

Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion in International Relations

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Introduction

In the course of his ethnographic study of the Ndembu tribes, the renowned anthropologist Victor Turner focused on the elaborate rituals that marked various phases of social transition, such as puberty and marriage. Also drawing on the work of Arnold van Gennep on rites of passage, Turner identified the entities going through social transitions as liminals, that ‘are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’. According to Turner, the defining attribute of liminal positions is their ambiguity and indeterminacy because they ‘elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space’.¹

The concept of liminality led Turner to develop a critique of the prevailing structuralism in sociology. He was first interested in how structure confronts liminality. In pre-modern societies, Turner found that ‘liminal situations and roles are almost everywhere attributed with magico-religious properties, and often regarded as dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting’. In rituals that accompany various social transitions, those in liminal situations are

represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, stripped naked. Their behaviour is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint.²

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¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, [1969] 1995), p. 95.

² Ibid.

Turner, then, found striking parallels between how pre-modern and modern societies approach liminality. Liminals are perceived as threats because as entities that are neither here nor there, they undermine the categorical distinctions that social structures rely on. Thus, Turner concluded that ‘for those concerned with the maintenance of structure, all sustained manifestations of [liminal communities] must appear as dangerous, anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions’.³

Secondly, Turner was interested in how liminality affects structure. According to Turner, liminal groups possess anti-structural qualities and revolutionary potential. By presenting the possibility of existing outside of and beyond the socially pre-given structural positions, they invite a broader societal reflection about the possibility to transcend social limits and constraints.⁴ Turner stressed that liminals have anti-structural effects not only because of their presence as peripheral and in-between actors, but because of the ways in which they act on their positions. He observed that these groups form *communitas*, a community which is characterised by the absence of social structural positions and status, and which breaks in through the interstices of structure, transgressing the norms that govern structured and institutionalised relationships.⁵ Thus, through the emphasis that he made on liminal groups’ anti-structural qualities, Turner used liminality not only as a descriptive concept, but also as a theoretical tool to understand the limits and contradictions of structure.

This contribution aims to extend and apply Turner’s perspective on liminality to the study of international politics. Mainly, it contends that the theoretical lens of liminality enables us to understand and appreciate certain limits and contradictions in the social structure of international politics, particularly concerning the Self/Other distinctions that are constitutive of state identities and international normative hierarchies. The existing literature on identities in International Relations (IR) has failed to pay due attention to the actors that elude the identity categories constituted by discourses on international politics, such as, Western/non-Western, developed/under-developed, democratic/non-democratic. I argue that an ontological focus on liminal actors in IR reveals that such identity categories and the normative hierarchies they embody are inherently unstable and continuously vulnerable to subversion. The social order of international politics is the site of an ongoing contestation between structure and liminality, where social structure seeks to domesticate liminality by positioning it in one of the pre-given identity categories, and liminality continues to subvert those very categories by presenting the possibility of an in-between existence.

It should be noted that an ontological focus on liminality does not necessitate the essentialisation of certain actors as liminals. Liminality is not a pre-given attribute of the actors that are deemed to be liminals, but a subject position which itself is discursively constituted. Although liminality eludes and defies all categories, including the category of the liminal imposed by the analyst, this contribution aims to shed light on its fleeting and slippery manifestations. Therefore, this contribution invites scholarly attention to how discourses of international politics construct liminal spaces, position certain actors within those spaces, and how the actors constituted

³ Ibid., pp. 108–9.

⁴ Ibid., p. 167.

⁵ Ibid., p. 128.

as liminals, in turn, practice their liminality. Civilisationist discourses on the West, for example, are predicated on the binary opposition between the West and the non-West; however, they simultaneously open up liminal spaces where the opposition breaks down, and position actors such as Turkey and Russia within those spaces. Likewise, the discourses on democracy are predicated on and reproduced through the opposition of democracies to authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, but have given birth to a host of liminal intermediate subject positions, such as illiberal democracies.

In addition, liminality is a contextual position. In other words, an actor which is positioned as a liminal within a particular discourse (such as, discourses on the West) is not necessarily a liminal in the context of other discourses. Thus, within the discourse of sovereignty, for example, Turkey is not a liminal actor, but there, too, is a liminal space, constituted by *de facto* or partial recognition, occupied by actors, such as Taiwan and Kosovo. As the social structure of international politics is made up of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing discourses, many actors occupy liminal positions in relation to one discourse or another. However, this ubiquity does not rob liminality of its theoretical purchase. The salience of certain liminal actors is augmented as the discourses that have constituted them as such become hegemonic. Just as neutrality and Third Worldism constituted liminal spaces during the Cold War, the ascendance of civilisationist discourses in the post 9/11 world have increased the salience of liminal spaces occupied by actors, such as Turkey.

