden away in assumptions, they perform a crucial function in carrying the theory. Earlier this chapter referred to basic concepts as anchors of theory, but it may be more useful to see them as keystones, holding in place a theory’s narrative arc. A prominent example is the concept of rationality, which is lodged in the assumption of the ‘rational actor’ underpinning much of mainstream IR theory. And as Chapter 3 shows, a theoretical narrative also carries and shapes the meaning of that concept. It is futile to try and disentangle the two to figure out which comes first: Theories and concepts are constructed together, and we must examine how the meaning of a given concept interacts with a theory’s explanatory and normative aims. So, we should ask how a concept acquires meaning within a theoretical narrative, how a concept web is integrated in the ontology and the argumentative logic of a theory. Following on from this, we should ask how the meaning of a concept changes when embedded in a different theory. Conversely, we should ask what a concept web does

for a theory, and how and why theorists build their arguments through some concept webs rather than others.

These questions sharpen the eye for different uses of the seemingly same basic concept. Take ‘power’: Just because the term is used across theoretical traditions in IR does not mean the concept is used in the same way (Berenskoetter, 2007). For instance, the realist reading of power as domination expressed in military capabilities of states has little in common with a feminist understanding of power as mutual empowerment in solidarity networks. Such differences may not matter if there is no conversation between the two camps. But if they want to have a productive conversation or contest each other’s conceptualisation of power, they must recognise and engage with their respective readings. This requires an effort in translation (Berenskötter & Guzzini, 2025).

The way concepts are treated also depends on the *type* of theory (introduced in Chapter 1). Grand theories can afford to discuss the nuances of a concept web and how it is integrated in the theoretical narrative, although there is a trade-off between complexity and simplicity, which can be found even within the same theoretical camp. For instance, the classical realist Hans Morgenthau spent an entire book on a comprehensive discussion of the concept of power at the expense of offering a succinct theoretical argument (Morgenthau, 1948). This was criticised later by neorealists like Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer who used a short conservative definition that depicts power primarily in terms of military capabilities, allowing them to construct a relatively simple theory. So-called middle range theories reduce concepts to variables. Because these theories tend to be designed for empirical analysis, they effectively turn concepts into a data container that can be used across time and space to, for instance, measure and compare the degree of power or the level of development in different states. In these cases, the concept web becomes visible only when the variable is articulated as a definition and broken down into empirical indicators for measuring purposes (see Chapter 16: Power, and Chapter 19: Development).

Often analysts don’t want to bother with theory because they see it as distraction from studying the practical issues and problems of the world. However, documenting and finding solutions to problems like ‘inequality’ or ‘climate change’ needs concepts to capture those phenomena in the first place. As we learned earlier, concepts can be defined in different ways – and variations in meaning of a concept can generate confusion over what is being measured, what the problem looks like and, consequently, how to address it. One way of dealing with this is to create typologies. Typologies are a popular heuristic tool because they allow seeing different versions (‘types’) of a basic concept and to classify empirical phenomena accordingly. You will find examples in many chapters of this book. But working with typologies can be tricky when we do not pay attention to where variations in meaning come from. The issue gets amplified when we want to assess an argument that contains two basic concepts. A good example is the (in)famous ‘democratic peace’ thesis, which suggests that democracies don’t go to war with each other. It effectively places ‘democracy’ and ‘peace’ in a causal relationship by implying, essentially, that democracy leads to peace. This reading is problematic for a variety of reasons. For our discussion here, analysts define these two concepts differently. This led to intense debates over the validity of the thesis because scholars disagreed over both which states should be classified as ‘democracies’ and which relations as ‘peaceful’. They also disagreed over the causal logic, or

mechanisms, linking the two concepts, that is, explanations for *why* democracies supposedly don't fight wars against each other. These debates, rooted in what the IR scholar Ido Oren (1995) called 'the subjectivity of the "democratic" peace', are not simply an academic matter. They have significant implications for how we judge the peacefulness of states (according to their political systems) and for the foreign policy of governments who believe in the truth of the democratic peace thesis. As such, this thesis demonstrates the political stakes of how we use concepts (see Chapter 17: Democracy).

Critical theorists are particularly aware of these stakes and scrutinise the use of concepts by fellow academics and by practitioners, especially when they are used for conservative or coercive purposes. In such cases, the critical analyst seeks to disassemble the taken-for-granted meaning of a concept and show the practices it (de)legitimises. Doing so also creates an ethical dilemma, which we find at the heart of critical approach more generally: Should the concept be used at all? Take, for instance, the concepts of colonialism or race (see Chapters 6 and 9). On the one hand, a critical approach seeks to expose the political work these concepts are doing, to show how hidden or socially accepted notions of 'colonialism' and 'race' enable practices that are violent and morally wrong. This might lead us to conclude that these concepts are dangerous, and that we should stop using them. On the other hand, the critical approach needs these concepts as analytical lenses precisely to make 'bad' practices (of colonial violence or racism) visible rather than letting them go unchecked. In doing so, it highlights their power and keeps them in the conversation. It is important to be aware of this dilemma and think about its implications. At the very least, it asks you to reflect on how you use a concept, to be clear about the purpose and consider the impact, and to balance the analytical exposure of the 'bad work' a concept can do with showing alternative, and morally preferable, ways of thinking and acting.

Real-world use: Concepts as categories of political practice

The above section already points to the importance of examining how concepts are used as categories of political practice: how they are employed in the 'real world' by governments, in state bureaucracies, in civil society networks, and in international organisations. In these environments, basic concepts function as focal points for political agendas and debates, as principles for strategic planning, and as frames that organise what people do every day. They are what William Connolly (1974/1993) calls the 'terms of political discourse' and structure political debates, policymaking and operational practices in institutions that shape our daily lives. We therefore need to pay extra attention to the normative content and consequences of concepts, that is, to 'the judgements they incorporate' (Connolly, 1974/1993, p. 3).

Tracing their use in political practice is to study why and how concepts are mobilised by political actors, what meaning is being advanced and for what purpose. It looks at how they are received by an audience, how they become dominant and entrenched within a society, and how they are challenged and contested (Ish-Shalom, 2021). An important part of that task is studying the language of political actors. Once we accept that language is powerful, it is largely irrelevant whether a politician truly believes what they say; what matters is that the

concepts they use mobilise thinking and action. For instance, following the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, the government of George W. Bush declared a 'global war on terror'. The implications of seeing your country at war and labelling others as terrorist are significant (see Chapter 11: War, and Chapter 15: Terrorism). Bush's declaration justified a range of policies and actions, including military interventions and torture. The 'war on terror' concept worked as a powerful frame not just for the US government, with many state and non-state actors around the world presenting themselves as participants in this 'war' and using the frame for their own agendas.

When we study the use of a basic concept, we need to consider its agenda-setting power. The way a concept is embedded in the political agenda of Actor A and received by Actor B will allow or support some conversations while shutting down others. This highlights how the meaning content and boundaries of the concept can work to exclude certain ways of seeing and acting. A classic example is how the concept of war divides the world into friends and enemies, thereby imposing a crude black-and-white picture onto social relations and forcing us to take sides. Relatedly, if a government primarily understands 'power' to mean being militarily strong, this will justify increasing the defence budget at the expense of other investments. But concepts can also work as inclusive frames. Thus, we need to consider the political strategy of keeping a basic concept deliberately vague, for instance when diplomats at the United Nations try to find common ground for a resolution among a variety of actors with different interests. In such a situation, vague meanings may be desirable because it helps negotiations and creates the necessary flexibility to come to an agreed formulation through a concept that can be interpreted differently to an audience back home.

It is easy to see concepts at work when expressed in spectacular form, as was the case with the 'war on terror'. But we also must pay attention to more mundane and 'boring' processes of implementation and institutionalisation of policy, that is, how basic concepts become gradually inscribed into institutional structures and normalised within bureaucracies. This may involve studying how concepts turn into classification devices or operational principles, how their use becomes – what seems to be – a technicality to the point that the concept appears to have lost its political character. This happened, at one point or another, with almost all the concepts covered in this book. Relatedly, we must not forget to consider the material and physical manifestation of a basic concept. It is tempting to only study language, but it is crucial to also trace how a concept takes on non-linguistic form in the real world and directs the allocation of material resources, how it organises physical spaces and shapes the bodies within them. The political use of the concept of religion offers impactful examples in this regard (see Birnbaum, 2016), as do the pages that follow.

In all these ways, concepts can function as tools for governing *and* for contesting political authority. So where should we look for them? The arena of world politics is fragmented and has many spaces for expressing political language. For students of IR, it makes sense to start with actors in positions of institutional power, whether we talk about states, international organisations or global corporations. But it is just as important to trace the use of concepts in transnational grass-roots movements and local spaces populated by ordinary people. After all, it is here where meaning becomes common sense and where it can be questioned and contested every day.

Coming full circle, we must not ignore the political use of concepts in academia. Most chapters in this book discuss the academic (analytical) and 'real world' (practical) uses in separate parts so you understand the work they do in each of these domains. However, a central aim of this book is to show that IR's basic concepts work *across* these two domains. Meanings developed and debated in academia and the real world are not insulated from, but (in)form, each other. Academics and policymakers have different professions, but they are embedded in and affected by the same political realities, if at different proximities, and engage in discussions about them. They influence each other: Scholars of world politics analyse what practitioners do and the concepts they use, which informs their thinking. In turn, they teach theories and concepts to students who may later become influential actors in the 'real world'. Some academics also advise politicians in private or participate in public debates, aided by think tanks who channel academic concepts into policy circles and to a broader audience. Thus, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 4) note, basic concepts are 'marked by close reciprocal connection and mutual influence between their practical and analytical uses'. The contributors of this book are very much aware of this. And while it is not always easy to show exactly how concepts circulate across these two domains, all chapters point to connections and invite you to trace them further.

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6

Colonialism

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Learning outcomes

- Understand how applying colonialism as a concept alters the way we see problems in world politics, and what and how we conceive of solutions.
- See that International Relations (IR) scholars have traditionally not considered colonialism as a useful concept, while in fact it underpins the very foundations of IR as both a real-world practice and an academic field of knowledge.
- Understand colonialism as a concept that operates both as a belief and practice, and also creates its opposing belief and practice (anti-colonialism).

Opening example: Framing the conflict in Israel/Palestine

The so-called conflict between Israel and Palestine is an example of a real-world issue that is affected by the concept one uses to understand it. For years, this subject has been viewed and taught as a 'conflict' in everyday political discussion and Western university courses (e.g. 'The Arab-Israeli conflict', 'the Israel-Palestine conflict', and more recently 'the Israel-Hamas' conflict). Even if not explicitly stated, this framing as a conflict uses nationalism as a core concept. The implication of this conceptual application is that Israel and Palestine are treated as competing *nations*, with nationalist ideologies and aspirations. Nationalism as the framing concept suggests the communities have equally valid but incompatible claims to territory. This conceptual reading is what leads to the term 'conflict', i.e. the problem is a territorial battle between two nations that hold 'ancient' hatreds towards each other. In terms of real-world practice and impact, this conceptual framing has resulted in a reliance on legal and territorial partition as a solution; and in academic contexts, the narratives of both 'nations' are given equal weight in the pursuit of objectivity.

