

International Relations from Lack to Plenitude: Critique and the Strange Death of Liberalism

Millennium: Journal of
International Studies
1–23

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DOI: 10.1177/03058298261475883

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David Chandler 

University of Westminster, UK

Abstract

International Relations (IR) has been transformed via its movement beyond the liberal imaginaries of the 1990s. This strange death of liberal IR, analysed here, enabled IR to transition from a discipline of lack – a discipline that was ‘pre-liberal’, struck in the timeless ‘state of nature’ – to a discipline of fullness that is ‘after IR’/‘beyond critique’. One alleged to be able to assimilate the world in ways that liberalism could not, going beyond the Eurocentrism of universal subject/object cuts and liberal binaries. IR, the liberal discipline in a non-liberal world, was famously theorised as a discipline lacking conceptions of progress, justice and ethics and as poor in relation to political theory. This article analyses the transition to ‘after IR’ as a discipline of plenitude and possibility, registering a world of uncertainty and contingency, where everything is possible except the articulation of any critical alternative to this world as it appears.

Keywords

after IR, critical IR, globalisation, Anthropocene, lack, plenitude

Corresponding author:

David Chandler, University of Westminster, 32-38 Wells Street, London W1T 3UW, UK.

Email: D.Chandler@Westminster.ac.uk

Introduction

The proposition at the core of this article is that it is possible to think ‘beyond critique’¹ and to argue that we are ‘after IR’ because International Relations (IR) scholarship has staged a double transformation of the discipline. This ‘staging’ took place in the 1990s when critical IR claimed to have won IR a ‘world’ of evolving liberal international norms and was completed by the rejection of this critical, liberal, imaginary of the world. In the first move, critical scholarship in IR perceived the end of the Cold War as heralding the potential fulfilment of IR’s liberal promise of moving beyond a world of fragmentation and division. In the second move, in the late 2000s and 2010s, the rejection of this failed and hubristic imaginary of the ‘world’ has enabled scholars to think ‘after IR’ and ‘beyond critique’, leaving behind this universalist and human-centred perspective.²

There is a problem with this staging of IR as achieving critical ‘lift-off’, as finally becoming a liberal discipline, in the 1990s, and then the rapid move to ‘after IR’, rejecting liberal modes of critique and inclusion, in the late 2000s and 2010s. I wish to argue that ‘after IR’ is neither ‘after IR’ nor somehow non-liberal, but rather a return to IR understandings, whereby a liberal gaze determined the world of the ‘international’ to be a non-liberal ‘world’, lacking in rationality, ethics and progressive possibilities. Contemporary post-critical IR may be ‘beyond critique’ but it cannot be understood to be beyond IR without neglecting the distinct nature of IR as an academic discipline. IR was distinguished from political theory (politics inside the state form) precisely by having a liberal set of

1. ‘Beyond critique’ or ‘post-critical’ IR is understood here to refer to a range of work in the discipline that does not follow the optimistic universalism that underpinned much of the critical understanding of IR in the 1990s and early 2000s. Critical IR sought to think the world of IR as an emergent liberal global order enabling universal rights and treatment. IR would then be emancipated from the fragmented, state-based international order of *realpolitik*. This critical imaginary included the expansion of the field of IR to include voices from the Global South, new social movements and civil society organisations, around an agenda which was to be human-centred, inclusive and empowering. These critical approaches included enthusiastic advocacy for ethical foreign policy, liberal norm diffusion, global civil society, cosmopolitan democracy, humanitarian intervention, human development, human security and human rights; see, for example, Daniele Archibugi and David Held (eds), *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995); Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘International Norm Dynamics and Political Change’, *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887–917; Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); Ken Booth (ed.), *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004); Andrew Linklater, *Critical Theory and World Politics: Citizenship, Sovereignty and Humanity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Tim Dunne and Nicholas Wheeler (eds) *Human Rights in Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
2. IR moves ‘beyond critique’ in the sense that a specific, liberal, form of critique was imbricated with advocacy for a global, more inclusive, more rights-based, liberal world order. It should be noted that critical IR can cover a wider range of interests and understandings, this article is responding to the symposium call to engage IR ‘beyond critique’ and carves out a specific reading of critique in relation to the liberal global imaginary of progress and inclusion (and attempts to push beyond its limits). Critique can be articulated in many other ways, see, for example, Justin Rosenberg et al., ‘Multiplicity and “The International” as Critique – A Forum’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 52, no. 2 (2023): 499–529.

ontological assumptions (liberal modernist cuts between subject/object and state/civil society) but realising that its ‘world’ – the international sphere – was not a liberal one.

