

Against Sovereignty: The Colonial Limits of Modern Politics

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Abstract

The discipline of International Relations is premised upon the idea that a premodern world of empires and colonial domination was gradually replaced through the global spread of modern sovereign nation-states. Decades of decolonial scholarship and the growth of the literature on state formations have shown fundamental continuities in these ‘transitions to modernity’, which are often overlooked by the assumption that establishes the discipline. This paper questions the possibility of responding to contemporary global crises through a political framework rooted in colonial and absolutist legacies, indicating the necessity of thinking not only beyond, but against sovereignty. This is presented, first, through an engagement with the historical development of modern sovereignty and the role of the ‘nation’ in tying the legitimacy of political authority to a cultural or historical homogeneity. Second, by drawing upon the existing critiques of the nation within decolonial literature, outlining two different responses to its role in struggles for decolonial democratisation. While such a rejection of sovereignty is by no means a finished project, it is a necessary component of contemporary political action (and academic reflection) that aims to look for alternative ways of addressing the many crises of the present while abandoning the colonial legacies of our current political forms.

Keywords

sovereignty, Historical Sociology, decolonial theory

Introduction

The fact that state sovereignty continues to be the foundation of contemporary world politics is a major obstacle for dealing with the main challenges of our times. The discipline of International Relations (IR) has been founded upon the premise of a system of national sovereignties as the defining feature of its object of analysis and has dedicated

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efforts to dealing with problems of collective action and cooperation among those for a long time. However, as much as the development of Global Governance, international regimes and organisations can promote significant change, their efficacy is generally dependent on and limited by the exercise of sovereign power by states themselves. Facing global issues like poverty and development¹ or climate change and ecocide² requires a deeper reassessment of how we conceive political authority, rejecting the ontological privilege of national sovereignty as the unit of analysis through which world politics is conceived. The social sciences, and IR in particular, must move away from a conception of ‘international’ rooted on the sovereign power of nation-states. Otherwise, the underlying premises of modern liberal politics will continue to guide us towards perfecting the exercise of authority in its current form through a procedural emphasis on elements like transparency and accountability, that are supposed to improve the quality of political decision-making without questioning the conception of the national state as its fundamental rational actor. If the rationality of liberal democracies is considered sufficient to produce the necessary measures to make nation-states cooperate to solve global matters, it becomes easy to overlook the fact that nation-states (and liberal democracy itself) are premised on the same colonial and absolutist legacies that produce the violences and exclusions against which we struggle. It is still possible to think of a democratisation of power within (and between, and across) states as a fundamental solution to all the dangers of our times, but only if such democratisation extends to a challenge to the sovereign power of states themselves.

The starting point of this paper is that our current understanding of territorial sovereignty comes from a political instrument of premodern origins.³ By accepting the sovereign state as the main form of political authority, the premodern legacies of absolutism and colonialism are themselves also maintained at the foundations of modern politics. This conception of sovereign power reveals the limits to the idea of democratisation of the state, framing the impossibility of holding the sovereign national state as the core political institution through which global issues can be addressed. Precisely because the modern nation-state is the culmination of varying legacies of absolutism and colonialism, to truly democratise political authority it is necessary to change its institutional format, moving it decidedly away from the modern sovereign state and the nation as its

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1. Ben Selwyn, *The Global Development Crisis*, 1 ed (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); Ben Selwyn, *The Struggle for Development* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017).
 2. Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (London: Verso, 2018), Kindle; Alexander Dunlap and Andrea Brock, eds., *Enforcing Ecocide: Power, Policing & Planetary Militarization* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).
 3. For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘premodern’ is meant as a critique of the idea of state sovereignty as the birthplace of modernity, still widely adopted in IR. It is not meant to reinforce the myth of modernity as emancipatory or morally superior, but to historically locate the origins of sovereignty as preceding the myth of modernity itself. The critique of liberal democracy and the premodern character of sovereign statehood builds upon the arguments initially developed by Pedro Salgado ‘Embedded Authoritarianism: Sovereignty, Coloniality, and Democracy in Latin America’, in *Global Authoritarianism: Perspectives and Contestations From the South*, ed. IRGAC (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2022), 13–24.

source of legitimation. In order to think of democratic exercises of political authority, it is necessary to go against the form of sovereignty that we inherited from the times of empires.

The first key step for this reassessment is therefore to break the links that exist between the establishment of national sovereignty and the dawn of modernity in international politics, moving away from the notion of a project of modernisation understood as the secularisation and democratisation of the state. While the literature on that topic is extensive,⁴ the discipline still largely accepts the emergence of modern sovereignty as the main rupture between a premodern world of empires, and a modern international system composed of sovereign nation-states. If modernity itself is not interpreted as a rupture,⁵ but as a heuristic device that highlights ‘the *continuity* between non-capitalist and capitalist societies’,⁶ this notion of sovereignty must be then interpreted not as a radical change, but as a legacy of absolutist and colonial politics that lives on to our days.

In this sense, the use of the term ‘premodern’ as a critique of sovereignty and the sovereign state is not in contradiction with the decolonial literature from which such critique is made. Rather, it is influenced by the use of ‘modernity/coloniality’ in the sense of pointing out that the most fundamental institutions of political modernity are deeply shaped by legacies which are being themselves the bearers of colonial continuities from which they are supposed to mark a radical rupture. In addition, such legacies partly pre-date the myth of modernity. Therefore, sovereignty does not come into being as an avatar

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4. Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, ‘The Big Bangs of IR: The Myths That Your Teachers Still Tell You About 1648 and 1919’, *Millennium* 39, no. 3 (2011): 735–58; Julia Costa Lopez et al., ‘In the Beginning There Was No Word (for It): Terms, Concepts, and Early Sovereignty’, *International Studies Review* 20, no. 3 (2018): 489–519; Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648 : Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003).
 5. Gurminder Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
 6. Ellen Meiksins Wood, ‘Modernity, Postmodernity or Capitalism?’, *Review of International Political Economy* 4, no. 3 (1997): 542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/096922997347742>. Wood highlights the importance of finding out the *specificity* of capitalism and its political forms, in a project that she develops in other works (Wood, 1991) and is later carried on by Teschke (2003), Lacher (2006) and others. This literature correctly rejects the identification between modernity and capitalism, but also points toward the development of a distinct institutional form of sovereign statehood (usually associated with modernity) by adding an important historical correction: this (so-called) modern state is not a product of French modernity, but of English capitalism. Although I agree with them, I am maintaining the use of ‘modernity’ (and ‘modern state’, ‘modern sovereignty’, etc.) in this paper to facilitate the dialogue with a discipline of IR that still relies on the myth of modernity. In this sense, it is possible to bring Wood and Bhambra together in a reading of modernity not as a chronological or epistemic rupture, but emphasising the pre- or non-modern social forces that promote it from the 16th century onwards. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States* (London: Verso, 1991); Teschke, *The Myth of 1648*; Hannes Lacher, *Beyond Globalization: Capitalism, Territoriality and the International Relations of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2006).

of modernity, but as the culmination of premodern claims of political authority and jurisdictions. The replacement of absolutism with the values of liberal democracy also meant replacing the monarch (or God) with the nation as the justification for the legitimacy of sovereign power, of its territorial form, and the relations of belonging established between the state and its citizens. That framework is still imbued with many limitations to the democratisation of political authority, and therefore to the accountability demanded from the last instance of political decisions. Most of the literature on Historical Sociology and Global Political Economy have addressed these limitations through the class character of modern democracy and the effects of bureaucratisation.⁷

In this paper, I want to emphasise a decolonial critique of the nation as the affirmation of cultural homogeneity that makes the conception of a 'body politic' possible.⁸ By questioning the construction (and management) of national identities and their others by states themselves, this literature offers important contributions to the contextual specificity of each national project, as well as to the way in which each of them are embedded in their own territorial context. Conceiving a democratic alternative to the current exercise of sovereign power requires destabilising the role of the nation in the formation and operation of statehood. By taking the decolonial approach, the critique presented is circumscribed to the theories produced by these scholars, drawing upon the particularities of the Latin American experience of the 'impossible nation', in Quijano's phrase. Scholars from many other traditions are mentioned and drawn upon, which reflects the fact that similar critiques can be made by drawing on other experiences of colonial modernity. The emphasis, however, lies with the decolonial tradition and their own empirical referents.

