RIS

Pluriversal sovereignty and the state of IR

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Abstract

IR proceeds on a Eurocentric ontological assumption that sovereignty has universal validity today. How can IR be decolonised, when in spite of countless examples of the enactment of 'sovereignty otherwise', the discipline remains unconcerned with the fact that the logic of sovereignty remains *uni*-versal. The question is as much political as it is intellectual, because as a discipline, we have allowed the inertia of our professional rhythms to marginalise *pluri*-versal sovereignty, or the organisation of sovereignty along different ontological starting points. I argue IR must abandon its disciplinary love affair with uni-versal sovereignty. The tendency to 'bring in' new perspectives by inserting them into an already ontologically constituted set of assumptions works to protect IR's Eurocentricity, which makes disciplinary decolonisation untenable. I propose that as a starting point, IR needs to be more mature about recognising the decolonisations that are happening under our very feet if we are to stand a chance at disciplinary level decolonisation. As an illustrative example, I explore an ongoing collision of settler-colonial and Mi'kmaw sovereignty through the issue of lobster fisheries in Mi'kma'ki, or Nova Scotia as the territory is known to Canadians.

Introduction: The state of IR

The discipline of international relations (IR) is not unique in its anchoring to Eurocentric ontological assumptions. It is always easy, and on occasion fun, to imagine the grass may be greener elsewhere (why didn't I become a *geographer* or an *anthropologist* instead!) but the truth is all our disciplines are similarly contaminated by the elixir of Eurocentric uni-versalism.

I hyphenate the word to draw attention to the fact that state sovereignty at the core of the international system is premised on a single verse, a single set of cosmological and ontological assumptions grounded in a Judea-Christian understanding of what the world *is*. This uni-versal view of sovereignty has violently normalised the separation of 'man' and 'nature' with direct, hostile, and genocidal effect over the last five hundred years.[1] Uni-versal sovereignty, then, describes the mainstream understanding of state sovereignty that has relied on ontological and cosmological assumptions particular to a Eurocentric genealogy while failing to systematically engage genealogies of sovereignty that are organised on ontological and cosmological foundations grounded in

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[1]Giorgio Shani and Navnita Behara, 'Provincializing International Relations through a reading of *dharma*', *Review of International Studies*, 48:5 (2022), pp. 837–56; Siba Grovogui, 'Regimes of sovereignty: Rethinking international morality and the African condition', *The European Journal of International Relations*, 8:3 (2002), pp. 315–38; Ajay Parasram, 'Hunting the state of nature: Race and ethics in postcolonial international relations', in Brent J. Steele and Eric Henize (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Ethics in International Relations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), pp. 102–15.

other parts of the world.[2] In essence, uni-versal sovereignty describes and enforces a territorialised and state anchored notion of modern sovereignty that is assumed to have global resonance without due regard to the distortive influence of colonial and imperial state-formation over the last five hundred years in general, and two hundred years, in particular.[3] Pluri-versal sovereignty, I argue, describes enactments of sovereignty that emerge out of practices that may overlap with uni-versal sovereignty, but cannot be reduced to state territoriality and norms of land ownership. Scholars have long pointed out that the failure to 'provincialise' or 'de-centre' or 'move beyond' Eurocentricity has meant that the scholarly mainstream continues to move along while failing to accurately understand the world as it is experienced by most of humanity, and in all its rich complexity.[4]

Lived experience matters for theorising, and there is slow but growing recognition that the systemic lack of diverse standpoints in universities has created enormous blindspots, which in turn replicate ontological and epistemic forms of violence through scholarship.[5] I am guided by the wisdom of the many racialised scholars working in the field of IR for at least the last four decades, who have steadfastly insisted that decolonisation, race/racism, reformulating our work does not ask anyone to ignore or sidestep the important core problems of security, peace, conflict, history, or power. It does, however, insist that in posing these questions, we refuse to proceed with myopic answers that assume the worldviews and knowledge systems of most of humanity don't matter.[6] Although scholars have long sought to study the world 'as it is', the distortive frameworks of centuries of colonialism make such a venture untenable without decolonisation as a necessary treatment. Attempts to integrate 'other' approaches into a preconceived and Eurocentric framework of the international

[2]Though not about 'sovereignty' directly, Elden's work on the genealogy of territory in the European tradition is helpful: Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2013). See also Ajay Parasram, 'Sovereignty', in P. Ballamingie and D. Szanto (eds), *Showing Theory to Know Theory* (Ottawa: Showing Theory Press, 2022), pp. 453–62.

[3]Gurminder K. Bhambra, 'Relations of extraction, relations of redistribution: Empire, nation, and the construction of the British welfare state', *British Journal of Sociology*, 73:1 (2022), pp. 4–15; Jordan Branch, '"Colonial refraction" and territoriality: The peripheral origins of sovereignty', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:2 (2011), pp. 277–97; Ajay Parasram, 'Postcolonial territory and the coloniality of the state', *Caribbean Journal of International Relations and Diplomacy*, 2:4 (2014), pp. 51–79.

