The challenge of liminality for International Relations theory

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Introduction

The concept of liminality favours a broad interpretation, lending itself easily to disciplinary contexts outside of the original framework of cultural anthropology. Developed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner by exploring the rites of passage, liminality points to in-between situations and conditions where established structures are dislocated, hierarchies reversed, and traditional settings of authority possibly endangered.[1] The liminal state is a central phase in all social and cultural transitions as it marks the passage of the subject through 'a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state'. It is thus a realm of great ambiguity, since the 'liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial'.[2] Yet, as a threshold situation, liminality is also a vital moment of creativity, a potential platform for renewing the societal make-up.

There is substantial, yet unrecognised, potential for the application of liminality across a range of International Relations (IR) problems, from the study of the pre-eminent IR concepts – power, security, sovereignty – to the analysis of the agent-structure relationship, state formation, and recognition, war and political violence, structural transformation of the international system, extraordinary politics during the times of transition, and the constitution of political identities. Applied to IR

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[1] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1960); Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1969).

[2] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 80–1.

theory, liminality introduces an emancipatory research agenda, revealing the radical promise of political anthropology for the study of International Relations.

The logic of transfer for applying the concept of liminality not only on the study of individual and small-scale communal human experiences but also in the analysis of full-scale societal systems stems from the underlying rationale of political anthropology that does not play on the opposition between the individual subject and the state, nor separate the international from the domestic sphere, or the 'political' from the 'social'. Instead of assuming an isolated 'international political realm' with a functionally defined 'logic of anarchy', as has been the rule in many disciplinary traditions of IR, liminality questions the very meaning of such an opposition. Contra the hierarchical set-up of traditional levels of analysis in IR, liminality shares the assumption of political anthropology about the inherently political nature of 'man', connecting it to the deepest, unalienable element of personhood.[3] As 'being human' means the inseparable ties between the individual subjects and political communities, liminality as a fundamental feature of the human condition could be legitimately applied to the analysis of International Relations as well.[4]

Yet, the application of liminality in IR has been modest at best. This is the case, as is suggested below, because the concept of liminality is against the grain of many traditional models of thought within IR theory. Liminality creates fundamental uneasiness for traditional IR theory as it disrupts, by definition, essentialisations and foundational claims. Defying set-in categories, liminality disturbs the ingrained 'level of analysis' thinking in IR by emphasising the fundamental ontological interconnection between the 'high' and the 'low', the 'centre' and the 'periphery', the domestic and the international. It questions the urge for static crystallisations, typical to much of positivist-rationalist IR theory. Instead, it highlights the processual nature of all international life, taking a particular interest in the study of social change. It entails a cyclical, rather than progressive understanding of international politics, and a relational rather than absolute conception of power. Or as Turner put it, liminality implies that 'the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low'.[5]

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[3] Arpád Szakolczai, 'What Kind of Political Anthropology? An external insider view', *International Political Anthropology,* 1:2 (2008), p. 280.

[4] For the application of the notion of liminality to the study of liminal experiences of societies writ large, see Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, 'The Order-maintaining and Order-transforming Dimensions of Culture', in S. N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Power, Trust, and Meaning: Essays in Sociological Theory and Analysis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995); Arpád Szakolczai, *Reflexive Historical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2000), *The Genesis of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), and *Sociology, Religion and Grace. A quest for the Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 2008); Harald Wydra, *Continuities in Poland's Permanent Transition* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & London: Macmillan, 2000); Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). In IR, the concept of liminality has been put to use in different empirical contexts by Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: 'The East' in European Identity Formation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Bahar Rumelili, 'Liminality and Perpetuation of Conflicts: Turkish-Greek Relations in the Context of Community-Building by the EU', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9:2 (2003), pp. 213–48; Merje Kuus, *Geopolitics Reframed: Security and Identity in Europe's Eastern Enlargement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Maria Mälksoo, *The Politics of Becoming European: A Study of Polish and Baltic Post-Cold War Security Imaginaries* (New York & London: Routledge, 2010), 'Liminality and Contested Europeanness: Conflicting Memory Politics in the Baltic Space', in Piret Ehin and Eiki Berg (eds), *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations in the Context of European Integration* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 65–83.

[5] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 83.

