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The place of Africa in international relations: the centrality of the margins in Global IR

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Abstract
The Global IR research agenda lays emphasis on the marginalised, non-Western forms of power and knowledge that underpin today's international system. Focusing on Africa, this article questions two fundamental assumptions of this approach, arguing that they err by excess of realism – in two different ways. First, the claim that Africa is marginal to international relations (IR) thinking holds true only as long as one makes the whole of IR discipline coincide with the Realist school. Second, the Global IR commitment to better appreciate 'non-Western' contributions is ontologically realist, because it fails to recognise that the West and the non-West are dialectically constitutive of one another. To demonstrate this, the article first shows that Africa has moved from the periphery to the core of IR scholarship: in the post-paradigmatic phase, Africa is no longer a mere provider of deviant cases, but a laboratory for theory-building of general validity. In the second part, the Sahel provides a case for unsettling reified conceptions of Africa's conceptual and geographical boundaries through the dialectical articulation of the inside/outside dichotomy. Questioning the 'place' of Africa in IR – both as identity and function – thus paves the way to a 'less realist' approach to Global IR.

Introduction: a 'double-realist' bias?

What is the place of Africa in international relations (IR)? In recent decades, Africa specialists and IR theorists have frequently deplored the alleged marginalisation of Africa in IR literature (see for instance Dunn and Shaw, 2001; Lemke, 2003; Brown, 2012). It is claimed that African dynamics are insufficiently explored and poorly conceptualised in the study of international politics. At the same time, under-resourced African scholars, universities, and journals struggle to obtain visibility in a research environment that is both highly competitive and self-referential (Hoffmann, 1977). It is as if Hegel's oft-cited remarks, which (in-)famously characterised Africa as an unknown, untamed, uncivilised continent devoid of history, agency, and political significance [Hegel, 1837 (2007)], were still relevant two centuries after their first formulation.

Similar observations are not unique to Africa, and could be stretched to other regions beyond 'the West' (albeit, perhaps, to a lesser degree). Noting this, the proponents of Global IR (Acharya, 2014; Bilgin, 2016; Acharya and Buzan, 2019) have advanced a new research agenda to address such criticism and engage the unresolved tensions between Area Studies and IR. Global IR calls for a more bottom-up, decentralised approach to IR, which pays due recognition to non-Western histories, geographies, and epistemologies in order to explore the complex web of relations underpinning today's international system more thoroughly. Building on this approach, recent scholarship has put forward an investigation of Africa from the point of view of Global IR

(Bischoff *et al.*, 2016). These studies aim at enhancing the role of African theories and practices, concepts and methods, authors and cases, with a view to tackling the perceived marginalisation of the continent in IR literature.

In keeping with the principal aim of this Special Issue, which invites authors to explore how non-Western worlds interact with, positively challenge, and potentially integrate classical IR thinking, the objective of this article is to contribute to these debates by critically engaging this emerging literature and the roles it assigns to Africa in shaping international politics and IR theories. In particular, we question two of the fundamental assumptions of the Global IR scholarship focusing on Africa, arguing that they err by excess of realism – in two different ways. On the one hand, the claim that Africa is peripheral to IR thinking holds true only as long as one takes a reductionist view that makes IR coincide with (some variant of) Realism,[1] and its focus on materialism, structuralism, Westphalian sovereignty, and great powers. While Africa has indeed remained in the background in the study of great power politics, recent developments have considerably expanded the agenda of IR scholarship, making room for theories and approaches in which Africa features prominently. On the other hand, the Global IR commitment to better inventory, appreciate, and build upon contributions that are 'non-Western' is ontologically unconvincing. We argue that it is too realist, in the sense that it fails to recognise that in a globalised world based on increasing transnational exchanges and shared and interconnected histories, the West and the non-West are entangled in a dialectical relationship that makes one constitutive of the other. Non-Western regions, in fact, should not be understood as a given reality that is 'out there', before the passive contemplation of a neutral observer, but as a cognitive construction that theories and practices actively shape and perform, as critical approaches to regional studies (Neumann, 2003; Söderbaum, 2016) and political geography (Paasi, 2009) have long recognised. From this perspective, apprehending the contribution of Africa to Global IR cannot be reduced to just 'add[ing] Africa and stir[ring]' (Abrahamsen, 2016A). Instead, it requires an effort to unearth the constitutive conditions that have made Africa come into being in the first place, as the other of its own other, be it the dominating West, civilised Europe, the rich Global North, the Islamic Umma, and so on (Shani, 2008).

The question over Africa's 'place' in IR therefore has a double sense, both theoretical-metaphorical and material-ontological. It concerns, respectively, Africa's role in and contribution to the literature of IR, understood as a scholarly discipline, and the physical place that Africa occupies on the map of international politics; in other words, where, how, and by whom the constitutive boundaries defining its identity are drawn. Much of the literature that has already addressed these questions is characterised by implicit realist assumptions, both in the sense of theoretical IR Realism and ontological realism. Toning such assumptions down, we argue, makes it possible to depart from recurring tropes and generate new insights into the 'place' of Africa and IR.