However, if the concept of nationalism is replaced with colonialism, then the identification of causes, problems, and solutions dramatically alter. Thus, viewed through the lens of colonialism, Israel and Palestine are not seen as having equal power and claims, but rather Israel is viewed as a dominant colonial power, pursuing a policy of annexation and occupation that is illegal in international law (Geneva Conventions; International Court of Justice). Meanwhile, Palestinians would be viewed as the wronged party with a rightful claim to justice. Instead of an ancient conflict, the matter is seen as settler colonialism, with historical roots in European colonisation in the 19th and 20th centuries. As such, from a policy perspective, the lens of colonialism would not emphasise a two-state solution but rather decolonisation of occupied territories and reparations for the Palestinians. From an academic perspective, the emphasis would shift from trying to convey 'both sides' of the debate, to identifying responsibility of the colonisers and their allies, both past and present, and understanding native resistance as a legal right.

Introduction

As demonstrated in the opening example, employing the concept of colonialism can reframe the way past and current global and local issues are understood. Such a reframing can help you search more deeply and often more globally for causes, connections, and consequences that might not be visible if you neglect to look through the lens of colonialism. In the first part of this chapter, I outline three real-world expressions of colonialism, both historical and current, that have been significant features of global politics: (1) Settler-colonialism, which is a displacement of, and in many cases genocide of, indigenous populations, and a simultaneous installation of non-native people (settlers) from the *metropole*; (2) Formal colonialism which is conducted formally by the metropole without removing the local population, for the purposes of resource extraction, territorial competition, and *missionarism*, sustained via native proxies and tutelage; (3) informal colonialism, which is conducted by non-state actors, corporations, or states under the guise of development, trade, or humanitarianism. The chapter explains the

similarities and differences between these forms of colonialism (though they can overlap and are not mutually exclusive) and also notes the importance of their legacies. Some of these actors explicitly recognised and even celebrated their practices as colonialism, but as we shall see, that is not always the case.

The section on academic uses will explain the difference between colonialism expressed as a historical event that could be reversed via the historical event of decolonisation, and colonialism as a set of beliefs, which is not eliminated via the event of decolonisation. Both expressions are part and parcel of the concept of colonialism. While colonialism as a concrete *practice* denotes the territorial, military, and economic control or annexation of land, i.e. expressed via *colonisation*, colonialism as a *belief* denotes a norm of state behaviour and theoretical justification. This view of colonialism as an idea, and as an explanatory and prescriptive device, allows us to shift beyond practical expressions of this concept to think about the way colonialism as a concept is rhetorically used, hidden, or critiqued within academia. Conversely, colonialism's opposing concept, *anti-colonialism*, has played an important role in both the real world and in academia in making sense of what colonialism consists of, how to detect it, and how to resist it.

Three themes run throughout the chapter. The first is that colonialism is understood differently depending on where you stand. Most obviously, the way a colonised people view this concept often contrasts with how a colonising power relates to it, which produces different thinking and actions that necessarily come into conflict. Secondly, there is a deep connection between real-world practices of colonialism and how academics theorise about world politics. And thirdly, because colonialism has significant, indeed devastating, impacts on people's lives, which continue for generations, it often elicits strong opinions and produces normative positions.

Emergence of the concept

A basic search for the meaning of the English word colonialism gives us 'the acquisition and domination (or rule/control) of territory' (or space, more generally). The etymological roots of the English word colonialism lies in the Latin words *colere* (to cultivate), and *colonus* (farmer, tiller, and by extension inhabitant). The first recorded uses of the word 'colonisation' were in a political and human context, referring to Roman military strongholds. It then became even more widely used from the 16th century in the natural sciences (especially biology and ecology) to refer to the physical arrival and spread of a plant or animal species in a new area, when large, organised, insect populations such as ants, bees, and termites came to be described as 'colonies'. The stretching of this language from human political and territorial domination to scientific and apolitical uses takes attention away from the impact on the people who were colonised. To counter this sanitisation, it is important to remember that colonialism is never the mere acquisition and domination of territory alone. Rather, it is accompanied by: displacement, exploitation, torture, or extermination of the local people; devastation of local economies and ecologies; and erasures of indigenous cultures, beliefs, and languages. This is a reminder that every definition is partial or incomplete (see Chapter 3: Rationality) and that how we understand a concept is often determined by the powerful. Colonialism, especially, takes on a different and more expansive meaning if we adopt the perspective of those who inhabit those spaces affected, i.e. the colonised.

There is a strong relationship between the concept of colonialism and the concept of imperialism, i.e. the belief and practice of upholding and strengthening an empire. The two are not

always synonymous, as not all colonialism produces an empire, nor have all empires in antiquity adopted the beliefs attached to colonialism. A notable feature of pre-modern empires was that local cultures were absorbed into and often reshaped imperial cultures. Expansion of empires at times produced expanded horizons of mobility for the purposes of labour, education, agriculture, trade, and religion. Ethnic hierarchies and practices of slavery were not absent, but assimilation was often favourable to destruction and division, for the sake of stable and successful rule over the newly acquired territory. Colonialism as a *modern* practice, however, distinct from its medieval and ancient forms, can be traced back to the European colonisation of the Americas from the late 15th century, which for the next five hundred years would manifest similar and recurring patterns on a global scale, and would become a prominent feature of European politics. As discussed later in the chapter, these colonial practices differed due to their entanglement with modernity, capitalism, and racism. Modernity saw the development of colonialism as an ideological aspiration and civilisational statement for rising powers, rather than a pragmatic feature of empire (Münkler, 2007, p. 8). At its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries, it was viewed by its enactors and advocates as a political, military, economic, religious, even scientific obligation and necessity. It was overtly practised as a legitimate policy of states until it was outlawed internationally in the Geneva Conventions after the Second World War (although, as we shall see, the practice did not disappear).

A cursory view of a map of the world identifying places that were colonised by Europeans shows that the majority of the world has been directly affected by colonialism (see Figure 6.1). Thus, the concept of colonialism was and is not a peripheral one but looms large in the history and current view of almost every part of the world. Thus, taking it seriously is not only a moral or ethical issue, but is also one of objective, historical accuracy (Jones, 2006, pp. 10–11).

Colonialism in political practice

Because European practices and knowledge production significantly shaped the concept of modern colonialism, and because the impact of this history is still felt today, I will focus here on European colonialism to illustrate different expressions. Three European empires whose widespread practice of colonialism significantly shaped global history are the Spanish, British, and French empires. These examples also demonstrate the way European and later American colonialism, even though supplied by similar and shared ideas, could take on different forms depending on the territories being colonised and the motivations of the colonising actor. Through the examples below, you will gain a better understanding of the distinctions between 1) settler-colonialism, 2) formal colonialism expressed via extraction and tutelage, and 3) informal colonialism or neocolonialism.

Settler colonialism

As the name suggests, settler colonialism directs attention to the practice of colonising actors who not only extract resources from acquired territories but also install their own population in them – this is often achieved by enticing ‘migration’ from the metropole to the colony, via financial incentives and under a pretext of civilisational or religious duty or elevation. This goes along with subjugating and displacing local or indigenous populations, or even depopulating the

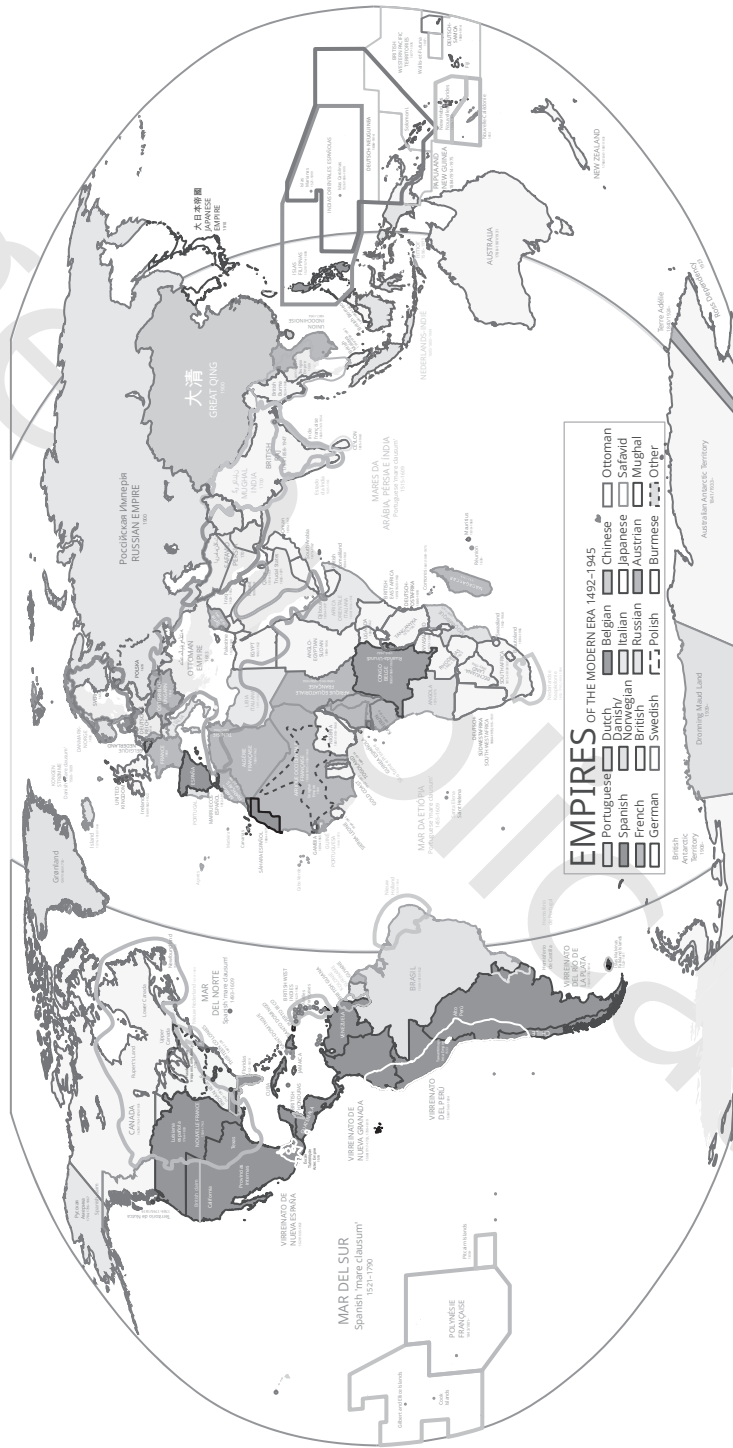


Figure 6.1 European Colonialism 1500 AD to 2000

Source: Nagihuni CC BY-CCO 1.0

territories through genocide (see Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Wolfe, 2006). The Spanish empire offers an illustrative example. It requires attention to two facts that tend to be erased from the conventional story of Christopher Columbus sailing west to prove there was a faster route to India. Firstly, Columbus' 'discovery' of the 'new world' was no such thing, since the Inca, Aztecs, and Mayans had already built sophisticated empires in the Americas before the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese. Secondly, Columbus' voyage coincided with the *reconquista* or the colonisation of Muslim Granada in southern Spain. The Spanish authorities justified religious discrimination against Muslims and Jews in Granada, even after their forced conversion to Christianity, with the argument that their souls were already corrupted and therefore they could never be fully 'civilised' (Grosfoguel, 2015, pp. 32–37). This precedent of the Spanish inquisition at home, and the use of a religious hierarchy to categorise people, was then exported to the Americas, but taken further by the Spanish colonisers when they encountered the indigenous populations. In order to justify the mass slaughter, enslavement, and theft of the native people, the Spanish argued that the indigenous people not only had corrupted souls, but that they *lacked souls altogether*, and therefore could not be deemed fully human. In this way, a religious hierarchy within Spain evolved into a racial and biological hierarchy in the Americas that facilitated the dehumanisation of the local populations and their subsequent genocide and displacement (Maldonado-Torres, 2008, p. 230). In a study on the earth's changing climate, scientists concluded that by 1600 a staggering 56 million indigenous people were killed by European settlers, with a decrease of 90% of the indigenous population – a scale of depopulation so catastrophic that the researchers found it had led to the cooling of the earth's climate (Koch et al., 2019). This devastation of the local populations directly correlated with the spectacular enrichment and rise of Spain as an imperial superpower, enabling it to dominate Europe in the early modern era, and extend its empire to Asia and the Pacific.