Most prominently, liminality offers an alternative view of social structure, one that is inherently unstable and wrought by tensions. It shifts the locus of agency from the established to those who are ambiguously positioned by the structure. It elevates the status of liminals from objects that are sought to be moulded by the agents of structure into one of the established categories, into subjects that challenge and subvert the structure. Thus, while topics such as the plight of unrecognised states, challenges of democratisation in illiberal societies, and identity conflicts in Turkey and Russia have certainly attracted the interest of political scientists, the theoretical lens of liminality invites us to re-examine these cases in light of their effects on the discourses which constituted them as such in the first place. Thus the main *problematique* is no longer one of whether and how Turkey can Westernise, but how Turkey reproduces, reconfigures, and subverts the discourses on the West through its very presence and representational practices. In analysing the 'revolutions' in the Arab world, the theoretical lens of liminality invites us to examine how the developments are reshaping the discourses on democracy, rather than whether and how the Arab societies can become established liberal democracies.

In the following section, I begin with a discussion on how liminality has been studied in the extant literature on identity in International Relations. The concept of liminality has been literally invoked only in a very limited number of works. While akin concepts, such as hybridity, have figured more prominently, IR theorising on identity has not fully explored the theoretical implications of in-betweenness. I argue that the preoccupation to demonstrate the significance of social order in International Relations has driven constructivist theorising into dismissing liminal spaces and occurrences as temporary aberrations. On the other hand, although post-structuralist perspectives have celebrated liminal, marginal, borderline spaces, they have shied away from analysing liminality as a position of subjectivity. Post-colonial perspectives have been the most interested in the subversive effects of hybridity, but they have

remained focused on the colonial and post-colonial discourses, and not generalised this insight into other discourses on international politics, which are also productive of hybrid, liminal, subject positions. Therefore, I argue that Turner's approach to liminality provides additional insights that enrich the existing theorising on identity in International Relations. Liminality is not simply another term to describe margins, borderlines, or hybrid actors; it provides a theoretical lens to analyse the constitution and contestation of social structure in International Relations.

In the third section, I put forward a framework to apply the liminality perspective to the analysis of the social structures of international politics, by first outlining how different discourses on International Relations produce liminal spaces; second, discussing how actors positioned in liminal spaces may practice their liminality; and third, elaborating on how structure responds to liminality. I argue that liminal spaces may arise in the social structures of international politics as a result of two processes: Liberal universalistic discourses constitute liminal spaces because they construct their Others not as anti-Self or non-Self, but as less-Self; and overlapping discourses on identity may produce liminal spaces of incongruence and mismatch. I then conceptualise that actors positioned in liminal spaces may practice their liminality in two ways: Although their very being challenges the established social distinctions, they may engage in representational practices that reposition them in one of the existing categories, with an overall reproductive effect on structure, and/or they may practice their liminality in a subversive manner by reproducing their own ambiguity.⁶ And finally, I contend that social structures of international politics respond to liminality mainly by attempting to 'domesticate' it, either by constructing new social categories, or by repositioning the liminal in one of the existing categories.

In the fourth section, I provide a brief illustration of the above framework through the case study of a state actor, constituted as a liminal within the civilisationist discourses on Europe and, more generally, the West: Turkey. First, I trace how Turkey came to be constituted as a liminal state actor, through the mismatch between particularistic and universalistic discourses on Europe and the West. Then, I discuss how, until recently, Turkey has enacted this liminal position through representational practices that reproduce the social categories of Europe/ non-Europe and the West/ non-West. After that, I analyse Turkey's recent regional foreign policy initiatives as examples of subversive practice of liminality. The article concludes with some suggestions for further research.

Structure and liminality in International Relations theory

Liminality in International Relations remains under-theorised. This concept is literally used in a limited number of works mostly as a descriptor of an in-between and peripheral identity position, mainly in reference to states, such as Turkey, Australia, and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.⁷ In using liminality as a descriptive

⁶ Turner was primarily interested in the subversive enactments of liminality because they challenged the prevailing structuralism in sociology. The framework that I offer encompasses both reproductive and subversive enactments of liminality.