To demonstrate this, we first survey and review the complex relationship between IR and Africanist scholarship. We show that in the past few decades, Africa has moved from the periphery of the discipline to its core, not only as a provider of case studies that systematically deviate from a presumed norm(ality) coinciding with 'the West', but also as a paradigmatic case for theory-building whose interest and validity are increasingly seen as generalisable beyond Africa itself. This is also because, at the same time that Africa was shifting away from its alleged marginality in IR scholarship, the centre of concern of (Realist) IR scholarship was fading away as part of the 'post-paradigmatic' turn in IR thinking. The second part of this article provides a case for unsettling reified and naturalised conceptions of Africa. It unearths longstanding uncertainties about the boundaries of Africa, showing that Africa's very identity is contingent on

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[1]By 'Realism' with a capital R we refer to the realist school of thought of international relations, so as to distinguish it from 'realism' with a small R, by which we refer here to the ontological stance characterizing the world 'out there' as objectively given and thought-independent.

shifting worldviews and dialectical relationships. It focuses particularly on the case of the Sahara-Sahel, a quintessential liminal space which has alternatively articulated the inside/outside dichotomy of the continent, and therefore provides a prism with which to explore in detail how the opposition between Africa and 'the West' (and the rest) is socially constructed and historically contingent. In conclusion, we draw some lessons from our analysis of the place of Africa in IR with a view to charting a way for a 'less realist' approach to Global IR: one that remains loyal to the commitment to plurality and complexity by recognising the dialectical and hybrid nature of regions and areas.

The place of Africa in IR literature

Paradigmatic IR and the marginality of Africa

The place and role of Africa in the international system have long been under-researched. At the dawn of modernity, the trades of gold, slaves, and weapons in and from Africa arguably played a crucial role in the establishment of an international system of states, in Europe and beyond (Grip, 2015). By deliberately excluding genealogical questions from their investigations, though, mainstream IR theories have attracted criticism for being unable to explain how 'a singular post-Columbian world system' has come into being (Ruggie, 1993). Similarly, much of the historiography of IR (Schmidt 2013a) has failed to recognise that Africa and its political dynamics are inextricably interlinked to the defining moments in the history of IR, not only as a side effect but often as a trigger. The colonisation of Africa cannot be separated from the 'central conflicts' (Modelski, 1987) among European powers in the late 19th century, including the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71 and the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877–78. Diplomatic incidents occasioned by colonial enterprises in Africa – such as the so-called 'Slap of Tunis' between France and Italy in 1881, and the Fashoda Incident between Britain and France in 1898 – almost tore the European alliance blocs apart, thereby shaking the foundation of international order and paving the way for World War I (Pakenham, 1992). Africa during colonisation has also been the testing ground for warfare techniques that dramatically shaped the major conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries: concentration camps in the Boer war (Van Heyningen, 2009); the use of airpower for military purposes in the colonial conquest of Libya (Van Creveld, 2012); and the counter-insurgency doctrines first developed by the French in North Africa, which would prove so influential in the American conduct of military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (Porch, 2013).

These observations notwithstanding, many scholars have acknowledged the peripherality of Africa to IR thinking (Dunn and Shaw, 2001; Harman and Brown, 2013; Abrahamsen, 2016A). This has arguably had something to do with the hegemonic status of Realism in IR theorising (Lemke, 2003; Brown, 2006), a school of thought which became so dominant in American academia, and beyond, that its boundaries almost came to coincide with those of the IR discipline in its entirety (Guzzini, 1998). Primarily concerned with great power politics, the (neo-)Realism research programme focused its attention on the states 'that make the most difference' (Waltz, 1979, 73), 'because these states dominate and shape international politics' (Mearsheimer, 2001, 17). It comes as no surprise, then, that African states endowed with limited military and economic capabilities remained at the margins of an IR thinking dominated by the Realists' concerns, standards, and methods. At the same time, the so-called 'behavioural revolution' experienced by American social sciences from the late 1960s onwards contributed considerably to downgrading the epistemological value of region and Area Studies (Katzenstein, 2002) within self-proclaimed rationalist approaches to IR thinking (Keohane, 1988), including both neorealism and neoliberalism. Africa was no exception. Contributions by Africa specialists, as well as those of other areas, were then seen as particularistic knowledge, hierarchically subordinated to the more generalisable, universality-aspiring insights produced by IR and other social sciences via statistic modelling. Theoretical contributions produced by scholars working on, in, and from Africa were thus captured in the "perennial contest between partisans of 'nomothetic' approaches […] and 'idiographic' approaches' (Kennedy, 1997; see also Wedeen, 2010; Abrahamsen, 2016A), with a limited impact on IR theory development.

While the marginality of Africa during this phase of IR thinking is evident, the justifiability for it is less convincing, even from within the Realist theoretical framework. One could claim, after all, that Africa provided the theatre for the *mise en scène* of some of the most important frictions of great power politics during the Cold War, possibly in a more long-lasting and consistent way than south-east Asia or central America (Schmidt 2013b). As the cases of Zaire/Congo, Angola, Ethiopia, Somalia, Egypt, and others illustrate, superpower competition over the post-colonial order arguably shows Africa to be the region in which the differences between the states that make the most difference stand out most clearly.

