

Sovereign equality as misrecognition

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Abstract

This article makes two contributions. First, I argue that contrary to what was often assumed in the recognition literature, social hierarchies (as in the Hegelian master–slave dynamic) are very stable. Though social hierarchies are relationships of misrecognition, they nevertheless allow for the simulation of recognition for ‘the master’, and also trap ‘the slave’ in that role through stigmatisation. Second, I make a historical argument about the state and its role in recognition struggles. The modern state is relatively unique (historically speaking) in being tasked with solving the recognition problems of its citizens. At the same time, the modern state has to derive its own sovereignty from the recognition of those same citizens. There is an inherent tension between these two facts, which forces the modern state to turn increasingly outward for its own recognition. This is why ‘the master–slave dynamic’ was increasingly projected onto the international stage from nineteenth century onwards (along with the diffusion of the modern state model). As a result, international recognition came to play an even larger role in state sovereignty than domestic recognition (in contrast to common historical practice). This also explains how and why social hierarchies came to dominate international politics around the same time as the norm of sovereign equality.

Keywords: Recognition; Sovereignty; History; Hierarchy

Introduction

Though it is traditional to assume that it has its origins in the seventeenth century, the modern international system has its real roots in the long nineteenth century.¹ Economic and social hierarchies created by nineteenth-century conditions have proven surprisingly durable.² Even as great powers have changed, the ‘West’ – elevated to an undeniable position of material power *vis-à-vis* the non-West in the nineteenth century – has remained at the political, economic, and social core of the modern system throughout the twentieth century, if not into the twenty-first. This is not to say that there have been no changes in the system since then: the way hierarchies manifest in the international system has varied considerably.³ In the nineteenth century, political, economic, and social hierarchies were openly

¹See, for example, Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), among others.

²See, for example, Buzan and Lawson, *Global Transformation*; John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); John M. Hobson and J. C. Sharman, ‘The enduring place of hierarchy in world politics: Tracing the social logics of hierarchy and political change’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:1 (2005), pp. 63–98; Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³See, for example, the discussions in Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit (eds), *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and Ayşe Zarakol (ed.), *Hierarchies in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

acknowledged, morally defended, and explicitly codified into legal arrangements and treaties, underwritten by the so-called 'Standard of Civilisation', which divided the world into 'civilised', 'barbarous', and 'savage' spheres, with corresponding degrees of legal 'recognition' from European states, ranging from full to none.⁴ Some of these arrangements persisted into the twentieth century, sometimes in modified form as in the League of Nations mandate system,⁵ but one of the more radical developments of the twentieth century was the spread and legal acknowledgement of notions such as self-determination and sovereign equality, which undercut the legitimacy of such explicitly hierarchical legal arrangements within the international system.⁶ Territories and peoples previously deprived of legal recognition altogether or were given only partial legal recognition – because they were considered to be savage or barbarous – were gradually (and after much bloodshed) recognised in the twentieth century as having their own sovereign states. Now international law⁷ operates on the principle that 'all sovereign states are equal'.⁸

As far as much of the International Relations (IR) literature is concerned, this is where the discipline's concern with the *history* of recognition ends. Until recently,⁹ the concept of recognition was not *usually* probed in traditional IR beyond an absence/presence dimension in the narrow legal sense.¹⁰ A state is either recognised as sovereign or it is not. If it is recognised, one may further ask by whom (*de facto* or *de jure*), but if a state ticks both boxes, there is nothing more to empirically probe from a 'recognition' angle. On the other hand, there has also developed in IR a parallel scholarship that has acknowledged (in a more critical vein) that recognition could be understood much more broadly, as a vital human need to be known, to be affirmed, to be recognised for who we are. Works in IR that have drawn attention to status-seeking, social stratification, or practices of exclusion usually operate, at least implicitly, with this second understanding of recognition,¹¹ which at first glance seems to have little to do with the legal understanding of recognition.

⁴See, for example, Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilization' in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Mark B. Salter, *Barbarians & Civilization in International Relations* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2004); Zarakol, *After Defeat*; Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society: East Asia's Encounter with the European International Society* (London: Routledge, 2009); Ann Towns, *Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵See, for example, Antony Anghie, 'Colonialism and the birth of international institutions: Sovereignty, economy, and the mandate system of the League of Nations', *NYU Journal of International Law and Politics*, 34 (2002), pp. 513–633.

⁶See, for example, Christian Reus-Smit, *Individual Rights and the Making of the International System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷For an overview of the development of the concept of recognition in international law, see Martin Clark, 'A conceptual history of recognition in British international legal thought', *The British Yearbook of International Law* (2018), available at: doi: 10.1093/bybil/bry003

⁸Anghie, 'Colonialism', p. 513. The formulation Anghie quotes is from Lassa Oppenheim, *International Law: A Treatise* (4th edn, Sir Arnold D. McNair ed., 1928): 'The equality before International Law of all member-states of the Family of Nations is an invariable quality derived from their International Personality.' Let's note that Oppenheim's *International Law* was first published in 1905. We will return to this history in the third section.

⁹This is starting to change: see, for example, Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Alexei Tsinovoi, 'International misrecognition: the politics of humour and national identity in Israel's public diplomacy', *European Journal of International Relations*, Online First (2018), pp. 1–27, available at: doi: 10.1177/1354066117745365; Hans Agne, Jens Bartelson, Eva Erman, Thomas Lindemann, Benjamin Herborth, Oliver Kessler, Christine Chwaszcza, Mikulas Fabry, and Stephen D. Krasner, 'Symposium: the politics of international recognition', *International Theory*, 5:1 (2013), pp. 94–107; Jens Bartelson, 'Three concepts of recognition', *International Theory*, 5:1 (2013), pp. 107–29; Thomas Lindemann, 'The case for an empirical and social-psychological study of recognition in international relations', *International Theory*, 5:1 (2013), pp. 473–92; Anthony Burns and Simon Thompson (eds), *Global Justice and the Politics of Recognition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013); Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar (eds), *The International Politics of Recognition* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2014).

¹⁰IR builds on the field of international law in this particular respect. See Anghie, 'Colonialism', p. 514 and Clark, 'Conceptual history' for an overview of how international law understands sovereign equality. See also Stephen D. Krasner, 'Rethinking the sovereign state model', *Review of International Studies*, 27:5 (2001), pp. 17–42.