⁷ Richard A. Higgott and Kim Richard Nossal, 'The International Politics of Liminality: Relocating Australia in the Asia Pacific', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 32:2 (1997), pp. 169–85; Bahar Rumelili, 'Liminality and Perpetuation of Conflicts: Turkish-Greek Relations in the Context of

concept, some scholars essentialise it. For example, according to Higgott and Nossal, Australia occupies a liminal position because it is caught between its identity as a Western state and its desire to associate more closely with countries in its region. Australia is fixed in this position because 'the contradictions between the two worlds ... are deep enough to prevent a full crossing of the threshold'.⁸

In this application, liminality is perceived to be the outcome of the structural incompatibility between international collective identities (that is, West and Asia), not a position which questions and transgresses their structural demarcations and incompatibilities. As an essentialised category, liminality loses much if not all its anti-structural bent, and functions to reproduce the structures of meaning which constitute liminality in the first place. However, Australia's liminality is at once the discursive product of the constitution of the West and Asia as mutually exclusive subject positions and eludes and subverts their mutual exclusivity.

The theoretical potential of liminality has been under-utilised in IR theories on identity for a number of reasons. Since the early 1990s, constructivist scholarship in International Relations theory has been preoccupied with identifying the main elements of the social order of international politics, including institutions, norms, ideas, meanings, discourse, practice, and habit.⁹ However, in demonstrating the significance of this social order, constructivist research has remained inattentive to the social categories on which the order is premised and hence overlooked the spaces of ambiguity that elude and slip through these categories.

According to constructivist theorising, social order in International Relations is advanced through the intricate link between norms and identity. The logic of appropriateness compels states to engage in the types of behaviour that are expected of their identity, and processes of shaming discipline those that violate the behavioural norms of their identity. The salient identities that drive the process of normative diffusion and progress tend to be 'liberal', 'democratic', 'European', 'civilised', and other more specific identities that derive from states' memberships in particular international organisations.¹⁰

But as Ann Towns has recently stressed, constructivist theorising has remained inattentive to the fact that norms also differentiate, and construct 'classes' of states based on the degree of their adherence to international norms.¹¹ Thus, social order in International Relations is premised on categorisation and stratification. Social categories situate and rank state actors *vis-à-vis* one another, as norm-abiders/

Community-Building by the EU', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9:2 (2003), pp. 213–48; Maria Mälksoo, 'Liminality and Contested Europeanness: Conflicting Memory Politics in the Baltic Space', in Eiki Berg and Piret Ehin (eds), *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations in the Context of European Integration* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 65–83; Maria Ruxandra Stoicescu, *Liminality in International Relations: A Discursive Analysis of Romania, Ukraine, and Turkey* (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Geneva, 2008); Lerna Yanik, 'Constructing Turkish "Exceptionalism": Discourses of Liminality and Hybridity in Turkish Foreign Policy', *Political Geography*, 30:2 (2011), pp. 80–9.

⁸ Higgott and Nossal, 'The International Politics of Liminality', p. 172.

⁹ Alex Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 887–917.

¹⁰ Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (eds), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Ann E. Towns, *Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 42–8.

violators, responsible/rouge, democratic/non-democratic, civilised/barbaric, and the motivation of states to advance in these social ranks is what explains their dutiful adoption of international norms.

Constructivists have stressed that identities and membership in international communities are based on intersubjectively shared understandings. This emphasis on intersubjectively shared understandings has also diverted attention away from ambiguity and controversy about boundaries and belonging.¹² To contend that what constitutes democracy is based on the prevailing shared understandings in international society establishes that democracy is not an objectively pre-given identity, but it does not acknowledge that whether a particular state is democratic or not may remain ambiguous and controversial. In addition, the in-built assumptions of a liberal trend toward isomorphism in international society¹³ have led constructivist theorising into thinking that such ambiguity and controversy will at most be short-lived and thus dismissing liminality as a temporary aberration.

While its preoccupation with structure has led the constructivist scholarship to negate and avoid liminality, it is rather puzzling why liminality has not figured more prominently in post-structuralist approaches, otherwise interested in deconstructing social and discursive structures. On the one hand, post-structuralist approaches offer a liminal reading of International Relations, by focusing on the margins, emphasising the uncertainty of being, instability of meaning, and challenging the binary oppositions.¹⁴ On the other hand, to avoid the presumption of agency, post-structuralist approaches have shied away from analysing liminality as a position of subjectivity.

However, the liminality perspective, in a number of ways, opens up space for an analyticist inquiry¹⁵ that is informed by a post-structuralist approach to the constitution of world politics: the analysis of how social categories constituted by the discourses of international politics are inevitably always negotiated, contested, and ultimately transversed by actors positioned in liminal spaces. In Turner's conceptualisation, liminality exists simultaneously inside and outside of discourse; it is constituted by the social categories of discourse but at the same time eludes those very categories. Liminality is where the discursive order breaks down and the inevitable instability of meaning is exposed. As a subject position, liminality embodies the critical agency to expose and deconstruct hegemonic discourses.