The legitimacy of modern sovereignty is produced by the affirmation of a nation as a common cultural identity that confers some unity to its population and, at the same time, is able to integrate other groups within the matrix of differences of a specific social formation.⁹ The second key step of this paper is a dialogue within the decolonial literature that questions the production of homogeneity and the management of pluralities through the nation. It consists in outlining the problems related to the construction of said cultural homogeneity in post-colonial contexts, and specifically outlining the contested responses to this problem within decolonial scholarship. On one hand, some scholars uphold the

7. Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Lacher, *Beyond Globalization*; Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

8. Rita Segato, *La Nación y Sus Otros: Raza, Etnicidad y Diversidad Religiosa En Tiempos de Políticas de La Identidad* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2007); Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa – Una Reflexión Sobre Prácticas y Discursos Descolonizadores* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2010); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

9. René Zavaleta Mercado, *La Autodeterminación de Las Masas* (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores/CLACSO, 2009); Segato, *La Nación y Sus Otros: Raza, Etnicidad y Diversidad Religiosa En Tiempos de Políticas de La Identidad*.

importance of the nation as a requirement for modern democratisation.¹⁰ On the other hand, the third step of this paper looks at an entirely different kind of response. Other decolonial scholars – especially Gloria Anzaldúa¹¹ and Silvia Cusicanqui¹² – take the nation and its claim towards a shared identity as a logocentric and patriarchal tool of domination. Rather than embracing this element of a modernising project, the key component of decolonisation is to find ways of embracing difference. The last section of this paper discusses the conceptual framework developed by these two scholars for that end – such as the borderlands, the *mestiza* consciousness, and *ch'ixi* – and opens the question about the implications for these different constructions of identity to the territorial institutionalisation of political authority.

I am not suggesting that such a reformulation of political authority would solve climate change or global poverty. Such solutions, of course, are way beyond the conceptual reformulations that are within the reach of academic debates. However, these conceptual debates do have very important implications for the broader political strategies devised to tackle such problems. The argument that sustains this paper points towards such a direct political contribution or intervention: these core challenges of our times cannot be solved within the framework of sovereign states as we know it, precisely because it is built to maintain the legal forms of capitalism – structures of property, subjectivities, territorial control and exploitation of nature – that are at the root of the problems that must be tackled. In other words, it is precisely because of how these legal-political forms become effectively isolated from politics – that is, from democratic debate and oversight¹³ – that political modernity (and the territorially sovereign state as its main form) must be discarded. In order to deal with these key challenges of our times, it is crucial to reconceptualise the exercise of political authority against this conception of modernity that is rooted in colonialism, absolutism and the instrumental application of their limitations on political subjectivity to protect the reproduction of capitalism.¹⁴ This means that political strategies that rely on conquering (by whichever means) and mobilising sovereign power as we know it will be tied to the reproduction of these premodern traits. The boundary between politics and the economy cannot be overcome without a reconfiguration of both sides of such duality, which necessarily includes the current conception of politics and the sovereign nation-state as its main institutional form. Demonstrating the connection between modern sovereignty and the limits imposed by this political framework is precisely the goal of the next section of this paper. Once that is done, we can move on to the discussion of nationalism and territoriality, as two key pillars to be reconsidered in imagining a different form of political authority.

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10. Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580; Zavaleta Mercado, *La Autodeterminación de Las Masas*.
 11. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.
 12. Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa – Una Reflexión Sobre Prácticas y Discursos Descolonizadores*.
 13. A. Claire Cutler, 'New Constitutionalism and the Commodity Form of Global Capitalism', in *New Constitutionalism and World Order*, eds. Stephen Gill and A. Claire Cutler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 45–62; Salgado, 'Embedded Authoritarianism'.
 14. Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*; Wood, 'Modernity, Postmodernity or Capitalism?'; Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*.

Nation, Sovereignty and the Premodern Origins of IR Theory

The mythical birth of the notion of sovereignty has been enshrined as the moment in which modern politics came into being within the discipline of IR as a whole. The literature that is still enshrined as its canon defines its core object as ‘a multiplicity of self-sufficient, impenetrable, sovereign nation states’,¹⁵ which provides the starting point for treating international politics as a ‘system’¹⁶ that can be analytically isolated even if such a system and its ‘regimes’¹⁷ can be described according to a hierarchy of rules and institutions that applies to the ontology of social life as a whole.¹⁸ That is, even if other actors and ontologies are taken into account, institutionalist and constructivist theoretical traditions also revert back into the state-centric disciplinary bias through the definition of which institutions, rules and actors form the system of international politics itself. Hans Morgenthau himself identifies a ‘retreat from nationalism’ in the post-war period due to the ‘growing recognition by statesmen, intellectuals, and technical experts that certain fundamental problems (. . .) transcend the interests and the ability to solve of any single nation, however powerful’.¹⁹ However, the regimes and institutions created to deal with said fundamental problems and increasingly studied by the IR literature on the second half of the 20th century are still described through the combination of national interests (however unequal each of their capacities) to shape the conditions for cooperation between them and the rise of new international orders.²⁰ The assumption that the state can still be held, following Rousseau, as a representation of a nation’s general will means that institutionalist and (to some extent) constructivist theories still conform to Waltz’s third image.²¹

Perhaps the latest iteration of an institutionalist approach within its disciplinary canon to move IR away from the interaction between sovereign units is the literature on Global Governance that has emerged since the early 1990s,²² where one of the key concerns

15. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 8.

16. Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, NY; London: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

17. Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 26, 57.

18. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *Making Sense, Making Worlds: Constructivism in Social Theory and International Relations* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); John Gerard Ruggie, ‘Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations’, *International Organization* 47, no. 1 (1993): 139–74.

19. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 122.

20. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*; G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4–20.

21. Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), 160–62.