¹¹See, for example, Reus-Smit, *Individual Rights*; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Richard Ned Lebow, *Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Gerry

Put another way, IR has understood the concept of recognition in two different ways, with obvious implications for how it is problematised and studied. Let's call the first understanding *legal recognition* and the second *existential recognition*.¹² In the first, thin, legal sense, recognition is mostly a problem only for those groups that seek statehood but have not yet achieved it. Gaining legal sovereignty solves recognition problems thus understood. In the second, thick, existential sense, all actors, including sovereign states, are seen to be motivated by their aspirations for recognition. This literature does not view legal sovereignty as meeting the innate need for recognition; rather, legal recognition of sovereignty factors at best as a prerequisite for agency. In most¹³ of these studies, actors that seek recognition in the broad sense are states already recognised as sovereign in the narrow sense.¹⁴ Yet this literature does not explain why states in particular are motivated by recognition in the first place¹⁵ and why that aspiration is not met with achievement of legal equal recognition, as both traditional IR (and the neo-Hegelian literature¹⁶ on the domestic politics of recognition) largely assumes. What is not well scrutinised, in other words, is the relationship between the two sides of recognition in international relations, that is, narrow-broad; thin-thick; legal-existential. Because recognition is understood so differently in these two strands of the literature, it may be assumed at first glance that mechanisms for legal recognition and existential recognition operate entirely autonomously from each other, and the seeming link between the two sides of recognition is merely a semantic confusion. This assumption would be misplaced. In this article, I argue that sovereign equality (legal recognition) itself is actually a type of misrecognition, if recognition is more broadly understood (as existential recognition).

In line with the rest of this Special Issue, I understand 'misrecognition' as 'the structural impossibility of actors being recognised in the ways they want to be'.¹⁷ I agree with the authors of the introduction that the Hegelian figuration is a basic archetype to which most – if not all – hierarchical social relationships can be productively reduced. However, in that reduction lurks also the danger of flattening the differences between different types of hierarchies and losing a degree of analytical purchase. It is important, therefore, to establish how (and to what extent)

Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States: Unequal Sovereigns in the International Legal Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Erik Ringmar, 'Recognition and the origins of international society', *Global Discourse*, 4:4 (2014), pp. 446–58; Erik Ringmar, 'The recognition game: Soviet Russia against the West', *Cooperation & Conflict*, 37:2 (2002), pp. 115–36; Reinhard Wolf, 'Respect and disrespect in international politics: the significance of status recognition', *International Theory*, 3:1 (2011), pp. 105–42; Jorg Friedrichs, 'An intercultural theory of international relations: How self-worth underlies politics among nations', *International Theory*, 8:1 (2016), pp. 63–96; Zarakol, *After Defeat*; Rebecca Adler-Nissen, *Opting Out of the European Union: Diplomacy, Sovereignty and European Integration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹²On this point, see also Lisa Strömbom, 'Thick recognition: Advancing theory on identity change in intractable conflicts', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:1 (2014), pp. 168–91.

¹³The exception are studies whose focus is on individual actors seeking recognition (even if they are agents of states). See, for example, Adler-Nissen, *Opting Out*; Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁴Though there is an overlap in some areas, note that the distinction between legal recognition and existential recognition does not map onto the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* sovereignty. Existential recognition is still outward looking.

¹⁵The general assumption is one of transferability from individual motivations to corporate ones. This may be true at times, but it does not account for historical polities that did not exhibit this pattern. In the second and third sections of this article I will instead make a historical argument about the recognition seeking behaviour of modern states.

¹⁶See, for example, Charles Taylor, 'Politics of recognition', *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); Robert Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). For an extension of Honneth's argument to IR, see Axel Honneth, 'Recognition between states: On the moral substrate of international relations', in Erik Ringmar and Thomas Lindemann (eds), *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), pp. 53–8.

¹⁷Charlotte Epstein, Thomas Lindemann, and Ole Jacob Sending, 'Frustrated sovereigns: the agency that makes the world go around', *Review of International Studies*, 44:5 (2018), introduction to the Special Issue. See also, Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, 'International misrecognition'.

various hierarchical forms – for example, domestic vs international – conform to or deviate from the basic Hegelian archetype.

Understood from this perspective, then, it could be argued that legal sovereign equality is not just an ordinary case of misrecognition (as all attempts at recognition are), but something even more than that. Not only has the dissemination of the sovereign equality norm failed to solve recognition problems in the broad sense, it has helped perpetuate them and may in fact be instrumental to their perpetuation. This critique has already been levelled at champions of equal legal recognition norms within the domestic sphere,¹⁸ but despite the obvious parallels between the notions of individual rights (or equal citizenship) and sovereign rights (or sovereign equality), the relationship of legal sovereign recognition to problems of international misrecognition in the broad sense has not been explored. Therefore, this article is concerned with delineating the reasons why (legal) sovereign recognition produces and reproduces (existential) misrecognition in the international system.

This article proceeds in three sections. First, building on Patchen Markell's work in the political theory of recognition,¹⁹ I advance a particular reading of the Hegelian master–slave recognition dynamic that draws attention to the durability of such hierarchical arrangements. This reading rejects the notion that recognition is an achievable goal on any level of politics, domestic or international, either through the master–slave dynamic or by 'the master' extending equal recognition to 'the slave'. What I am especially interested in, however, is in explaining why master–slave hierarchies persist despite their inherent inability to provide the recognition that the actors sought in the first place. I argue that the master–slave dynamic is durable because it allows for the master to simulate sovereignty, or to have the image of sovereignty, even as they fail to achieve the real thing.²⁰ This is what turns the momentary struggle for recognition into a social structure of domination in which roles are internalised and therefore seen as natural by both sides of the relationship. This is the first main contribution of this article.

In the second section, I consider the role the modern state plays in the pursuit of sovereignty. In order to understand how the master–slave recognition dynamic translates into international relations and how it interacts with the aforementioned categories of narrow (legal) and broad (existential) pursuit of recognition in world politics, we must first locate the state properly in the recognition field. I argue in this section that the *modern* state, unusually for polities across history, has the dual task of providing sovereignty *for* its citizens while also being sovereign *over* its citizens. In other words, the modern state has to help individuals feel recognised, that is, as sovereign, in the world, while it also itself demands to be recognised as sovereign over individuals. The inherent unachievability of these dual tasks in a universe solely of their own – that is, the state-citizen relationship – is what projects the master–slave dynamic to the international stage.

The third section then argues that the nearly simultaneous emergence of the nation-state form and preoccupation with external recognition of sovereignty is not a coincidence, and that there is something very *modern* also about the internationalisation of the 'politics of recognition'. Because the modern state is tasked with solving the recognition problem of its citizens by being sovereign for all of them, but cannot derive that power just from the recognition of the same citizens whose recognition problems the state is tasked with solving, the modern state's pursuit of recognition increasingly turns to the external world after the nineteenth century. This is the

¹⁸Most notably in Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Markell is criticising Charles Taylor's approach to recognition and multiculturalism, as will be discussed later. See also Epstein, Lindemann, and Sending, 'Frustrated sovereigns'.