Formal colonialism

The concept of formal colonialism directs attention to when a state adopts the colonisation of another place as official policy, writes this agenda into the state's laws and allocates government departments to handle ('administer') the colonies. This formalisation does not require settlers. The British empire, the largest and most enduring of the European empires, is a good example. As with the Spanish, Britain amassed huge wealth by extracting resources from its colonies, especially India, which was used to spearhead and fund the industrial revolution and turned Britain into an economic powerhouse (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2021). India, in turn, went from being one of the richest places on the planet to one of the poorest as a result. Britain made its colonisation of India official in 1858 through the Government of India Act, which formally transferred control of India from the East India Company to the Crown. British rule over India did not try or intend to displace the native population, even though millions still died due to the impact of colonialism (Hickel et al, 2021). Instead, Britain chose to exploit them mostly as indentured labour within India or in other colonies such as in the Caribbean, or by enlisting them in the imperial army (Barkawi, 2017). Rather than replace local rule entirely, the British created a system of tutelage (Go, 2011; Robertson, 1908), in which local elites were incorporated into a system of governance, known as the Raj, to do the bidding of the colonial power – effectively outsourcing imperial rule while freeing up Britain's resources for the domestic front or for allocation elsewhere.

Another aspect of formal colonialism is the drive to not only dominate and extract from colonial territories, but to also supposedly civilise native populations. This impulse rests on the belief that not only are the indigenous populations biologically and racially inferior, but so are their belief systems, morals, and cultures. The French empire was particularly invested in this notion of *mission civilisatrice*, or a 'civilising mission', in the Muslim world. The prime example of this was Algeria, which France occupied for at least 130 years between 1830 and 1962. French colonialism there ended after a devastating eight-year war. The civilising mission in Algeria meant France was not only concerned with material and territorial matters. As the anti-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon (2008) explained, it was also engaged in a project of mental and psychological colonisation and an eradication of the Algerians' 'barbaric' belief system. For this reason, many historians of empire consider French colonialism in Algeria as being one of the most pervasive and intrusive forms, not only invading the political and economic spheres, but also the social and private spheres. For example, France pursued a policy of 'de-veiling', i.e. forcing Algerian Muslim women to remove their religious head-coverings (the *haik* in Algerian, or hijab in Arabic) via claims of emancipation and modernisation. In reality, it could be seen as another form of colonial control over colonised women's autonomy and resistance (Fanon, 1965/2003).

Colonial legacies

Following the end of the Second World War, formal colonialism gave way to territorial and legal decolonisation. Legal decolonisation here refers to the disbanding of overseas colonies by law, with the newly independent states receiving legal recognition and a seat at the United Nations after its establishment in 1945. However, declaring an end to formal colonialism does not make the concept redundant, for several reasons. To start with, it is difficult to determine start and end dates of empire. Even if we did agree on them, such periodic markers never give us the full picture of colonialism. Moreover, legacies of colonialism and colonial violence are embedded both in the former colonies and in the metropole (the domestic territories of the colonisers), generating postcolonial dynamics between and within them.

For instance, we can see former colonisers trying to retain the benefits of the colonial legacy without extending the material, political, and cultural advantages to people or descendants from former colonies. Often, this is expressed in political debates over immigration, citizenship, and national identity. Britain sought to retain its powerful ties over newly decolonised states via the creation of the 'Commonwealth'. It encouraged immigration of people from current and former colonies in the Commonwealth to take up jobs in the UK to rebuild the country after the Second World War (Shilliam, 2018). They were then subject to discrimination and even denied citizenship rights, exemplified in the 'Windrush' scandal when the government deported people who had lived and worked in the UK for decades because they did not possess official migration documents, even though these were not required at the time (see El-Enany, 2020). The legacies of empire also came to the fore in public protests over statues of individuals who had played a prominent role in and profited from British colonialism (see Box 6.1).

The French government also encouraged people from former colonies to immigrate to rebuild France's post-war infrastructure. These immigrants, mostly from North and West Africa, continued to be impacted by France's civilising mission. Under the banner of secularism (Pasha, 2017) or *laïcité*, the government issued legal bans on the hijab in numerous public spaces such as schools,

and there remains a persistent public and political interference with Muslim women's autonomy and their sartorial choices. Discrimination and racism affects ethnic minorities across various sectors, including employment, schooling, and policing (Lentin, 2008). When France won the men's Football World Cup for the first time in 1998, many of the players hailed from France's former colonies. While the diversity of the French team allowed non-white French citizens to truly connect for the first time with the national team, far right parties propagated the view that 'the multi-ethnic team was a symbol of the decay of the true France' (Mignon, 2001).

Box 6.1 Statues as symbols of colonial legacies

The concept of colonialism has been used critically by political activists who seek to highlight enduring and problematic legacies of empire. In recent years, the question of how much attention should be given to the history and negative impact of colonialism has been hotly debated among politicians, journalists, social activists, academics, and members of the public, feeding into what some have described as 'culture wars'. In May 2020, in the wake of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, protests across European cities demanded reparations for Europe's violent colonial past and complicit role in the transatlantic slave trade. In Bristol, UK, protestors toppled the statue of Sir Edward Colston (Figure 6.2), dumping it in the river as a gesture of revulsion at Britain's colonialism. Colston's statue had been erected in 1895 in celebration of his philanthropy and patronage of Bristol's cultural heritage; but in the process, it erased the fact that Colston's philanthropy was only possible due to the immense wealth he amassed as a slave trader. The protestors' action produced a heated debate about the role of colonialism in British history, culture, and identity, and whether Britain should finally apologise and atone for its past. In response, others argued the protestors and the 'decolonising' movement were tampering with history and undermining British tradition and identity. While public debates about whether statues of colonisers should stand or be removed may seem to be a superficial issue compared to structural changes that could improve people's lives, it points to deeper issues of colonial legacies, material reparations, national identity, and education (Rao, 2025).



Figure 6.2 Toppled Statue of Edward Colston

Source: 'Statue of Edward Colston at the M Shed' by Adrian Boliston is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Informal colonialism

Colonialism also occurs informally, without legal acknowledgment, conducted by non-state actors and corporations, by states, or a combination thereof (Nkrumah, 1974). Sometimes, the term used to describe such informal processes is 'neocolonialism', although this fails to capture colonial activities that occurred *prior* to formal colonisation. For instance, the informal roots of the British empire reach far back into the 16th century via corporations such as the East India Company.

The concept of informal colonialism is commonly used to direct attention to exploitative practices and dependencies in the pursuit of financial gain. It is often linked to capitalism. Capitalism is an economic system in which industry and business are owned by private actors (rather than the state), who therefore can control prices (often making them higher) and wages (often making them lower) in order to maximise profits. Karl Polanyi (2002) described the so-called first stage of capitalism as 'the great transformation' that took place within Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries, with increased trade of luxury goods such as spices and silks for the sake of domestic economic growth. These newly accessible luxury goods hailed from non-European colonies. Moreover, and crucially, the emergence of capitalism was not only attributable to these goods, but also to the acquisition of land via colonialism and the exploitation and trade of non-white humans as commodities – in other words, slavery. The patterns of such colonialism were long conducted by trading corporations set up with private capital (but with royal assent), such as the Virginia Company in the Americas, the East India Company in Asia, and the Royal African Company. These corporations did not only trade in existing commodities, but also generated new markets for tobacco, sugar, and cotton that relied heavily on slave-based labour. These markets and the wealth they amassed for the colonisers would not have been possible without, especially, people kidnapped from the African continent who were forced into slavery by European traders and plantation owners in the Americas upon the belief that Africans were racially inferior. Moreover, the actors involved in such trading patterns were mostly unregulated, given freedom over new territories and often wooed by states because of the wealth and power they accumulated. States also realised they could use these non-state actors as proxies for imperialist trade, not only collaborating with them but eventually employing them as **ambassadors** or granting them tax-collecting powers, as Britain did to the East India Company in 1725. These practices enabled opportunistic exploitation by private companies to shift into direct colonialism by their patrons (Bhambra, 2020).

We can see informal colonialism also taking place long after formal decolonisation, although the actors involved usually reject the label of colonialism as a description for their practices. The United States, with its avowed commitment to capitalism, became one of the greatest beneficiaries of collapsing empires in the 20th century. Decolonisation opened up new markets for US exports and allowed multinational corporations like Nike and Apple to exploit cheap labour in sweatshops or cobalt mines in countries such as Indonesia or the Congo. The **globalisation** of American consumer goods went hand in hand with the globalisation of US culture via Hollywood, fashion, and the music industry, which some describe as '**soft power**' (Nye, 1990) and others as 'cultural imperialism' (Schiller, 1978; see also Said, 1994). Other actors, most notably China, are now competing

with US companies in this regard, detectable especially in its economic projects in Africa (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2011). Through commercial influence or the carrot and stick of foreign aid under the aegis of development, powerful states are able to exert significant political influence on weaker states that depend on them for investments and trade. A political misstep by a weaker state can easily lead to the termination of a foreign aid programme or the withdrawal of commercial investment. In such a relationship, development projects can be viewed in terms of economic colonialism (see Chapter 18: The Market, and Chapter 19: Development).