Concepts akin to liminality have figured prominently in post-colonial approaches to world politics, which have always sought to uncover spaces of dialogue, interstitiality, and localisation under conditions of Western hegemony.¹⁶ Particularly relevant in this respect is Homi Bhabha's theorisation of the implications of hybridity

¹² In a rare instance, Emanuel Adler acknowledges that 'given that we are discussing collective cognitive phenomena, there may be controversy about boundaries and membership. These controversies arise because states may be members of more than one community-region as a result either of their "liminal" status (e.g., Turkey) or of concentric circles of identity.' Emanuel Adler, 'Imagined Security Communities: Cognitive Regions in International Relations', *Millennium*, 26:2 (1997), p. 265.

¹³ Towns, *Women and States*, pp. 27–8.

¹⁴ James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (eds), *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989); Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker (eds), *Challenging Boundaries* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Patrick T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science and its Implications for International Relations Research* (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁶ See in particular, Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2003); L. H. M. Ling, *Postcolonial International Relations: Conquest and Desire between Asia and the West* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

for colonial rule. Bhabha has stressed that colonial discourse does not produce the colonised as an Other anti-thetical to Self, but rather as a hybrid, 'discriminating between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles'.¹⁷ According to Bhabha, in addition to manifesting the extent of transculturation between coloniser and colonised societies, hybridity also enables a unique form of effective resistance against the coloniser. Having (seemingly) adopted the knowledge of the master, the natives are at once complicit in its reproduction, but also simultaneously misappropriating and perverting its meaning, thereby circumventing, challenging, and refusing colonial authority. As an illustration of such misappropriation and subversion, Bhabha offers an account of a group of Indians who had embraced the Bible as the book of God, but refuse to believe that it was conveyed to them by their European masters because 'that cannot be, for they eat flesh'.¹⁸

Thus, as a liminal actor, the colonised is able to subvert the dominance of colonial authority, not through the pro-active agency of an autonomously calculating agent that manifests itself in oppositional resistance, but through an agency that emerges within the master discourse, but manifests itself innovatively in episodes of hybridisation and localisation. Ilan Kapoor characterises it as a 'guerrilla type' agency, which he argues is indeed more effective than the direct counter-hegemonic discourse that is more liable to cancellation or even reappropriation by the dominant.¹⁹

The obvious complementarities between Turner's perspective on liminality and the notion of hybridity in post-colonial approaches call for further exploration. Yet, key differences in scope ought to be noted. Turner has embedded liminality within a general theory of social structure, while post-colonial approaches have studied hybridity as a particular characteristic of colonial discourses. Thus, Turner's perspective enables us to analyse the subversive implications of liminality within the entire social structure of international politics, including but not limited to the colonial/post-colonial discourses. As the following section of this article will attempt to show, liminal spaces abound in discourses of international politics; as in-between spaces between the temporal and spatial categories emerge in multiple ways, and actors are positioned within those spaces.

In short, while liminality and concepts akin to it are not new in IR theories of identity, there are key insights to be derived from Turner's perspective on liminality and its relation to social structure. Constructivist theories on identity remain the most distant to explorations of liminality, as they are yet to attend to social categorisation and its implications for International Relations. Post-structuralist and post-colonial approaches, on the other hand, have already invested heavily in the theorisation of akin concepts such as hybridity, margins, borderlines, interstitiality, and transversality. Despite close affinities, Turner's perspective on liminality cannot be subsumed under the existing approaches. Its different stance on questions of epistemology and agency sets it apart from post-structuralist approaches, and enables empirical studies of liminal subject positions. In addition, Turner's perspective on liminality extends post-colonial insights regarding the subversive implications of hybridity to other discourses on international politics.

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi', *Critical Inquiry*, 12:1 (1985), p. 159.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁹ Ilan Kapoor, 'Acting in a Tight Spot: Homi Bhabha's Postcolonial Politics', *New Political Science*, 25:4 (2003), pp. 561–77.

The social constitution of liminality in International Relations

In order to avoid essentialising the concept of liminality, it is necessary to analyse the social constitution of liminality in International Relations. Liminality is not a pre-given attribute of actors in International Relations that they hold through time and space. Neither is it a pre-existing social category occupied by different actors at different points in time. Liminality is a realm of social possibility; it is a fluid space, which can be occupied, claimed, and performed by actors. The social constitution of liminality concerns the construction of these fluid spaces as well as the positioning of actors within those spaces. In other words, it calls for an analysis of how certain actors come to be constituted as liminals. Which discourses, through the imposition of what types of social categories construct liminal spaces?