¹⁹Markell, *Bound*.

²⁰This reading is also very much inspired by Markell's reading of Hegel. Unlike some of the other contributions to this volume (to be replaced by actual citations), I do not adopt a Lacanian or psychoanalytic approach. For ways of reconciling the two, see Epstein, Lindemann, and Sending, 'Frustrated sovereigns' or Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, 'International misrecognition'.

second main contribution. I conclude with a discussion of how the sovereign equality norm has trapped all international actors in a futile ‘politics of recognition’ in the twentieth century and speculate briefly as to whether a different kind of politics is possible in the twenty-first century.

I. Why the ‘struggle for recognition’?²¹

The desire for recognition is a desire for sovereignty, understood as an affirmation of the self: ‘the condition of being an independent, self-determining agent’, with ‘something like full ownership of one’s life and doings’.²² In other words, the search for recognition is an extension of our desire for to be a ‘somebody’, a someone who can impose their will on the world, someone who is free.²³ In the beginning (according to Hegel), ‘self-consciousness believes itself to be independent, but finds this claim threatened by the sheer fact of its corporeality, which renders it subject to material forces and bodily needs beyond its control’.²⁴ This leads to a desire²⁵ to consume (or dominate) material things in order to confirm one’s freedom from them. Satisfying material desires is insufficient evidence of one’s sovereignty, however; by consuming an object, we show that we are more powerful than the object, but as soon as the moment of consumption is over, we need to consume more, which reminds us of our own corporeality. Therefore, material objects are not enough to give an agent the confirmation they seek of their sovereignty: ‘If an external object is to provide more than fleeting self-certainty, it must somehow both be negated in its independence and yet continue to exist ... And the only sort of thing which can “abdicate” its own claims to independence in this way is ... another self-consciousness.’²⁶ Therefore, according to Hegel, it is the self’s inability to secure certainty of its independent existence through satisfaction of material desires that leads it to a *struggle* for recognition. We want more than to exist as a physical being in the material world: we want our value, our awareness of ourselves, to be affirmed by another who is capable of doing so.

Because each actor has the same goal to confirm their own sovereignty, the struggle for recognition is mutually exclusive, casting doubt on independence claims of both sides.²⁷ Thus, the quest for recognition takes the form of a ‘life-and-death struggle’,²⁸ which ends with either the death or surrender of one side. The defeated party affirms the sovereignty of the victor by recognising them as the master; the vanquished becomes the slave. What this means, however, is that the master is recognised by someone who is not quite an agent himself: ‘What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. He is, therefore, not certain of being-for-self as the truth of himself.’²⁹ Thus this relationship also fails to acquire for the actor what it sought in the first place: recognition from the slave is unfulfilling because it comes from someone who is not recognised as an equal or quite as human. The *asymmetry* of the master–slave relationship is thus a problem.³⁰

²¹From this point on in this article, the term recognition should be understood broadly and not in the narrow, legal sense, unless otherwise specified.

²²Markell, *Bound*, p. 11.

²³In the *Philosophy of Right*, p. 4, Hegel defines the essence of human spirit as freedom, but he has a particular understanding of what freedom means, which he provides on p. 23: ‘Only in this freedom is the will completely *with itself* [*bei sich*], because it has reference to nothing but itself, so that every relationship of *dependence* on something other than itself is thereby eliminated.’ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁴Markell, *Bound*, p. 104. See also Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 104–10.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 104–05.

²⁸Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 114; see also Alexandre Kojève, ‘In place of an introduction’, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols jr (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 7–15.

²⁹Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 117.

³⁰*Ibid.* See also Markell, *Bound*, p. 106.

Many have read Hegel as thus advocating 'for the master to *complete* the exchange by reciprocally recognizing the independence of the slave, which would, of course, amount to the abolition of the master-slave relations itself'.³¹ This reading is then used to support politics of multiculturalism and identity recognition. The best-known example is Charles Taylor, whose 1992 essay 'Politics of Recognition' launched *the* politics of recognition in domestic politics. In that essay, Taylor makes a number of interesting arguments. For example, he suggests that recognition is a *modern* problem; before then, 'general recognition was built into the socially derived identity by virtue of the very fact that it was based on social categories that everyone took for granted'.³² Recognition becomes a problem when traditional categories of identity are eroded, and identity becomes, in Taylor's words, 'inwardly derived, personal, original'.³³ With modernity, identity is not automatically recognised or propped up by existing social categories; it has to be won 'through exchange, and the attempt can fail'.³⁴ This is why, according to Taylor, we now understand that there is a human need for the recognition of identity; its absence can inflict grievous wounds.

By contrast, Markell suggests that the master-slave dynamic cannot be read to support a view that 'the struggle for recognition can find only one satisfactory solution, and that is a regime of reciprocal recognition among equals'.³⁵ In Markell's more convincing reading of the master-slave dynamic, the misrecognition of the slave or the injustice of the relationship does not result from a failure on the part of the master to recognise the slave properly. Rather it is the recognition dynamic itself that produces the slave and the asymmetry or the injustice, hence it cannot be rectified by an act of equal recognition.³⁶ In a way, both sides of the dynamic are trapped by the asymmetry of the recognition relationship.³⁷ The slave cannot have the recognition he seeks because he is not *yet* 'human' and the master cannot get recognition because he is the *only* 'human' (as he imagines).

Let's pause here to also note that many readings of Hegel have focused on the fact that the dynamic comes to an end through a reversal, through the labour of the slave.³⁸ The argument goes that in the act of surrender, the would-be slave confronts their 'own finitude' and the futility of the 'aspiration to demonstrate its sovereignty at all costs'.³⁹ The slave also acknowledges the need to overcome their situation, contrary to the master, who has no desire to overcome their role.⁴⁰ The slave is thus open to change, learning, historical processes. Furthermore, the slave is forced to work by the master: the slave moulds nature for the master, turning it into products, and in the process, achieves real 'mastery' through creativity and labour.⁴¹ The master, on the

³¹Markell, *Bound*, p. 106.

³²Taylor, 'Politics of Recognition', p. 34. (The essay was republished in 1994.)

³³Ibid. On the point of how identities became more constructed in 'modernity', see also Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); John W. Meyer and Ronald L. Jepperson, 'The "actors" of modern society: the cultural construction of social agency', *Sociological Theory*, 18:1 (2000), pp. 100–20.

³⁴Taylor, 'Politics of Recognition', p. 35. Taylor is too optimistic about how inwardly derived and original modern identity is.