Be that as it may, the alleged peripherality of Africa in IR thinking becomes much less pronounced as soon as a narrow focus on Realism and mainstream positivism gives way to greater theoretical pluralism. For the development of world system theory and dependency theory, for instance, Africa has contributed not only with valuable case studies, but also with world-leading research centres and scholars, as the case of the University of Dar es-Salaam illustrates (Sharp, 2013; Mamdani, 2018). Similarly, the decline of neorealism's hegemonic status in IR thinking has brought Africa back in (Harman and Brown, 2013) as a valuable case with which to develop and test alternative theoretical approaches. In a world of regions (Katzenstein, 2005), the rise of the African Union and its collective security mechanisms has prompted analyses inspired by theoretical approaches as diverse as liberal institutionalism (Engel and Gomes Porto, 2010), 'new' regionalism (Grant and Söderbaum, 2003), practice theory (Bueger, 2016), and constructivism (Williams, 2009), to name but a few. Constructivism has also provided the theoretical toolkit for generating important insights on international humanitarian (Campbell, 2003) and peacebuilding (Autesserre, 2010) interventions, studies whose influence has spanned well beyond the field of Africa specialists.

Nevertheless, critics contend that these studies have failed to convincingly offset the longstanding marginalisation of Africa from the study of international politics. Three main observations are put forward to support this claim. In the first place, it has been noted that 'while Africa is the site of many issue-based studies and provides empirically detailed accounts of international relations, many such accounts remain at arm's length from core conceptual and theoretical debates in IR' (Harman and Brown, 2013, 70). Reiterating the oft-noticed subordination of Area Studies, Africa is seen at best as a case study providing additional raw data to illustrate, apply or test a general theory deducted from elsewhere – typically from observation of the behaviour of the states that continue to make the most difference. Hardly challenging the fundamental disciplinary assumption of mainstream IR, this attitude has been dubbed 'add Africa and stir' (Abrahamsen, 2016A).

The second observation is that Africa is often incorporated into IR theorising not only as a case study, but typically as a deviant case, 'wheeled on to the stage as representative of whatever delinquency, from state failure to the drugs trade, is exercising the analyst' (Harman and Brown, 2013, 70). African institutions and practices are typically seen as providing a poor fit for the standard application of IR theories. This incidentally reinforces the view of a Western norm (ality) opposed to an African exception. Looking at the building blocks of the international system, for instance, scholars have frequently found African states to diverge significantly from the ideal of the Western, Weberian state (Bøås and Jennings, 2005). The coining of concepts such as quasi-state (Jackson, 1991), collapsed state (Zartman, 1995), shadow state (Reno, 1995), and criminalised state (Bayart *et al.*, 1999), referring to cases as diverse as, respectively, Ghana, Somalia, Sierra Leone, and South Africa, illustrates how African states have been almost endlessly pathologised (Abrahamsen, 2016A), most notably in the 1990s.

The third reason for scepticism highlights the limited consideration for African agency in IR debates. As Harman and Brown (2013, 86) have observed in their literature review on Africa's comeback in IR scholarship, 'a focus on structure without a more detailed consideration or acknowledgement of agency binds Africa's international relations into a narrow and predetermined position as the recipient of international affairs rather than an active player'. Viewing the weakness of African states as a shortcut to analytical irrelevance, scholars have placed a

considerable, and often exaggerated, emphasis on how international dynamics and material constraints shape African politics, with little consideration for local forms of agency (Herbst, 2000). To be fair, however, one should acknowledge the extensive criticism levelled against this reductionist view of Africa as a passive recipient of policies designed abroad and imported inertly with disastrous consequences. Scholars have convincingly argued that African elites have skilfully exploited (and manipulated) the opportunity structure created by international dynamics for domestic political purposes (Clapham, 1996; Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Bayart and Ellis, 2000; Murray-Evans, 2015; Soulé, 2020), prompting the conclusion that Africa in international politics is an actor, and not just acted upon (Brown, 2012).

Overall, then, one could claim that while the hegemony of Realism resulted in the substantial disregard – if not exclusion – of African realities from IR debates, the emergence of theoretical pluralism since the 1990s has led to a remarkable comeback of Africa in IR thinking. Although not without ambiguities, African cases, problems, and thinkers have significantly contributed to the expansion of the research agenda of many emerging IR paradigms. With the compartmentalisation of IR theory development in a plurality of paradigms (Guzzini, 1998), however, African cases almost never featured among the paradigmatic cases providing the key explanation or demonstration of an emerging theory.

Post-paradigmatic IR and the centrality of Africa

This trend has considerably changed in the 'post-paradigmatic' phase of IR thinking. Influential scholarship has in fact claimed that the state of the IR discipline today is characterised less by grand meta-theoretical debates than by efforts to bridge the gaps across paradigms and refine existing theories against concrete policy problems (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010; Dunne et al., 2013; Acharya and Buzan, 2017). This approach rests more or less explicitly on a pragmatist set of assumptions. By practicing theoretical pluralism and analytical eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010), recent IR scholarship addresses research questions that are issue-oriented and practice-driven, rather than theory-driven. By fostering inter-paradigmatic cross-fertilisation, contemporary IR research seeks to illuminate concrete policy dilemmas that are substantively related but normally formulated in separate paradigms.