Social order in international politics is premised on the production of various social categories that situate actors *vis-à-vis* one another spatially, temporally, and with reference to material and moral hierarchies.²⁰ While some of these categories allow for the transition of actors from one category to another, others consist of fixed and bounded categories that preclude such transitions. For example, temporal categorisations based on levels of development, modernity, etc., allow for transitions, while spatial categorisations generally do not. Prevailing patterns of categorisation have also evolved historically. As noted by John Ruggie, mutually exclusive social categories in International Relations achieved dominance with the birth of the modern state system.²¹ Therefore, the constitution of liminal spaces in International Relations varies according to the types of social categories that are in place.

In contemporary IR, liminal positions arise mainly through two processes. First, universalistic identity discourses while constructing temporal social categories of 'have's and 'have not's – that is, modern/unmodern, developed/undeveloped – at the same time position most of their significant others in a liminal state of becoming, that is, modernising and developing. Thus, universalistic identity discourses produce a distinction not between a Self and an Other, but a Self and its liminals. The hegemony of liberalism has made universalistic discourses and their associated social categories a prevalent feature of contemporary International Relations.²² The discourses on modernisation, development, Europeanisation, and other forms of liberal transformation map out a social world where a group of actors, that is, developing societies, candidate countries, economies in transition, emerging markets, post-conflict societies, are situated in a perpetual state of becoming. Being on a trajectory of becoming, they validate the universalistic and transformative pretensions of Western, liberal, and developed countries, yet at the same time, they reproduce their superiority, by always falling short of a complete transformation, remaining second-best, incomplete, and deformed replicas. Thus, what constitutes liminality is not the (possibility of) transition, but rather the fact that this transition is priorly

²⁰ On how state sovereignty resolves the tension between temporal and spatial categories, see R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). On the inextricability of temporal and spatial differentiation, see Sergei Prozorov, 'The Other as Past and Present: Beyond the Logic of "Temporal Othering" in IR Theory', *Review of International Studies* (forthcoming).

²¹ John G. Ruggie, 'Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations', *International Organization*, 47:1 (1993), pp. 139–74.

²² David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, 'Neo-Modernization? IR and the Inner Life of Modernization Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 8:1 (2002), pp. 103–37.

constituted to always remain half-complete. Hence, while transition stages are pre-existing social categories, liminal actors elude and slip through these transitional categories as they embody (and perform) simultaneously the possibility and the impossibility of transition.

Secondly, liminal spaces are inevitably constituted in the interstices of overlapping discourses on identity. The stuff that makes up the social order in international politics, that is, norms, ideas, and discourses often produce alternative social categorisations that do not completely overlap. These mismatching categorisations produce conflicting Self/Other distinctions, and give rise to liminal positions which are partly Self and partly Other. Because social order thrives on clear-cut distinctions and hierarchies, the construction of certain actors as modern but undemocratic, or civilised but undeveloped constitute liminal positions that undermine the categories.

The growing complexity and density of the social order in international politics have given rise to an increasing number of social categories, thus expanding the possibility for the emergence of liminal spaces. In addition, the coexistence of particularistic identity discourses, which place actors in mutually exclusive and immutable positions according to geography and culture, with universalistic identity discourses, which differentiate between actors on the basis of temporal categories, often generates Self/Other distinctions that do not completely overlap. Hence, a growing number of liminal actors slip through the cracks in the social order of world politics.

Although liminality is a discursively constituted space, it can nonetheless generate very real experiences and consequences for actors constituted as liminals. As was also noted by Turner, liminal actors may act toward their liminality in different ways. While some liminal actors respond to the ontological insecurity engendered by liminality with practices that reinforce and reproduce the existing social categories, others adopt a more subversive strategy that seeks to convert the ambiguity of their position into an asset, and to challenge the existing social categories. The representational practices of liminal actors are often shaped by their own domestic discourses, and the social and material consequences they face as a result of their liminality. Liminality in fact makes both types of enactment possible, and they may coexist to a certain extent.

When liminal actors act out their liminality by seeking to position themselves in existing social categories, this poses no problems for structure. In the European periphery, the liminal spaces constituted by EU enlargement have been occupied by state actors who seek to position themselves as (central) European actors if necessary by framing their neighbours to the East as less European or non-European.²³ For example, their liminal positions have led the Baltic states into a line of foreign policy practice that emphasises Russia's lack of Europeanness, and underscores the continued threat from Russia.²⁴ By escaping liminality through reinforcing the demarcation of the categories of European/non-European, the Baltic states were able to ensure a spot for themselves in the emerging European order. The recent Palestinian bid for statehood in the United Nations can be considered as another example of a liminal actor (within the discourse of sovereignty) seeking to avoid the ambiguity of

²³ Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: the East in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Merje Kuus, *Geopolitics Reframed: Security and Identity in Europe's Eastern Enlargement* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

²⁴ Maria Mälksoo, 'From Existential Politics towards Normal Politics: The Baltic States in the Enlarged Europe', *Security Dialogue*, 37:3 (2006), pp. 275–97.

its position (along with its negative consequences) by repositioning itself within one of the established social/political categories.