22. Of course, there are many *critical* traditions – that is, placed outside the disciplinary canon – that present different sets of epistemic challenges to the discipline and its statecentrism.

revolves precisely around the multiplicity of actors that contribute to the production of said governance. James Rosenau relates this multiplication of actors to a disaggregation of authority:

the proliferation of global actors and the dispersion of their authority have resulted in the transformation and not the breakdown of global structures. Disaggregated authority and the proliferation of actors has led to the emergence of the multi-centric world as a sometime partner, sometime rival, and sometime co-equal of the long-standing state-centric world, a process that I have called the bifurcation of world politics and that some analysts have treated as the emergence of a global civil society.²³

When dealing with this multiplicity of actors in a way that encompasses the wide variety of those within the ‘multi-centric world’, however, Rosenau reverts back to the fact that all of them are defined as not states.²⁴ This leaves this new paradigm proposed by him in a conundrum: the aim is precisely to show how global politics has evolved from a scenario in which a multiplicity of actors influence global affairs, but they only do so precisely because they influence those actors who are able to control currency through central banks, and the use of coercion through armies and the police.²⁵

While a deeper engagement with the Global Governance literature is not within the scope of this paper, this brief one serves to demonstrate a tension created by maintaining the analytical role of sovereignty as the cornerstone of global affairs. If the political goal is defined as influencing the actions of sovereign states, they are still being acknowledged as the prime actors of world politics. As much as we indeed still live in a world shaped by them, this framing attempts to work around sovereignty, accepting it as a given. The suggestion made in this paper is that this effort, while clearly fruitful, is also insufficient to deal with problems that result from the very fact of having world politics still revolving around sovereign entities that are taken as the legitimate representations of national general wills. This has been increasingly clear by the advance and continuity of various forms of ecocide and genocide²⁶ that have been empowered by recent authoritarian politics across the globe. To demonstrate how these challenges are rooted in sovereignty itself as a legal and political form, it is necessary to historicise sovereignty, seeing it not as a neutral demarcation of the rise of political modernity, but as a powerful political tool that is constantly re-written as part of social and geopolitical disputes

23. James N. Rosenau, *The Study of World Politics – Volume 1: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 14.

24. Rosenau, *The Study of World Politics*, 16.

25. Rosenau, *The Study of World Politics*, 17.

26. Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa – Una Reflexión Sobre Prácticas y Discursos Descolonizadores*; Abdias do Nascimento, *O Genocídio Do Negro Brasileiro: Processo de Um Racismo Mascarado* (São Paulo: Perspectivas, 2016), Kindle; Dunlap and Brock, *Enforcing Ecocide: Power, Policing & Planetary Militarization*; Wainwright and Mann, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*.

between different groups.²⁷ In the words of Benjamin de Carvalho, to see sovereignty not as a principle, but as politics.²⁸

In order to turn to the politics of sovereignty, it is essential to understand the practices that shaped the historical development of this process of centralisation of political authority.²⁹ In fact, this has been promoted by a literature that spans different theoretical traditions since the 1990s that share a revisionist perspective upon the discipline itself, the definition of its object of study ('international politics'), and the sets of contextually specific practices and concepts that led to the creation of the system of sovereign states, with an emphasis on the problems around the reification of 'international politics' as a separate sphere of social reality.³⁰ According to the common threads produced by this literature, understanding the politics of sovereignty requires a return to the early modern period, to emphasise how it comes into being through two decidedly premodern elements: absolutism and colonialism.

Recovering the absolutist origins of sovereignty is an essential challenge to the disciplinary assumption grounded on the myth of 1648. The discipline of IR largely continues to rely on the idea that modern sovereignty emerges out of the secularisation of international politics and the establishment of impersonal sovereignty in the Treaties of Westphalia.³¹ However, the revisionist historiography on the states-system and on the sovereign state in IR points out that the change from a sovereignty tied to the body of a divine monarch to a popular, democratic and secular sovereignty takes place throughout centuries, through context-specific discourses on sovereignty and intervention that shape how sovereign authority can be exercised, and how the entities that exercise it are equally variable.³² One of the key references for this literature is the work of Michel Foucault that traces the genealogy between the pastoral of souls within religious communities in the 16th century and the secular government of citizens by the state.³³ Foucault, however, admittedly does 'not try even to sketch the series of transformations that actually brought about the transition from this economy of souls to the government of men and populations'.³⁴

27. Cynthia Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State, and Symbolic Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*; Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*.

28. Benjamin De Carvalho, 'Sovereignty in Historical International Relations: Trajectories, Challenges, and Implications', in Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa Lopez and Halvard Leira (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 227–28.

29. Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 93.

30. De Carvalho, 'Sovereignty in Historical International Relations: Trajectories, Challenges, and Implications', 221–30; de Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson, 'The Big Bangs of IR'; Lacher, *Beyond Globalization*; Teschke, *The Myth of 1648*; Rob Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State, and Symbolic Exchange*.

31. de Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson, 'The Big Bangs of IR'.

32. Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State, and Symbolic Exchange*, 16.

33. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 228–32.

34. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 227.

This effort is undertaken by a broader tradition of Historical Sociology, within which I emphasise a historical materialist tradition that formulates a social history of political thought³⁵ and develops it in a radically historicist and anti-Eurocentric direction.³⁶ This literature – Political Marxism – has directly contributed to highlighting the premodern origins of modern sovereignty in absolutism – as pointed out by Foucault – by identifying the different social forces and accumulation strategies that can be linked to these specific practices that shape sovereign power in particular historical contexts. This allows for these shifts in the exercise of political authority to be inscribed in the context of broader social and geopolitical disputes, and in the transformations that result from them. Throughout these transformations on the politics of sovereignty, however, a key fundamental continuity can be identified throughout this long process of transition from ‘dynastic’ to ‘modern’ sovereignty. Even though the discursive mechanisms of legitimation of sovereign power changed, as well as the set of social and geopolitical practices that inform its exercise (i.e. the concrete manifestations of the politics of sovereignty), the existence of the state, broadly conceived, as the institution in which the exercise of political authority is centralised was (and still is) maintained.

A more detailed historiography of these social and geopolitical processes that culminate in the transition from absolutist to national sovereignty while highlighting the continuities is beyond the confines of this paper.³⁷ Still, this literature demonstrates that the consolidation of sovereignty as a core pillar of world politics throughout the early modern and modern periods redefines sovereignty itself in terms of its limits and attributions, in the daily practice of geopolitics and foreign policy. But this process also consolidates sovereign power (whatever this might mean exactly in a given context) as an attribute of statehood, with pressures towards the centralisation and de-personalisation of the exercise of political authority. For instance, when Benno Teschke³⁸ describes the post-Glorious Revolution settlement in Britain as the consolidation of this shift from dynastic to modern geopolitics, this is described as the process through which the landholding class directly represented in parliament takes over the attributions of sovereign power that

35. Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 2012).

36. Samuel Knafo and Benno Teschke, ‘The Rules of Reproduction of Capitalism: A Historicist Critique’, *Historical Materialism* 29 (2020): 54–83. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-00001441>; Eren Duzgun, ‘Against Eurocentric Anti-Eurocentrism: International Relations, Historical Sociology, and Political Marxism’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 23 (2018): 285–307; Pedro Salgado, ‘The Transition Debate in Brazilian History: The Bourgeois Paradigm and Its Critique’, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 21 (2021): 263–284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12394>; Pedro Salgado, ‘Anti-Eurocentric Historicism: Political Marxism in a Broader Context’, *Historical Materialism* 29, no. 3 (2021): 199–223. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12342056>.

37. See, among others already cited, Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*; Teschke, *The Myth of 1648*; Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State, and Symbolic Exchange*; Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*; Wood, *Liberty and Property*.