Resisting binary opposition, liminality allows for the extended conceptualisation of a political subject (that is, self-liminal-other) which has fundamental implications for the traditional categorisation of actors (that is, state and non-state) in international relations in general as well as for the dynamics of the politics of belonging, becoming, and recognition in Europe and elsewhere in particular. Based on the premise that without understanding what is happening at the limit, we are unlikely to grasp the workings of the core,[6] liminality takes an active interest in the boundary zones and peripheries (traditionally conceived) rather than the established centres of international politics. Liminality respects the fundamental polyvocality of the world, resisting instinctively the attempts to overtly unify political processes and subjects by forging them into a hierarchical order. As such, it also has implications for the normative agenda within IR theory. Last not least, the concept of liminality enables IR as a discipline to seek active intellectual exchange and build mutually beneficial channels for the transfer of knowledge with Postcolonial Studies, Cultural Theory, International Political Theory, Semiotics, and Critical Geopolitics, which have appropriated the akin notions of hybridity, interstitiality, creolisation, marginalisation, and carnivalisation.[7] Liminality could become the 'bridge concept' along which to deepen the interdisciplinary theoretical dialogue between these fields.

Nonetheless, in spite of the interdisciplinary origins and the relational bend of its title, the discipline of IR has traditionally hardly focused on what falls between neat clean-cut categories, concentrating on the construction of rigid formal dichotomies instead. This is particularly striking considering that most of international politics happens precisely *in between* different political subjects that are themselves inevitably 'happening' as a result of multiple relational links to others. Apropos, *betwixt and between* could serve as a slogan for IR as a field of thought and practice between scholarly and practical knowledge in general. That is, if we subscribe to the argument of all political concepts inhabiting a liminal space between theory and practice. It is inherently difficult to suspend essentially political concepts utterly from politics and to distil them into perennial categories, as has, however, been the urge of IR theorising more often than not. Epistemologically and methodologically, we should rather recognise the intrinsic *in-betweenness* of political categories (such as 'security' as an essentially contested concept between theory and policy), and consequently engage the contradictions and normative implications of the contextual definitions of these notions.[8] The curious absence of liminality from most theoretical elaborations of IR demonstrates in no less curious way the limits of the contemporary political imagination.

This article seeks to rectify the situation by building a concise case for serious engagement with liminality in IR theory. The argument is advanced in four sections. After taking stock of the general implications of engaging liminality in IR theorising, the discussion moves to explicate the value added of liminality against the backdrop of similar claims raised by scholars writing from the critical tradition in IR. The structure-generating potential of liminal conditions in international politics and the

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6 In addition to many post-structuralists in IR, the significance of boundary maintenance in the development of political distinctiveness has been vividly demonstrated by anthropologist Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969).
7 Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968).
8 Felix Ciută, 'Security and the Problem of Context. A Hermeneutical Critique of Securitisation Theory', *Review of International Studies*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 301–26.

analytical utility of liminality for studying war is sketched out next. The article concludes with reflections on the normative ramifications of embedding liminality deeper in IR theorising.

Implications of engaging liminality in IR theory

Liminality, as applied to IR theory has two major consequences for the traditional ontology and epistemology of international politics. First, it follows that, what should be central to the investigation of the workings of world politics are not prefixed categories at clearly separable levels of analysis (state, international system/society) and their deterministic interaction, but rather their complex emergence, factual and discursive, via the socialisation to (and occasional resistance against) the historically embedded rules and structural contexts.[9] The ontological make-up of global political reality is consequently understood as constituted of multiple 'products-in-process', as entities neither here nor there but always as becoming different, without any teleological implications entailed.[10] That is, liminality does not share an idea of history underlined by the belief in progress.[11]

Secondly, rejecting the attempts to objectify, reify, and temporally fix the multiple states of being, the focus of inquiry should rather be on the genealogical exploration of the processes of becoming, and the inter-societal dimension of social change. Against the IR's intrinsic fetish of structure, liminality emphasises the historical evolution of the modern international system as well as of the concepts used for describing its operation.[12] The emphasis on processuality, relationality, and differentiation, and the rejection of essentialisation, sets liminality sharply in opposition to not only positivist/rationalist IR, but also to a lot of conventional constructivist and Marxist approaches to the study of world politics. Liminality offers a fundamental critique of the conventional onto-spatial imagination of IR with its traditional focus on policing the 'sensible boundaries' of statehood, sovereignty, international system, identity, and security.[13] Instead, it reveals their contested history, recognising the inevitable intertwining of logical classifications and hierarchies to social and political ones.[14]

While mainstream IR theory from classical realists to contemporary neo-liberals has sought universal laws of international politics, liminality seeks to capture the particular, contingent, and idiosyncratic, always aiming at a sensitive grasp of the context. True, liminality also draws on universals (that is, the ubiquitous rites of

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9 Cf. Milja Kurki, *Causation in International Relations: Reclaiming Causal Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 245–88.

10 Cf. Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 7; James Der Derian, 'Virtuous war/virtual theory', *Critical Practices in International Theory: Selected Essays* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 254.

11 Cf. Walter Benjamin's work on passages and his idea of non-linear time in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Belknap Press, 1999).