For a growing community of ‘post-critical’ IR scholars today, the failure of the critical imaginaries of global rights and liberal universalism, of the 1990s, is perceived not as a negative experience but, on the contrary, a liberating one.³ There are a range of post-critical approaches to IR today, which are conceived as ‘beyond IR’/‘beyond critique’. These would include, but are not limited to, approaches that work within what are sometimes called the ‘relational’,⁴ the ‘material’⁵ or the ‘ontological’⁶ turns within IR, including new materialism,⁷ actor network theory,⁸ speculative realism,⁹ object-oriented ontology,¹⁰ quantum theoretical approaches,¹¹ and decolonial,¹² Indigenous,¹³ posthuman,¹⁴ more-than-human¹⁵ and multi-species¹⁶ ones, and those drawing upon critical

3. In this respect ‘beyond critique’ also speaks to the late Bruno Latour’s understanding of the constraining nature of critique, as limited to problematisation and deconstruction, and the need to engage in more constructive and experimental ways, exploring the world and its lively entanglements; see Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’, *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48. See also David Chandler and Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘Encounter, Critique, and Postcritique: A Play in Two Acts’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 52, no. 3 (2024): 609–639.
4. Emilian Kavalski, ‘Relational Theories in International Relations’, in Nalanda Roy (ed.) *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (New York, NY: Oxford Academic, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.681>.
5. Roger Mac Ginty, ‘A Material Turn in International Relations: The 4×4, Intervention and Resistance’, *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 5 (2017): 855–74.
6. Laura Zanotti, *Ontological Entanglements, Agency and Ethics in International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
7. Tom Lundborg and Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis, and International Relations: A Radical Intertextual Approach’, *Review of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (2015): 3–25.
8. Andrew Barry, ‘The Translation Zone: Between Actor-Network Theory and International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (2013): 413–29.
9. Steven Shavero, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
10. Timothy Morton, ‘Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology’, *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 163–90.
11. James Der Derian and Alexander Wendt (eds), *Quantum International Relations: A Human Science for World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
12. Nirmal Jindal and Kamal Kumar (eds), *Decolonising International Relations: Perspectives from the Global South* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025).
13. Mary Graham and Morgan Brigg, ‘Indigenous International Relations: Old Peoples and New Pragmatism’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 6 (2023): 590–9.
14. Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *Posthuman International Relations: Complexity, Ecologism and Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2013).
15. Audra Mitchell, ‘Nonhuman, More-Than-Human, and Post-Human International Relations and International Studies’, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, ed. Nalanda Roy (New York, NY: Oxford Academic, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.754>.
16. Chie Sakakibara, ‘Multispecies Relations, Multispecies Justice, and Multispecies Futurism’, *Postcolonial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2025): 80–5.

Black Studies.¹⁷ These approaches are held to free IR scholarship from what is now conceived to have been a ‘prison’ or set of epistemological constraints imposed by IR as a liberal discourse of abstract universal framings with the liberal model of the autonomous human subject at the centre.

As Anthony Burke, Stephanie Fishel and colleagues argued in this journal: ‘Trying to write from within IR, we find ourselves prisoners in our own vocation. We are speechless, or even worse, cannot find words to represent the world and those within it’.¹⁸ The escape from the prison of IR takes post-critical scholarship in IR out to a wider world of relational entanglements in which thinking can be enabled through experimental engagements with the differentiated and emergent ‘reality’ ‘on the ground’. While the ‘world’ of liberal universals abstracts from the infinite plenitude of the generative, interactive relational entanglements of the ‘earth’, IR ‘beyond critique’ seeks to work with these earthly forces.¹⁹ As Burke et al write, in a critical liberal IR imaginary:

... the Earth is treated as raw material for the creation of a world tailored to human needs. Heidegger famously framed ‘earth’ and ‘world’ as two countervailing, conflicting forces that constrain and shape one another. We contend that existing political, economic and social conditions have pushed human worlding so far to one extreme that it has become almost entirely detached from the conditions of the Earth. Planet Politics calls, instead, for a mode of worlding that is responsive to, and grounded in, the Earth.²⁰

This is echoed by Milja Kurki’s understanding of critical IR as analogous to theorising from a spaceship or ‘IR Hovercraft’, suspended above the messy, entanglements of earthly realities that do not fit with critical IR’s universal abstract human-centred schemas.²¹ In experimentally thinking from the ground of the cowshed, she concludes:

One outcome of relational planetary multispecies politics then is that it also opens up an important infrastructural politics, for IR, but also [for the] practice of international politics.

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17. Farai Chipato and Chandler, ‘Another Decolonial Approach Is Possible: International Studies in an Antiracist World’, *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 7 (2022): 1783–1797.
 18. Anthony Burke et al., ‘Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2016): 499–523, at 502.
 19. Approaches which broadly work in the relational, material and ontological frames outlined above, seek to problematise critical IR’s subject-centred approach – spanning across disciplinary areas of thought from Kathryn Yusoff’s ‘geo-Poethics’ of *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), to algorithmic governance, see, for example, Louise Amoore, *Cloud Ethics: Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); to ecological thought, see Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018); and regimes of anti-Blackness (see, for example, Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2017) – are all dependent upon an unseen reality that is excessive of ‘algorithmic attribution’ (Amoore, *Cloud Ethics*, 172) or ‘the categorical distinctions of disciplinary knowledge’ (Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 3).
 20. Burke et al, ‘Planet Politics’, 518.
 21. Milja Kurki, ‘Stretching Concepts at the Cowshed: Towards Relational, Planetary, Multispecies Politics’, *European Journal of International Relations*, published online 8 May 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661261447803>.