Another possible way to practice liminality, however, has subversive implications for social order. It entails the very performance of the ambiguous identity that is imposed on the liminal by society. As much as discourses on international politics construct liminal spaces, they allow those that are constituted as liminals to straddle discursive categories in their representational practices. Because they are constituted as such by social structure, liminal actors are self-conscious about the ambiguity of their social positions. Yet, the subversive practice of liminality need not entail the will to oppose social order. The European Union (EU) is a good example of a liminal actor that straddles the distinction between a federation and intergovernmental organisation in its practice. The inability of the Westphalian discourse to position the EU into either of these categories has enabled the EU to enact a post-Westphalian identity that subverts the very distinction.²⁵ Certainly, the enactment of this liminal subjectivity is conditioned internally, by the incapacity to agree to a vision of what the European polity ought to be. Yet, from a liminality perspective, what concern us are the consequences, and the EU's subversive enactment of liminality is one that transverses the Westphalian structures of bounded community and unitary actorhood.

As liminal spaces are becoming more prevalent in the social order of world politics, the social categories on which order is predicated are becoming more vulnerable to potentially subversive practices of liminal actors. However, it is necessary to be simultaneously cognisant of how social order is responding to growing vulnerability. In the pre-modern societies studied by Victor Turner, the elaborate rituals that accompanied various types of social transition functioned as mechanisms of managing and ordering liminality. As liminal spaces become more prevalent, contemporary international society is developing mechanisms akin to such rituals. One way of ordering liminality is through the establishment of graded schemes of transitional social categories. These categories construct social positions within the liminal spaces of transition, and as a result, diminish the spaces that fall in-between categories. For example, the EU's scheme of neighbours, associated countries, candidates, negotiating countries, and new member states is a brilliant ordering scheme which in many ways ameliorates the uncertainties and ambiguities of the liminal spaces constituted by the process of enlargement.²⁶ As a result, those who are positioned in the perpetual state of Europeanisation are categorised, ranked, graded, and ordered so as to reduce their possibility of slipping through categories. Hence, the sustenance of the liberal world order marked by universalistic identity discourses and various forms of social transition depends on the multiplication of social categories that order and domesticate (find a social home for) liminal actors.

In short, liminality unleashes the contending processes of domestication and subversion. The politics of liminality include the construction/reproduction as well as the contestation/subversion of social distinctions. On the one hand, structure and the established categories of social order strive to come up with mechanisms – akin

²⁵ See, in particular, Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁶ On how this categorisation sustains an imperial order, see Helmut Behr, 'The European Union in the Legacies of Imperial Rule? EU Accession Politics Viewed from a Historical Comparative Perspective', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:2 (2007), pp. 239–62.

to Turner's rituals – to order and domesticate liminality. On the other hand, potentially subversive liminal spaces continue to emerge as an effect of social structure and categorisation. Those who are constituted to occupy liminal positions mostly seek to position themselves in an existing social category (self-domestication), and in their efforts to do so, reproduce social order. The subversive potential of the liminal is unleashed when liminal actors practice their liminality in a way that embraces their ambiguity and in-betweenness.

Turkey as a liminal subject

Analysts accustomed to describing Turkey as a torn society, straddling Europe and Asia, in-between the West and the Muslim world, may dismiss a discussion of Turkey's liminality as academic parlance. However, as was stressed earlier, the employment of liminality perspective entails the investigation of the discourses that construct the liminal spaces within which Turkey is situated as a liminal actor, and of how Turkey acts toward its liminal position and its consequences for social structure.

The liminality perspective would stress that Turkey's liminality is not its inherent trait; it is a contextual product of specific discourses on international politics. The ascendance of civilisationist discourses in the eighteenth century and their confluence with the more particularistic discourses on Europe have positioned Turkey (at the time Ottoman Empire) as a liminal.²⁷ These discourses have manifested remarkable continuity, but their salience has varied historically. As a result, within the salient categorisation of identities as capitalist/communist during the Cold War, Turkey's liminality was less pronounced. Yet, with the end of the Cold War, and the restructuring of the European order through EU enlargement, social categorisations based on the particularistic criteria of 'belonging to Europe' and the more universalistic 'ability to acquire European norms' have become once again prominent.