[4]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limits of World History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002); Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

[5]Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 8 (1989), pp. 139–67; Zoe Todd, 'An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: "Ontology is just another word for colonialism"', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29:1 (2016), pp. 4–22; Sarah Hunt, 'Ontologies of indigeneity: The politics of embodying a concept', *Cultural Geographies*, 21:1 (2014), pp. 27–32; Jeff Corntassel, 'Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1:1 (2012), pp. 86–101; Marisol de la Cadena, 'Indigenous cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual reflections beyond "politics"', *Cultural Anthropology*, 52:2 (2010), pp. 334–70; David Lake, 'White man's IR: An intellectual confession', *Perspectives on Politics*, 14:4 (2016), pp. 1112–22.

[6]Giorgio Shani, 'Towards a post-Western IR: The *Umma, Khalsa Panth*, and critical International Relations theory', *International Studies Review*, 10:4 (2008), pp. 722–34; Errol A. Henderson, 'Hidden in plain sight: Racism in International Relations theory', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:1 (2013), pp. 71–92; Robbie Shilliam (ed.), *International Relations and Non-Western Thought* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011); David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, *Savage Economics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010); Navnita Behera (ed.), *International Relations in South Asia: Search for an Alternative Paradigm* (New Delhi: Sage, 2008); Siba Grovogui, 'Regimes of morality: International morality and the African condition', *European Journal of International Relations*, 8:3 (2002), pp. 315–38; Randolph Persaud and R. B. J. Walker, 'Apertura: Race in International Relations', *Alternatives*, 26:4 (2001), pp. 373–6; Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair, *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003); Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western eyes revisted: Feminist solidarity through anti-capitalist struggles', *Signs*, 28:2 (2003), pp. 499–537; Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974).

has almost always led to co-option or assimilation, ignoring the rich substance that gives meaning to decolonial politics and praxis.[7]

Decolonial options, including those that overlap with questions of sovereignty, exist for their own sake and on their own terms. Sometimes, this may overlap with the interests and range of view of colonial modernity, but these options could never be reduced to oppositional or dialectical terms because doing so limits the range of politics to the battlefield of uni-versal reason rather than pluri-versal reason.[8] In so doing, the centrality of sovereign ontological politics is lost, and any hope of apprehending 'the real world' is forfeit, so long as we believe that structures of knowledge matter when they are not only 'Western'.[9] Integration into an already existing framework of sovereignty is thus not only inadequate, but also not possible, which is why I see this as such a fundamental problem for IR to grapple with. As Giorgio Shani articulated the problem 15 years ago in contrast with efforts to diversify the discipline through bringing in non-Western voices, 'the ontological premises of Western IRT need to be rethought not merely 'enriched by the addition of new voices' from the Global South.'[10] To be clear then, I must stress that the problem is not in making 'other' forms of sovereignty legible to IR, but in changing IR so that it can more maturely understand the decolonial politics related to sovereignty that *is*, will, and always has been happening.

I have lived and learned on unceded Mi'kmaq, Coast Salish, and Algonquin territories over the last thirty years, in urban centres contained to what is known as 'Canada' in the colonial geographic framing. As a result, the issue of 'sovereignty' is especially fragile here in the settler-colony, where there can be no date affixed to mark a 'post' colonial moment, however problematic. Debates on sovereignty tend to be subsumed under the well-established Western legal provision of 'internal state sovereignty' or 'domestic' politics or 'second image' issues depending on what kind of IR you're reading. Either way, from the viewpoint of colonial modernity, sovereignty is understood to be a structured form of hierarchical power, contained and practised by a territorial entity that is recognised by other similar territories as being states, ostensibly equal in their sovereign rights.[11] For the sake of this intervention, I focus on the problem of uni-versal sovereignty as a whole, not to take specific issue with any particular theorist of sovereignty, but rather to speak to the broader disciplinary level issue that uni-versal sovereignty blocks IR from taking seriously the many articulations of sovereignty and sovereignty-like practices that do not conform to the expectations of the imperially constituted state, embedded in the modern/colonial interstate system that borders the research agenda.

By 'sovereignty-like' I do not mean to suggest that we only concern ourselves with movements seeking to attain state sovereignty, like Palestine or Tamil Eelam, because to some important extent movements of this nature require official state sovereignty in the conventional sense. Some scholars, have focused on 'geopolitical anomalies' like the Tibetan government in exile based in India that awkwardly overlaps different conventional types of sovereignty, or inherently transnational articulations of sovereignty-like or national-like communities, especially religious communities.[12]

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[7]Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1:1 (2012), pp. 1–40; M'sit No'kmaq et al., '"Awakening the sleeping giant": Re-Indigenization principles for transforming biodiversity conservation in Canada and beyond', *FACETS*, 6:1 (2021), pp. 839–69; David Blaney and Arlene Tickner, 'Worlding, ontological politics, and the possibility of a decolonized IR', *Millennium*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 293–311.

[8]Mario Blaser, 'Ontological politics and the stories of peoples in spite of Europe: Towards a conversation on political ontology', *Cultural Anthropology*, 54:5 (2013), pp. 547–68; Cristina Rojas, 'Contesting the colonial logics of the international: Toward a relational politics for the pluriverse', *International Political Sociology*, 10:4 (2016), pp. 369–82.

[9]Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

[10]Shani, 'Toward a post-Western IR', p. 723.

[11]David Lake, 'The new sovereignty in International Relations', *International Studies Review*, 5:3 (2003), pp. 303–23; Nicholas Onuf, 'Sovereignty: Outline of a conceptual history', *Alternatives*, 16:4 (1991), pp. 425–46; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, UK: Verso, 1983); Kenneth Waltz, *Man, The State, and War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018).