This contributes to explaining the growing relevance of Africa to today's IR debates. From the perspective of the pragmatist turn in IR scholarship, Africa offers an unparalleled wealth of concrete policy dilemmas 'that, while of interest to scholars, bear at least implicitly on concrete challenges facing social and political actors' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010, 20), both domestically and internationally. Africa in fact provides a privileged field in which to identify and address policy-relevant puzzles, and to explore the analytical and problem-solving purchase of emerging theoretical approaches. In other words, Africa's conceptualisation as a 'standard deviation' from political normality, which once underpinned its peripherality in IR, has become the reason for its renewed centrality. In the post-paradigmatic phase of IR thinking, problems that appear intractable from within the constraining parameters of a single paradigm provide unique opportunities for building new approaches that bridge across paradigmatic divides. There is no shortage of illustrations of this argument. The remainder of this section singles out three policy areas in which reflections originating from African cases and problems have stimulated scholars to push the boundaries of IR thinking. The impact of such theoretical and conceptual developments has spanned well beyond the realm of African specialists, thereby making Africa a laboratory of the emerging theory and practice of international politics.

The first of these examples has to do with the study of conflicts. Ever more detailed conflict metrics made available to the community of scholars attest that Africa has spearheaded the remarkable worldwide rise in intra-state conflicts and civil wars following the end of the Cold War. It is therefore unsurprising that much of the (now burgeoning) literature on new wars (Kaldor, 1999) and their political economy (Collier and Hoeffler, 1999; Berdal and Malone, 2000) was first devised and refined by building largely on African cases, to the extent that

early civil war explanations and models were criticised for their alleged 'African bias' (Gutiérrez Sanin, 2004). That initial Africanist imprint has largely faded away, and civil war studies have now become a firmly established field of research of comparative and international politics, with well-funded departments in the most respected universities worldwide. Retrospective assessments confirm that theorisations of an alleged crime-conflict nexus, first introduced by looking at African cases, have gained considerable traction in scholarly and policy debates in order to illuminate cases spanning across different continents (De Boer and Bosetti, 2015).

The second example concerns the cornerstone of the international system: the concept of sovereignty. As already observed, there is no shortage of scholarly works finding African states somehow defective *vis-à-vis* the ideal type of Westphalian statehood and sovereignty. Interestingly, however, recent scholarship has found that concepts of 'deviant' statehood originally coined to describe African realities can be applied well beyond Africa, including in the global North. In spite of all its ambiguities, the extraordinary success of the concept of 'failed state' testifies to this (Bueger and Bethke, 2014). First introduced by Africanists in reference to economic and political crises befalling African states (Brett, 1986), the concept was soon catapulted onto the international stage in a widely read *Foreign Affairs* article, and used to describe cases 'from Haiti in the Western Hemisphere to the remnants of Yugoslavia in Europe, from Somalia, Sudan, and Liberia in Africa to Cambodia in Southeast Asia' (Helman and Ratner, 1992, 3). Eventually, the notion of failed state became the cornerstone of the 'Bush Doctrine' (White House, 2002), arguably one of the most influential pieces of foreign policy since the end of World War II. The concept of neopatrimonialism exhibits a comparable trajectory. It was first introduced to apprehend and catalogue a bizarre deviation from the trajectory of modernisation, one that had not been foreseen by Max Weber but which was observed in Central Africa (Médard, 1982). Recently, however, influential scholarship has introduced neopatrimonialism to the toolkit of mainstream social sciences to describe relevant dynamics of international politics observed 'in Africa and beyond' (Bach and Gazibo, 2012), including the Philippines and Brazil, Italy and France. The notion of hybridity offers another valuable example. It was first evoked in the Africanist literature in order to describe the anomaly of postcolonial state-building (Ekeh, 1975). In recent years, hybridity has gained currency in core IR debates, including those addressing political ordering (Boege *et al.*, 2008), international peacebuilding (Belloni, 2012), and comparative institutionalism (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). Pooled together, these observations may lead one to conclude that, when looking at the international system with empirical accuracy, 'African-type' states may be less an anomaly in need of explanation than the rule that demands to be understood. Taking stock of these developments, the rigid assumptions of previous conceptualisations about the core attributes of sovereign statehood are being softened. Influential scholarship has proved eager to make room for postcolonial and postmodern statehood as fully-fledged paradigms of sovereignty in IR, alongside modern, Westphalian statehood (Sørensen, 2001).

Closely related to the changing understanding of statehood in IR, the third example refers to the study of governance. Early governance conceptualisations and analyses addressed core IR debates, dealing with the issues of world order, international organisations, globalisation, and transnational coordination. While Africa has been poorly represented on the stage of these global issues, it has, however, offered a variety of meso- and micro-level cases to the empirical investigation of governance without government (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992). Research in and on Africa has therefore proved instrumental for governance theory-building, with important contributions to theoretical perspectives as diverse as liberalism (Rotberg 2004, 2015), constructivism (Risse, 2011), and neoinstitutionalism (Menkhaus, 2006). Critical approaches to governance, too, have found fertile ground in Africa. Seminal studies in this domain have explored the intersection between security and development in Africa by leveraging neo-Gramscian (Harrison, 2004) and Foucauldian (Duffield, 2001) perspectives on governance. African dynamics have also provided quintessential cases for the development of issue-based analyses of governance. Among them, it is worth mentioning influential pieces of research on the contribution of private