The invasion and occupation of territories also continues to take place. For example, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 followed by the conflict in Syria since 2011 set in motion the establishment of another network of American military bases in the Middle East region, with 19 in Northern Syria alone (Gani, 2018). In 2015 the US had at least 800 bases in over 70 countries (Vine, 2021), forming a military network that enables ‘command of the commons’ (Posen, 2003) while enabling unrelenting military support and protection to its allies and proxies in different world regions. This includes Israel, which many scholars and lawyers have identified as practising settler colonialism on Palestinian land in contradiction of numerous United Nations Security Council resolutions and the Geneva Conventions (Sayegh, 1965/2012; Tatour & Tatour, 2024; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024). While Israel justifies its ongoing destruction and seizure of Palestinian land in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem by claiming it is rooting out terrorists, counter-terrorism discourse has been shown to work as a mask for militarised and surveillance colonialism (see Chapter 15: Terrorism; Abu-Bakare, 2020; Said, 1987).

Academic use of colonialism

One mistake that is sometimes made is to treat colonialism simply as a normal feature of history. However, it was a political choice that was frequently challenged both within the coloniser societies – by politicians, philosophers, philanthropists, and social commentators – and by the colonised or enslaved societies, as exemplified by the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) (James, 2001), the Indian Rebellion (or First War of Independence) in 1857 (Gopal, 2019), the Pan-African uprisings (Rodney, 2022), and the Arab revolts in the Middle East in the 20th century (Gani, 2014; Kanafani, 1972). Such acts of resistance routinely exposed the fact colonialism was untenable; so what emboldened the colonising states to persist in this practice? One answer is that colonial practices were aided by justifications provided by knowledge production. In other words, colonialism was not merely a military, territorial, or economic venture, but also an academic one. This section starts by outlining the historical support for colonialism within academia. It then shows how, after colonialism was outlawed and culturally condemned, the issue was mostly met with silence, erasure, and indifference by IR academics. The chapter then discusses the intellectual and activist critiques that have forced IR into greater engagement with the concept.

Conservative uses

It is no coincidence that colonialism reached its peak during what is commonly described as the Enlightenment period in Europe between the 17th and 19th centuries. The enlightenment is often referred to as a period that advanced human thought and progress through a drive for knowledge that promised emancipation from ignorance, 'backwardness', and religious superstition. Yet it was the pivotal phase when the relationship between knowledge and colonialism was cemented. It spurred on the so-called 'Age of Exploration', namely the appetite for discovery and study of unknown worlds and people. Enthusiastic philanthropists and amateur scientists sponsored anthropologists, botanists, natural historians, artists, and other 'experts' to accompany trading corporations and state-led colonial missions on their voyages, to observe and record findings about communities and locations around the world. Their insights and the artefacts looted during colonial invasions would make their way back into museums and exhibitions in the metropole, such as the British Museum or the Natural History Museum in London, where many of these artefacts are still housed today.

The knowledge generated by influential scholars provided the intellectual and rational substance to supply and uphold colonial beliefs, to validate the practice of colonialism and counter charges of immorality by dissenters. One key factor was the development of notions of race and racial hierarchies, which were devised and given coherence by philosophers and scientists during the Enlightenment period, including liberal philosophers like John Locke and Immanuel Kant (see Bernasconi & Mann, 2005; Gani, 2017). During that time, an obsessive drive for classification of all things from minerals and rocks, to plants, insects, and animal species was extended to human beings. If the natural world could be compartmentalised, they argued, then so could humans be classified into different races with varying biological, intellectual, and moral traits and capacities (see Chapter 9: Race). What made racist ideas seem credible was the veneer of scientific objectivity and 'evidence', when in fact they were speculative theories. For instance, Charles Darwin's work on evolutionary biology was treated as scientific 'proof' for the existence of racial hierarchies. Darwin's theory of evolution was used to justify the idea that humans developed at different rates based on their racial classification, with some evolving more slowly and differently, while others excelled through 'natural selection' and 'survival of the fittest': the clue was on the cover of his published findings *The Origin of the Species* in the oft-forgotten subtitle *The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. Thus, colonialism could be packaged as a necessity for survival, an unavoidable and unblameworthy manifestation of natural selection, and innate strength over others who were not developed enough to resist.

Such academic ideas justified varying treatments of native peoples by the colonisers based on where they saw them on the civilisational pyramid. People in the 'orient', namely South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and East/South-East Asia, were categorised as 'barbarians' – deficient in their reason and morality, and still lagging in their evolutionary development, but still capable of learning and progressing. Thus, as in the examples given earlier, the British and the French adopted practices of tutelage, proxy governance, and civilising missions. In contrast, colonial theory classified the people of the Americas and the people of Africa as 'savages' – having the least capacity for reason and moral intuition and incapable

of learning from advanced races. Territories inhabited by ‘savages’ were thus primarily seen as places to plunder and redirect resources to the metropole (the colonisers’ homeland), while its people were only considered useful for slave labour or dispensable altogether. In fact, the Europeans and their settlers classified the ‘savage’ natives among the flora and fauna. In other words, they were dehumanised and their territories were effectively treated as uninhabited – empty land that was free game for colonial settlement. This belief was captured by the Latin term *terra nullius*, which justified European settler colonialism in South and North America, Australia, Scandinavia, New Zealand, and South Africa, and Palestine since the late 19th century.

IR’s silence over colonialism

Once the Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlawed colonialism, unabashed racism and open support for colonialism became less acceptable. This produced two misconceptions within academia, especially IR. The first misconception propagated during the Cold War and post-Cold War eras was that colonialism was now an outdated and obsolete issue. This idea was aided by the construction of historical watersheds that erroneously suggested we live in an era that has moved beyond colonialism. Formal decolonisation and IR’s focus on sovereign states as the primary actors (see Chapter 7: Sovereignty; Grovogui, 1996) made imperial and colonial relations (historical and actual) disappear from the analytical radar of IR. In this vein, 1945 was constructed as a watershed which saw the end of fascism and the birth of a new order that cherished human rights – but in reality, ongoing colonialism continued and undermined that assumption. Language such as ‘development’, ‘globalisation’, or even ‘democratisation’ masked the ongoing neocolonialism detectable in many states’ foreign policies as discussed in the section above.

The second misconception was that IR concepts and mainstream theories can be separated from their entanglement with colonialism. For example, nationalism is often taught as if it is a domestic concept that shapes internal politics. This tends to ignore the fact that it emerged not in parallel to but in fact due to colonialism, as nationalism was seen as one of the markers of civilisational superiority that separated Europe from those that it colonised (see Bhabra, 2023, p. 127; see Chapter 8: The Nation). The realist concern with power politics and state competition, which theorists present as a continuous feature of world politics since the Peloponnesian wars in ancient Greece and driven by the structure of international anarchy, tends to ignore the extent to which state rivalries have historically revolved around colonial territories (Henderson, 2013). Or take Liberalism, which is often seen as the moral, progressive arm of IR, yet which provides continued justification for military intervention under the guise of humanitarianism (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021) (see Fig. 6.3).

Because of such misconceptions and ‘oversights’, colonialism was not included as an analytical category within mainstream IR (until recently, it shared this with the concept of empire, see Barkawi, 2010; Bell, 2013). As a result, IR has been inadequate in accounting for the impact of historical legacies or neocolonial practices in world politics, and the ways in which colonialism – both beliefs and practices – continue to live on in mainstream IR concepts. The latter also occurs via the marginalisation of indigenous knowledges: that is, the failure

to incorporate, learn from, credit, or cite scholars from colonised or formerly colonised communities, and the dismissal of their knowledge and beliefs as lacking in scientific validity or objectivity. This type of erasure works in tandem with the physical elimination (genocide) of colonised communities, and has been given its own corresponding label: *epistemicide*. Another term that exhibits the relationship between colonialism and the erasure of indigenous knowledges is *scholasticide*, coined by the Palestinian academic Karma Nabulsi (2009) in which the native producers of knowledge are targeted and systematically wiped out by the colonising force. In sum, academia has not only supplied the ideas that justify colonialism and aid policymakers in 'the real world' but it has also helped to normalise colonialism through silences and a refusal to challenge oppression within the political status quo (Gani and Marshall, 2022).

Critical uses

While some academics produced the complicities and silences outlined above, other academics have challenged them. Recognising knowledge as a primary concern, scholars have, through theories and methodologies of *postcolonialism* and *decoloniality*, given the concept of colonialism far greater visibility in IR and other disciplines (Shilliam, 2021). Unlike the conservative uses and approaches that claim to only analyse colonialism empirically, postcolonial and decolonial scholarship's engagement with the concept has been explicitly normative and unequivocally critical. They have played a major role not only in identifying colonialism's historical crimes, but also in exposing its crimes in the present as well as the means of resistance, both through knowledge and material efforts. Thus their (re)conceptualisation of colonialism as a concept with contemporary relevance also contains in it an aspirational element of seeking justice and emancipation. In this way, academic critiques of colonialism both inspire and are inspired by actions of anti-colonial activists.

Among some of the notable **anti-colonial** thinkers to recast colonialism in academia as immoral and deplorable is the Martinique-born writer Frantz Fanon. A psychiatrist by profession who also lived under and fought against French colonialism in Algeria, Fanon was able to use both his professional expertise and his lived experience to inform his intellectual writing on colonialism (Sajed, 2019). Recognising the destructive power of epistemicide, in which indigenous archives and institutions of learning were destroyed and languages outlawed during colonialism, Fanon insisted on the need to revive local and regional cultures and historical narratives (Fanon, 1961/2001). Crucially, Fanon not only criticised the colonisers but also 'native elites' who adopted and internalised colonial ideas and practices, and enabled neocolonialism by retaining economic systems and social hierarchies long after formal decolonisation (2008). In highlighting the psychological and epistemic dimensions, Fanon's work provides a comprehensive and deeper understanding of the concept and reach of colonialism.

Another important critical thinker who has influenced how critical IR scholars read colonialism is the Palestinian academic Edward Said (see Box 6.2), often seen as key to the development of **postcolonial theory**. As a scholar of literature, Said's primary interest was

in language, particularly language as a site of power. Thus, for him, colonial power did not only operate via the military, or via political decisions, but more insidiously via language, or **discourse**, in multiple sites away from government and diplomatic corridors. Said exposed how colonial beliefs such as racial stigmas and a sense of Western superiority were introduced, reproduced, and concretised through language and culture found in literature, art, exhibitions, museums, and film (Said, 1979/2003, 1997). The cultural sphere, he argued, was far more effective and pervasive in spreading the colonial ideas outlined in the previous section than political actions, because it seeped into the everyday consciousness of ordinary people, and was far harder to combat and eliminate via decolonial and anti-racist policies and laws.