38. Teschke, *The Myth of 1648*, 252–5.

were previously held by the king: like decisions over taxation, jurisdiction, diplomacy, control of the armed forces and its right of self-convocation. This set of attributions remains unaltered throughout the transition to capitalism, which allows for reading modernity not only as historical and epistemic rupture, but also highlighting its continuities.³⁹ Of course, the limits to the exercise of this authority change throughout the next few centuries both in relation to the evolving notions of individual and collective rights,⁴⁰ and to other sovereign polities formally acknowledged as equal.⁴¹ Such changes, however, can be traced back to and grounded in different forms of property, of practices of accumulation, and geopolitical strategies of contextually specific actors.⁴² Returning to the point about understanding sovereignty as a political tool, the distinction to be made is that the move away from absolutism changes the politics around how the tool is used, but not the tool itself. Sovereignty continues to be the attribute of statehood, that legitimates the exercise of centralised political authority. The contribution of this Marxist literature in IR and Historical Sociology amounts to the point that although the geopolitically mediated spread of capitalist modernity throughout the globe gradually changed the attributions and exercise of sovereignty, it did so by reinforcing the role ascribed to sovereignty in the organisation of an international order constituted by multiple politically constituted territories.⁴³ The rise of global capitalism or political modernity accommodated sovereignty as the premodern absolutist instrument through which these territories are held together.⁴⁴

On the other hand, the shift away from the divine rights of an aristocratic dynasty as the foundation of sovereignty brings a gradual shift towards the affirmation of cultural

39. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*.

40. Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*; Christian Reus-Smit, *Individual Rights and the Making of the International System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

41. Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State, and Symbolic Exchange*; Walker, *Inside/Outside*.

42. Lacher, *Beyond Globalization*; Benno Teschke and Can Cemgil, 'The Dialectic of the Concrete: Reconsidering Dialectic for IR and Foreign Policy Analysis', *Globalizations* 11, no. 5 (2014): 605–25.

43. Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994); Teschke, *The Myth of 1648*; Lacher, *Beyond Globalization*.

44. The difficult task presented here is the one that lies at the core of Historical Sociology: to navigate between the opposite extremes of (a) understanding the rise of capitalism/modernity as a radical rupture with the social and geopolitical processes that originated them, and (b) adopting the lens of coloniality as an overarching explanatory logic that abdicates from historical analyses of the significant historical transformations (like capitalism, or the many changes in colonial strategies and policies) witnessed since the 16th century. The Political Marxist literature that informs this article proposes a historicist agency-centred methodology as the best tool for such a task (Knafo and Teschke, 'The Rules of Reproduction of Capitalism: A Historicist Critique'; Salgado, 'Anti-Eurocentric Historicism'). In the argument developed here, my goal is to highlight the continuity in a discipline (IR) that is built upon the rupture of modernity as its premise. For this purpose, it is more important in this paper to discuss the legacies of colonialism and absolutism – broadly understood – than the many transformations in the politics of sovereignty brought by the transition to capitalism, for instance.

homogeneity of a people and a territory, codified in the idea of a nation.⁴⁵ The use of the idea of nation as the ‘imagined community’ that constitutes a common identity among a population presents two consequences for the development of sovereign statehood throughout the modern period. First, strong nationalist discourses are developed not through the disaggregation of premodern aristocratic states, but precisely as a consequence of their enduring continuity. And, as such, although these nationalist discourses represent an opposition to aristocratic privileges, they also represent a fundamental continuity of a project of centralisation of political authority, that is, of the particularly absolutist form of sovereign power.⁴⁶

Second, the creation of these homogeneous national identities relies on centuries of social differentiation through colonial practices in many scales. For instance, in the argument developed by Mahmood Mamdani, the rise of the modern nation-state comes out of a process of ethnic cleansing that created the ‘homogeneous national homeland’⁴⁷ for Christians (against Moors and Jews) in the Iberian Peninsula, as well as by colonial domination in the Americas. This demonstrates a permanent tension within the nation-state, as these two entities (nation and state) are ‘necessarily incompatible, for the purpose of the state is to apply law equally to all members, while the purpose of the nation is to protect and valorise only members of the nation. If the state does the bidding of the nation, it will instantiate in law national prejudice, which is antithetical to the rule of law’.⁴⁸ Mamdani’s argument is developed through the opposition between the colonial practices embedded in the making of the nation and the secular liberal tolerance presupposed by ‘Westphalian tolerance’⁴⁹ and the rule of law. As discussed by the literature mentioned above, such an account of modern sovereignty does not hold to the historical record of the absolutist legacies carried out by the Westphalian settlement and European geopolitics in the 17th and 18th centuries. However, the colonial aspect of the production of national homogeneity and the limitations it imposes on the supposed democratisation of politics by the paradigm of modernity is a common critique raised by decolonial literature.

According to Aníbal Quijano,⁵⁰ the production of geocultural identities can be traced back to the colonial encounter, and to the construction of subjectivities according to the position occupied by places and people within the global division of labour that gives rise to a modern/colonial world-system. This production of identities is the foundation for the racial categories of modernity and, at the same time, the basis for the cultural homogeneity needed for the construction of a nation. Therefore, the same colonial practices of geopolitical domination that give origin to racial categories are also the

45. Buzan and Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations*, 114–18.

46. Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*, 30.

47. Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2020), 1.

48. Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native*, 7.

49. Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native*, 5–6.

50. Quijano, ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America’.

cornerstone for the creation of the modern nation-state, with homogenisation of people through the action of public authority and its mechanisms of violence. The existence of prolonged centralised power over a territory is an essential starting point for the possibility of a national sentiment, which results from the long-term subjection of the population in this space to a power structure that articulates: (a) the control over labour, its social forms and its products; (b) sex and social reproduction; (c) political authority and the legitimate use of violence; (d) the production of knowledge and subjectivities.⁵¹ Both racial and national categories are shaped by the exercise of centralised power and violence, creating new structures of power that bring together these four elements. Both are, therefore, fruits of colonisation: ‘the nation-state began as a process of colonization of some peoples over others that were, in this sense, foreigners, and therefore the nation-state depended on the organization of one centralized state over a conquered space of domination’.⁵²

The conception of sovereignty that establishes our idea of the nation-state and serves as the cornerstone of political modernity in IR is therefore deeply rooted in premodern absolutist and colonial legacies. The continuity of a politics of sovereignty that relies unproblematically on its current form of institutionalised political authority – the nation-state – as the core pillar of world politics will not be able to abandon the embedded authoritarian and colonial practices that shaped it, and continue to be essential to the reaffirmation of its centralised authority.⁵³ This is why it is necessary to consider new forms of organising political authority as a whole, which within the scope of this paper, takes two forms. First, rethinking the connection between the state and the nation as a shared cultural background that legitimises its authority over a population through a premise of homogeneity. Second, rethinking the spatial projections of political authority, and especially how it is affected by a rejection of the nation as the core affirmation of shared experiences that establishes a political community, even if imagined. The next section turns to the first of these, through a discussion of the nation in decolonial theory.

Decolonial Theory and the ‘Impossible Nation’

Despite the large and multidisciplinary literature dedicated to nations and nationalism, I choose to emphasise the contributions from the Latin American tradition of decolonial thought in this article for two reasons. First, because it shares an understanding of nationhood that inscribes it within the practices of colonial domination at the birth of modernity itself.⁵⁴ At the same time, the notion of ‘coloniality of being’ represents the idea of geopolitically differentiated subjectivities, according to the position they occupy in these patterns of colonial domination, and according to the racial and national categories

51. *Ibid.*, 557.

52. *Ibid.*, 558.

53. Salgado, ‘Embedded Authoritarianism’.

54. Quijano, ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America’; Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

derived from them.⁵⁵ Second, because their emphasis on the Latin American experience allows for a few key insights derived from the region's particular historical experience of formations of states and nations, disrupting the traditional Eurocentrism in IR that insists on formulating general conceptions by abstracting away from European experiences.