12 Cf. R. B. J. Walker, 'History and Structure in the Theory of International Relations', in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & London: Palgrave, 2001[1989]), pp. 321–3.

13 Wanda Vrasti, 'The Strange Case of Ethnography and International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 37:2 (2008), p. 300.

14 See further Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, trans. Rodney Needham (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963).

passage) but these are based on observation of human experience, not on the rationalisations of detached analysts that construct abstract notions of universality. Liminality is an intellectual manifestation of an attempt to transform the structuralist understanding of the world into a vital field of immanence where there is no 'outside',[15] but rather a continuous flow between different forms and ways of being. Intriguingly, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, the notion of the 'outside' is expressed in many European languages by a word that literally means 'at the door' or 'at the threshold'. The *outside* is accordingly not another space residing beyond a determinate space, but rather a passage, or the exteriority that gives it access.[16] The standard topographical division of IR between what is happening inside and what outside of the sovereign state thus loses its argumentative purchasing power in the light of the distinctively *in-between* quality of liminality.

To accept liminality as a fundamental feature of political subjectivity in International Relations constitutes a radical move away from an urge for concrete classifications which seek to control the subject by the very 'attack' of naming it in a particular way. All classifications, including the distinction between the inside and outside of the sovereign state, nurture the hope of successful management of a situation, as if the inability to classify would signify an open recognition of humans' fundamental helplessness in the face of the world.[17] The metaphysics of modern security (or rather the lack thereof) demonstrates the growing inability of states to neatly organise their safety and well-being into distinct spheres of *internal* and *external* security with the traditional instruments of 'national security'. It is as if the whole phenomenon of security has become liminal, quite alike the Möbius ribbon, continually on the threshold of either one state or the other, and the traditional topology of security thus eroded along with the distinction between the local, national, and international.[18] Contra IR's penchant for searching ontological safety in the certainty of timeless categories, liminality recognises the discontinuities and ruptures in world politics as the standard rather than exception. Recognising the centrality of liminality as a fact of international political life implies a concurrent recognition of our exposure to the open and the *de facto* acknowledgement of the inevitable chaos of a world without lines.[19]

What is then the value added of liminality considering that similar claims have been raised before by scholars writing from the critical tradition in IR without making explicit use of the notion? In my reading, there is no other social scientific concept that draws better home the old truth of the connection between the ways we look and the things we thus see. Liminality illuminates the flow between different states and forms of being and thus helps us to reimagine the ways we think about and relate to the international political reality. It calls for the acceptance of disorder along with the fact that there are limits to what we can possibly know, as in liminality

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[15] Cf. Antonio Negri, 'Giorgio Agamben: The Discreet Taste of the Dialectic', in Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (eds), *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 109–15.

[16] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community,* trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis & London: The University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 67–8.

[17] Cf. Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity* (New York: Anchor, 1970), pp. 197–8.

[18] Didier Bigo, 'Internal and External Security(ies): The Möbius Ribbon', in Mathias Albert, David Jacobson, and Yosef Lapid (eds), *Identities, Borders, Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 115.

[19] Cf. Jenny Edkins, 'Whatever Politics', in Calarco and DeCaroli, *Giorgio Agamben*, pp. 90–1.

the outcome is never certain. Liminality allows for the deeper understanding of what happens during the 'constitutive' or 'axial' moments in politics, national and international, and enables the specification of the effects of these critical experiences. It embraces both a spatial and temporal dynamic of international life, and captures the ultimate unresolvability of the agent-structure problem in International Relations. While post-structuralists have long argued for the relational understanding of identity and its complexity beyond a simple Self-Other dichotomy, they have yet to grasp the potential of liminality in explaining the 'problem of difference' in the construction of identities and the related processes of securitisation.[20]

There are a number of distinctly liminal states cropping up in the realm of international politics worth further exploration. These include the ritual liminality of the processes of political transition; suspended, or even permanent liminality as emerging from the ordeal of a prolonged state of political ambiguity; and physical liminality of political subjects as an experience of living on the border. Understanding societal reactions to liminal experiences, or the ways political communities are shaped by liminality allows for further insights into the foregrounding of agency against set-in structures. Since classical anthropological works studied liminality from both a chronological and a spatial angle, IR could equally address the possible uses of the notion as a temporal and a spatial category, as well as a characteristic experience accompanying the transformative situations and transitions in international politics. These transitions can be sudden, such as is the case with riots and revolutions, or prolonged, as in case of wars, or states of enduring political instability.