actors and capitals in the provision of public goods, from structural adjustment programmes to private–public partnerships and security sector reforms (Taylor, 2010; Abrahamsen, 2016B). Africa-focused research has also paved the way for the study of (global) health governance. As Africa accounts for approximately two-thirds of the people living with HIV/AIDS in the world, the global response to HIV/AIDS in Africa has provided a seminal case study through which to explore multi-level and multi-sectorial governance of health and broader human security, including issues of coordination, hierarchy, and partnership (McInnes, 2006; Poku *et al.*, 2007; Brown, 2009). More recently, the Ebola pandemic in West Africa offered a valuable case with which to investigate the harmonisation of the regional and global governance of health crises (Ifediora and Aning, 2017). Africa has therefore provided a paradigmatic, textbook case for the development of health governance theories and practices, exercising a major influence on the research agenda of governance and security studies well beyond the continent's boundaries (Elbe, 2008; MacLean and MacLean, 2009). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to magnify the relevance of this body of literature.

To conclude, then, recent studies on issues as important as conflicts, sovereignty, and governance appear to have benefitted greatly from concepts, methods, and heuristic cases that were first introduced in Africa. Critics may contend that while these issues might well be important, they remain peripheral to IR theorising, as long as IR is conceived as the science that investigates the foreign behaviour of the states that, owing to their power, dominate and shape international politics. We find such sceptical remarks misplaced. Not only because changing international dynamics make Africa today the ideal observatory for the investigation of the rise of emerging countries (Taylor, 2014), while virtually all the great powers are intent on developing and implementing 'Africa Strategies' (Faleg and Palleschi, 2020; Soulé, 2020). But also, and more importantly, because civil wars, neopatrimonial statehood, and multi-stakeholder governance are the cutting edge of a more theoretically aware IR research agenda that has long acknowledged the artificiality of the inside/outside threshold in international politics (Walker, 1992; Bigo, 2001). Although Africa-focused studies tend to shy away from grand theoretical claims, a sobering endeavour to mid-range theorising remains no less cogent, and arguably more attuned to a post-paradigmatic development of cutting-edge IR scholarship.

Africa and the ontological realism of global IR
Areas as dialectical constructs and the case of Africa

Discussing the contribution and role of Africa in a globalised IR discipline should also imply questioning what is meant by 'Africa'. This means exploring Africa's connotative and denotative values, that is, respectively, how the label 'Africa' is mobilised in discourse, and what non-discursive entity it refers to, if any. The very conception and definition of the continent have never been fixed or uncontested, and its inclusion in the wider research agenda cannot overlook the historical, political, and intellectual processes that have constructed Africa as a presumably independent object of the international system.

Notwithstanding its emancipatory purposes, in Global IR, the ontological debate has remained somewhat limited: the existence of an area is implicitly assumed as ontologically given, determined by its intrinsic characteristics, and preceding its relations with other units. Even if the 'spatial turn' in social sciences has opened the way to a reconceptualisation of sub-system units – such as regions and areas – in terms of constructed socio-relational categories open to change (Waever, 2020), most of the Global IR literature tends to treat areas as a pre-given object of inquiry.

Global IR's ontological 'realism' is arguably rooted in the ontological positivism of mainstream IR approaches, and even more in the historical trajectory of one of the most important disciplines that has converged towards and informed Global IR, namely Area Studies. The origins of Area Studies are intrinsically connected to the colonial expansion of European powers during the

18th and 19th centuries, and for a certain time after their appearance, they primarily served the expansionist project of the Western world (Khosrowjah, 2011). Accordingly, the identification and delimitation of an area were principally influenced by the political and 'civilizing' needs of the conquerors, who required the social sciences to elaborate the knowledge necessary to understand, control, and discipline people and societies outside of Europe. In this sense, the distinction between an Anglo-American *Middle East* and a French *Proche-Orient* well captures the potential shifts and overlapping of Area Studies and its relation of dependence with historically situated political contingencies (Capdepuy, 2008). In a similar vein, the rise of Area Studies in the US was decisively favoured by the beginning of the Cold War and the new role assumed by the US as the principal Western global power (Katzenstein, 2002). Accordingly, the identification and definition of an area should never be seen as autonomous from the power structures, historical legacies, and contingent interests characterizing the international system at a specific time (Bilgin, 2004).

What is more, the 'bordering processes' (Walker, 1992) that have brought areas into being are not only expressions of specific power relations, but also serve as exercises of identity-building. As Said (1978) convincingly demonstrated in the case of the 'Oriental' world, the construction of an area is about power and conquest as much as it is about constructing a presumed Other in order to define a Self. Consequently, Global IR partly fails in refining an essential ontological assumption: non-Western worlds and their contribution to global affairs should not be studied because they add to the history of the West, but because they – the West and the non-West – are inextricably interlinked and therefore parts of the same history (Hobson, 2012).

Following these premises, the emergence and (re-)definition of 'Africa', intended as an object of intellectual inquiry and a building block of the international system, must be understood as the result of different political projects which have evolved and intersected over time: while the ontological and geographical contours of Africa are often seen as reified, the identification of an African area has in fact been shaped, negotiated, and remade by a vast and heterogeneous group of 'region-builders' (Paasi, 2001), including Western thinkers and policy makers, international organisations, or local states.