[12]Fiona McConnell, 'The fallacy and the promise of the territorial trap: Sovereign articulations of geopolitical anomalies', *Geopolitics*, 15:4 (2010), pp. 762–8; Shani, 'Towards a post-Western IR'.

While I am indebted to this thinking, and in solidarity with sovereignty-seeking minority populations in need of the protection conventional sovereignty can sometimes offer, the framing of 'anomaly' keeps uni-versal state sovereignty as the centre from which one deviates. Here I am more interested in practices for which the English language knows no adequate translation, and this may include Eurocentric sovereignty in some senses, but also vastly exceed the limits of that partial definition. This is especially visible in the ways that Indigenous scholars, land protectors, and elders have articulated and maintained relationships with land in a way that dramatically exceeds the modernist limitations of what sovereignty is, even though the brute violence of modernist state sovereignty continues unabated in its attempts to extinguish alternative ontological starting points of sovereignty.[13]

The question I take up here is whether it is possible to have a decolonised discipline that does not directly confront, dismantle, and pluralise what sovereignty *is*. I answer in the negative: for a discipline like IR, there is no decolonisation possible so long as uni-versal sovereignty remains at the centre. We have to choose – are we interested in decolonising the discipline at its core, or are we content to trod the beaten path of 'bringing in' different perspectives so that they can be siloed and ignored by the disciplinary mainstream on the one hand, or treated as metaphorical examples in a neocolonial scramble to co-opt decolonisation without materially embracing the minimum requirements of what that means within our community of IR scholars? This has profound implications for how we teach, how we research, and how/where we live our lives.

In the next section of the article, I elaborate briefly on what I mean by pluri-versal sovereignty. Section two then situates pluri-versal sovereignty by grounding it to the land on which I live and work, Mi'kma'ki, or the eastern coast of what is more commonly known as 'Canada'. I am aware of my own ontological limits, and as such, I draw on the work of Mi'kmaq scholars, parliamentarians, land/water protectors, and elders as well as their collaborators to demonstrate the ontological differences that make theorising sovereignty in uni-versalist terms akin to ongoing colonisation. Once this holds, it is clear that if IR scholars wish to study the world 'as it is', pluri-versal sovereignty is an essential attribute of the global system that needs to be seriously engaged with. Taking Mi'kmaw sovereignty seriously requires rethinking the limitations of what sovereignty is, and Mi'kmaq scholars and elders have gone to great lengths to make the case that 'seeing with one eye' alone, or seeking to subsume ontologically distinct worldviews into an already existing Eurocentric framework is fundamentally a colonising exercise.[14] While there are many, many examples that speak to the pluri-versal nature of sovereignty across land and time, focusing on the ongoing ontological confusion around lobster fisheries in Mi'kma'ki clearly demonstrates why uni-versal sovereignty is simply unable to understand the international relations and politics at play.

The limit of uni-versal sovereignty

The hegemonic story of state sovereignty and the international system is still the Westphalian model, where the state territory emerges out of Western legal, theological, and philosophical principles and practice.[15] Lots have argued that the Westphalian critical juncture is exaggerated, and

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[13]Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 'Grounded normativity and place-based solidarity', *American Quarterly*, 68:2 (2016), pp. 249–55; Lynn Gehl, *The Truth That Wampum Tells* (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2014); Corntassle, 'Re-envisioning resurgence'; Taiake Alfred, *Peace Power Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[14]M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., '"Awakening the sleeping giant"'; Sherry Pictou, 'Wolastoqiyik and Mi'kmaq grandmothers: Land/water defenders sharing and learning circle: Generating knowledge for action', *KAIROS* (27 September 2021) available at: {https://www.kairoscanada.org/wolastoqiyik-and-mikmaq-grandmothers-protect-land-water}.

[15]Elden, *The Birth of Territory*; Jacques Maritain, 'The philosophical attack', in W. J. Stankiewicz (ed.), *In Defense of Sovereignty* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 41–64; Onuf, 'Sovereignty'; Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

that it misses the relationship between imperialism and the development of modern state practices of measurement, policing, and the general inability to accurately describe the formation of the modern state system without colonial and imperial relations.[16]

There is an almost ecumenical quality about the expectation that sovereignty is the soul that gives territory national meaning. In a disciplinary sense, it is perhaps Hans Morgenthau's (1948) unambiguous description of sovereignty as a 'fact' of politics that helps to cement it, but it has always been implicit even if not explicit. This fact has been substantially studied in the field, and the most common narrative places sovereignty as a requirement of statehood and generally a relationship of power that has both internal and external dimensions. The external aspect of sovereignty requires that other sovereign entities respect the sovereignty of other states by not interfering in the 'internal' sovereignty of the other. States interfere in one another's affairs all the time, which is where the centrality of power and the assumptions of 'anarchy' have been so influential in terms of IR theory historically.[17] As David Lake (2003) outlined, in the pages of this very journal twenty years ago, absolute sovereignty made the leap from unit level to systems level theorising through Waltz's *A Theory of International Politics* (1979). In this way I take inspiration from Richard Ashley's 1984 article, 'The Poverty of Neorealism' even though his main concern was with how neorealism's broad assumptions distorted the discipline. Writing on neorealism, Ashley argued that the approach selectively draws on elements from science, classical realism and ultimately produces an approach that