Drawing from the work of Quijano discussed above, the transition to national states is described as a process that relies upon a democratisation of society as one of its basic conditions, that consists on the creation of a homogeneous national identity to be ascribed to (or adopted by) the population.⁵⁶ One of the main traits of Latin America is that, because of its formation through the colonial encounter between different populations and modes of labour control, the coexistence between these differences in the same territories and formally as subjects of the same state makes the creation of a unifying national sentiment an impossible task. This is especially the case, he argues, in countries where a small white minority controlled the state after independence, with the exclusion of other subjects from political participation in that new state, so that the new national identity carried on the project of colonisation and dispossession in the same way as the previous colonial empire.⁵⁷

55. Santiago Castro-Gómez, *Revoluciones Sin Sujeto: Slavoj Žižek y La Crítica Del Historicismo Posmoderno* (Ciudad de Mexico: Akal, 2015), Kindle; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'On the Coloniality of Being', *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 240–70. The different ways in which the formation of said identities is presented as historical process or as part of the structure of a modern/colonial world-system is discussed elsewhere by Salgado, 'Anti-Eurocentric Historicism'.

56. Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', 558–60.

57. Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', 562–5. Of course, this project of colonisation and dispossession amounts to the global expansion of capitalism, which entails the formation of specific forms of property and subjectivities, racialised in contextually specific ways. The economic, legal and geopolitical aspects of how the gradual expansion of capitalism is mediated through nation-states is detailed in a vast literature. See Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2018); Charles Post and Xavier Lafrance, eds., *Case Studies in the Origins of Capitalism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Salgado, 'The Transition Debate in Brazilian History: The Bourgeois Paradigm and Its Critique'; Teschke, *The Myth of 1648*; Ntina Tzouvala, *Capitalism as Civilisation: A History of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Here, however, I am framing the critique to nation-state sovereignty within the decolonial literature through Quijano as its main reference. My argument relies on this literature about capitalism and nation-states and contributes to it with a reflection on the complex relationship that is established (or presumed) between this conception of sovereign statehood as representative of a culturally homogeneous nation and the large populations that are excluded from this conception of politics for not belonging to the nation/not being citizens. This reinforces capitalist expansion by allowing these populations to be turned into dispossessed workers and even surplus populations subjected to super-exploitation. Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), Kindle; Ruy Mauro Marini, *Dialéctica de La Dependencia, Decimoprimer Reimpresión* (Ciudad de Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1991). This article ties into that literature even if it does not develop the argument in that extent, due to space limitations.

This conundrum of the ‘impossible nation’ posed by Quijano presents two possible solutions. He presents the first one himself, by claiming that, since the racial categories resulting from colonial domination represent an obstacle to the formation of national societies in Latin America, the only possible solution is a decolonisation of power that allows for a democratisation of society that cuts across racial categories and geopolitically differentiated subjectivities. However, in Quijano’s formulation, this democratisation is seen as a necessary condition to the establishment of the modern nation-state: ‘only through the process of democratization of society can the construction of a modern nation-state, with all of its implications, including citizenship and political representation, be possible and successful’.⁵⁸ Quijano’s framing of the conundrum revolves around a contradictory view of the state: it is part of the political structures shaped by the coloniality of power, and at the same time the only possible means through which citizenship and legal subjectivity can be effectively enacted. It therefore reinforces the nation-state as the only possible form of institutionally organised political authority, despite the problems discussed in the previous section.

The same solution is presented by René Zavaleta Mercado in his analysis of Bolivia as a *formación social abigarrada*, or a motley or disjointed social formation. The expression used by the Bolivian sociologist is very close to the notion of a social formation in other Marxist scholars, being used as a mid-range concept that refers to the coexistence of multiple modes of production in one same society, with their own temporalities and developmental trajectories.⁵⁹ In his case, however, Zavaleta Mercado refers to the impossibility of development of capitalism in Bolivia due to the exclusion of civil society from the state. He situates himself alongside a disruption of the Marxist orthodoxy of mid-20th century developmentalism, pointing out that the trajectories of development in Latin America would never follow the same steps of developed countries, questioning the possibility of liberal democracies of the same kind.⁶⁰

Zavaleta Mercado’s thinking around the Bolivian *abigarramiento* has become particularly relevant due to its use as the conceptual basis for the recent projects of plurinationalism in Latin America.⁶¹ It is important to point out that Zavaleta Mercado reflects upon the *abigarramiento* (‘disjointedness’) of Bolivian social formation not as a positive trait that can lead towards an innovation in the institutional form of the sovereign state in a post-colonial context. Instead, it is similar to Quijano’s formulation of the nation as an impossibility, since Zavaleta Mercado⁶² presents this ‘disjointedness’ as an obstacle to

58. Quijano, ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America’, 572.

59. Aaron Augsburger, ‘The Plurinational State and Bolivia’s “Formación Abigarrada”’, *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 7 (2021): 1568–69. For a critique of such use of social formation, see Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*.

60. In this sense, Zavaleta Mercado is part of the tradition of social theory that lays out the foundations for dependency theory, alongside Florestan Fernandes in Brazil. See Salgado, ‘The Transition Debate in Brazilian History: The Bourgeois Paradigm and Its Critique’; Felipe Antunes de Oliveira, ‘The Rise of Latin American Far Right Explained: Dependency Theory Meets Uneven and Combined Development’, *Globalizations* 16, no. 7 (2019): 1145–64.

61. Álvaro García Linera, *Identidad Boliviana: Nación, Mestizaje, y Plurinacionalidad* (La Paz: Vicepresidencia del Estado, 2014).

62. Mercado, *La Autodeterminación de Las Masas*, 210.

the efficacy of democracy within the state, namely, of the style of liberal democracy commonly associated with capitalist development. By framing the impossibility of repeating the trajectory of capitalist development in Latin America, Zavaleta Mercado, like Quijano, accepts the identification between capitalist development and a functioning state democracy with an expanded and inclusive conception of citizenship⁶³. The notion of a plurinational state can indeed point towards a step beyond the limits of a sovereign state and its liberal conception anchored in the cultural homogeneity of a nation. However, this prescriptive use of the term is not necessarily separated from a descriptive one, that attributes the coexistence of multiple identities with a social formation to a failed project of modernisation due to the lack of a hegemonic social force producing a national-popular sentiment.⁶⁴

In other words, the suggestion of a plurinational state as a solution to the impossibility of cultural homogeneity in a colonial context carries in itself a contradiction of destabilising the necessity of cultural homogeneity while upholding the institutional form of the modern sovereign state. If plurinationality effectively transforms the state through the incorporation of each nation's forms of political action as legitimate exercises of political authority and their recognised jurisdictions,⁶⁵ it poses a much more fundamental question to the exercise of sovereign power which begs the question of to what extent this plurinational collective can still be called a *state*. Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar⁶⁶ raises this same critique by pointing out the limits encountered by communitarian politics in the Bolivian context, where 'autonomous forms of government are (. . .) trapped in the defensive consolidation of a state project' under MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo*) rule.⁶⁷ In that case, the relation between communitarian politics (including but not reduced to those of different ethnic and national groups within the state) and the state itself is one of *tutelage*, where the latter continuously seeks 'a more or less silent obedience or acceptance on the part of the diverse social contingents of their re-monopolised decision-making', and in so doing 'continuously "disavow" – and, when they deem it necessary, attack and repress, of course – autonomous initiatives'.⁶⁸ This *tutelage*, she concludes, reveals

63. Mercado, *La Autodeterminación de Las Masas*, 142. *Abigarramiento* in this sense, by referring to the impossibility of a democratic civil society, is close to the argument presented by Florestan Fernandes about the 'incomplete' bourgeois revolutions that are always wedded to autocratic forms Florestan Fernandes, *A Revolução Burguesa No Brasil – Ensaio de Interpretação Sociológica*, 2ª Reimpressão (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Globo, 2008); Salgado, 'The Transition Debate in Brazilian History: The Bourgeois Paradigm and Its Critique'; Salgado, 'Embedded Authoritarianism'.