Liminality helps to illuminate and understand multiple practices of global politics, from the study of political dissidents, participants of social movements, refugees,[21] stateless people, ethnic or socio-political minorities, and (illegal) immigrants to the analysis of states and spaces of exception in the contemporary juridical-political order of world politics.[22] Examples include the analysis of power, violence, and resistance in the context of the long 'War on Terror', practices of security-political global governmentality, and acts of commemorative politics as expressions of temporal liminality.[23] The recent burst of interest among critical IR scholars towards Giorgio Agamben's ideas of bare life, sovereign power, and the state of exception as the biopolitical paradigm of contemporary international politics is yet to make an imaginative leap connecting these notions to the concept liminality. Just as the liminal state proper, the state of exception, as described by Agamben, is a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all previous determinations and distinctions are deactivated.[24] Periods of broad-sweeping anomie and crisis in international relations

[20] Cf. Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006); Bahar Rumelili, 'Liminal Identities and Processes of Domestication and Subversion in International Relations', in this *RIS* Forum.
[21] Cf. Richard Ned Lebow, 'German Jews and American Realism', *Constellations* (forthcoming), offering a captivating account of the initial psychological state of the German scholars who emigrated in the United States in the 1930s.
[22] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Jef Huysmans, 'International politics of exception: competing visions of international political order between law and politics', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 31:2 (2006), pp. 135–65.
[23] See, for instance, Jenny Edkins, 'The Rush to Memory and the Rhetoric of War', *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, 31:2 (2003), pp. 231–50.
[24] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 50.

are similarly marked by the collapse of normal social structures. In crisis, social functions and roles could break down to the point where culturally conditioned behaviour is completely overturned, and all previously relevant social relations and customs suspended and altered.[25]

In the course of a prolonged liminal experience, the liminal ordeal is likely to become incorporated into and reproduced in the 'permanent structure' of a society. Hence the idea of 'perpetual liminality' emerges as a condition characteristic to societies which have long lived 'on the limit' and thus proven to be quite unable to conclusively surpass the experience, in spite of the apparent entrance into the phase of societal reaggregation. This development could prove to be most intriguing from the perspective of IR, as it would enable a culturally deeper and thicker analysis of a whole gamut of societies and states going through a crisis or a dissolution and a collapse of the previous order. Recognising the radical propensities generated by the liminal experience and the potential of liminality to bring about historical change from a mere discontinuity to a revolutionary rupture touches the crux of the analytical utility of the notion for IR.

Naturally, there are also clear limits to and modalities of applying the concept of liminality to societies writ large. First, there is the peril of determinism – of making a hyperbole argument by claiming liminality to be found essentially everywhere. That would be a logical conclusion drawn from reading Agamben, for instance, who claims the state of exception having become the utmost biopolitical paradigm of contemporary international politics. Accordingly, a condition of permanent crisis emerges as the new normality of international political reality. It is as if liminality has turned in on itself and the threshold has consequently become the world – with movement backwards and forwards constrained.[26] Yet, failing to distinguish between modalities of liminality would totalise and trivialise the concept and thus diminish the analytical usefulness of liminality for IR. The acknowledgement that we live in times and a world of change, or subscribing to the recognition of modernity as itself 'permanently liminal',[27] should be accompanied by close-up contextual analyses of liminal moments and situations of different degrees and types in global politics.

Secondly, the limitations of stretching the notion from small-scale communities to societies writ large should be clearly acknowledged in each case. Unlike in the original anthropological usage of the term in the context of studying the Ndembu rites of transition, large-scale societal liminal conditions lack a clear time-span, obvious entrance and exit points and authoritative 'ceremony masters' that could guide the members of the society through the liminal ordeal.[28] Therein lies the danger of the conceptual inflation of liminality as a result of the overtly metaphoric usage of the term outside of its context of conception. As scholars and practitioners of IR, we should steer clear from simply piling up new empirical evidence from our field to extend the anthropological model without critical engagement with and substantive enhancement of the original idea of liminality.

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[25] Agamben, *State of Exception*, pp. 65–6.
[26] Richard Sakwa, 'Liminality and Postcommunism: The Twenty-First Century as the Subject of History', *International Political Anthropology*, 2:1 (2009), p. 122.
[27] Szakolczai, *Reflexive Historical Sociology*, pp. 215–27.
[28] Zygmunt Bauman, 'After the Patronage State. A Model in Search of Class Interests', in Christopher G. A. Bryant and Edmund Mokrzycki (eds), *The New Great Transformation? Change and Continuity in East-Central Europe* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 17.