> treats the given order as the natural order, limits rather than expands political discourse, negates or trivializes the significance of variety across time and place, subordinates all practice to an interest in control, bows to the ideal of a social power beyond responsibility, and thereby deprives political interaction of those practical capacities which make social learning and creative change possible. What emerges is an ideology that anticipates, legitimizes, and orients a totalitarian project of global propositions: the rationalization of global politics.[18]

I find Ashley's critique of neorealism hauntingly relevant to the problem of uni-versal sovereignty today, in terms of how Eurocentic understandings of land, property and law, collude with explicitly racist notions like '*terra nullius*' and the implicit principle of civilisational hierarchy encoded into that assumption to protect and preserve what Cristina Rojas has described as the 'colonial logics of the international'.[19] Although Ashley wasn't thinking about pluriversal sovereignty, the impetus of his critique was that going down the path of uncritically accepting core assumptions and building systems of thought that 'negates or trivializes the significance of variety across time and place' was something that needed to be stopped.

The consequences of negating and trivialising difference have created a myopic understanding of the politics of sovereignty that rationalises practices of sovereignty that don't conform to the model as being, at best, 'external' or of no causal impact. We do not need to rehash the debates about positivism to see that this deficiency – deliberate or accidental – has led to egregious outcomes such as explaining freedom based on the philosophical musings of dead white men instead of the lived

[16]Antony Anghie, 'Francisco de Vitoria and the colonial origins of international law', *Social and Legal Studies*, 5:3 (1996), pp. 321–36; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, UK: Verso, 1983); Gurminder K. Bhambra, 'Comparative historical sociology and the state: Problems of method', *Cultural Sociology*, 10:3 (2016), pp. 335–51; Jordan Branch, 'Mapping the sovereign state: Technology, authority, and systemic change', *International Organization*, 65:1 (2011), pp. 1–36; Grovogui, 'Regimes of morality'.

[17]Ken Waltz, *Man, The State, and War*; Ken Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979); John Mearsheimer *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001); Lake, 'The new sovereignty in International Relations'.

[18]Richard Ashley, 'The poverty of neorealism', *International Organization*, 38:2 (1984), p. 228.

[19]Rojas, 'Contesting the colonial logics of the international'; Arthur Manuel, *Unsettling Canada* (Toronto, Can.: Between The Lines, 2015); Eva Mackey, *Unsettled Expectations* (Black Point, Nova Scota: Fernwood Publishing, 2016).

experiences and enacted cosmologies of people who freed themselves from enslavement.[20] I want to stress the point here of *deficiency* within the discipline instead of a need for greater 'inclusion'. As David Blaney and Arlene Tickner have explained, the push for 'inclusion' can often be the point at which ontological violence is exerted. They argue that simply respecting difference and moving to include multiple perspectives reinscribes ontological violence.

> Difference is *not* about engaging across perspectives or in a single world. Rather, it is about struggling and working to craft encounters across ontological difference and recognising the power at play in practices that convert Western realities into *the* reality and demote 'other' realities to differing representations of the world the colonisers have made.[21]

Like Shani's point about rethinking ontological starting points for IR theory mentioned in the previous section, Blaney and Tickner help to explain why inclusion is problematic. Whether the battle was about including feminism or postcolonialism in the 1980s, IR ironically misses the boat precisely by practicing 'inclusion' in a liberal way that doesn't require serious engagement with the implications of gender and race for the discipline. With this history in mind, it is not enough to know that decolonising scholarship is finding a home in IR journals, the question of decolonising IR must reach further until it becomes untenable to build models and studies that are premised on uni-versal assumptions of sovereignty.

There's an important distinction to be made between the practice of international politics and the more abstract work of IR theorising – decolonial politics and practice continues regardless of what scholars write. Without putting too fine a point on it, the systemic and institutional protection of Eurocentricity in the disciplinary core exemplified by uni-versal sovereignty is a form of structural white supremacy. It's structural in this sense because even in ostensibly welcoming decolonial arguments, those arguments don't need to be contended with in terms of thinking about what the main subject of IR actually is. This is a bad thing for the discipline, but with respects to the 'real world' it is encouraging to be reminded that scholars don't really matter that much with respects to enactments of decolonial politics because these politics, movements, and ways of life have existed in spite of the violence and legitimation of violence that academia has participated in over centuries. Whether we talk of the so-called science of race, the trope of a 'state of nature' that sought to place Indigenous peoples into a hierarchical order of civilisation, the classification of human life as 'exceptional commodities', the predominantly white male imperial nostalgia of popular scholarly media darlings, or cleaning up of structural white supremacy by hiding it in everyday practices and technocratic decision-making like citizenship policy has all gone a long way towards making people distrustful of what 'experts' have to say about their politics.[22]

Many experts of course are much more in synch with the real-world politics of decolonisation. As Anishnaabe political scientist Sheryl Lightfoot explains, global Indigenous politics inherently challenges the universality of state sovereignty by simultaneously working within and against institutions of global governance. As she explains,

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[20]Robbie Shilliam, 'Race and revolution at Bwa Kayiman', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 269–92.