³⁵Ibid., p. 50; cited in Markell, *Bound*, p. 91. This is despite the fact that Hegel himself advocated something similar (via the state) in other parts of his writing (more on this to follow).

³⁶'[T]he very desire that animates the struggle for recognition is impossible to fulfill ...; consequently, the asymmetry and thus the inadequacy of the relation of master and slave lies in the fact that only one of the two parties has acknowledged this, admitted the impossibility of satisfying its own claims, and conceded its own dependence.' Markell, *Bound*, p. 108.

³⁷'By refusing to risk his life in a fight for pure prestige, [the Slave] does not rise above the animals. Hence he considers himself as such, and as such is he considered by the Master.' The master on the other hand, is 'as a result of his fight, already human, "mediated". And consequently, his behaviour is also "mediated" or human, both with regard to things and with regard to other men; moreover, these other men, for him, are only his slaves.' Kojève, 'In place', p. 18.

³⁸See Kojève, 'In place'. See also, for example, Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (New York: Humanities Press, 1954).

³⁹Markell, *Bound*, p. 107.

⁴⁰Kojève, 'In place', p. 21.

⁴¹Ibid., 23.

other hand, is increasingly dependent on the labour of the slave for his existence.⁴² Thus, in readings of Hegel that emphasise the reversal, the slave has a better chance of escaping from the master–slave dynamic than the master.⁴³ For our purposes here, however, the more intriguing aspect is the often-overlooked fact that *the master* is both trapped by the dynamic *and* (at least in one possible reading of Hegel) has an interest in prolonging it. The dynamic is both more ubiquitous and stable than one would expect: ‘what is most intriguing about Hegel’s account of master and slave is that, *despite* his claim that it is contradictory and cannot ultimately satisfy the desire that animates it, this social relationship does not simply collapse under the weight of its own incoherence’.⁴⁴ Why, then, do the master–slave recognition hierarchies persist for extended periods of time, if they are indeed so asymmetric, and so ultimately unsatisfying for both sides of the equation?

This is because while actors can never fully achieve the kind of recognition they seek through this dynamic, the master–slave hierarchy ‘accommodate[s] contradictions ... without resolving them’.⁴⁵ The master status in the master–slave dynamic creates for the master a very viable approximation of the self as sovereign: ‘this arrangement thus reflects back to the master something like the image of himself as sovereign that himself had originally sought, insulating him from the experience of his own dependence’.⁴⁶ The master may not have the recognition (or sovereignty) they desire, but they now have the image (or simulation) of that recognition: ‘These roles ... lend relative stability to the intersubjective world, making it possible for the master to experience his own status – like the slave’s – as a reflection of who he always already is, rather than as the political (and therefore fragile) effect of an ongoing practice of subordination.’⁴⁷ This is a misrecognition that masquerades as recognition, for extended periods of time. Taking the argument even further, one can also observe that as much of the literature on social stratification and stigmatisation also demonstrates,⁴⁸ in social figurations where one is (mis)recognised as being better than the other, the ongoing interaction continuously creates and recreates the identities of the parties involved, which are then perceived as reflecting inherent, innate, and fixed characteristics. The slave then becomes a ‘natural’ slave; the master is the master because they must surely ‘deserve’ to be. More importantly, both parties internalise these roles as such.

This is a more satisfying dynamic for the master than it is for the slave, because through it the master gets an approximation of fully realised self-sovereignty in the form of the ‘master’ image. To be fully sovereign as a human being, as a consciousness, is to be the master of one’s destiny – it requires the ability to make and impose one’s own rules on the world, to stand up against and defeat the vagaries of nature and one’s own appetite. It is very difficult to realise this ideal, but in the master–slave hierarchy, the master can feel as if they have indeed achieved it (or has gone a long way in achieving it) *in comparison* with the slave. This is why in social hierarchies those in lower ranks are often characterised as anomic, untrustworthy, undisciplined, lawless, dirty, emotional, or having loose morals. In other words, they are perceived as being dominated by the animalistic side of human nature – they are supposed to be the ones who are ruled by appetite or instinct, that is, they are the ones who are not masters of their own destiny, they are the ones who are dependent. In comparison, the existential impasse of the master becomes tolerable and their own dependence is masked: the trouble with the master–slave relationship ‘is not only that it leaves the self-consciousness who becomes master in a condition of ontological ignorance, doomed to pursue a fantasy of sovereignty he cannot attain; it is also that the strategies he

⁴²Ibid. ‘The future and History hence belong not to the warlike Master, who either dies or preserves himself indefinitely in identity to himself, but to the working Slave.’

⁴³I will come back to this suggestion in the third section on international misrecognition.

⁴⁴Markell, *Bound*, p. 109.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 110.

⁴⁶Ibid. p. 112.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸See, for example, Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson *The Established and Outsiders* (London: Sage Publications, 1994); Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

employs in pursuit of that impossible fantasy involve the subjection and unfreedom of others',⁴⁹ By projecting all (or most of) undesirable attributes as stigma properties onto the slave, can the master create an *image* of sovereignty, and *simulate* their possession of a fuller, superior humanity.⁵⁰

II. The state and the struggle for recognition

Thus far, we have been speaking in the language of parable and not about actual events or relationships in history. How should this framework be translated into international relations? It is tempting to assume that the master–slave configuration can be used to make sense of relationships between states (posited as conscious agents) as much as individuals (as conscious agents) without any need for modification as one goes up and down the level of analysis. In this section, I will argue that while the dynamic is indeed helpful in making sense of international affairs, we cannot simply treat states as individuals when using the schema, for two reasons. First, the state has a special place of importance in Hegel's thought, as well as in neo-Hegelian theories, and it is not conceptualised as the equivalent of an individual (or even the sum of individuals). Therefore, the state as an actor seeking recognition on the international stage cannot be treated unproblematically as if it was the equivalent of an individual, and instead needs to be located properly in the Hegelian theoretical framework, as a site that has supposedly reconciled recognition conflicts among individuals. Second, echoing Taylor's point about the modernity of recognition politics above (but without Taylor's optimism), there is in fact a historical dimension to how the states have become the primary vehicles for the pursuit of recognition by persons. The historicity of the state's role on the domestic side of recognition politics is often recognised in the literature (most notably by Hegel himself) but the international dimension is often overlooked. As I will show, over time, the state's struggle to gain recognition from its citizens and to solve the citizens' own recognition problems has made recognition into an international issue, or a problem that sought its resolution internationally. In other words, there is a very historical dimension to the transfer of recognition struggle from the domestic level to the international one.