From this perspective, the partition of Africa delineated by Hegel proved seminal in shaping European processes of identity and otherness building. In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel divided Africa into three regions: North Africa, which he called 'European Africa'; northeast Africa, which he termed 'the land of the Nile'; and then 'Africa proper', the land to the south and the west. He considered North Africa and the Nile Valley to be extensions of Europe and Asia, respectively. Of 'Africa Proper', the land to the south and west, which provided slaves for the transatlantic trade, Hegel opined: 'Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world – shut up' [Hegel, 1837 (2007), 91]. The judgment expressed *vis-à-vis* 'Africa Proper' – mostly corresponding to what we consider today as forming Sub-Saharan Africa – contributed decisively in creating the image of a continent without agency in the international system, a space consequently open to penetration and conquest by 'external' powers and civilisations, whether these be European colonisers or the Arab conquerors of the Middle Ages (Bayart and Ellis, 2000). In this sense, the partition proposed by Hegel significantly influenced the way Europeans (and Westerners more generally) interpreted, divided, and disciplined Sub-Saharan Africa. The clearest example is represented by the distinction between 'Arab' and 'African' populations and subjects, and the consequent division between 'white' and 'black' Africa. Driven by a racialised interpretation of African history and politics, the European empires created explicit hierarchies among the polities and the societies that they conquered, generally according to Arab descendants and North African polities a higher level of civilisation and a sort of right to be co-opted and act as ruling agents over less developed black people (Hall, 2011). This arbitrary ethnic, geographical, and political distinction was also reiterated in academia, where the division of labour between the 'orientalists' and the 'ethnographers' sanctioned a civilisational cleavage between a complex and multifaceted Middle East and 'primitive' black Africa (Aïdi *et al.*, 2020).

Despite being historically contingent, the division between North and Sub-Saharan Africa continues to shape political, economic, and security dynamics at the continental level. On the one hand, the anti-colonial struggles that followed the first great wave of African independences in the 1960s offer a clear representation of the impact and persisting tensions generated by this normative and political division. Various African leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah from Ghana or Modibo Keïta from Mali, but also Ahmed Ben Bella from Algeria, openly advocated and supported a full political integration of the newly independent Africa based on sovereignty sharing, as the only way to emancipate and preserve the continent from external influences (Hartmann, 2016). This emancipatory and anti-colonial approach paved the way for the creation of Pan-African organisations such as the Organization of African Unity (OUA, from 2002 the African Union) or the African Development Bank. On the other hand, the normative commitment to continental unity and emancipation set Africa's regionalism sharply at odds with Area Studies, given the latter's colonial rooting and its disciplinary distinction between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.

As a result of this persisting ambiguity, the call to unity of Pan-Africanists did not fully succeed in redefining African politics. Divisions and mistrust between states and sub-regions persisted, and along with enduring transnational tensions and conflicting loyalties, they finally hampered the implementation of a unified political project for Africa (Bach, 2015). Within this context, North African countries have typically featured a sort of double identity, and are usually recognised more as members of the Arab and/or Middle Eastern world than as representatives of the African region. These same countries have fashioned their strategies and power moves in order to exploit their position 'in-between' two worlds. Egypt under Nasser was a central actor in developing and sustaining Pan-Africanist as well as Pan-Arabist political projects and organisations. In a similar vein, Africa was the region where, from the mid-1990s onwards, Khadafy's Libya tried to reassert its role and influence as a regional power, following two decades in which the regime's attention had mostly been directed at the Middle East (Huliaras, 2001). Moreover, West Africa has been the 'battleground' where the competition for leadership between Algeria and Morocco has been particularly evident and enduring (Hernando de Larramendi, 2019). And while Algeria's political and economic peculiarities make the country inward-looking and self-contained, Morocco has long built closer ties to the European Union than to the African Union.

Additional examples contribute to clarifying how the nature and contours of Africa are not ontologically given, but contested – something that the Global IR literature fails to acknowledge. The inclusion of Madagascar in/as Africa and the simultaneous exclusion of Yemen are, after all, a social construction, reified into a fact that a critical approach should strive to unsettle (Aïdi et al., 2020). While Madagascar is an island 500 miles away from the African coast that presents specific and autonomous historical and ethnic features, Yemen appears to be both historically and 'geopolitically' a land in between the Arab Peninsula and North East Africa, whose political, social, and economic dynamics are strongly interconnected with those of the African countries on the other side of the Red Sea (Donelli, 2020). The case of apartheid South Africa offers yet another counterintuitive example clearly shaped by non-geographical considerations: the country was placed in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) category by the World Bank for years (Aïdi et al., 2020), presumably because its social and racial characteristics undermined othering processes.

The ontological realism of Global IR, then, arguably reproduces a discourse of marginality of non-Western Areas, and Africa in particular. By reifying areas, Global IR critically overlooks the co-constitutive relations that make areas empty signifiers, unless they are linked to one another. While discussing the African contribution to the construction of other areas – and the West in particular – goes beyond the scope of this article, in the rest of this section we use the case of Africa to problematise the ontological assumptions of Global IR, and do this by discussing the origins of one of its most important 'internal borders'.