[21]Blaney and Tickner, 'Worlding, ontological politics, and the possibility of a decolonized IR', pp. 298–9.

[22]Henderson, 'Hidden in plain sight'; Robbie Shilliam, 'Forget English freedom, remember Atlantic slavery: Common law, commercial law and the significance of slavery for classical political economy', *New Political Economy*, 17:5 (2012), pp. pp. 591–609; Olivia Rutazibwa, 'From the everyday to IR: In defence of the strategic use of the R-word', *Postcolonial Studies*, 19:2 (2016), pp. 191–200; Ajay Parasram and Nissim Mannathukkaren, 'Imperial afterlives: Citizenship and racial/caste fragility in Canada and India', *Citizenship Studies*, available at: {DOI: 10.1080/13621025.2021.1984494}.

a new understanding of decolonizing self-determination is emerging. States are now expected to protect the land, self-determination, and collective rights of Indigenous peoples, by imagining, negotiating, and recognizing various possible modes of plural sovereignty and power sharing.[23]

Lightfoot's work and broader collaborations around notions of 'complex sovereignty' offer ways to understand the politics of sovereignty that speak to the diverse ways through which Indigenous people challenge and transform colonially constituted notions like uni-versal sovereignty. Similarly, Manuela Lavinas Picq's work studying Kichwa women working in the Ecuadorian context demonstrates how women engage the state strategically as a third party. Explaining the centrality of gender to understanding the operation of indigenous global politics, Picq observes, 'While Indigenous claims seek to expand political autonomy *from* the state, Indigenous women seek autonomy *with gender accountability*, in this case *through* the state.'[24] While for some Indigenous scholars and activists, working through colonial institutions can produce forms of recognition that can be significant, for others like Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard, the consequence of pursuing recognition on settler-colonial grounds subverts the politics of 'resurgence' through which forms of governance indigenous to land (what he calls 'grounded normativity') are the casualty of seeking recognition.[25]

Decolonisation happens in the real world, where scholars must be not only scholars, but people who are purposefully engaged in processes that either resist colonial violence or else advances it. Such binaries from an ostensibly decolonial article! In terms of sovereignty, IR scholars then must confront what the violence of failing to understand pluri-versal sovereignty means not just for the abstract ability to theorise the international, but for our everyday interactions with one another at conferences, our students in the classroom, our children and families, and the broader communities in which we are embedded either consciously or not. Failing to do so, especially in terms of being complicit with the violence of uni-versal sovereignty, participates in the erasure of ways of being that will not conform to the expectations of the modern, colonial state, and state system, including principles like 'place-based solidarity' and 'grounded normativity' as well articulated alternatives to uni-versal sovereignty elucidated by Indigenous scholars who are part of decolonial politics, not only scholars studying alongside.[26] In focusing on the international, we forget that the 'relations' is much more than diplomacy, war, or bureaucratic collaboration on the one hand or an abstract realm in which to animate thought exercises about particular readings of anarchy. We enact the international everyday, in our interactions, in our choices, and what we decide is too complicated to find a way to describe within the confines of our jobs as professors.[27] In the next section, I will explain this everyday enactment of pluri-versal sovereignty by describing an ongoing conflict of sovereignty in Mi'kma'ki, itself an international territory though not a 'state' as IR would consider it.

Mi'kmaq lobster fisheries and pluri-versal sovereignty

In September of 2020, fishers from Sipekne'katik, one of seven districts in Mi'kma'ki,[28] opened a lobster fishery in congruence with their own sovereign laws, but also in congruence with their treaty rights as affirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada in two related decisions from over twenty

[23]Sheryl Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 33–4.

[24]Manuela Lavinas Picq, *Vernacular Sovereignties: Indigenous Women Challenging World Politics* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press), p. 162.

[25]Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks*.

[26]Glen Coulthard and Leanne Simpson, 'Grounded normativity and place-based solidarity', *American Quarterly*, 68:2 (2016), pp. 249–55.

[27]Jonneke Koomen, 'International relations as if people matter', *Journal of Narrative Politics*, 8:1 (2021), pp. 1–6.

[28]The province of Nova Scotia falls within the geographical scope of Mi'kma'ki, but the colonial and Indigenous geographies across 'Canada' do not align.

years ago.[29] What should have been celebrated as a milestone on the path to truth and reconciliation in a country that has committed to walking this path since 2015 was instead confronted with violent racism of a structural and everyday nature. Mobs of white people descended upon the Mi'kmaq fishers, terrorising them at sea and on land, pulling up lobster traps, destroying property and infrastructure. This was all largely justified in the predictably developmentalist and environmentalist language of 'conservation of lobster stock', even though the violence against Mi'kmaq fishers extended to the destruction of lobsters that had already been caught. The hypocrisy of conservation concerns was very apparent, and it is clear from the disproportionate application of force and existential settler-colonial nationalist angst that what was really at stake had little to do with lobsters, and much more to do with sovereignty.