As is well acknowledged, for Hegel, *the state* (or the modern state) was the solution to the impasse created by the master–slave dynamic. It is only through the state (as the end point of reason) that a person can become absolutely free: 'self-consciousness, by virtue of its disposition, has its substantial freedom in the state as its essence, its end, and the product of activity'.⁵¹ The struggle for recognition thus 'can only occur in the natural state, where men exist only as single, separate individuals; but it is absent in civil society and the State because here the recognition for which the combatants fought *already exists*'.⁵² This is taken up by neo-Hegelian theories⁵³ to argue that the state can indeed become a reconciliatory site by extending equal recognition to all its citizens (or groups of citizens, as the case may be). It is not only Hegelian theories, however, that attribute a particular importance to group endeavours in the age of modernity in the quest for sovereignty. There is a sense in much of Western political thought that 'modernity' is an equaliser that renders the 'modern' person much smaller and less powerful than the 'best' of his predecessors (for better or worse, depending on the thinker).⁵⁴ For some, this means the indi-

⁴⁹Markell, *Bound*, p. 112.

⁵⁰This is not to say stigmatisation is the only response to misrecognition – in real world hierarchies that are more complex and layered than the master–slave figuration, other strategies may be available to actors depending on their status. See, for example, Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, 'International misrecognition'.

⁵¹Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (1889), section 3, p. 257.

⁵²Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (1817), p. 172 (*Zusatz* to sec. 432). As cited by Markell, *Bound*, p. 125 (emphasis added by Markell).

⁵³See, for example, Williams, *Hegel's Ethics*.

⁵⁴See, for example, works of Edmund Burke, Ferdinand Tönnies, Alexis de Tocqueville, among others.

vidual quest for sovereignty should be abandoned altogether in favour of some other goal, such as happiness or self-interest,⁵⁵ yet for others, such as Hegel but also Rousseau,⁵⁶ the state (or the group or the general will or the nation) becomes the only vehicle through which individuals can attain sovereignty.⁵⁷

The modern state so conceived was thus assigned with a dual task that most polities in history were not:⁵⁸ it needs to be sovereign *over* its subjects (common enough in history), *and* it needs to be sovereign *for* its subjects (much rarer, at least in reference to the majority of subjects). Therefore, built into the claim that the modern state can reconcile the struggle for recognition between individuals are a number of assumptions about different aspects of sovereignty, which actually do not hold up very well under closer scrutiny. The state that will reconcile the 'struggle for recognition' must first be *recognised itself* by individuals (Assumption 1) as having the *capacity for such recognition* (Assumption 2) and *the ability to distribute* it to all *equally* (Assumption 3). In other words, the state must be acknowledged as sovereign by its citizens, and must in fact be sovereign for its citizens, so that it can then 'distribute' that sovereignty equally among its citizens, so that they do not have to struggle to get it themselves. All three assumptions are problematic in their own way, but together they explain why the struggle for recognition in modernity has had such a pronounced international dimension, as will be discussed in Section III.

Let's take Assumptions 1 and 3 together, since they both have to do with the recognition relationship the state has with its citizens. Following Hegel and neo-Hegelian theories of equal recognition, it may be tempting 'to treat the state like a *deus ex machine* that appears from outside the social, which – by virtue of its sovereign elevation above the conflicts of social life – can serve as a mediating institution'.⁵⁹ Yet the state itself does not stand in a relationship of equality to its citizens; as is well acknowledged in IR, the state is atop the domestic hierarchy. Thus, the relationship the state has with the citizens is one of asymmetry by definition,⁶⁰ laden with the same problems as discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, the historical origins of any given state very much resemble the master–slave figuration; (Western) modernity entails a process of abstraction of authority from the person of the kings to institutions, but there is no reason to assume that the process of abstraction would transform the primary recognition dilemma. The fundamental problem remains that the act of recognition by the citizen-subjects by itself cannot create the sovereignty of the state, but only an image of it. The state cannot become truly sovereign via the recognition of its citizens any more than the master can; it can only simulate that sovereignty over time (more on this to follow). So, there is always something precarious about the domestic recognition of the state by its citizens, a tension built into the very character of state sovereignty.

There is also the problem that the modern state is not equally distant to all of its citizens. It has been long acknowledged that while the modern state promises political emancipation through the equal legal recognition of citizenship for all, such recognition often entrenches existing inequalities by designating social or economic issues as 'non-political'. By labelling certain problems as beyond the purview of politics, legal equality thus 'disguises their status as

⁵⁵Liberal, utilitarian, and libertarian approaches – one could argue that they are exchanging the goal of positive freedom with negative freedom.

⁵⁶To the preceding acquisitions could be added the acquisition in the civil state of moral liberty, which alone makes man truly the master of himself. For to be driven by appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is liberty.' Jean Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Book I, ch. 8.

⁵⁷A notable exception is Nietzsche, who is not satisfied with the solution offered by the state nor has much patience for the empty freedom offered by liberalism, calls for the 'last man' of modernity to be replaced by the *Übermensch*. See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

⁵⁸Ayşe Zarakol, 'States and ontological security: a historical rethinking', *Cooperation & Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 48–68.

⁵⁹Markell, *Bound*, p. 125.

⁶⁰We can debate whether the 'end of history' ideal state as Hegel envisions it escapes this asymmetry, but the debate is irrelevant to the current discussion.

forms of power and makes them more difficult to address politically'.⁶¹ Thus even when the state is approaching its citizens equally, it reproduces existing social hierarchies. But the problem runs deeper than that, in the sense that the state's own quest for recognition becomes entangled in the politics of stratification domestically (also internationally, but more on that to come). The example Markell uses to illustrate this point is the Prussian emancipation Edict of 1812, granting full rights to Jews. The contradiction of that edict was that while it 'moved to dissolve the legal distinction between Jew and Christian ... the same edict took pains to ensure that Jews could always be recognized *as Jews* by the authorities'.⁶² This is because the recognition of the sovereignty of the state is also a simulation, an image (as all recognition is, as discussed in the previous section); for it to be constantly reproduced, for recognition to be 'more than momentary and ephemeral, the institutions of the state must maintain a vigilant surveillance of the Jews to be sure that they are conforming to the terms of their emancipation – and such surveillance requires that Jews be recognizable'.⁶³ This also makes the impossible task of acquiring sovereignty (state sovereignty in this case) the problem of Jews (or other similarly situated groups). In other words, the problem of domestic sovereign recognition (or the need for it to be continuously simulated) becomes disproportionately borne by the 'others' of society.