Box 6.2 The contribution of Edward Said's *Orientalism*

Edward Said's groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (2003), first published in 1979, provided the scope for perceiving colonialism beyond the political sphere. It was a major intervention in two ways: Firstly, it consolidated what came to be known as postcolonial theory or postcolonial studies. Secondly, it played an important role in normalising a critical view of colonialism in academia and public discourse. For example, prior to the publication of *Orientalism*, that term was used in a descriptive and even positive way to identify a colonial interest and specialisation in the 'Orient' among academics and think tanks that also served colonial or neocolonial administrations (Gani, 2022; Parmar, 2004). Said's book converted the label of 'orientalism' into a pejorative one that became associated negatively with colonialism and racism. Now, thanks to Said, the description 'orientalist' is widely understood as something or someone that provides a colonial and racist perspective of both Islam and the 'East'. In his work, Said also exposed the practice of 'othering' as a core feature of colonialism. This is the notion that colonialism helped to construct Europe's idea of itself by projecting all that was disdained and unwanted onto the colonies, e.g. qualities like irrationality, backwardness, fanaticism, dogmatism, underdevelopment, immorality, superstition, corruption, savagery, and barbarism. This not only defined the 'other' and provided justification for their colonisation, but was also used to juxtapose against positive values that were assigned to Europe to produce a sense of civilisational superiority. The tendency to create knowledge of the 'orient' without the voices of the colonised peoples themselves has been termed '**Eurocentrism**' by postcolonial scholars.

While postcolonial theory places great focus on discourse as a site of power, **decolonial theory** places greater emphasis on structures and material manifestations of colonisation and, therefore, also material forms of decolonisation. Developed by South American academics, it also shifts attention away from British and French empires to Iberian empires. The Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano sought to demonstrate that colonialism is not only a concept, nor an ideology, but also a *structure*, which he termed coloniality (Quijano, 2000). This, he explained, was maintained through three elements to form a matrix – racial hierarchy, capitalist culture, and finally knowledge. This gave rise to the term 'decoloniality' which reflects the struggle to

dismantle all the systems of interconnected coloniality which exist before and after formal colonisation has begun and ended (Quijano, 2000, 2007). Another decolonial scholar, Maria Lugones, added to this framework by arguing that gender was also an important component of colonialism (see Chapter 13: Gender). She and other decolonial feminists incorporated patriarchy as another system within the matrix of coloniality that upholds the means of colonial domination and oppression (Lugones, 2010, 2016; see also de Jong et al., 2018).

For students and scholars, knowledge is often the most accessible and urgent site of decolonisation. A major component of this effort is uncovering and reintroducing non-colonial and native knowledges, histories, belief systems, languages, and ways of being: in effect, reversing the epistemicide and scholasticide of colonialism (Trouillot, 2015). This goes beyond merely a critique of colonialism and seeks to cultivate alternative knowledges by shifting the focus onto the narratives and experiences of the (formerly) colonised. Thus, movements such as *'Rhodes must fall'*, and *'why is my curriculum white?'* have called for more diversity of authors in university syllabi and interrogated which countries are considered important sites of intellectual output. The difficulties in having these marginalised narratives heard in formal academic arenas or corporate media platforms has led decolonial and post-colonial scholars to foreground methods such as story-telling, art, music, and creative outlets of writing in pamphlets, blogs, and zines (Sabaratnam, 2021; Shilliam, 2020; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). Such efforts are not only a form of justice (what is often referred to as 'epistemic justice'); they also create a more accurate, rigorous, rich, and comprehensive understanding of colonialism past and present. Yet, translating anti-colonialism from knowledge into action remains an ongoing challenge and a reflection of the continuing dominance of different forms of colonialism in the public imagination (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

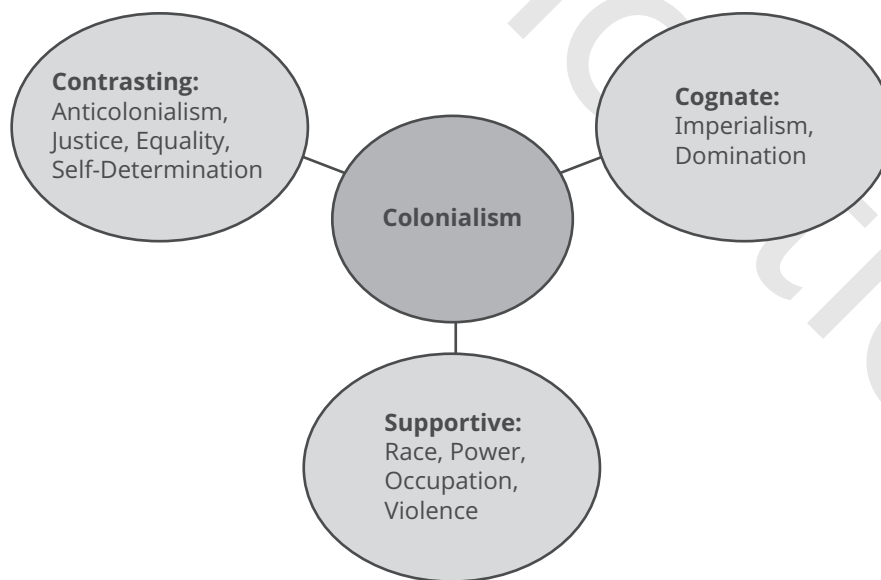


Figure 6.3 Concept web: Colonialism

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined key elements of the concept of colonialism and its practical expression in varied forms, from settler colonialism to colonial tutelage and extraction, to informal or neocolonialism. The analytical and political stakes of viewing world politics through such lenses are significant. Applying colonialism to Palestine and Israel, the so-called 'Age of exploration' in Europe, US-led globalisation after the Cold War, or China's engagement in Africa fundamentally alters the analysis, the perspectives one takes seriously, and the solutions or responses to the problem. The chapter has explored two dimensions of the concept of colonialism, the practice (real-world use) and the ideas (academic use) that give it meaning. Moreover, these dimensions are not separate; both the real-world and academic uses are deeply connected. Knowledge production on colonial and racial hierarchies shapes and justifies real-world colonialism; similarly, real-world colonial practices provide the conditions and empirical material for scholars to theorise about colonised people and territories. The chapter noted that the academic discipline of International Relations, while intertwined with colonial projects in the early 20th century, has long overlooked the central role and impact of colonialism in world affairs and IR theory. The chapter also pointed to a number of critical efforts to correct this amnesia. Indeed, IR cannot afford to ignore the concept; bringing it back supports greater rigour and historical accuracy for the understanding of world politics, and connects the discipline to pressing concerns in the public sphere.

Study questions

- 1 How does using the concept of colonialism change the way you view the problems and solutions to issues in world politics? Identify two contemporary cases that are usually viewed through other concepts in mainstream IR.
- 2 How does academic knowledge support and oppose colonialism?
- 3 Why do you think IR has historically overlooked the importance of colonialism?
- 4 How does taking the concept of colonialism more seriously improve the accuracy and rigour of analysis in IR?
- 5 Can one remain neutral about the concept of colonialism?

Recommended reading

Jones, B. G. (2006). *Decolonizing International Relations*. Rowman and Littlefield.

This text is an edited collection of chapters that explore the relationship between colonialism and IR, and contains a useful introductory chapter.

Bhambra, G. K. (2014). Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues. *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(2), 115–121.

This text provides an overview of the major anti-colonial theories and approaches, and clarifies the differences between them.

Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 387–409.

This text explores in depth the theory and impact of settler-colonialism.

Go, J. (2011). *Patterns of empire: The British and American empires, 1688 to the present*. Cambridge University Press.

This text provides comparative cases of two empires that enacted formal colonialism, with clear examples of tutelage, extraction, and missionaryism.

Nkrumah, K. (1965). *Neo-colonialism*. Nelson.

This text explores in depth the category of neocolonialism and the continued use of colonialism even after formal decolonisation.

Gani, J. K., & Marshall, J. (2022). The impact of colonialism on policy and knowledge production. *International Affairs*, 98(1), 5–22.

This text looks at the historical entanglement between academia and colonial policies.

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7

Sovereignty

Tanja Aalberts

Learning outcomes

- Be familiar with the common understanding of sovereignty applied to the state and how it separates (and links) domestic and international domains.
- Understand how the concept of sovereignty supports and sustains a logic of in/exclusion.
- Be aware of different conceptualizations throughout history that have changed the meaning and scope of sovereignty.
- Understand that sovereignty is contested across empirical, normative and theoretical levels.

Opening example: Arctic sovereignty

With the melting of arctic ice, new trading routes and possibilities for exploration of its rich natural-resource deposits are opening up. This has started a (discursive) scramble for the Arctic, in which various actors try and make sovereignty claims. In 2007 a Russian submarine even planted a flag at the seabed 2.5 miles below the North Pole. Although quickly dismissed as a mere symbolic action without legal power, it did prompt various political declarations on Arctic sovereignty. The so-called Arctic5 - US, Canada, Russia, Norway and Denmark - issued the Ilulissat declaration stating that "by virtue of their sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in large areas of the Arctic Ocean the five coastal states are in a unique position to address [the] possibilities and challenges of the melting icecap" (Arctic5, 2008). Relying on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Arctic5 proclaimed sovereign responsibility to protect the unique Arctic ecosystem. In turn, the European Parliament issued a resolution identifying the melting of the icecap as a "common concern" to the whole international community, and called for the adoption of a specific treaty for the Arctic (European Parliament, 2008). As indigenous people to the Arctic region, the Inuit responded by calling on their international right to self-determination and the changing nature of sovereignty:

Sovereignty is a term that has often been used to refer to the absolute and independent authority of a community or nation both internally and externally. Sovereignty is a contested concept, however, and does not have a fixed meaning... For Inuit living within the states of Russia, Canada, the USA and Denmark/Greenland, issues of sovereignty and sovereign rights must be examined and assessed in the context of our long history of struggle to gain recognition and respect as an Arctic indigenous people having the right to exercise self-determination over our lives, territories, cultures and languages. (Inuit Nunaat, 2009)

In short, we see different actors using different conceptions of sovereignty, and mobilizing different legal regimes to sustain their claims to the Arctic.

Introduction

In ordinary language, sovereignty means supreme authority. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, sovereignty can pertain to a variety of hierarchical relations, e.g. between God and His creation, between husband and wife in traditional marriages, or between the King and his people. However, in the academic field of International Relations and in the real world of diplomacy, sovereignty is wedded to the state, which formally still counts as the key subject of international law. This link with statehood traditionally identifies sovereignty with a territorial logic of exclusive jurisdiction. As we shall see, it faces both inwards (domestic realm) and outwards (international realm). Moreover, this chapter highlights how sovereignty is built on a logic of inclusion/exclusion.

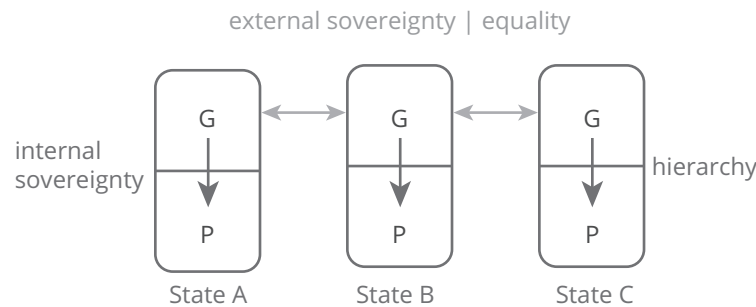
Despite the central role it plays in international politics, sovereignty also remains an elusive concept. It lacks a clear referent object, which is to say there is no singular item that

represents sovereignty. While we can list many things as symbols or manifestations of sovereign statehood – e.g. flags, armies, embassies or monarchical rituals – none of these capture sovereignty completely. Similarly, sovereignty is associated with many intangible elements, such as supremacy, territoriality, jurisdiction, or autonomy, yet none of them is equivalent to sovereignty in its entirety. Instead, the concept becomes “real” by relating multiple elements, aspects and experiences to each other. To use the terminology introduced in Chapter 2, the meaning of sovereignty is formed out of a web of concepts, which together constitute its meaning within a particular historical or theoretical context (Bartelson, 1995) and organize the world in a particular way.