Indigenous scholars and journalists have been clear in explaining that laws Indigenous nations have signed with Canada are important, but that laws and principles that extend thousands of years prior to the idea of Canada are also relevant, especially as it is almost always Canada that fails to honour its legal obligations to Indigenous peoples and nations.[30] Even within the colonial court system, the principle that Canadians have a 'privilege' to fish subject to the rules and regulations of Canada differs fundamentally from the Mi'kmaq 'right' to fish.[31] Mi'kma'ki was never ceded, in a Eurocentric understanding of the word, and the handing over of land or territory to be possessed by a human community makes little sense when interpreted through the laws that have developed over thousands of years in this part of the world. There have been a number of signed treaties – something that is not the case across all of 'Canada' – but these Treaties of Peace and Friendship do not discuss the surrendering of territory. Indigenous scholars across many nations and territories have done exemplary work to systematically demonstrate that most Indigenous worldviews across the territory settled as 'Canada' are ontologically in conflict with the Eurocentric assumptions of what land or property or development even means.[32]

From just this far into the story, we can predict how an IR approach guided by uni-versal sovereignty might make sense of this situation. It would fall under the jurisdiction of internal sovereignty and thus not be of concern to the international realm on the one hand, or perhaps it would be situated as one of many sites of state contestation in a conventional sense where an oppressed minority is seeking concessions or freedom from an oppressive and powerful majority. Either scenario holds the Eurocentricity of sovereignty as an ontological truth and misses the decolonial politics at play with the Mi'kmaq fishers enacting their sovereign right to licence fishers to fish outside of the Canadian designated fishing season and quantitative limitations set by the settler-colonial government. The narrative reflects only the 'modern' side of the coin, so to speak, failing to see its constitutive 'colonial' side.[33]

This is precisely the Canadian narrative. In the settler-colonial governance structure, the department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) has been centrally involved in trying to mediate and resolve the conflict. Although there are a small amount of Mi'kmaq parliamentarians (two appointed Senators and one elected member of parliament) who have been offering advice to DFO on how to proceed in a way that respects the constitutional rights of Mi'kmaq to operate and regulate their

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[29]Naomi Metallic and Constance MacIntosh, 'Canada's actions around the Mi'Kmaq fisheries rest on shaky legal grounds', *Policy Options* (9 November 2020), available at: {https://perma.cc/Y7P2-SG8C}.

[30]Gehl, *The Truth That Wampum Tells*.

[31]Nation To Nation, 'Dear Non-Mi'kmaw Fishers: Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia Have an Inherent Right to Fish, You Do Not', Nation to Nation APTN (8 October 2020), available at: {https://www.aptnnews.ca/nation-to-nation/dear-non-mikmaw-fishers-mikmaq-in-nova-scotia-have-an-inherent-right-to-fish-you-do-not/}.

[32]M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., '"Awakening the sleeping giant"'; Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks*; Bruno Barras, 'Life projects: Development our way', in Mario Blaser et al. (eds), *In The Way of Development: Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects, and Globalization* (New York, NY: Zed Books, 2004).

[33]Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

own fisheries on their territory, this advice was largely ignored.[34] Rather than addressing the problem as one between two sovereign nations, the government of Canada tries to subsume Mi'kmaq sovereignty into its uni-versalist lens and make arguments that the Mi'kmaq fishers are impacting lobster stocks, in spite of the fact that the 472 licenses held by First Nations represents merely 4 per cent of the 12,047 commercial licenses issued by DFO.[35]

By holding uni-versal sovereignty constant, the narrative is one about a human community controlling internal or external dimensions of sovereignty. Eurocentric ontological assumptions of what land 'is' and how this informs the meaning of sovereignty extend from a starting point that humanity is separate from land and nature; even given lordship over nature by an omnipotent God figure that acts with agency and interest in the world.[36] As explained by Mi'kmaq elders and scholars, however, this does not reflect or even approximate what Mi'kmaw sovereignty involves.

Although not explicitly talking about 'sovereignty', M'sɨt No'kmaq et al. identify seven principles needed for 're-Indigenisation' applied to biodiversity conservation. These involve

1. Embracing Indigenous worldviews of ecologies and *M'sɨt No'kmaq*
2. Revitalise and learn from Indigenous languages of the land
3. Recognise the supremacy of Natural laws and guidance for living within them from traditional laws like *Netukulimk*
4. Honour and deepen correct relationships with each other and all ecologies
5. Gain insights through 'total reflection' and reveal the truth
6. Hold other ways of knowing as valid: *Etuaptmumk*, or 'two-eyed seeing', and 'strong like two people'
7. Deepen relationship and knowing through 'story-telling, story-listening'[37]

The details of these principles are clearly explained in the article, but here I draw attention to *Netukulimk*, which the authors explain states that

'man and nature are one', 'everything comes from the land', and 'all that the earth holds is sacred.' These values and belief systems are at the core of how we should govern and conduct ourselves on the lands and waters. Understanding natural laws can give us the power to act in a good way.[38]

From the ontological starting point of Eurocentric sovereignty, natural law as it relates to sovereignty and sovereign practice might be traced through Western political theory and ultimately rests authority in a monotheistic understanding of a God that has direct agency and acts. We see this clearly in the work of John Locke and others who have drawn on the trope of the state of nature using the book of Genesis as source material, to cite just one example.[39] But as described by M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., the laws of nature 'explain the relationships, responsibilities, and obligations that all forms of life have to one another.'[40] Rather than an ontology of ownership, there is an ontology of relational obligation, something that Anishnnabe and Dene scholars Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard cited in the previous section have similarly described as 'place-based solidarity' or 'grounded normativity'. Mi'kmaw Senator Dan Christmas invokes *Nutukulimk* in describing the crisis of sovereignty in DFO's response to the fisheries, arguing

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[34]Dan Christmas, 'Statement by Nova Scotia Senator Dan Christmas on DFO's "*New Path for First Nations to Fish in Pursuit of a Moderate Livelihood*"' (March 2021), available at: {https://www.aptnnews.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Senator-Dan-Christmas.pdf}.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Parasram, 'Hunting the state of nature'.