This brings us back to Assumption 2 – can the state be sovereign *for* its citizens? Leaving aside the questions of whether it can achieve sovereignty via the recognition of its citizens or distribute whatever goods it produces equally, is there a scenario under which it can actually achieve sovereignty in the sense of 'the condition of being an independent, self-determining agent', with 'something like full ownership of one's life and doings', as discussed in the previous section? Can the state master nature for its citizens? Can it be absolutely free in the world? Could it elevate its citizens to a condition of genuine, positive, freedom? Once again, we can point to a strand of political thought from Hobbes to Rousseau to Schmitt that sees this almost godlike potential in the state, but it is difficult to argue that any modern state has even approximated such sovereignty as an actor itself, let alone for its citizens.⁶⁴ One could even argue that the densely interactive conditions of modern world politics make approaching such freedom more difficult for modern states in the same way conditions of modern society do so for individuals. Yet, the modern state is relatively unique among historical polities in promising to deliver sovereignty *for* its citizens in addition to *over* its citizens. The primary justification for its level of penetration into daily life is in fact this very promise, which means that the modern state project has to be somehow legitimated despite its continuous failure to deliver upon one of its main goals. If one of the solutions is the domestic arrangement discussed above, yet another one is to projection of the simulation of sovereignty to the international arena. This is how the master–slave dynamic acquires an international angle.

III. The international struggle for recognition

It is not coincidental that social hierarchies of the international system became entrenched at the very historical moment – nineteenth century – that the modern state project reached maturation as an idea,⁶⁵ and as this section will argue, their co-emergence cannot be attributed to material factors alone. It is also not an accident that of all aspects of modern sovereignty, external

⁶¹Markell, *Bound*, p. 128. Also see Karl Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State' (1843) and 'On the Jewish Question' (1844); Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁶²Markell, *Bound*, p. 145.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁶⁴In fact, some argue that the disillusionment in the modern state is one of the reasons for the failure of the modern project and its replacement with post-modern and reactionary critiques. See, for example, the works of Zygmunt Bauman, for example, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), or David Harvey, for example, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).

⁶⁵See, for example, Buzan and Lawson, *Global Transformation*.

recognition was the last to emerge (more on this to follow). This is not to say that there was no struggle for recognition in ‘world politics’ before the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, following the observation⁶⁶ that there is something *modern* about the ‘politics of recognition’ in that recognition becomes political in domestic politics only after traditional categories are eroded and identity becomes constructable (or after self-fashioning becomes possible), I would posit that there is something *even more modern* about the *international* ‘politics of recognition’. Modern states are much more preoccupied with ‘international’ recognition than most of their predecessors. The previous section has already gestured in the direction of this argument, but let me delineate even further, given that the argument runs entirely counter to received wisdom in rationalist IR that states (and especially modern states) do not care about intangible goods such as recognition and are motivated by material interests alone.

Most IR definitions of state sovereignty can be reduced to the components of ‘supreme authority’ and ‘territory’,⁶⁷ both of which come with implicit assumptions about recognition, internal and external. For example, Stephen D. Krasner defines ‘the Westphalian state’ as ‘a system of political authority based on territory and autonomy’;⁶⁸ elsewhere he distinguishes between ‘interdependence sovereignty ... [that is,] the ability of states to control movement across their borders’,⁶⁹ ‘domestic sovereignty’, which denotes the extent to which political authority can ‘effectively regulate behaviour’;⁷⁰ ‘Vattelian sovereignty ... [that is,] the exclusion of external sources of authority both *de juri* and *de facto*’⁷¹ and ‘International legal sovereignty [which] refers to mutual recognition’.⁷² Traditionally, most IR scholarship operated with the assumption that the ‘Westphalian state’ had in fact emerged after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which was supposed to have transformed the world from one dominated by religious divisions to one of territorial sovereign states extending each other mutual recognition. For the last few decades, however, the Westphalian narrative and the accompanied dating of modern sovereignty back to the seventeenth century has come under criticism. The overwhelming majority⁷³ of these scholars⁷⁴ date the emergence of modern state to a much later period. Interestingly the later dating usually does not focus on the emergence of the notion of centralised supreme authority, which most scholars concede date back to earlier periods,⁷⁵ but rather around the emergence of territoriality⁷⁶ and the

⁶⁶As discussed in the first section of this article. See also fn. 30.

⁶⁷Jens Bartelson, ‘Dating Sovereignty’ (unpublished manuscript, 2017), p. 2. See also Daniel Philpott, ‘Sovereignty: an introduction and brief history’, *Journal of International Affairs*, 48:2 (1995), pp. 206–45.

⁶⁸Stephen D. Krasner, ‘Compromising Westphalia’, *International Security*, 20:3 (1995–6), p. 115.

⁶⁹Krasner, ‘Rethinking’, p. 19.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷³See Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648* (London: Verso, 2003) for a rare argument for dating it earlier than Westphalia, but Teschke’s focus is not on sovereign recognition.

⁷⁴See, for example, Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999); Stephan Beaulac, ‘The Westphalian legal orthodoxy – myth or reality?’, *Journal of the History of International Law*, 2 (2000), pp. 148–77; Andreas Osiander, ‘Sovereignty, international relations and the Westphalian myth’, *International Organization*, 55:2 (2001), pp. 251–87; Krasner, ‘Rethinking’.

⁷⁵And it can be demonstrated that the notion of supreme authority existed outside of Europe as well. Even the European label of ‘Oriental Despotism’ as used to denounce Asian polities points to its existence elsewhere. See Hobson and Sharman, ‘Enduring place’ for a discussion. In other words, supreme authority is a necessary but not sufficient component of ‘Westphalian’ sovereignty of the modern state. See also Ayşe Zarakol, ‘A non-Eurocentric approach to sovereignty’, in Julia Costa Lopez, Benjamin De Carvalho, Andrew A. Latham, Ayşe Zarakol, Jens Bartelson, Minda Holm (eds), ‘Forum: In the beginning there was no word (for it): Terms, concepts, and early sovereignty’, *International Studies Review*, 20:3 (2018).