64. Augsburger, 'The Plurinational State and Bolivia's "Formación Abigarrada"', 1570–2.

65. Luis Tapia, *La Hegemonía Imposible* (La Paz: Autodeterminación, 2015), 42.

66. Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, 'Competing Political Visions and Bolivia's Unfinished Revolution', *Dialectical Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (2011): 275–7; Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, 'Bolivia: Statisation of the Social, Destruction of the Communitarian', *Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 283–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2019.1673332>.

67. Gutiérrez Aguilar, 'Bolivia: Statisation of the Social, Destruction of the Communitarian', 287.

68. *Ibid.*, 289.

a form of politics that is not mediated by the liberal notion of citizenship as inclusion,⁶⁹ but by a hierarchy between the state power (and the citizens that constitute its legitimising nation), and the communities that it either recognises or not as rightful members of its own 'civil society'.

The idea that such hierarchies can be dismantled through the management of a democratised state not only remains open to the forms of colonial tutelage described by Gutiérrez Aguilar, but also reinscribes a methodological nationalism in the analysis of decolonial politics. This is precisely the direction in which Rita Segato drives her conception of 'national formations of alterity':

The idea of 'national formation' [of alterity] can be understood as the application of the instrument of anthropological relativism to the idea of Nation (. . .). This concept draws attention to the fact that processes of otherification, of racialisation, and ethnicization that are specific to the formation of national states emanate from a history that occurs within the boundaries of each country, and at the same time shapes the geographic and human background of each of them. (. . .). This is why I call 'historic othernesses' the human profiles that result from this process, and I emphasise that their emergence is situated in specific localities, in their regions, and, above all, in the nation.⁷⁰

Segato avoids essentialist conceptions of identity by affirming that, rather being understood in internalist and self-referential ways, they must be conceived historically, in relational ways. However, by limiting their genealogical processes to their respective national contexts she is also adopting the analytical lens of methodological nationalism. The idea of a plurinational state becomes, in very clear terms, centred around the experience of these multiple identities within the shared political space defined by the bounded territoriality of a specific state, which escapes any interrogation. As a result, the nation serves not only as a hegemonic narrative of homogeneity, but also as a matrix through which multiplicity itself is produced and managed.⁷¹

The critique of the nation-state offered by Segato is aimed specifically at the hegemonic conception of the nation that is produced by elites and promoted by the state. But by giving this hegemonic nation an all-encompassing reach in producing and ordering its own 'matrix of alterities', she emphasises the role of these alterities as components of the nation themselves, as subaltern social forces which are able to generate counter-hegemonic versions of that nation by appropriating and reinterpreting its symbols. It is

69. One challenge in writing this article was to differentiate between two distinct notions of citizenship: one that treats it as a synonym of legal-political subjectivity, and one that sees it through a critical lens for accepting that it conditions subjectivity to the relation with a (nation-)state. The first is clearly adopted by Quijano, who sees decolonisation as a democratic expansion of citizenship, and seems to apply equally to Zavaleta Mercado and Segato. The other is part of the critique proposed by Gutiérrez Aguilar, Cusicanqui and Anzaldúa. Remarks as the one that preceded this footnote are attempts to move towards the latter. I am thankful to Reviewer 2 for helping me notice this distinction.

70. Segato, *La Nación y Sus Otros: Raza, Etnicidad y Diversidad Religiosa En Tiempos de Políticas de La Identidad*, 28. Direct translation from the original in Spanish.

71. Segato, *La Nación y Sus Otros: Raza, Etnicidad y Diversidad Religiosa En Tiempos de Políticas de La Identidad*, 29–30.

crucial to be able to see the nation as a space of deliberation and historical fragmentation, rather than a reified and inert totality.⁷² Segato is undeniably correct in pointing out the historical character of nation-building as a process, which can therefore be influenced and disputed by the alterities – the ‘others’ – constituted by it. The problem lies in her emphasis on the nation as a system of symbolic exchanges within the political (territorial) boundaries of statehood. This creates a separation between the hegemonic national discourses of white elites that attempt to produce cultural homogeneity and the claims of territorial authority by these same elites that drive the very institutional and territorial consolidation of these states. It is this separation that allows her argument to move from seeing nation as the hegemonic production of homogeneity (the impossibility outlined by Quijano) and an articulation of alterity and multiplicity managed by the national state. To say that national states build a unified narrative of identity that shape a resulting plurality⁷³ erases the violence and dispossession enacted by the state itself in enforcing the hegemonic nation over its others. More importantly (in the context of the argument made here), to claim that the construction of difference can only be perceived in the horizon provided by the national context⁷⁴ seems to condition alterity, multiplicity and social diversity to their positions *within* the state. This creates problems in contexts where some of these subaltern ‘national alterities’ can trace their genealogies to centuries before the production of the national contexts into which they were unwillingly inscribed, and by which they are constantly threatened with violent dispossession. Specifically, to oppose the violence and dispossession historically enacted by states with the creation of new states (or recognising the statehood of ancient nations) is a logic that is trapped within the assumption of modern nation-state sovereignty as the only possible articulation of identity, territory and political authority. Instead, the point is to dismantle states’ capacity to enact such violence by delegitimising the hierarchies – citizens/non-citizens, national/foreign – that they institute as articulations of alterity.

By maintaining the state as the primary *locus* of politics, as the realm in which the articulation of pluralism, difference, and multiple ethnic identities and political subjectivities is possible, these articulations are reinscribed in a methodological nationalism that accepts the existing world order premised in the modern form of sovereign statehood as a given. In privileging the ‘national-popular’ (as Zavaleta Mercado) or the management of alterity through the nation itself (as Segato), the necessity of a ‘national’ politics is still presented as a unity. The critique posed here consists in highlighting that the only way in which democratisation is made possible within a political framework that acknowledges the colonial violence inscribed in the affirmation of ‘national-popular’ as a unity is by also incorporating a revolutionary component that posits the end of the state itself.⁷⁵ Otherwise, the capture of communitarian impulses by state sovereignty will

72. *Ibid.*, 30.

73. *Ibid.*, 58.

74. *Ibid.*, 47.