The Sahara-Sahel: dividing, connecting, constructing 'Africas'

As this overview has demonstrated, 'Africa' is not an established and natural component of the international system, but rather a social construct made and remade in relational and dialectical opposition to other social aggregates and spatial imaginaries. Accordingly, specific and fixed 'African' features do not exist as such, but emerge from the contingent intersection of historical legacies, systemic pressures, and 'local' transformations.

More specifically, the constructed division between North and Sub-Saharan Africa allows us to introduce and problematise the most important internal 'frontier' of the African continent, namely the Sahara-Sahel region. We acknowledge that other socially constructed partitions of/ in Africa do exist, which have generated persisting socio-political effects on the continent: namely, the 'exogenously' imposed distinction between a Francophone and an Anglophone Africa has greatly contributed to hampering the Pan-African project (Ackah, 2020) and under-mining Africa's 'sameness'. Yet, we argue that the strategies, policies, and bureaucratic division of labour within Western Ministries of Foreign Affairs or in most international organisations continue to be informed by identification of the Sahara-Sahel as the main border in/of Africa (OECD/SWAC, 2014).

The Sahara-Sahel represents a fault line which can be seen both as an insulator, dividing different areas, and as a connector tying together Africa's constitutive sameness. According to a historical and geographical tradition that runs from Kant to Braudel, the Sahara and the Sahel represent, respectively, the largest 'sea of sand' of the planet and its vast semi-arid shores.[2] Taken together, they form a spatial aggregate which can simultaneously connect or divide the Mediterranean world from black Africa, and their role has changed over the centuries (McDougall and Scheele, 2012). Consequently, exploring the very definition and emergence of the Sahara-Sahel region is key to understanding how 'Africa' has historically come into being, and how it has been defined and delimited in relation to its Mediterranean and/or European other. The Sahara-Sahel has in fact been designated through a dialectical process which has defined the area on the basis of what it is not, rather than considering what characterises it. In accordance with this framing, the Sahara-Sahel has become a space of 'exception' (in the sense employed and developed by Agamben, 2005): either an alterity taken in (*ex-capio*) from the (European) outside, or a 'barbarian' other in which the external civilisations can perceive the confirmation of their superiority and retrace the origins of various security threats to keep at bay.

This definition of the Sahara-Sahel as a threshold separating the civilised Mediterranean world from Sub-Saharan Africa is deeply anchored in history. Indeed, the Greek historian Herodotus described the Sahara as the southern border of the civilised world, a 'natural' and geometrical barrier dividing civilisation from anarchy (Mattheis *et al.*, 2018, 42). At the same time, this vision of the area as the place of transition from order to chaos, but also as a unitary and distinguished geographical space, was adopted and reified by the Arab travellers, merchants, and preachers who started exploring and penetrating the area many centuries later. During the Middle Ages, Arab penetration beyond the Sahara and along the routes of the intra-African slave trade decisively contributed to fixing the representation of the Sahara-Sahel as a liminal and bordering space. On the one hand, reinterpreting biblical and classical sources, various Arab thinkers – among them Ibn Khaldun – advanced a vision of Africa as being hierarchically organised on a racial basis. Like the European colonisers centuries later, they consequently distinguished between a 'white' and a 'black' Africa (the *Bilad al-Sudan*), and identified the Sahara-Sahel as the fault line between the two (Lydon, 2009). On the other hand, this same intellectual tradition also reaffirmed the identification of the Sahara-Sahel area as a space of chaotic otherness; through the use of the notion of *badiyya* (literally 'the savage land'), the Arab chroniclers attributed to the Sahara Desert a normative connotation in opposition to those lands inhabited by Arab populations

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[2]The term *Sahel* comes from the Arab word *Sahīl* – 'shore'

where legal and religious principles and structured polities define and sustain order and civilisation (McDougall and Scheele, 2012).

The period of European colonisation confirmed and reinforced the essentially dialectical nature of the bordering process of the Sahara-Sahel. The *politique des races* became the governing and disciplining principle adopted by the French administration for ruling and distinguishing between the populations under their rule (Baldaro and Raineri, 2020). Hence, the Sahara was further framed as the dividing line between civilisation and pre-historical societies: while the application of the *indigénat* legislative code to Sub-Saharan and Sahelian populations confirmed their 'exceptional' nature, the inclusion of North Africa within the same system of civil law applied in Europe reinforced the ontological distinction between these two worlds occupying the same continent (Bonnecase and Brachet, 2013).

While the image of the Sahara-Sahel as an insulator has been constructed and reified over the centuries, this remains only one possible interpretation of the role and nature of this region. Returning to the era of Arab penetration into West Africa, we may remark that the term 'Sahel' first made its appearance in the 17th century in two of the most important Arab chronicles of the time. The *Ta'rikh al-Fattash* and the *Ta'rikh al-Sudan* narrate the stories of two of the most extensive and flourishing Islamic kingdoms of the period, namely the Mali and Songhay Empires. Built around the cities of Gao and Timbuktu and controlling the Trans-Saharan trade, the two kingdoms were presented as empires of the Sahel, two polities whose intellectual, political, and social influence was perceived from Cairo to the Gulf of Guinea and beyond (Bonnecase and Brachet, 2013). The importance of the Mali and Songhay Empires testifies to the centrality of the Trans-Saharan trade, a fundamental connecting phenomenon that blurred the distinction between a North and a Sub-Saharan Africa. In keeping with this, it must be underlined that the economic, social, ecological, and spatial organisation of the Sahara-Sahel has always favoured the mobility and exchange of goods and persons, in a process that has shaped the very identity of local communities – as in the case of the Tuareg. This process has created an integrated socio-economic system, with the Sahara at its centre, that continues to influence inter-African circular migratory movements today (Scheele, 2012; OECD/SWAC, 2014).