Yet another point of contestation with applying liminality to full-scale societies that go through a dissolution or a collapse of the previous order is the question regarding the actual subject who experiences the liminal ordeal at a wider scale. Is it just the elites of a society, or more or less everybody – or is it really something that can only be determined *post hoc* by the analyst? Put differently, how should the connection between liminality and *Communitas* (that is, the community going through a liminal experience) be understood in larger political communities?[29] Why do some types of *Communitas* emerging from liminal moments turn out as aggressive, full of resentment and hatred, instead of bolstering positive solidarity among the group members, and increasing thus their potential for further political mobilisation?[30] And what if the ritual passages of whole-scale societies go wrong and produce effects of most undesirable kind – as happened infamously with the communist regimes of the twentieth century?[31] In order to elucidate these problems, the engagement with liminality has yet to be substantiated with empirical studies from different fields and theoretical traditions of IR. The 'Arab Spring' and the popular reactions to the debt crisis in Europe would be interesting examples to explore here. The articles of this Forum applying the notion to the cases of Romania and Turkey constitute a good start.

Liminality as an 'unstructured' origin of structure

Liminality is commonly regarded as the space of new political beginnings, a potential source of renewal for a community, or even a platform of large-scale societal change. Social and political thinkers have asked for the relationship between liminal experiences and the establishment of permanent structures, or the 'lasting effects' of answers produced in 'extraordinary moments', emphasising the extent to which 'structure' and 'order' are indeed always born in liminality.[32] Recognising the constitutive potential of liminal experiences for the crystallisation of certain ideas and practices, we should acknowledge the emergence of essentially new structure-like qualities in liminal periods.[33] While the playfulness of the period of liminality is inherently unstructured, it is nonetheless highly structuring at the same time. Liminality constitutes a formative experience for the subject, providing it with a new structure and a new set of rules. Once established, these rules will then glide back to the level of the taken-for-granted. Hence, if somewhat paradoxically in the light of the essentially unstructured nature of liminality, the liminal phase/experience/period

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[29] See Bjørn Thomassen, 'Uses and meanings of liminality', *International Political Anthropology*, 2:1 (2009), p. 21.

[30] This problem is further analysed in the context of the contemporary 'memory wars' between Russia and its former satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe in Maria Mälksoo, 'Nesting Orientalisms at War: World War II and the "Memory War" in Eastern Europe', in Tarak Barkawi and Keith Stanski (eds), *Orientalism and War* (New York: Hurst & CO., forthcoming 2012).

[31] Arpád Szakolczai has described the Soviet communism as a specific kind of permanent liminality, as under this regime 'the Second World War never ended'. Szakolczai, *Reflexive Historical Sociology*, p. 223.

[32] Thomassen, 'Uses and meanings of liminality'; Szakolczai, *Reflexive Historical Sociology*; Wydra, *Continuities in Poland's Permanent Transition*.

[33] Thomassen, 'Uses and meanings of liminality', p. 20.

could constitute the *origin* of the structure all the same.[34] It is nonetheless essential to avoid a common tendency to retrospectively depict social processes as something which result was inevitably 'known in advance', almost predetermined. As William Connolly reminds us, the politics of becoming is really quite indeterminate for the result that this process might lead to cannot be known in advance.[35] The recognition of the potential of liminality to create structure-like properties should not be mistaken for another claim of foundationalism.

The strength of liminality as the phase of pure possibility underscores the potential power of agency in the liminal process. Instead of seeing reality as largely 'given' – as is still the case with some more conventional veins of constructivism, not to mention the traditional positivist IR approaches – the recognition of liminality simultaneously means to acknowledge the power of agency to restructure the existing realities and create new ones. It is for their potentially unsettling power for existing certitudes, truths, and identities that liminal figures are generally perceived as both alluring and endangering by the insiders of a defined political community. Yet, there is also a positive, productive aspect of the situations of crisis and transition as the new setting emerging from these transitions can be better than the old order of things. Nonetheless, the prospect of the possible 'permanentisation' of liminality still emanates danger as it lacks the promise of reintegration that would re-establish the previous order. Therefore, permanent liminality writ large no longer permits novelty and encourages innovation, imposing rather formlessness and disorientation as a technique of governmentality. The permanent change is thus indeed there, but without qualitative transformation.[36]

Hence, it is of vital importance to pay close attention to how the liminal period is dealt with by societies experiencing a large-scale social drama, and how it is attempted to be brought to a conclusion. Who will be in charge for the 'routinisation' of the extraordinary situations? Who will become the 'carriers' of the new world-view that is eventually institutionalised?[37] These are vital sociological questions that should be kept in mind while applying the notion of liminality to the analysis of full-scale societal complexes and their interaction.

Standard structuralist approaches to the study of critical events tend to gloss over the fundamental ambiguity of liminal periods by reconstructing a historical path of such events, leading up to the previously known outcome. Michel Dobry has argued for the centrality of 'fluid conjunctures' in international politics instead, emphasising the importance of avoiding the illusion as if the outcomes of a fundamental social

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[34] Thomassen, 'Uses and meanings of liminality', pp. 20–3. Turner often pointed to liminality as an 'original state' of a kind, the formless reality out of which new forms emerge, the zone of new beginnings. The crux of the matter is touched upon in his famous essay 'Betwixt and Between' as follows: 'Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise'. See Victor W. Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*', *The Forest of Symbols* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987 [1967]), p. 97.