75. Chris Hesketh, ‘A Gramscian Conjuncture in Latin America? Reflections on Violence, Hegemony, and Geographical Difference’, *Antipode* 51, no. 5 (2019): 1488.

reinscribe relations of tutelage between a hierarchy of political subjectivities organised and managed by the state.⁷⁶

Decolonial Practice Against Sovereignty

A project of multiculturalism or plurinationalism mediated by the nation-state itself as the core of a ‘matrix of alterity’ is close to what Silvia Cusicanqui targets in her critique of ‘official multiculturalism’.⁷⁷ She returns to the notion of an ‘internal colonialism’ carried on by the state itself as an instrument of local elites in an attempt of producing a modern society. These official discourses of multicultural inclusion, however, have ordered these alterities through forms of second-class citizenships since their beginning in the 19th century, and continue to do so today.⁷⁸ Cusicanqui thus reaffirms the coloniality of the state, which returns to the problem posed by Quijano: it is impossible to think of modernity without a homogeneous nation that confers legitimacy to the exercise of political authority. She does so by evoking Zavaleta Mercado’s *sociedad abigarrada*, as the acknowledgement that these different cultural identities coexist within a singular ‘national society’, or within a state, but not in a harmonic mixture. Instead, they relate to each other in contentious and antagonistic ways. But unlike Zavaleta Mercado, who hopes for a national project led by the counter-hegemonic force of the working class to complete the project of modernity,⁷⁹ Cusicanqui rejects the linear conception of history that is still embedded in Zavaleta Mercado, and, according to her, also in Quijano and other prominent decolonial thinkers in the anglophone world.⁸⁰

By highlighting the limits of plurinational projects promoted by the state and its role in the continuation of colonial orders, Cusicanqui presents an alternative answer to Quijano’s conundrum of the ‘impossible nation’. In her view, the decolonisation of power which Quijano speaks of is not possible within the institutional framework of the nation-state. This becomes clear in two moments in her writing. The first, is her rejection of a decolonial thought that is not tied to decolonial practice:

There can be no discourse of decolonisation, or a theory of decolonisation, without decolonial practice. The discourse of multiculturalism and the discourse of hybridity are essentialist and historicist readings of the indigenous question, that do not reach the deeper themes of

76. Hesketh, ‘A Gramscian Conjuncture in Latin America? Reflections on Violence, Hegemony, and Geographical Difference’; Gutiérrez Aguilar, ‘Bolivia: Statisation of the Social, Destruction of the Communitarian’.

77. Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa – Una Reflexión Sobre Prácticas y Discursos Descolonizadores*, 58.

78. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

79. Mercado, *La Autodeterminación de Las Masas*, 248–61.

80. Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa – Una Reflexión Sobre Prácticas y Discursos Descolonizadores*, 62–9. This critique is addressed elsewhere as the result of an engagement with structuralist readings of historical materialism Pedro Salgado, ‘Agency and Geopolitics: Brazilian Formal Independence and the Problem of Eurocentrism in International Historical Sociology’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2020): 432–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1638343>; Salgado, ‘Anti-Eurocentric Historicism’.

decolonisation; instead, they cover and renew effective practices of colonisation and subalternisation. Their function is to remove indigenous populations as subjects of history and turn their struggles and demands into ingredients of an engineering of cultures and statecraft that is able to subsume them into its own neutralising will. A ‘change so that never changes’ that attributes rhetorical acknowledgements and subordinate the indigenous populations in purely emblematic and symbolic roles, a kind of ‘cultural oppression’ at the service of the ‘pluri-multi’ spectacle of the state and of the means of mass communication.⁸¹

This is part of her critique of the role of (nominally) decolonial intellectuals in the maintenance of the coloniality of knowledge, through their participation in colonial institutions such as universities in the North, foundations, international organisations and their respective structures of power that entail access to the libraries, imposition of language, citation networks and funding capacities. According to her, a decolonial thought that is distanced from the decolonial practices and lived experiences of subaltern groups⁸² is not able to bring the deep transformation that decolonisation entails: a solution to Zavaleta Mercado’s *abigarramiento* that does not simply push ‘forward’ towards modernity. This transformation – decolonisation – depends on concrete gestures, practices and ways of naming the world. The necessity of translation drives her to the adoption of an Aymara term – *ch’ixi* – as her way of denominating dialectical change: ‘something that is and is not at the same time, that is, the logic of an included third. A grey *ch’ixi* colour is white and is not white at the same time, or is white and also black, its opposite’.⁸³

Ch’ixi allows Cusicanqui to think of legal-political subjectivity beyond citizenship – that is, without the requirement of belonging to a state (and therefore, to a nation) and the homogeneity implied. This differs significantly from Segato’s version of an alterity that is understood through the nation-state, since the emphasis placed on difference by a *ch’ixi* conception of subjectivity is organised horizontally, through the lived experience of alterity. It therefore fundamentally transforms the state and its logics of identity, territoriality, authority and jurisdiction. The second clear rejection of the state form comes precisely from her rearticulation of territoriality: the claiming of territory as identity is marked by a patriarchal logocentrism that revolves around establishing property and belonging. Instead, a feminist notion of identity revolves around the interculturality of concrete interpersonal relationships, based on everyday practices and on establishing pacts of reciprocity through which difference can coexist. The *ch’ixi* conception

81. Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa – Una Reflexión Sobre Prácticas y Discursos Descolonizadores*, 62.

82. The shift from Cusicanqui’s use of ‘indigenous populations’ to the broader and more abstract term ‘subaltern groups’ here is not accidental. The notion of indigeneity is itself embedded in practices of colonial rule, and its use may reinforce dichotomies between the modern and non-modern as subjects and objects. Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2012); Sarah Radcliffe, ‘Geography and Indigeneity I: Indigeneity, Coloniality and Knowledge’, *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 2 (2017): 220–9.

83. Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa – Una Reflexión Sobre Prácticas y Discursos Descolonizadores*, 69.

of subjectivity through the emphasis on shared experiences of alterity, rather than the affirmation of identity, therefore points towards a feminist conception of decolonial theory and praxis, in the sense that it displaces the affirmation of identity and territoriality derived from the patriarchal conception of 'belonging' to a nation-state.⁸⁴

The construction of multiple political subjectivities in coexistence displaces the territorial authority of modern statehood, through embodied experiences of people in their relations to each other. The *ch'ixi* subjectivity takes place not within the culturally homogeneous territory ascribed to a nation-state, but through the lived experience of alterity through encounters.⁸⁵ In this sense, Cusicanqui's argument echoes Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of the borderlands.⁸⁶ She describes the violences that exclude her from the racist, patriarchal and heteronormative society in which she lives, and connects such exclusion to the symbolic devaluation of her *chicana* (i.e. not entirely Latina, certainly not white) cultural heritage within modernity. This is what she describes as being in the crossroads: not belonging to any country, and to all countries at the same time.⁸⁷ Not having a culture (in the sense of a pre-established identity), but participating in the making of a new consciousness: the *chicana* consciousness

By creating a new mythos – that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave – la mestiza creates a new consciousness.

The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundations of our lives, our cultures, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.⁸⁸

The rejection of the state as the locus of sovereign power and the institutionalisation of politics is also a rejection of the fixed identities of modernity/coloniality. This is, indeed, the nature of the border in Anzaldúa's thought. Her use of *borderlands* refers to much more than the limit between territorially defined political authorities. It defines identities, and in doing so its territoriality is not limited to the physical space of the border itself, but is 'vague and undetermined', constantly embodied in those marked as different as an 'emotional residue', a 'constant state of transition'.⁸⁹ In the manner of

84. *Ibid.*, 72–73.

85. A notion of territoriality as informed by historically and contextually specific social practices is shared between Cusicanqui, Anzaldúa and the tradition of geopolitical Marxism informed by critical geography. See Knafo and Teschke, 'The Rules of Reproduction of Capitalism: A Historicist Critique'; Lacher, *Beyond Globalization*; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

86. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

87. *Ibid.*, 80–81.

88. *Ibid.*, 80.