As this chapter will show, as a key concept, sovereignty remains contested, on conceptual, empirical, political and normative levels. With this in mind, the next section outlines the story of origin of sovereignty as the foundation of modern International Relations. The chapter proceeds by discussing the uses of sovereignty in contemporary political practice. The third section examines multiple conceptualizations of sovereignty within contemporary approaches in International Relations (IR) theory. Together they illustrate the various ways the concept of sovereignty has been practiced and theorized, and the crucial role it plays in ordering and giving meaning to our political reality.

Emergence of the concept

The term *souveraineté* allegedly was coined by Jean Bodin (1530–1596), a French philosopher, to stop continuous fights over power in the overlapping feudal structures of the Middle Ages by creating one central authority. Modern international order incorporates this idea in the notion of the state as the holder of exclusive authority within a designated space. In traditional IR historiography, the Peace of Westphalia (1648) serves as the mythical birthday of this arrangement. The so-called Westphalian model grew out of several Latin principles: “*cuius regio, eius religio*” (he whose region, his religion), “*rex in regno sui est imperator regni sui*” (the king in his kingdom is emperor of his realm) and “*per in parem imperium non habet*” (among equals nobody rules). Together, these mottos highlight that sovereignty is based on territorial borders, and that the state has the exclusive and supreme authority over its own territory and population (Ruggie, 1993). This is also referred to as “**internal sovereignty**”. This is a hierarchical order, in which the state authorities (government, police, judiciary) make and enforce rules that people in their territory need to obey. “**External sovereignty**”, in contrast, connotes the formal absence of an overarching authority in the international realm. It emphasizes independence of and equality between states. In the Westphalian model, the concept of sovereignty thus somewhat paradoxically involves both hierarchy and equality at the same time (see Figure 7.1). But they are the flipside of the same coin. For if all states have exclusive sovereignty over their own territory (domestically), it follows that no state has authority over another state (otherwise the latter would not be the highest authority within its own territory anymore). In relation to each other, therefore, states formally are equals, as sovereigns.



The dark gray arrows identify internal sovereignty: within each state the government (G) is the highest authority, and rules over the population (P). The light gray arrows identify external sovereignty: in the relationship between sovereign states, no one has formal authority over another state.

Figure 7.1 Westphalian Model

The Westphalian birthday of the modern state system has been debunked as a myth, as its emergence did not happen overnight but was a long process (Osiander, 2001; Reus-Smit, 1999). Moreover, the sovereign state is not a product of nature but of human activity, and that activity does not always match the model outlined above. Crucially, the focus on Westphalia is a Eurocentric depiction of the evolution of the international order that ignores alternative conceptions of sovereignty practiced elsewhere (Hobson, 2009; Zarakol, 2022). IR scholars now generally accept that sovereignty is a complex concept that has evolved over time, and that the Westphalian model is an “ideal-type” that does not accurately reflect empirical reality. All that said, the model and its inside/outside logic continues to have a “powerful hold” (Walker, 2003, p. 93) over how IR scholars and practitioners think about the world and the basis from which much of international politics is conducted and contested (see Chapter 5: International Order).

Real-world use: Sovereignty in world politics

As the organizing framework of post-Second World War international relations, the United Nations Charter (1945) reflects the Westphalian model through the principles of territorial integrity (article 2(4)), non-intervention (article 2(7)), and sovereign equality (article 2(1)). Membership to the United Nations (UN), as the key forum of the international community, is exclusively available for sovereign states. According to the 1933 Montevideo Convention, a state consists of: (a) permanent population; (b) defined territory; (c) government; and (d) the capacity to enter into relations with other states. Within international law, only states qualify as legal subjects with full sovereignty rights and duties, based on mutually exclusive territorial jurisdictions. Whereas this territorial logic on the one hand renders sovereignty an absolute and exclusive concept – where the one sovereignty begins, the other ends – with a clear inside and outside, it also means that each sovereign state is dependent upon the recognition by others of their status as sovereigns. In that sense sovereignty is a relational concept. This is quite important, and the implications are visible when we think about entities like Taiwan, Kosovo, or Palestine, whose status and identities as sovereign states remain

contested within the international community (mainly for political reasons). As a consequence, they have to date not been accepted into the UN as full members.

Sovereignty and (post-)colonialism

As a guiding principle of international society, sovereignty has a tainted history of in- and exclusion. Originally, sovereignty was limited to an exclusive club of European, Christian states. In the 19th century this practice turned into a legal doctrine, which dictated that only entities that met the so-called Standard of Civilization could join the club as sovereign states (Gong, 1984). Sovereignty was defined in terms of its origin as a European institution, a “gift of civilization”. Distinguishing between civilized, barbarian and savage states, the Standard of Civilization in turn legitimized colonialism as a civilizing mission, making it the “White man’s burden” to turn savage tribes into civilized nations worthy of sovereignty and admission to the club (Keene, 2002). Therefore, sovereignty was mobilized as a general norm regarding what a state should look like, based on the European model, thus excluding colonies from statehood, and the rights to independence, non-intervention and equality (see also Chapter 6: Colonialism, Chapter 8: The Nation, and Chapter 21: International Community).

This exclusionary conception of sovereignty – and the colonial practices it legitimized – became normatively bankrupt after the Second World War. In its place, the universal right to self-determination for all peoples was established, which set off processes of decolonization and turned most landmass of the globe into independent sovereign territories. This was facilitated by the UN, not only annulling the Standard of Civilization as a normative criterion, but also the capacity to govern as an empirical element of statehood: “Inadequacy of political, economic, social or educational preparedness should never serve as a pretext for delaying independence” (UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV), 1960, article 3). In other words, the principle of self-determination tilted the balance toward sovereign statehood as an absolute juridical right to independence and autonomy for former colonies, whether or not they empirically matched the criteria. This gave rise to the concept of “quasi-states” applied to states with “negative sovereignty” – based on international recognition of their freedom from intervention – as opposed to “positive sovereignty” – i.e. capacity to govern (Jackson, 1990). However, this universalization of sovereignty and the expansion of international society to include all territories as states did not end challenges to the concept of sovereignty.

Contemporary challenges to sovereignty

In contemporary political discourse and practice, sovereignty faces both empirical and normative challenges. Empirically, sovereignty as a key principle of contemporary international order is contested in at least three ways. First, state sovereignty is often said to be undermined by processes of globalization (Weiss, 2016). The speed and density of global migration, capital flows, and the cross-border operation of powerful multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations – like Apple, Shell, Amnesty International and private military companies – are difficult to square with the focus on states as the key actors with sacrosanct borders (Sassen, 1996). Contemporary global power rather seems to consist of overlapping

relations between a variety of public and private actors. Sometimes referred to as “hybrid sovereignty” (Srivastava, 2022), it is important to note that this contestation concerns issues of power and control. Formally, it is still only states that have sovereign status – and the accompanying rights and duties – under international law.

Second, sovereignty apparently is compromised by the role of international institutions and practices of supranational governance, especially through processes of regional integration (within for example the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the African Union, and the European Union (EU)). Particularly the process of European integration seems to stand at loggerheads with the principle of sovereignty as exclusive state power and autonomy (Walker, 2003). This was reflected in the slogan “Take back control”, on the basis of which the UK decided to leave the EU (Brexit) and regain their national sovereignty that had supposedly been confiscated by the EU. But the story is more nuanced and complicated. For one thing, the basis of European integration is a collection of treaties, negotiated between the member-states, by which they formally agreed to delegate decision-making power to European institutions. Similarly, in the Schengen Agreement (1985), numerous EU member-states made their own sovereign decision to give up on their right to border control among themselves. Moreover, not all issues have moved to the supranational level. Notably foreign and security policy remains at the level of the member-states, who try to cooperate but retain their decision-making power on these issues. This sharing of decision-making power between the EU and its member-states is also referred to as “pooled” sovereignty (Keohane, 2002).

A third contestation of sovereign statehood concerns the category of states that are sovereign in name but lack control over their population. Numerous former colonies and quasi-states have developed into fragile or failed states, such as Somalia, Sudan and Congo (Fund for Peace, 2023). They still count as sovereign states, including a seat and equal vote in the UN General Assembly, but are considered unable to act like a state within their domestic domain (e.g. keeping their citizens safe, providing basic services). While this performance seems a purely factual or empirical question, it is based on a (Western) ideal of what a real – effective, legitimate, proper – sovereign state looks like. When this image turns into a measure of sovereign statehood it becomes clear that sovereignty is still a normative concept (Grovoqui, 2002). As a guiding principle of international society, sovereignty therefore not only connotes rights states have, connected to principles of equality and non-intervention, but also comes with ideas about how good member-states of the international community should behave. Such ideas include not only respecting each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity but also respect for human rights as a universal value, as stated in the UN Charter (1945) and the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

With the end of Cold War, the issue of human rights became a key concern at the UN. This also created a dilemma, as criticizing another state over human rights violations goes against a core principle of sovereignty, namely non-interference in each other's domestic affairs. Appalled by the inaction of the UN while genocide and ethnic cleansing were committed in Rwanda and Kosovo in the 1990s, then Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for a reconceptualization of sovereignty in his 1999 Annual address to the UN General Assembly:

States are now widely understood to be instruments at the service of their peoples, and not vice versa... When we read the charter today, we are more than ever

conscious that its aim is to protect individual human beings, not to protect those who abuse them. (Annan, 1999)

In his speech, the Secretary-General was pinpointing how two key principles of the United Nations – state sovereignty and human rights – were commonly understood in juxtaposition. While the conjunction of sovereignty with non-intervention made a lot of sense in the post-Second World War context of outlawing war and colonization, it also created a hard split between domestic and international affairs. This subsequently turned sovereignty into a shield against interference with domestic affairs, including violent practices like mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing and human rights abuses. The fundamental dilemma was summarized in a question raised by Annan: “If humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should [the UN] respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica – to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?” (Annan, 2000, p. 48).

From sovereign rights to sovereign responsibility

The normative contestation of sovereignty as a shield set off a fundamental reconceptualization of sovereignty through the idea of a “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) (ICISS, 2001). A key shift in political discourse was to think about sovereignty in terms of not only state rights, but also duties and responsibilities. While in legal discourse sovereignty has always been connected to both rights and duties, throughout most of the 20th century these duties were limited to respecting the territorial integrity of other states and, for instance, the immunity of political leaders. Today, the international responsibilities in the exercise of sovereignty stretch much further and include obligations towards one’s own citizens, as well as to human rights everywhere, including non-personal entities such as the environment. It thus includes the duty to actively protect citizens from atrocities by their own government and prevent genocide and other crimes against humanity (under the R2P paradigm), and to protect the so-called global commons like the deep seabed, outer space, or the Antarctic as the common heritage of mankind (Aalberts & Werner, 2016).