[35] Cf. William E. Connolly, 'Suffering, Justice, and the Politics of Becoming', in David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro (eds), *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[36] Sakwa, 'Liminality and Postcommunism', p. 122.

[37] Thomassen, 'Uses and meanings of liminality', p. 22.

experience summarise, mirror, or encompass the processes that produced them.[38] Arguably, the perspective that reconstructs the logic of events according to their outcomes quite simply refuses to accept that the unfolding of process can turn towards one outcome or another only *at the margin*. Following the logic that the outcome essentially ascribes its meaning (retroactively) to the event, this position cannot admit that 'tiny causes' can often result in 'great effects' or may even reverse 'structural trends'.[39] The contingency of the results of liminal processes, like large-scale crises, revolutions and wars, thus emerges as an important shared epistemological assumption behind the concept of liminality and post-structuralist approaches to the study of International Relations. Again, liminality recognises the freedom of agency: it emphasises the plasticity of 'structures', and their sensitivity to mobilisations, and to the tactics and moves of actors. By a beautiful analogy to the matter that can be found either as solid, gas, or liquid, Dobry calls attention to the fact that the so-called social 'structures' (or institutions and social relations more generally) need not necessarily be more 'solid' and 'stable' than matter. Rather, in spite of their occasional 'objectification' and institutionalisation, social structures and relations can equally experience transformations of their states and, therefore, effectively experience different states.[40]

In light of these elaborations, it is difficult but to agree with Arpád Szakolczai who claims the concept of liminality to be 'potentially one of the most general and useful terms of social science', comparable to the staples of IR, such as structure and order.[41]

War as a liminal situation *sui generis*

War is one of the generative diseases of world politics that the notion of liminality helps to understand. All wars are essentially liminal experiences, moments of radical contingency and uncertainty, accompanying the birth and demise of eras. Recognising war as a liminal experience helps to illuminate the constitutive function of war for politics and societies, its profoundly productive power for the structure and substance of the international system and its discontents.[42] As for liminality in general, 'the final element of war's ontology is its power to remake what is unmade'.[43] Conventional veins of social and political inquiry have understood war not as a generative force but rather as an interruption in the normal peacetime processes of society, bracketing it off the inevitable march towards liberal modernity through periodisation and separation. Conceiving war as a liminal situation *sui generis* helps to avoid the tendency of most IR theoretical traditions to reduce war to terms of analysis derived from peacetime society, to another social domain.[44] Instead,

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[38] See Michel Dobry, 'Critical Processes and Political Fluidity: a Theoretical Appraisal', *International Political Anthropology*, 2:1 (2009), pp. 74–7.

[39] Dobry, 'Critical Processes and Political Fluidity'.

[40] Ibid., pp. 80–1.

[41] Szakolczai, *Reflexive Historical Sociology*, p. 218.

[42] Cf. Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton, 'Powers of War: Fighting, Knowledge, and Critique', *International Political Sociology*, 5:2 (2011), pp. 126–43.

[43] Barkawi and Brighton, 'Powers of War', p. 140.

[44] Cf. Tarak Barkawi, 'On the limits of new foundations: a commentary on R. Harrison Wagner, *War and the State*', *International Theory*, 2:2 (2010), pp. 317–32.

understanding war through the lens of liminality underscores its unique nature among other social activities, 'its own character and logic that cannot be reduced to any ordinary social dynamic'.[45]

Just as liminality writ large, war is fundamentally a situation of uncertainty. War constitutes a central phase in the escalation of violence, and can shake the existing societal structures and international system to the backbone. The post-war process of reconstruction can, in turn, be conceived of as a rite of re-aggregation – of the beginning of coming to terms with the experience of a major collapse of the existing order, of healing wounds, and moving on.[46] Nonetheless, the road of transition from war to peace is hardly straightforward and fixed. The post-war phase is often marked by a prolonged state of juridical-political limbo (such as the case of Kosovo) that might result in *de facto* quasi-autonomous states (for example, Transnistria in Moldova) or the separatist regions recognised by some, but not most of the international community (for example, the dubious status of North Ossetia and Abkhazia after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008).