89. *Ibid.*, 3.

dialectical thought, it is a constant encounter of difference, which produces an outcome (in her case, the *chicana*, or the *mestiza*) that cannot be reduced to either of those initial elements. This is an essential component of her understanding of the border as the production of a new form of consciousness (see quote above) that ‘break[s] down the subject–object duality’ in its many modern and contemporary ontological implications: between male and female, between white and non-white, etc. The border assumes an essential role in the production of this subjectivity that is in a constant state of transition, precisely because it is threatened by both worlds that produced her.⁹⁰ Its importance in the context of this paper comes from the fact that it establishes the making of subjectivity as a historical process,⁹¹ and not as the outcome of modernity itself (as in Quijano) or as a *locus* of enunciation tied to an epistemic privilege in the colonial divide (as in Mignolo). Anzaldúa reaffirms the coloniality of being, power and knowledge by tracking their effects on the production of multiple subjectivities not only through their origin in the colonial encounter, but also in how the emotional experiences of exclusion and its many forms of violence continue shaping subjects who embody the borderlands.

This echoes an important meta-theoretical discussion about historicism within decolonial theory, which impacts the discussion on the role of nationalism in processes of state formation. The nation, as a homogeneous identity that shapes a body politic and legitimises the exercise of political authority by a modern territorial state, necessarily reifies a given identity around a specific narrative of citizenship built around colonial dispossession and violence. According to Anzaldúa, this national identity is specifically a male and generally white one.⁹² This means that the subject shaped by the border culture, in its constant state of transition, cannot itself be contained in a nation of its own. To fixate its identity as such would multiply the borders between different homogeneous identities. Instead, the *chicana* consciousness requires what Anzaldúa refers to as embracing the contradictory – the duality of *Guadalupe* and *Coatlicue*.⁹³ In other words, this is why the argumentative framework used by Anzaldúa to decolonise *chicana* and *mestiza* as categories of subjectivity does not easily extend to the state itself. These categories dealt with by Anzaldúa – *chicana* and *mestiza* – are already markers of colonial difference, whereas the state relies on the affirmation of cultural homogeneity (through the nation) for its legitimisation. To decolonise the state would entail a rejection of the patriarchal and logocentric articulations of territory, identity, property and sovereignty that legitimise it. Such rejections appear in Cusicanqui through the notion of *ch’ixi* and had already appeared in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* as that new consciousness that is only possible by the direct and constant experience of the border, the crossroads. This is important: neither in Cusicanqui nor in Anzaldúa such rejection gives rise to a new identity or territory. Both *ch’ixi* and the *mestiza* consciousness refer to the construction of identity through the constant practice of experiencing difference. The latter also explicitly refuses a territory. Instead, it implies a form of territoriality defined by the

90. *Ibid.*, 20–23.

91. Salgado, ‘Anti-Eurocentric Historicism’.

92. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 15–20.

93. *Ibid.*, 45–51.

geographical experience of difference: *the Borderlands/La Frontera*. In Anzaldúa, 'To survive the Borderlands/you must live *sin fronteras*/be a crossroads'.⁹⁴

Conclusion: No Borders, No Nations

This reading of Cusicanqui and Anzaldúa allows for a quick and dry response to the problem posed by Quijano: yes, the nation is impossible in a post-colonial context because of the impossibility of articulating difference and homogeneity in a way that does not establish a hierarchy of subjectivities within a specific national context (as it does in Segato). As a result, this also means that to think of decolonisation as a democratisation of citizenship makes it an impossible task, since the sovereign nation-state relies on the hierarchical distinction between those who are or not members of the nation, and citizens of the state. This prevents the advance of modernisation in these contexts. However, the incomplete modernisation is not seen in Anzaldúa and Cusicanqui as an absence. To see it in such a way means to embrace a linear conception of history that embraces national projects of modernisation and development, and reinforce the necessity of thinking these processes in *national* terms, as is the case in Zavaleta Mercado and Segato. Quijano hints at the construction of modern nation-states as a necessary step in the trajectory of decolonisation in Latin America, while at the same time acknowledging the limits of this trajectory:

In terms of the national question, only through the process of the democratization of society can the construction of a modern nation-state, with all of its implications, including citizenship and political representation, be possible and successful. But under the ongoing process of reconcentration of power at a global scale, that perspective may well not be feasible any longer and a process of democratization of society and public authority may require some quite different institutional structure.⁹⁵

This tension remains unresolved in Quijano and is given a radical solution by Cusicanqui (which was already hinted in Anzaldúa). The colonial experience of the borderlands, the *chicana* consciousness shaped by the personification of difference, the Aymaran *ch'ixi* – these are all deeply incompatible with the construction of a common national identity aimed at projects of modernisation and democratisation within the confines of the nation-state. To insist on that direction means to reinforce the modernisation project and its political form, which brings with it the legacies of absolutism and colonisation. In this sense, Anzaldúa's narrative of the borderlands exemplifies the effects of the politics of sovereignty⁹⁶ on a personal level. These tensions around the nation in decolonial thought can be read as a struggle against the very limits of the institutional framework imposed by modernity. By reading these decolonial struggles alongside the IR debates around sovereignty, we find a radical contribution to the latter that is anchored on the necessity of moving not only beyond the ideas of sovereignty and modern territoriality, but *against* them.

94. Ibid., 195.

95. Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', 572.

96. De Carvalho, 'Sovereignty in Historical International Relations: Trajectories, Challenges, and Implications', 227–8.

To do so entails imagining another territorial basis for political authority, one that does not rely on the logocentric practice of establishing claims of property rights and ownership over land, and abstract and homogenising identities. As highlighted by Gutiérrez Aguilar, this requires changing the conception of politics from a 'national-popular' to a 'communitarian-popular' one,⁹⁷ which reflects Cusicanqui's construction of subjectivity through the experience of differences in concrete social relations. This disrupts the idea of a 'nation' and its patriarchal logic of ownership/belonging, and paves the way for the construction of new forms of territoriality based on the concrete experiences of difference and practices of reproduction of subaltern groups. In other words, if the territoriality we know conceives of territory as the property of the sovereign⁹⁸, the decolonial critique articulated by Cusicanqui and Anzaldúa helps us to think of new territorialities based on different conceptions of 'property' and 'the sovereign'. The question of what this different territoriality is, and how it reflects a transformation of the institutional form of political authority is yet to be answered. In the limits of this paper, the insight that Hesketh⁹⁹ derives from Gramsci and Marx remains essential: an ethical (in this sense, truly democratic and decolonised) state can only be imagined through the end of the state itself.

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97. 'Our inquiry into the production of the communal and the new political projects that emerge from this process understands the common (lo común), on the one hand, as a critical category, a category produced and realised in terms of struggle, and on the other, as a social relation. (. . .) For us, the common as social relation is a mode and a collective power of creation and cultivation of bonds centred on the guarantee of the material and symbolic reproduction of life, which generates fabrics of interdependence that are different from, and opposed to, the divisions that yield the existence and expansion of capital as social relation'. Gutiérrez Aguilar, 'Bolivia: Statisation of the Social, Destruction of the Communitarian', 286. This form of commonality, although based on property rights, does not reproduce logocentric claims, being centred instead on 'material and symbolic reproduction of life' through the cultivation of 'fabrics of interdependence', in line with the *ch'ixi/mestiza* consciousness discussed above. To what extent the same applies to a broader literature on communitarian politics is not in the scope of this paper.
98. Robert D. Sack, 'Human Territoriality: A Theory', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73, no. 1 (1983): 55–74.
99. Hesketh, 'A Gramscian Conjuncture in Latin America? Reflections on Violence, Hegemony, and Geographical Difference', 1488.

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