⁷⁶See, for example, Jordan Branch, ‘Mapping the sovereign state: Technology, authority and systemic change’, *International Organization*, 65:1 (2011), pp. 1–36; Bartelson, ‘Dating Sovereignty’; Buzan and Lawson, *Global Transformation*. See

principle of external recognition, both of which most scholars now date to the nineteenth century.⁷⁷

To give a few examples, Derek Croxton notes that historically, ‘the difficulty is not finding a ruler who considers himself to be sovereign, but a group of rulers who recognise each other’s sovereignty’.⁷⁸ Krasner notes that ‘the principle that rulers should not intervene in or judge domestic affairs in other states was actually introduced by two international legal theorists in the latter part of the eighteenth century, Emmerich de Vattel and Christian Wolff’.⁷⁹ Andreas Osiander notes that ‘before the nineteenth century state and society were not generally seen as coextensive’.⁸⁰ He also observes that ‘for a long time after Jean Bodin popularized the concept [of sovereignty] in the late sixteenth century, political theorists and practitioners alike attached more importance to its domestic than its external side’.⁸¹ Mutual recognition of sovereignty became emphasised (most notably by international lawyers) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, after ‘the integrating power of industrialization brought about a near congruence between state and society: each “nation” state was now, or at least could conceivably be, its own society, considered complete unto itself’.⁸² Jens Bartelson argues that ‘a modern notion of recognition first evolved in response to declarations of independence’⁸³ and while external recognition originally was understood to be a way of acknowledging facts on the ground, in the nineteenth century, it came to be understood as constitutive of statehood.⁸⁴ The way nineteenth-century legal frameworks developed, it was initially conceded that sovereignty was first acquired internally, but also argued that it was made complete by external recognition and through membership in international society.⁸⁵ But soon this view was replaced by one that elevated external recognition over internal recognition of sovereignty and made external recognition dependent on the level of civilisation, with humanity divided into three spheres as civilised, barbarous, and savage, all with corresponding degrees of recognition.⁸⁶ In the twentieth century,

also Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁷⁷See, for example, Derek Croxton, ‘The peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the origins of sovereignty’, *The International History Review*, 21:3 (1999), pp. 569–91; Krasner, ‘Rethinking’; Turan Kayaoglu, ‘Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations theory’, *International Studies Review*, 12 (2010), pp. 193–217.

⁷⁸Croxton, ‘The peace of Westphalia’, p. 571, citing also F. H. Hinsley, ‘The concept of sovereignty and the relations between states’, in *In Defense of Sovereignty*, ed. W. J. Stankiewicz (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 275–7.

⁷⁹Krasner, ‘Rethinking’, p. 20. See also Bartelson, ‘Dating Sovereignty’ and Stephane Beaulac, ‘Emer de Vattel and the externalization of sovereignty’, *Journal of the History of International Law*, 5:2 (2003), pp. 237–92.

⁸⁰Osiander, ‘Sovereignty’, p. 279.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 281.

⁸²Ibid., pp. 281–2.

⁸³Jens Bartelson, ‘Recognition: A Short History’ (unpublished paper, 2016), p. 6.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 14. Bartelson also counts Hegel among those who had this understanding, for example, in the *Philosophy of Right*.

⁸⁵Bartelson, ‘Recognition’, p. 15, citing Henry Wheaton, *Elements of International Law* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1836), I,II, p. 21.

⁸⁶Bartelson, ‘Recognition’, p. 16. Bartelson here is referring especially to James Lorimer, *The Institutes of the Law of Nations: A Treatise of the Jural Relations of Separate Political Communities* (Edinburgh: William Blackwell and Sons, 1883). The exact quote from Lorimer is as follows: ‘As a political phenomenon, humanity, in its present condition, divided itself into three concentric zones or spheres – that of civilized humanity, that of barbarous humanity, and that of savage humanity. To these, whether arising from peculiarities of race or from various stages of development in the same race, belong, of right, at the hands of civilized nations, *three stages of recognition* – *plenary political recognition*, *partial political recognition*, and *natural or mere human recognition* ... The sphere of plenary political recognition extends to all the existing States of Europe, with their colonial dependencies, in so far as these are peopled by persons of European birth or descent; and to the States of North and South America which have vindicated their independence of the European States of which they were colonies. The sphere of partial political recognition extends to Turkey in Europe and in Asia, and to the old historical States of Asia which have not become European dependencies – viz. to Persia and the other separate States of Central Asia, to China, Siam and Japan. The sphere of natural or mere human recognition, extends to the residue of mankind: though here we ought, perhaps, to distinguish between the progressive and non-progressive races.’ Emphasis added. On Lorimer, see also Marti Kosenniemi,

the same notion was echoed by the mandate system of the League of Nations, where it was held that some communities 'have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognised subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone'.⁸⁷ The main difference between the logic underwriting the mandate system and Lorimer's racial theory of recognition is that the mandate system accepts the possibility of future recognition; it is progressive.

To sum up, within the historical trajectory of the modern international system, thinking about sovereignty evolved from it being understood as primarily (if not exclusively) internally driven and being in the purview of the political ruler alone, to it becoming abstracted from the person of the monarch to institutions, then associated with the general will of the community – that is, the 'nation' – and territorialised. Around the same time, external recognition started to play a much larger role in the determination of sovereignty, eventually surpassing in many most parts of the world – that is, for those deemed 'savage' or 'barbarous' – the fulfilment of the criteria for the internal constitution of statehood. In other words, polities that had long displayed features of internal sovereignty (for example, the Ottoman Empire, Siam, Japan)⁸⁸ could now be called semi-sovereign due to lack of external recognition.

This legal framework evolved in the twentieth century, with the promise that the external recognition thus withheld in the nineteenth century could now be attained, only if domestic structures could be brought up to external 'standards of civilisation' (or modernity, or development).⁸⁹ The eventual outcome of this evolution was the emergence of the universal law of sovereign equality in the second half of the twentieth century. IR now has a corpus of works dealing with this period and the social, economic, and political hierarchies engendered therein. What we had not done a good job of explaining thus far was the puzzle about timing: why should the timing of the emergence of the preoccupation with external recognition (and thus international social hierarchies) coincide with the emergence of the modern state and become even more pronounced following the global diffusion of the modern state norm? The Hegelian reading of internal/external recognition dynamics I advanced in previous sections helps us make sense of the timing of these developments and explains why the nineteenth century was such a formative period in the emergence of modern international order.

To recap, when sovereignty lies with the ruler alone, as opposed to institutions, whoever is the ruler is recognised by his subjects more or less straightforwardly in the manner captured by the master–slave figuration. This is ultimately a misrecognition for the ruler because the subjects are in a dominated position, and the more dominated they are, the less valuable is the recognition they offer. Yet human history is littered with such arrangements and they are for the most part very durable. This is because the *image* of sovereignty mirrored back to such a ruler in such a situation – say, for example, the Pharaoh in Ancient Egypt – must be rather compelling⁹⁰ as an approximation of true sovereignty (which is unattainable). In such settings, which permeate vast swaths of human history, the desire for recognition figures into external relations of the polity in a different manner the modern world of international relations. If an enemy ruler is defeated in battle, they and their people are often enslaved (or absorbed) under domestic rule, which reinforces the pattern above. By contrast, peacetime 'recognition' gestures from other 'sovereign' rulers in the form of emissaries, tributes, gifts, etc. are probably somewhat meaningful to the ruler receiving them, but decidedly less so in comparison with the internal simulation of recognition in

'Race, hierarchy and international law: Lorimer's legal science', *The European Journal of International Law*, 27:2 (2016), pp. 415–29.