[37]M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., '"Awakening the sleeping giant"', pp. 846–7.

[38]Ibid., p. 846.

[39]Parasram, 'Hunting the state of nature'.

[40]Ibid.

The new regime signals a continuation of a colonial, top-down, prescriptive approach to the relationship with Maritime Indigenous Peoples and Canada … It dismisses the pursuit of a Nation-to-Nation, treaty relationship; it completely disrespects the Mi'kmaw traditional law of *Nutukulimk* – and it totally abandons the duty to consult, as there was absolutely no consultation with the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw Chiefs on this policy statement. Consequently, it's not an overstatement to suggest that this undertaking constitutes an abject failure to uphold the Honour of the Crown.

Dan Christmas was appointed to the Senate of Canada as an independent in 2016, and until that point there had never been a Mi'kmaw Senator. His remarks and work in the Senate, including a 54-page Senate Report released 12 July 2022 responding to DFO's approach entitled *Peace on the Water*, and his ability to move between settler-colonial and Mi'kmaw worlds demonstrated through a defence of *Nutukulimk* speaks to the ontological conflict of sovereignty in the ongoing fiasco.[41] The authorship of the scholarly paper discussed above also speaks to the substantive difference in research design and findings when led by Mi'kmaq scholars and elders. The paper brings together ten authors, the first of which, 'M'sɨt No'kmaq', is a Mi'kmaw concept representing 'a kin relationship with the land, waters and all living beings'. Roughly translated, the authors of the article explain, the concept means 'all my relations', which is a common statement expressed in public by Mi'kmaq at public forums that have been open to non-Indigenous people like myself.

Mi'kmaw grassroots grandmother and water protector Dorene Bernard is commonly at the forefront of water defence work in Mi'kma'ki, and has described the inherent relationality between Mi'kmaq and water:

Canada must honour our inherent treaty rights, address the historical traumas of colonization, and ensure that our sovereignty and treaty rights to our lands and waters, as well as resources for indigenous peoples and our future generations, are acknowledged and respected. The life, culture, and strength of the Mi'kmaq cannot be separated from the sacredness of water. We embrace our connection to Mother Earth and her lifeblood and our people, and we encourage all to remember that water is precious and that all life depends on it to survive.[42]

Within this statement, which Bernard wrote as a journal article addressing the endemic problem of environmental racism, she describes life, culture, and strength as being fundamentally related to water. She positions herself as a person whose responsibilities extend across generations. Much of the excellent work published that speak to describing and practicing Mi'kmaw worldviews in scholarship happens in legal studies and what we might broadly call conservation or environmental studies. This extends in part because of the fundamental connection between the practice of sovereignty with a concern for all life, but it also describes the colonial categorisation of knowledge into disciplinary silos. The significance of this decolonial scholarship and practice for pluriversal sovereignty is substantial and underappreciated for IR. As explained by M'sɨt No'kmaq et al.,

Crucial are transformative changes in the ways Westernized systems and societies view the world. Indigenous Peoples who have lived on this land "since the beginning", may provide guidance, through their worldviews and ways of knowing for confronting the biodiversity crisis and its fundamental causes.[43]

Acting on the requirements of these sovereign obligations has been punished by the Canadian state, despite widespread recognition that the land is 'unceded'. Invoking reference to globally recognised

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[41] Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Ocean, Peace on the Water: Advancing the Full Implementation of Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik and Peskotomuhkati Rights-Based Fisheries (July 2022), available at: {https://sencanada.ca/media/kikbt2do/2022-07-12_pofo_report_ss-2_peace-on-the-water_tabled-version_e.pdf}.

[42] Dorene Bernard, 'Reconciliation and environmental racism in Mi'kma'ki', *Kalfou*, 5:2 (2018), pp. 297–303.

[43] M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., "'Awakening the sleeping giant'".

laws like the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People has been of strategic importance at times in Indigenous global politics, but part of the problem of documents within the UN system constituted by uni-versal sovereign states is in terms of how critical documents like the UNDRIP is interpreted. Lightfoot argues that Canada's 'selective endorsement' was managed in a way that domesticated Indigenous politics to 'Canada' and enabled Canada to present itself in good international terms by accepting a document intended to help Indigenous people *outside* of Canada.[44] The multilevel politics and diplomacy at play reinscribes uni-versal sovereignty.