A remarkable account of war as a liminal experience of its own kind is provided by an American cultural historian Paul Fussell.[47] Besides the strikingly spatial liminal character of the First World War trench warfare, that is the distinct liminality of the No Man's Land, Fussell points to an interesting pattern in the war-fighting practice and thought-processes of the soldiers in the First World War. As there were three separate lines of trenches in the Great War – namely, front, support, and reserve, a battalion normally spent a third of its duty time in each, and the routine in each line was similar: the unit was divided into three groups, two of which standing down as the third kept alert. While universally applicable from artillery to submarines, the daily pattern of participating in such tripartite ways of dividing things for an extended period of time inevitably contributed to the tendency of seeing 'everything as divisible as threes'.[48] The magical threes of traditional myth and ritual further donated some of their meanings and implications to 'military threes'. As a result, the military triad took on a mythical or prophetic character, elevating the military action to the level of myth.[49] This is further supported by the essentially three-part conception of the military training process: first, preparation; then execution; and finally critique. War memoirs replicate this process accordingly, matching the war experience of moving between the line, battle, and recovery with the existential dimensions of quest, death, and rebirth.[50]

Being quite clearly distinguishable and therefore largely symmetrical to the tripartite structure of ritual processes, as described by anthropologists quoted above, these three zones of war were characteristic to the so-called traditional, or conventional, wars of the twentieth century. The Cold War with its recurring rupture points between war and peace, and modern asymmetrical and protracted conflicts, such as the current Western war in Afghanistan, are a vivid illustration of the idea of *permanent liminality* – a prolonged condition of being stuck in the *in-between* zone

[45] Martin Shaw, *Dialectics of War: An Essay in the Social Theory of Total War and Peace* (London: Pluto, 1988), p. 11.
[46] Cf. Szakolczai, *Reflexive Historical Sociology*, p. 223.
[47] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1975]).
[48] Ibid., p. 125.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., pp. 130–1.

of war and peace. For the Western soldiers fighting the Taliban and *al-Qaeda* – and perhaps equally so vice versa – the nature of contemporary conflict forces them to face the condition of ultimate, protracted liminality: they are living in the perpetual *potential war zone*, with the persisting tension that could burst into a life-endangering confrontation any given moment. Moreover, with the modern day terrorism, there are hardly any 'reserves' left in the traditional sense of the term, as any civilian could find herself at the hottest 'front' of the conflict if caught in the midst of an attack of a suicide bomber. Modern international conflict has turned the condition of perpetual liminality into a universal experience.

The cyber component of modern conflicts further illuminates the liminal nature of contemporary warfare. If we follow Turner in understanding liminality as essentially *becomingness*, we could regard the virtual space of waging war as liminal *par excellence*. Gilles Deleuze's notion of the virtual as 'pure becoming without being' which is 'always forthcoming an already past', but is never present or corporeal has a particular resonance here. The virtual is a liminal space that is constituted only by its state of becomingness; it is not an actual being or object to become. It exists as pure becoming that suspends both 'sequentiality and directionality', being a passage without a concrete line of passage.[51] Standard IR approaches, as Der Derian's work has evocatively shown, are not equipped to explore the 'interzone of the virtual, where simulacra reverse causality, being is simultaneously here and there, and identity is deterritorialised by interconnectivity'.[52] In this context, it is hardly surprising that modern security organisations, like NATO, are struggling so hard with trying to accommodate cyber attacks within the traditional framework of understanding an 'armed attack', and determining whether or not this type of warfare could also invoke the collective defence provision of the Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty with the legitimate case for the use of force. Cyber warfare is by definition a liminal activity: it is difficult to track it down; there are no clear entrance or exit points, and last not least, it may be a transition, or an accompanying phase, to full standard warfare.

Regardless of the 'new' or 'old' nature of contemporary wars, the analytical purchasing power of the concept of liminality is obvious for the re-interpretation of major crises, such as political revolutions, or studying the impact of wars on the rise of the modern world by considering its institutional structure as being essentially produced by liminal crises.[53]

The return of play to the scholarship and practice of international politics

Raising liminality's status as an epistemological category for the study of international politics constitutes a critical move that has, not in the last order, fundamental implications for responsible scholarship and ethical practice of international relations. The ubiquity of liminal situations and phenomena in international politics, as this article has aimed to illuminate, calls for the recognition, rather than negation and suppression, of ambivalence as a constant fluctuation between different ways of

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[51] Slavoj Žižek, 'The Reality of the Virtual', *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 9–10.
[52] Der Derian, 'Virtuous war/virtual theory', p. 255.
[53] Cf. Szakolczai, 'What Kind of Political Anthropology?', p. 278.

being. The concept of liminality acknowledges the complexity of ambivalent situations, allowing for an improved analysis of the modalities of various kinds of conflicts by genealogically tracing their conditions of emergence. As liminality embraces difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy, it has clear normative appeal for transcending the 'problem of difference' that is allegedly pervading international society as a tendency to interpret difference as inferiority, destining it thereby to eradication.[54]