The R2P doctrine maintains that, while the protection of citizens remains first and foremost the duty of the government itself, if a state is “unwilling or unable” and “manifestly failing” in its duty to protect its citizens, the responsibility of doing so moves to “the international community” as a collective agent (see Chapter 21: International Community). Ultimately, the UN Security Council can authorize the use of international military force for humanitarian purposes. Such reconceptualization of sovereignty as a responsibility then could legitimize interventions as an exceptional measure *in the name of* sovereignty, rather than being criticized as its transgression. While not codified as a formal legal obligation, R2P was unanimously endorsed by all UN member-states at the 2005 World Summit, and adopted in the General Assembly Resolution 60/1 (2005) and UNSC Resolution 1674 (2006). Earlier, the logic of Responsibility to Protect had already been incorporated in Article 4 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union. These endorsements show that within the international society, sovereignty is no longer conceived as an absolute freedom to do as one pleases within one’s own territory and jurisdiction, but sets a limit for crimes against humanity as fundamental norms of the international society. In the terms of the Westphalian model outlined earlier, we might say the recognition of external sovereignty became

conditional on the “proper” exercise of internal sovereignty. Within the conceptual framework of this book, linking sovereignty to the responsibility of upholding human rights shifts the latter from a contrasting to a supporting concept of sovereignty.

At the time of writing the UN Security Council adopted the R2P language in almost 100 resolutions, mostly to recall the primary responsibility of states (Global Centre for R2P, 2025). In 2011 the Security Council for the first time authorized a military intervention under the R2P paradigm, to protect the civilians from the atrocities of the Gaddafi regime in Libya (UNSC Resolution 1973, 17 March 2011). Attempts by the US to authorize an R2P intervention in Syria in the same year were vetoed by Russia and China. Also in other humanitarian catastrophes, like Palestine and Sudan, geopolitics is trumping humanitarian values once again. This selectivity, linked to the charge of hidden motives for taking action, as well as the historical tension between advocating sovereignty and colonial practices, dampened the enthusiasm for the R2P paradigm.

Box 7.1 Performing sovereignty in the UN’s Universal Periodic Review

Calling upon states regarding their violation of human rights is one of the most sensitive issues in diplomacy. Even if they are universal, many human rights concern the relationship between a government and its citizens and therefore fall under the principle of internal sovereignty. Moreover, human rights are often criticized for being Western liberal values, and interfering in domestic affairs as a form of neocolonialism, in disrespect of sovereign equality as the fundament of the UN. In order to deal with this tension between sovereignty and human rights, the UN General Assembly has set up a mechanism of international peer review (UNGA Resolution 60/251, 15 March 2006). In this Universal Periodic Review (UPR) all 193 UN member-states are called upon every 4.5 years by the Human Rights Council to subject their human rights records to an international peer review. During this process the member-state under review submits a report of the state of affairs concerning all its obligations under human rights treaties. This report is shared with all member-states, together with information from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as information submitted by non-governmental organizations. This forms the basis for a 3.5 hour Q&A session. As each and every state is submitted to the same procedure and can give comments to any of their fellow states, the UPR seeks to address human rights violations on the basis of sovereign equality. It has been described as a ritual through which states perform their roles as good sovereign members of the UN, reconfirming their commitment to both human rights and sovereign equality as fundamental norms of international society. Yet, the ritualistic character of the process can, at the same time, facilitate staged performances (Charlesworth & Larking, 2014). States sometimes shield their allies from criticism by giving positive reviews and occupying speaking time so that there is less time for critical comments and recommendations. Moreover, when recommendations themselves become general and repetitive, the UPR seems to overshoot its target.

These various contestations notwithstanding, sovereignty remains a useful abstraction and a popular aspiration in a globalized world. Just think again of those entities that do not have a seat in the UN General Assembly. The ongoing struggle by Palestinians for recognition and the Inuit Declaration mentioned at the outset illustrate the continuous pull of sovereignty, as well as the high stakes of inclusion and exclusion from the sovereignty game (Adler-Nissen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2008). Moreover, Brexit illustrates that even the EU as the institutionalized project of supranational governance beyond Westphalian statehood is not immune to the pull of state sovereignty as a trump card to try and get back control. As a concept sovereignty still informs and occupies many IR debates too.

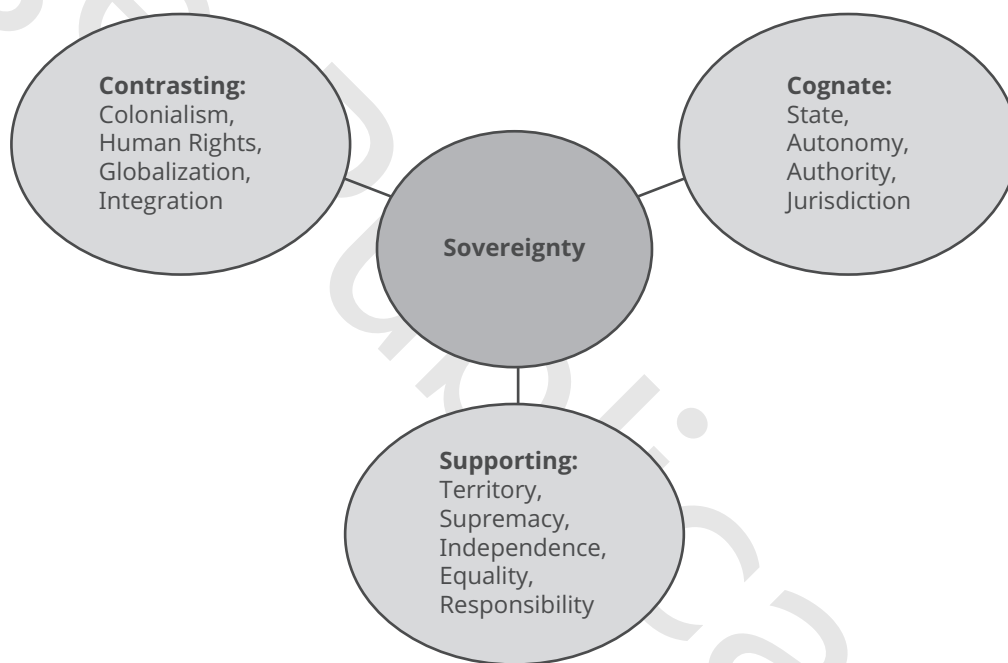


Figure 7.2 Concept web: Sovereignty

Academic use: Sovereignty in IR theory

As discussed above, the Westphalian model is built on a distinction *and* inherent link between “inside” and “outside”. As such, it provides the mythical foundation for IR as a discipline traditionally studying the “living-apart-together” of states as the key units of international order. Yet *how* IR theories conceptualize sovereignty differs significantly, which has consequences for how scholars use the concept analytically. This section discusses multiple understandings of sovereignty within key approaches in IR theory. Together they illustrate how concepts are theoretically informed, and provide different tools to analyze the state of the world (Aalberts, 2012).

Sovereignty as state property and power

The concept of sovereignty seems particularly important for Realism, given its focus on the state as the key “unit” in international relations. Most prominently, Kenneth Waltz identified states as being “like units” in a system of international anarchy: “a state = a state = a state”. Through his influential theory, Waltz’s short-cut description significantly influenced IR thinking on the sovereign state. For him, sovereignty refers to a state’s capacity “to decide for itself how it will cope with its internal and external problems” (Waltz, 1979, p. 96), highlighting autonomy, independence and decision-making power as the key supporting concepts of sovereignty. Moreover, it is a given property of state actors. Sovereign statehood is presented as a matter of fact, having a permanent essence as a given category and key actor across time and place.

Waltz’s ambition to present a simple – in his terms: parsimonious – theory turns states into given, natural-like entities whose sovereignty derives from and resides with the state itself, more specifically in its material power resources. In turn, the fundamental, indivisible, and uncontested status of states as sovereign actors gives rise to the key feature of Waltz’s account of international relations: international anarchy (see Chapter 2: Studying Concepts). He derives this, essentially, from the difference between internal and external sovereignty: within states there is society and a hierarchically organized order, whereas externally the “equal” status of sovereign states constitutes anarchy. In this realm, there is no place for international law; there is only the “law of the jungle” (i.e. survival of the fittest).

Sovereignty as “organized hypocrisy”

In contrast to Waltz’s parsimonious and abstract account, other theorists maintain that concepts should (aim to) provide a truthful picture of reality. An important representative in this regard is Stephen Krasner (1999), who criticizes the singular conception of sovereign statehood. He was also one of the IR scholars to problematize Westphalian sovereignty as a myth (Krasner, 1993), highlighting that the model has never matched reality. To develop more accurate descriptions, Krasner subdivides sovereignty into four different kinds: Westphalian sovereignty, international legal sovereignty, domestic sovereignty and interdependence sovereignty. Each of these forms highlights different supporting concepts – such as authority, control, autonomy, territory – that together compose the meaning of sovereignty in different manifestations. Two forms focus on sovereignty as material capacity: *domestic sovereignty* addresses the effective power within a territory, while *interdependence sovereignty* focuses on a state’s capacity to control its own borders. The other two highlight the central role of authority as a right to power: *Westphalian sovereignty* refers to exclusive authority within a territory (internal sovereignty), while *international legal sovereignty* links authority to formal independence and mutual recognition (external sovereignty). As such, Krasner separates sovereignty into different exercises of power and authority. Moreover, rather than seeing sovereignty as a legal status – which an entity either has or not – such a conceptualization suggests that states enjoy different degrees of sovereignty as they differ in their ability to exercise these different dimensions.

At face value, these different kinds of sovereignty establish a typology for more precise measurement of sovereignty across time and space. Krasner's view that concepts should be accurate descriptions of reality to be effective research tools is based on the positivist model of knowledge production, which assumes that there is an independent reality "out there" about which we can obtain objective knowledge through theoretical models, precise concepts and empirical analysis. Thus, the concept of sovereignty must be assessed against state behavior – to what extent do they respect the rules and each other's sovereignty? Ultimately, he diagnoses sovereignty as "organized hypocrisy": while widely recognized in public discourse, in practice sovereignty rules are constantly violated as states behave according to their national self-interest. In reality, international norms only exist as a thin normative disguise to political business-as-usual. In the end, Krasner confirms the realist maxim that sovereignty is dependent on power – it is a property only the powerful can claim and ignore as they like.

Other IR theories put the social character of sovereignty upfront and present it as an institution or social construct of the international society in which states are embedded.