⁸⁷From Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, as cited by Zarakol, *After Defeat*, p. 86. On the Mandate system see also Anghie, 'Colonialism'.

⁸⁸Other sovereigns were deprived of external recognition altogether.

⁸⁹See Zarakol, *After Defeat*, ch. 2 for a discussion of these standards evolved.

⁹⁰After all, there are even examples of rulers treated as gods.

the form of worship or reverence.⁹¹ The ratio between the importance of the internal vs external dimension of recognition of sovereignty undergoes a major change in the nineteenth century, after the emergence of the territorial, national, centralised state, which is tasked with being sovereign *for* its citizens (a new development) as well as *over* its citizens (a common feature in history). External recognition thus becomes increasingly important for the state because it is a path to simulating being sovereign *for* as opposed to *over* citizens.⁹²

Despite its increasingly penetrative and extractive reach, as well as its monopolisation of all sorts of authority previously dispersed, the modern state is not rejected but ‘recognised’ as sovereign by its citizens precisely so that it can now impose the will of the citizens on the world, so that persons can be sovereign through the state. But while the ‘recognition’ of subjects may have been enough to simulate sovereignty for a single ruler (or family), it is not enough for the modern state. The modern state cannot derive the power to recognise its citizens simply from the recognition of its citizens. It must march progressively through history to the pinnacle of civilisation, etc. (to invoke a few twentieth-century notions about the state’s purpose).⁹³ It must be sovereign *in the world*. Following the same pattern as self-consciousness seeking proof of its own sovereignty, the modern state’s pursuit of sovereignty also turns first to the external world, where it cannot find the confirmation it seeks, and then to a struggle for recognition, resulting in international master–slave configurations (or social hierarchies) between states.

As noted above, in external battles, the more common historical pattern before the nineteenth century was absorbing the vanquished into the polity, either outright or as tributary entities. Those outside of the ontology of the polity were mostly ignored. By contrast, since the nineteenth century, what we see instead is a trend of keeping the side that has submitted as distinct as unit from the dominant party (and increasingly so), while simultaneously pushing for it become as similar to the dominant party as possible. This trend was driven from the top by European/Western states that had to demonstrate their sovereignty comparatively. This is why nineteenth-century empires exhibit different centre-periphery patterns than other empires in history, with purported ‘nation-states’ visibly at the centre. By the twentieth century, great powers increasingly move away from territorially absorbing those countries that they dominate, preferring to keep nation-state territoriality intact even in instances of full-blown occupation. At the same, there is a parallel trend towards domestic homology (also helped along with other forces of modernity, such as capitalism and rationalisation)⁹⁴ – the more ‘the slave’ resembles ‘the master’, the more satisfying the recognition, however simulated. As more communities and polities are thus remade in the image of the nation-state, they also become tasked with being sovereign *for* their citizens, and they too become increasingly more preoccupied with external recognition of their sovereignty. For all these reasons, the emergence of the framework of sovereign equality is not the eradication of master–slave hierarchies in the international system, but is itself a product of those hierarchies.

Conclusion: Sovereign equality as (mis)recognition

The international legal regime of sovereign equality, even though it grants the ‘slave’ communities of the modern order the recognition previously withheld from them, is not driven by a genuine recognition of sovereignty of ‘the other’, which is impossible in any case. The extension of the legal recognition of sovereignty recreates at the international stage the same dynamic that

⁹¹Or we could say that even tributes were important to the extent they came from the ‘world’ of the sovereign. The opinion of genuine foreigners is irrelevant.

⁹²See also Zarakol, ‘States and ontological security’.

⁹³Not to mention Hegelian notions about the state.

⁹⁴Why and how this homology emerges is discussed extensively in Zarakol, *After Defeat*. See also Ayşe Zarakol, ‘What made the modern world hang together: Socialisation or stigmatisation?’, *International Theory*, 6:2 (2014), pp. 311–32. See also the World Polity School, for example, Meyer and Jepperson, ‘The “actors” of modern society’.

modern state has with its own ‘others’: equal recognition is gradually extended to those previously deemed ‘savage’ or ‘barbarous’ in order to bolster the recognition that they themselves had given to the ‘mastery’ of the West. But for their simulated recognition of the ‘master’ to be anything more than fleeting, their ‘otherness’ has to be continuously recreated through stigmatisation.⁹⁵ Sovereign equality thus not only masks relations of domination in the international system by ‘translating’ them into seemingly voluntary contracts entered by seemingly equal agents, but also helps perpetuate the hierarchies of the international system.

Furthermore, the presence of this norm has extended the lifespan of the master–slave recognition dynamic by blocking the avenues that would help ‘the slave’ get out from under that dynamic. For example, one of the reasons ‘the slave’ is ultimately able to escape from the figuration is because they are supposed to have understood the futility of the ‘aspiration to demonstrate its sovereignty at all costs’.⁹⁶ Yet, the processes described above render ‘the slave’ an emulator of ‘the master’, and ‘the master’ does not understand the futility of the aspiration. The same processes also rob ‘the slave’ of the creativity they would develop through their work on the natural world.

The disappointing conclusion for the international order is that ‘the slave’ cannot escape this dynamic in the sense of acquiring real freedom and sovereignty any more than ‘the master’ can, and both sides remain fixated on the politics of recognition and status, as a great deal of literature in IR now demonstrates.⁹⁷ Sovereignty is simulated but not achieved.⁹⁸ The best ‘the slave’ can hope to achieve is the reversal of the hierarchy of simulation. If this Hegelian reading is correct, the anticipated rise of China or the non-West will not overcome the asymmetry of the recognition relationship, but at best will replace it with another hierarchy. The international system may very well be eroded or improved upon from other angles, but the international politics of (mis)recognition cannot be the solution to the problems it has had a part in creating.

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⁹⁵See Zarakol, *After Defeat*.

⁹⁶Markell, *Bound*, p. 107.

⁹⁷See fn. 9.

⁹⁸There are potentially productive links between reading recognition as a simulation, on the one hand, and the politics of recognition as a modern phenomenon, on the other, with Baudrillard’s argument about the historical evolution from the real towards the simulacra (image). The article’s scope did not allow me to pursue that line of inquiry. For an application of Baudrillard to IR theory, see Cynthia Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, The State and Symbolic Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).