It would only be empirically relevant and normatively rewarding to view international politics as a 'giant fugue of interweaving themes and voices, of subject and reply'.[55] The notion of liminality calls for the recognition of an entire constellation of different 'voices' of international political reality, and for reading them contrapuntally, as always engaging with each other. As outlined by Edward Said, the contrapuntal approach envisions cultures not as pure, distinct, monolithic entities, but as largely overlapping and interdependent, in which the patterns of power and domination are always accompanied by resistance and subversion, thus constituting a flow of points and counterpoints.[56] In a similar spirit, world politics could be regarded as made of processes and crossings rather than clearly distinguishable blocs; as a combination of fragile and mixed identities, of different figures inhabiting different edges of the international reality, of ambiguities, frustrations, and uncertainties. Instead of attempting to draw rigid boundaries (and be thus destined to continually police them) in order to represent international reality as constituted of distinct entities and structures, we would benefit epistemologically by recognising the pervasiveness of liminality in international political life.

Bringing liminality to the conceptual centre of IR strongly resonates with Naeem Inayatullah's and David Blaney's suggestion to revision and redesign IR as a theory of *intercultural relations*, or the study of differences.[57] The inability of traditional IR to make a unique contribution to social theory has arguably stemmed from its persistent avoidance and denial of the problem of how to handle cultural difference. Accordingly, the traditional IR theory shares the spirit of modernisation theory that attempts to establish human commonality, or universality, by employing two binaries: the spatial demarcation of inside/outside and a developmental sequence from tradition to modernity.[58] The potentiality that liminality is loaded with, however, is a powerful celebration of the claim that cultural difference could also offer opportunities, not merely problems. Conceiving human existence first as potentiality, or possibility, opens up the space of extended movement for subaltern agencies, recognising their transformative capacity. Furthermore, a dialogue between those beholding different visions and experiences of the world can catalyse self-reflection amongst the bold and powerful of this world as well, leading them to introspect the 'other' within 'themselves'.[59] Being more sensitive to the numerous manifestations of liminality in international politics thus also enables us to become more aware of our own selves, and our own frames of thinking and interpretation. While in music the

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[54] Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006).

[55] Cf. Colin Symes, 'The Paradox of the Canon: Edward W. Said and Musical Transgression', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 27:3 (2006).

[56] Ibid.

[57] Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, p. 17.

[58] Ibid., pp. 94–7.

[59] Ibid., p. 158.

counterpoint marks a supplementary melody as distinct from the main theme, applying a contrapuntal approach in the scholarship of IR would essentially mean writing against the mainstream.

The concept of liminality invites the IR scholars and practitioners to take the 'sociological turn' in the study of international politics a step further. Taking a cue from Raymond Aron's typology of scientific activities, it would hardly be an overstatement to argue that the 'science of IR' has so far been too preoccupied with finding general rules and regularities in international systemic functioning (that is, the 'philosophy' of International Relations), not paying nearly enough attention to the social context of the practice of politics, or the sociology of it.[60] Bringing liminality to the conceptual centre of the discipline could potentially turn out to be an empowering move for exploring the previously unsought avenues of thought as the study of liminal conditions in international politics brings the examination of *potentiality* to the fore of the study of international *actuality*.[61]

The fact that liminality is full of potency and potentiality, as well as creativity, experiment and play, has major implications for the scholarship and practice of IR. It calls for the polyvocality of both the politics and scholarship of International Relations, for indeed:

There may be a play of ideas, a play of words, a play of symbols, a play of metaphors. In it, play's the thing. Liminality is not confined in its expression to ritual and the performative arts. Scientific hypotheses and experiments and philosophical speculation are also forms of play, though their rules and controls are more rigorous and their relation to mundane 'indicative' reality more pointed than those of genres which proliferate in fantasy. One might say, without too much exaggeration, that liminal phenomena are at the level of culture what variability is at the level of nature.[62]

A normatively exemplary IR scholarship could hence function as a special kind of a liminal-like, or liminoid genre with an aim to expose the injustices, inefficiencies, immoralities, and alienations that are generated by mainstream modern economic and political structures, processes and ways of thinking about them.[63] As a discipline, IR has an innate potential to become a critical practice of a very special kind, always aiming to provide clear-headed and engaged analysis of the established order of international politics.

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[60] Cf. Gergely Romsics, 'The legacy of classical realism and the "ethical turn"', *Foreign Policy Review*, 4 (2007), p. 102.
[61] Cf. Edkins, 'Whatever Politics', p. 77.
[62] Victor W. Turner, 'Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6:4 (1979), p. 466.
[63] Ibid., p. 494.