Sovereignty as an institution of international society

Conceptualizing sovereignty as an institution – a foundational set of rules – of the international society links its quality as a state characteristic to the wider social context in which the concept of sovereignty emerges in the first place (see also Chapter 21: International Community). As elaborated by Hedley Bull, one of the founding fathers of the English School, sovereignty indeed is considered "an attribute of all states" but, crucially, this attribute derives from "recognition as a basic rule of coexistence within the states system" (Bull, 1977/1995, p. 35). In other words, states cannot be sovereign by themselves, but can only obtain that capacity or status in a context of international order that contains sovereign statehood as an accepted and respected norm. Akin to the Westphalian model, Bull refers to the internal and external assertion of sovereignty, identified as supremacy inside and independence outside. While sovereignty – autonomy and territorial integrity – is derived from mutual recognition, he also sees a link to power: "An independent political community which merely claims a right to sovereignty (or is judged by others to have such a right), but cannot assert this right in practice, is not a state properly so-called" (Bull, 1977/1995, p. 8). Yet, while identifying sovereignty as an attribute of states, it is not conceived of as individual state property or capacity. Rather, it is a right that has to be claimed, recognized and exercised – in that particular order.

What transpires here is a more social understanding of the international realm, in which international politics is not just driven by the "laws of the jungle", but where an international society can emerge where states "conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions" (Bull, 1977/1995, p. 13). Through these institutions, international society is more than a random collection of individual state actors. Sovereignty in this context functions as a foundational institution: It regulates the interaction between states (via rights and duties they have vis-à-vis each other), while also playing a more constitutive role in defining the kind of international order as one of equal states. In other words, it identifies both who are

the key actors (states) *and* the rules of their (co-)existence and relationships (non-intervention, equality, prohibition of aggression etc.) (Reus-Smit, 1999). Crucially, these membership rules can change in tandem with changing ideas about legitimate political authority and norms of international society. The English School thus conceptualizes sovereignty as a foundational, enduring *and* changing institution of international society.

Sovereignty as a social construct

Constructivism considers sovereignty as a social construct, an idea created and accepted by a community of people. Sovereignty norms are “both presupposed by and an ongoing artefact of practice... If states stopped acting on those norms, their identity as ‘sovereigns’ ... would disappear” (Wendt, 1992, p. 413). By agreeing on and acting out the norms associated with sovereignty within international society, states obtain their identity as sovereigns. The constructivist emphasis on norms, identity and practice leads to a less parsimonious and more contingent reading of sovereignty – to see what sovereignty means, and which rules apply, it needs to be studied in its social context. But sovereignty is not simply what states make of it. Sovereignty also makes states, and they cherish this status identity – indeed they need it to exist in the first place. Hence, some constructivists employ a universal, more abstract notion of sovereignty, namely its feature as a recognized status of independence within international society. This conceptualization suggests a rudimentary reading of statehood as a territorial container in which a government rules over a population. In that reading, sovereignty notably refers to the external dimension of its recognition (Biersteker & Weber, 1996, p. 2). Sovereignty then is conceptualized as a normative layer that constitutes status or identity in the international and is added on to states as empirical entities, based on historically variant rules of recognition (Wendt, 1999).

Above we have seen how in political reality ideas about sovereignty as well as membership criteria – who may join the club of sovereignty states – are historically contingent (remember the Standard of Civilization). Also the scope of sovereignty itself – what rights and duties states have – has changed over time (as illustrated by the R2P paradigm). As should be clear by now, such changes are easier to accommodate by theories that put the social character of sovereignty upfront and present it as an institution or a social construct of international society. Post-structuralist theories draw further attention to the politics and power dynamics of such constructions.

Sovereignty as a discursive practice

Post-structuralist approaches discuss “sovereignty” as a performative language game. It is performative in the sense that it produces a particular reality. As post-positivist approaches to concept analysis, post-structuralists argue that we should not try to capture what sovereignty *is* – indeed they reject the possibility of universal definitions as neutral descriptions of an independent reality – but focus on how its meaning is produced through discursive practices – what realities it creates, how sovereignty divides the “inside” from the “outside”,

and “us” (e.g. citizens) from “them” (e.g. migrants). Crucially, such projections are political, as they make particular actions and even violence rational or legitimate – for instance to protect the EU from influxes of boat migrants. Moreover, post-structuralist approaches analyze how seemingly opposed concepts, such as sovereignty and intervention, in fact are interlinked conceptually: it is only through transgressions (i.e. intervention) that we can know what nowadays is considered the normal state of affairs (i.e. what state sovereignty is supposed to look like) (Weber, 1998).

Another important contribution consists of uncovering how the concept of sovereignty has been used in different ages as a means of political ordering and in- and exclusion (Bartelson, 1995). Such genealogies for instance explore how European sovereignty was produced through the practice of colonialism. Only through their encounter with the barbarian non-sovereigns did European states get to identify themselves as civilized sovereigns (Anghie, 2005). In other words, the European “Self” was produced through a negative image of the “Other”, which in turn legitimized colonization and European domination. And crucially, this domination did not end with decolonization and the principle of self-determination. For the latter was based on a European and conservative conception of who could determine their own future, namely a replica of the colonial, territorial state as the only possible successor to colonial powers (see Chapter 8: The Nation). The option to return to pre-colonial forms of tribal communities was foreclosed. Contemporary maps of Africa thus still show the colonial borders, drawn by the rulers of the European colonizers. Also the concept of quasi-states is based on (Western) sovereignty as a fixed category or standard that the former colonies had to approach to become “real” sovereigns one day (Doty, 1996) (see also Box 7.2).

As such, sovereignty pertains to a continuous performativity based on apparently natural and universal but ultimately contingent “standards of normality”, i.e. what it means to be a proper or real sovereign state. But who determines that? Moreover, deviance from the prevailing and allegedly universal standard of sovereign statehood in turn legitimizes far-reaching measures that go against the basic ordering principles of sovereignty, non-intervention and autonomy itself. This shows the politics and productive force of discourse.

Box 7.2 Measuring sovereignty

There are several initiatives that seek to measure sovereignty. Such benchmarks serve to demarcate “real” or “full” sovereign statehood from incomplete sovereignties. Unsatisfied with the abstract conceptualizations of sovereignty, they seek to translate the intangible concept into concrete indicators and empirical variables that can be measured and ranked. One such initiative is the European Sovereignty Index, developed by the European Council on Foreign Relations think-tank (ECFR, 2022). It replaces the juxtaposition of sovereignty and EU governance: “European sovereignty is not about building fences or retreating from

(Continued)

the world stage; nor should it stand in opposition to national sovereignty. Instead, it is about boosting the European Union's capacity to manage the complex interdependencies that characterise today's world". The index scores all member-states on their contribution to "European sovereignty" within different policy domains in an interactive online tool. By adding up all the scores, it measures how sovereign "Europe" allegedly is. Another example is the so-called Fragile State Index by the US think-tank Fund for Peace. This yearly index uses 12 indicators to assess the performances of all UN member-states (Fund for Peace, 2023): "It is critically important that the international community understand and closely monitor the conditions that contribute to fragility - and be prepared to take the necessary actions to deal with the underlying issues or otherwise mitigate the negative effects".

Such indices aim to translate the concept of sovereign statehood into empirical and quantifiable indicators (Berg & Kuusk, 2010; Thomson, 1995). They align with positivist IR approaches that conceive of sovereignty as a descriptive concept, which mirrors a corresponding state of affairs in reality. They seek to create a more valid, precise, testable and scientific concept of sovereign statehood as it exists in reality. Post-positivist approaches criticize these indices for ignoring sovereignty's discursive quality, and for "produc[ing] a world knowable without the detailed particulars of context and history" (Merry, 2011, p. 84; see also Bhuta, 2012). For instance they ignore how colonial history and extraction might factor into state failure, and which might call for different measures.

Conclusion

As a basic concept of International Relations, sovereignty is both essentially contested, and essentially uncontested. It is a fundamental concept, yet apparently not a given. It is often treated as a matter of fact, but at the same time subject to continuous conceptual quarrels. It is both presented as absolute and as relational. It connotes supreme authority, as well as its lack. It is said to be a property unique to the state, yet increasingly presented as pooled or hybrid too. It is both a powerful force and a mythical abstraction. It is a formal status, yet under constant empirical and normative attack. It both has an appearance of permanency and is equally claimed to be outdated. It is both common sense and elusive. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that there have been calls to dispel the "S-word" as a protean and erratic concept (Henkin, 1999). Yet, the concept of sovereignty remains a crucial and powerful tool both in political practice and academia. This book invites us to reflect on what concepts *do*. In this context, the heterogeneity, variety and contestation of sovereignty – though sometimes dazzling – is in itself insightful to scrutinize the work that concepts do. In this spirit, the aim of this chapter was not to take away the complexity of sovereignty by finding a universally acceptable definition, but to show how as a concept it is neither historically, nor theoretically, nor politically innocent.

Amidst all this contestation, sovereignty at once remains uncontested in the sense that it still functions as a basis for international discourse and IR as a discipline. In the search for some kind of essence or grounding, it is constantly filled with either empirical

components or other abstract concepts that stand in close relationship to sovereignty, yet do not cover it in all its dispositions: supremacy, territoriality, authority, jurisdiction, recognition, responsibility, to recall a few that have passed in review. Analyzing such a concept cannot proceed as a matter of abstraction or definition, or by conceiving it as a “thing” that can be discovered through empirical fine-tuning. As this textbook seeks to show, conceptual ambiguity invites us to explore a concept’s historical depth and the politics it brings about, rather than conceive it as a problem that needs to be solved through better definitions. Similarly, rather than asking why sovereignty endures as a central concept despite its ambiguity and controversy, we need to come to terms with Jens Bartelson’s (1995, p. 237) point that sovereignty’s very centrality as a key concept in IR is conditioned by its ambiguity and vice versa.

Study questions

- 1 “Sovereignty is empirically and normatively contested”. Explain what this means and provide examples.
- 2 How is it possible that sovereignty entails both hierarchy and equality?
- 3 Explain how European integration can be said to limit sovereignty, and how it does not.
- 4 How does Responsibility to Protect change the meaning of sovereignty?

Recommended reading

Biersteker, T. J., & Weber, C. (Eds.). (1996). *State sovereignty as social construct*. Cambridge University Press.

An important contribution to the debate on sovereignty as a norm of international society. The introduction on the meaning of the constructivist turn for our understanding of sovereignty is followed by informative chapters examining its transformation in light of, *inter alia*, colonialism, quasi-statehood and nationalism.

Jackson, R. H. (1990). *Quasi-states: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*. Cambridge University Press.

From an English School perspective, Jackson analyzes how the process of decolonization led to the emergence of so-called quasi-states – that is, entities that were recognized as sovereign states in a formal sense (juridical statehood with “negative sovereignty”), while lacking the empirical basis for effective statehood (“positive sovereignty”).

Krasner, S. D. (1999). *Sovereignty: Organized hypocrisy*. Princeton University Press.

Writing from a realist perspective, Krasner argues that sovereignty is nothing but organized hypocrisy. He differentiates between different kinds of sovereignty (Westphalian, international legal, domestic and interdependence sovereignty) to analyze the continuous compromises of the sovereignty norm.

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