The tension between these two visions of the Sahara-Sahel was expressed in new ways during the 20th century. On the one hand, during the 1950s and the 1960s, the Sahara-Sahelian zone was reorganised following the rationalist and modernising approaches promoted by international organisations and donors in the 'developing world', or Global South, including both North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa (Wood and Ryden, 1992). On the other hand, the oil crisis of the 1970s, coupled with the devastating climatic crises that affected the Sahel in those decades, contributed to deepening the gulf between North and Sub-Saharan Africas, driving the economic and political trajectories of these two regions apart. These events, at least in part caused by the attempt to advance economic development through the promotion of homogenising institutional and managerial blueprints for the whole African continent, decisively contributed to shaping the identity and functioning of the Sahara-Sahel, eventually (re)transforming the region into a space of exception, an insulator where emergency forms of governmentality have become the new normal (Mann, 2015).

The security concerns which have come to characterise the international perception of and approach to the Sahara-Sahel since the beginning of the 2000s have also reiterated and sanctioned the role of the region as the border and dividing space between Europe and North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, the Sahara-Sahel is now seen as 'Europe's Southern border' (Raineri and Strazzari, 2019) and a part of that 'Enlarged Neighbourhood' (EEAS, 2016) that in the EU's official documents creates a new distinction – and an implicit hierarchy – between North Africa – a central part of EU's near neighbourhood – and the rest of the continent. It remains questionable whether these emerging policies, discourses, and practices of bordering recapture the Sahara-Sahel in the orbit of Europe, dragging it away from the African centre of gravity, or rather confine the Sahel to a permanent otherness *vis-à-vis* Europe. What is clear,

however, is that they reconfirm and perform the imaginary of the Sahara-Sahel as a threshold between two distinct Africas. Notably, this spatial imaginary hides, but is premised on, the persisting interconnections of the Saharan frontier, starting with intra-African migrations and trans-Saharan exchanges, which make the Sahara-Sahel a connector and integrator of different 'areas'. Incidentally, the 'Sahel as a border' imaginary contributes to disrupting the socio-economic organisation and livelihoods of local communities (Bøås, 2021).

In a sense, the Hegelian conceptualisation of 'Africa proper' appears even now to inform the European approach towards the African continent, by producing borders and constructing spaces that affect and determine the meaning we attribute to the term, the concept, and the study of 'Africa'. With its blindness to ontology, genealogy, and dialectics, Global IR scholarship exhibits an implicit and unproblematised ontological 'realism'. As the case of the Sahel suggests, Global IR reiterates and reinforces the reification of the non-Western areas, thereby limiting its emancipatory potential.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding a long-lasting tradition and narration of exclusion that continues to inform the mainstream approach towards the continent, this article has shown that Africa has gained a prominent place in international politics and in the study of IR. Engaging with the main topic of this special issue, and its aim to open new venues for a fruitful dialogue between Area Studies and IR, the article has argued that as the hegemony of the Realist school of IR subsides, Africa has provided a rich and differentiated field of study, able to offer a central contribution to the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical debates of a post-paradigmatic IR discipline.

At the same time, while supporting the main premises informing the current debates on Global IR and comparative regionalism, the article has insisted on the need to further problematise the ontological basis which determines our identification and discussion of areas and regions. Africa, like all other regions of the world, does not exist as such, but is rather a historical and social construct whose origins and genealogy have been formulated in dialectical relations with the other units of the international system. In this sense, as Neumann (1996) already remarked, social units qualify and identify themselves (the 'Self') in function of and in relation to an internal and/or external 'Other'. Accordingly, Africa does not exist *per se*, but only in relation and in opposition to other regions and constructed identities, whether these be Europe, the Middle East, the Arab world, or others.

In order to break with a tradition of ethnocentrism, Global IR should be open to question ontological realism and embrace a dialectical approach to regional and Area Studies, one which sees particularism and specialisation as the result of interactions endowed with ontological precedence. Consequently, studying Africa would not only serve the 'decentralisation side' of the Global IR agenda; knowing Africa's history, exploring African politics, and listening to academic voices from the continent itself are all necessary strategies for understanding the origins, development, and functioning of the other regions of the world too, starting with the West. At the same time, investigating the African contribution to the definition, continual reconstruction, and contestation of the international system, as much as the development of 'Western' societies or the globalised chain of production, should all become central strategies for developing a discipline that is able to be effectively Global. Accordingly, by highlighting the existing interconnections and the process of co-constitution which characterises the relation between Africa and the rest of the international system, a Global discipline of IR is not only necessary for understanding international politics but, even more important, it is also emancipatory, as it defies reified categorisations, hierarchical assumptions, and implicit power projects.

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