Currently, Turkey's liminal position *vis-à-vis* Europe results from incongruence between two cross-cutting discourses on European identity, which are jointly produced through the EU: Europe as an exclusive identity based on a pre-existing geography and culture and Europe as an inclusive identity which can be acquired by others through compliance with universal norms. Turkey is a liminal because it is positioned right where the social identity categories provided by these discourses do not overlap, and thus open up a space of ambiguity.²⁸ The dual discourse on European identity is validated and held together when those who are not inherently European are not able to acquire European identity through complying with its norms, and when those who are inherently European are able to do so. Hence while the dual discourse on European identity has been validated via the exclusion of (southern and eastern)

²⁷ Many studies note the remarkable historical continuity in the European discourses on Turkey. See in particular, Iver B. Neumann and Jennifer Welsh, 'The Other in European Self-Definition: an Addendum to the Literature on International Society', *Review of International Studies*, 17:4 (1991), pp. 327–48; Thomas Naff, 'The Ottoman Empire and European States System', in Hedley Bull and A. Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); and Kivanc Ulusoy, 'The Changing Challenge of Europeanization to Politics and Governance in Turkey', *International Political Science Review*, 30:4 (2009), pp. 363–84.

²⁸ Bahar Rumelili, 'Constructing Identity and Relating to Difference: Understanding the EU's Mode of Differentiation', *Review of International Studies*, 30:1 (2004), pp. 27–47. See also Helene Sjursen, 'Why Expand? The Question of Legitimacy and Justification in the EU's Enlargement Policy', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40: 3 (2002), pp. 491–513.

Mediterranean countries and the membership process of Central and East European states, Turkey, as a country that is only partly inherently European and demonstrates less than full compliance with European norms, becomes constituted as a liminal.

Analysing the social constitution of Turkey as a liminal state in this fashion enables us to identify cracks and contradictions in the discourses on European identity. The case of Turkey and its in-betweenness then becomes not an exceptional anomaly within an otherwise all-encompassing social/political order, but the very manifestation of the latter's incoherence and vulnerability. Whereas analyses that posit Turkey to be one of Europe's 'Other's tend to highlight the marginalising and discriminatory capacity of the European order, the concept of liminality unearths its actual incapacity to fully categorise and manage.²⁹ In addition, approaching EU-Turkey relations from the perspective of liminality also enables us to understand the particular intensity of the discourses of difference and danger invoked by the prospect of Turkey's accession. The European discourses on Turkey's membership are imbued with threat perceptions not because Turkey is more different from Europe than other neighbouring countries in absolute terms, but because Turkey's liminal position creates a greater necessity to clarify and articulate the differences between Turkey and Europe.³⁰

As was noted earlier, liminality generates very real experiences and consequences for the actors constituted as liminals. Since the early eighteenth century, Turkey has sought to escape the ontological insecurity induced by its liminal position, by seeking to reinstate itself as a European state. The admission of the Ottoman Empire to the Concert of Europe in 1856, the entry of the modern Turkish republic to the League of Nations as a European state in 1932, membership in the Council of Europe (1949) and even in NATO (1952) constituted different episodes in this never-ending quest to confirm once and for all that Turkey belongs to the group of 'established' states.³¹ Thus, Turkey enacted its liminality in a way that has reproductive effects on social structure; by insisting on being recognised as a European/Western state, Turkey contributed to the reproduction of the established social categories (European/non-European, Western/non-Western). However, given the incongruities in the discourses on European identity discussed earlier, none of these moves eliminated the liminal space within which Turkey is positioned.

In this respect, the significance of the EU-Turkey relationship stems from the fact that the former remains the only Western/European institution which has not granted Turkey the membership it has sought with varying degrees of determination since 1959. As the EU oscillates between subsuming Turkey within a more inclusive conception of European identity and pre-defining Turkey as different from Europe, Turkey's liminality is continuously reproduced.

²⁹ For a historical analysis of how Turkey's representational practices have shaped and negotiated discourses on European identity, see Viatcheslav Morozov and Bahar Rumelili, 'The External Constitution of European Identity: Russia and Turkey as Europe-makers', *Cooperation and Conflict* (forthcoming).

³⁰ Bahar Rumelili, *Constructing Regional Community and Order in Europe and Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 77.