To put this in concrete terms, the year before the launch of the fisheries in 2020, three Mi'kmaq grassroots grandmothers were arrested for not obeying a colonial-court ordered injunction to leave a land and water defence blocking a hydrocarbon storage company based on honouring their sovereign obligations to protect land and water in Mi'kma'ki. When police refuse to respect *Netukulimk*, grassroots grandmothers will also invoke UNDRIP, however, as a longtime observer and settler-supporter of Mi'kmaq-led land and water defence projects in Mi'kma'ki, it is no exaggeration to describe the general police engagement with water protectors as profoundly offensive and violent both ontologically and materially. As the first human language to develop here by many thousands of years, 'the Mi'kmaq language holds the rest of the story of the plants, animals and geography, as it can describe the land and the changes over time.'[45] This arrest is not unique, and the harassment of Mi'kmaq water protectors and land and water protectors across many nations is something played out again and again across the continent for hundreds of years. Even though awkward officials mumble out land acknowledgements regularly that say 'we are all treaty people' and that Mi'kma'ki is 'unceded', the cognitive dissonance of settler colonial nationalism comes to life by the fact that bureaucrats, police officers, business people, and many citizens seem to recognise no conflict in enforcing uni-versal Canadian laws overtop of Mi'kmaw laws, the latter of which have been in place for thousands of years. While under the approach of uni-versal sovereignty, this conflict is represented as a small 'domestic' issue, if a jurisdictional issue like this were to take place such that Canada was arresting US citizens on US territory, it would be a sufficient violation of the norm of sovereignty to justify military conflict. And yet, violations of sovereignty and Indigenous laws happen time and time again in Mi'kma'ki and elsewhere, not because people are unaware that Mi'kma'ki is unceded, but because they assume that the uni-versal sovereign right of Canada extends across all of the territory Canada claims to control.[46] As I type these words in the autumn of 2021 a leaked memo from the government of New Brunswick, the Canadian province adjacent Nova Scotia that is also overlapped by Mi'kma'ki, has made national news because it advises employees to avoid saying that New Brunswick is on 'unceded' and 'unsurrendered' territory, even though it is.[47]

Conclusion

If you are reading this forum, clearly decolonisation is important to you, as it ought to be for all of us. This meandering path we have travelled together has been necessary for the purpose of drawing attention to sovereignty in a pluriversal sense, not to split hairs about the comprehensiveness of the disciplinary lit review that will always be lacking, but to offer a chance to take a big step back and think about what kinds of fundamental and structural changes we need to make in the IR discipline to be serious about decolonisation.

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[44] Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics*, pp. 106–08.

[45] Shalan Joudry, cited in M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., '"Awakening the sleeping giant"', p. 849.

[46] Keith Doucette, 'N.S. RCMP arrest three "grassroots grandmothers" at Alton Gas protest site', *CTV News* (10 April, 2019), available at: {https://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/n-s-rcmp-arrest-three-grassroots-grandmothers-at-alton-gas-protest-site-1.4373715}.

[47] Hadeel Ibrahim and Aidan Cox, 'N.B. employees told to stop making Indigenous title acknowledgements, but won't face repercussions if they do', *CBC News* (15 October 2021), available at: {https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/first-nations-new-brunswick-1.6211638}.

The pluriversal sovereign politics underlying the ongoing isheries conflict in Mi'kma'ki and Canada juxtaposes more than 13,000 years of Mi'kmaw fishing practices and sovereignty that is ontologically relational and inclusive of non-humans on the one side, with the property-based Eurocentric understanding of sovereignty on the other. In the same sense that I do not mean to pick on any one scholar or approach to sovereignty within the discipline, so too do I not mean to overly isolate or essentialise this argument as one relevant only in Mi'kma'ki. The reason I describe the ongoing conflict over fisheries in Mi'kma'ki is because I live here and because decolonisation is not an abstract thing. The specific laws and principles that Mi'kmaq fishers, chiefs, parliamentarians, grassroots grandmothers, and water protectors use have developed in Mi'kma'ki and thus need to be central to the analysis of pluriversal sovereignty. While my students and I visit and support sites of land and water defence, organise events, and participate in work parties that seek to honour our treaty obligations as immigrants to Mi'kma'ki, our role as non-Indigenous academics is to do the labour of identifying the deficiencies and harm within our scholarly practices to help calibrate our trade in a way that can more accurately perceive the world as it is. If the reader accepts that there are ontological differences about what sovereignty *is*, then that is enough to support my contention that IR must reject uni-versal sovereignty for pluriversal sovereignty to accurately engage the subject.

If we can accept that there are ontological differences about what it means to practise sovereignty, then the question must be asked – what business do we have continuing to favour uni-versal sovereignty as it is enforced in the international system? Taking sovereignty seriously requires approaching it in pluriversal terms because if we seek to incorporate practices of sovereignty *otherwise* into a Eurocentric framework, we are actively engaged in the process of colonisation. This is not to suggest that ontologies of sovereignty do not interact and transform in tandem all the time – as I said earlier, decolonial praxis is happening regardless of what the lettered few have to say about it. But if we are serious about decolonisation – and I think we ought to be – we have to be serious about ensuring that we are deeply critical of work that continues to act as if we live in a Eurocentric uni-verse. Pluriversal sovereignty as a way of nuancing decolonisation in the discipline has a lot to offer in terms of reinterpreting conflicts happening globally, approaching international ethics and preventing/mitigating the manmade disasters of modernity, and better understanding historical encounters and entanglements where sovereign ontological orders encountered and interacted. Sure, it may come at the expense of more neat and tidy theorising, but the expectation for neat and tidy theorising comes as a result of systematic exclusion of the intellectual contributions of the majority of humanity.

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