³¹ See Dilek Barlas and Serhat Guvenc, 'Turkey and the Idea of a European Union During the Inter-War Years, 1923–39', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 45:3 (2009), pp. 425–46; E. Yilmaz and Pinar Bilgin, 'Constructing Turkey's "Western" Identity During the Cold War', *International Journal*, 61:1 (2005), pp. 39–59; and Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Although Turkey has enacted its liminality mostly in a way that reproduces the existing social categories; in recent years, Turkey has begun to increasingly articulate its identity in hybrid terms, as both Western/European and Asian/Middle-Eastern/Islamic. This hybrid identity discourse is at the same time undergirding a more activist regional foreign policy. In a way, Turkey is seeking to capitalise on the social constitution of its identity as partly Self/partly Other to represent itself as both Self and Other and reap the foreign policy benefits of a unique social position in International Relations.³² While this identity reconstruction and the associated foreign policy practice are heavily debated domestically and internationally, what are significant from a liminality perspective are its potentially subversive implications on the discourses on European/Western actorhood.

In many ways, the subversive implications are manifest in the active Western debate on whether Turkey is or is not drifting away from the West: When Turkey negotiates an uranium exchange deal with Iran on behalf of the West and votes against stronger UN sanctions to Iran in the Security Council, it transgresses socially accepted understandings about how a Western ally is to behave in world politics. Yet at the same time this foreign policy activism, that Turkey legitimises by references to Western norms and interests, cannot be ruled out as anti-Western. Through this befuddlement it creates, Turkish foreign policy is eluding and undermining the social distinctions between the categories of Western and Islamist, and European and regional foreign policy.

As to be expected, Turkey's subversive enactment of liminality has unleashed contending processes of domestication. Recent Turkish foreign policy has at best generated an equivocal response in the West that is still premised on the constitution of Europe and Asia and the West and Islam as mutually exclusive social categories. For example, while Turkey's partly-Self/partly-Other identity was appreciated when it played a mediatory role in the Caricature crisis, when Turkey built on the same arguments and role conception to oppose the appointment of Anders Fogh Rasmussen to NATO chairmanship, it was perceived as an indicator of Turkey's deviation from European norms and values.³³ Although liminality theory thus unravels the ongoing process of contestation between structure and liminality, it does not offer a prediction as to whether processes of subversion or domestication will prevail. Yet, unlike conventional analyses that only question the wisdom or the efficacy of the 'new' Turkish foreign policy by taking the existing social categories for granted,³⁴ liminality theory turns the spotlight onto structure, and to the ways in which Turkey exposes its incongruities and vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

This contribution sought to outline ways in which liminality can further our understanding of the social structures of international politics, by extending the framework

³² Pinar Bilgin and Ali Bilgic, 'Turkey's "New" Foreign Policy towards Eurasia', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 52:2 (2011), pp. 173–95; Bahar Rumelili, 'Turkey: Identity, Foreign Policy, and Socialization in a Post-Enlargement Europe', *Journal of European Integration*, 33:2 (2011), pp. 235–49.

³³ For detailed analysis of these developments, see Rumelili, 'Turkey: Identity'.

³⁴ Ziya Onis, 'Multiple Faces of the "New" Turkish Foreign Policy: Underlying Dynamics and a Critique', *Insight Turkey*, 13:1 (2011), pp. 47–65.

developed by Victor Turner in the field of anthropology. First of all, the employment of liminality as a theoretical tool involves the identification of liminal spaces within discourses of international politics. It invites us to approach liberal, universalistic identity discourses that position their significant others in a liminal state of becoming from a critical angle. It also draws our attention to how, as the international social order grows more complex, an increasing number of liminal spaces emerge in the cracks of the overlapping discourses on identity. Secondly, by focusing on the actors positioned within the liminal spaces, the liminality perspective brings to the foreground the contending processes of domestication and subversion, where in the former, agents of structure reposition the liminal within the established categories of order, and in the latter, liminal actors subvert the categorical distinctions that place them in a liminal position in the first place. These contributions of the liminality perspective were then illustrated through a case study of a liminal actor, Turkey, by focusing on how the civilisationist discourses on international politics position Turkey in a liminal space and the ways in which Turkey reproduces and subverts those discourses.

The theoretical contributions of liminality to International Relations also extend beyond such micro-level analyses. At the macro-level, the concept of liminality exposes limits to global community and order previously unaccounted for in the literature, and poses a direct challenge to liberal accounts of world politics. In particular, the liminality perspective suggests that the limits to a global community do not only stem from the inability to transcend social bonds constituted by the pre-existing particularistic cultures.³⁵ Various universalistic projects of including the 'Other' in a broader notion of Self construct sites of liminality, which are, in turn, associated with threat, and othered in order to secure stability and certainty of being. The solution to this vicious circle, as stressed by Anne Norton, lies not in identifying and strengthening the similarities between Self and Other, but in attaining the capacity to recognise the Other as simultaneously other and like.³⁶

³⁵ Arash Abizadeh, 'Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity', *American Political Science Review*, 99:1 (2005), pp. 45–60.

³⁶ Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).