Settings for academia, for IR, and for international politics in practice are confined to buildings manufactured to exclude worlds of others. We think and do policy in closed worlds. But where we think seems to matter for what and how we think.²²

Kurki argues that while ‘IR concepts struggle and wither in the cowshed, new meanings, sensations, and ways of relating also emerge from the cracks of what falls away. In other words, from the decay of IR of the old, blooms new life, new relations, conceptually and practically’.²³

We are told that the world of critical IR, now imagined to be in the past or no longer fit for purpose, was a world imagined to be framed and made in the image of the universal liberal subject standing in opposition to (or hovering above) both the world of the nonhuman, reduced to a standing reserve or resource,²⁴ and blind to the ongoing reproduction of differences and distinctions within the liberal conception of the human as subject.²⁵ The world that emerges, ‘after IR’, is necessarily post-critique as critique is understood to be too tightly bound to the liberal imaginaries at the heart of the discipline’s universalism and anthropocentrism. Critique comes from the positionality of the spaceship or the ‘IR Hovercraft’, seeking to fit the plenitude of lively, messy, differentiated, entangled, earthly realities into liberal boxes with their linear lines and deterministic imaginaries in fixed grids of time and space.

While the appearances of the problem field of IR may seem little changed over the last few decades – the problems of war, global inequality and colonial legacies remain constant – the discipline itself has been transformed as relational, new materialist and ontological approaches²⁶ have displaced critical liberal universal imaginaries as the main vehicles for alternative thinking. This means that ‘after IR’/‘post-critical’ IR lacks any positive or futural imaginary capable of challenging the cynical and sceptical subjectivities that drive IR as a discipline of great power apologia. While the discipline of IR could be understood to have been caught between ‘apology and utopia’, realpolitik and utopianism (in the words of international legal theorist Martti Koskenniemi),²⁷ today’s ‘after IR’ has increasingly replaced utopianism with post-structuralist scepticism.²⁸

22. Ibid., 25.

23. Ibid., 4.

24. Andrew Pickering, *Acting with the World: Agency in the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025).

25. Vicki Squire, ‘Migration and the Politics of “the Human”: Confronting the Privileged Subjects of IR’, *International Relations* 34, no. 3 (2020): 290–308.

26. By ‘relational’, ‘new materialist’ and ‘ontological’ approaches, this article refers to ‘post-critical’ approaches which consciously centre relational entanglement and differentiation rather than seeking to forefront universal understandings which necessarily assume a subject-centred framing whereby the world is accessible and amenable to linear or reductive understandings and interventions can then be based on linear causality. Cybernetic approaches, which forefront relational context and suggest forms of experimentation and exploration within these, illustrate this shift well; see further Pickering, *Acting with the World*.

27. Martti Koskenniemi, *From Apology to Utopia: The Structure of International Legal Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), originally published in 1989.

28. Post-structuralist scepticism is not the same as postmodern relativism or ‘anything goes’. A world of rich relational entanglements is not amenable to top-down, linear policy

IR may have been ‘liberated’ from the ‘prison’ of critical liberal political imaginaries of abstract subjects and an instrumental view of universal causality, but this ‘liberation’ is from the critical perspectives of the 1990s and early 2000s. The discipline of IR, from its founding onwards, was liberal on the essential, meta or ontological level,²⁹ defining the international sphere precisely on the basis of lacking the cuts and binaries required for theorising from a spaceship or ‘IR Hovercraft’.³⁰ IR ‘after IR’ maintains the affirmation of the world, the impossibility of human powers of interventionist problem-solving (the ‘apologia’ of Martti Koskenniemi)³¹ but lacks any aspiration towards ‘utopia’. Post-structuralist scepticism keeps the present open but at the same time provides no grounds for positing any alternative to the constant work of survivance and adaptation.³²

Thus, IR emerges as ‘after IR’ and ‘beyond critique’ via the alleged overcoming, refusal or bypassing of critical liberal political imaginaries of the world and its universal human subject. It is precisely this shift which is interrogated here. The main part of this article is in three sections. The first section analyses the strange death of liberalism in IR,³³ highlighting the difference in approach between many critical theorists of the 1990s and early 2000s who tended to argue that IR, in fact, needed to develop universalist and human-centred approaches, and today’s disillusionment with the critical project. The second section, ‘Misreading the Critical Turn’, analyses the ‘liberal’ nature of IR’s self-understanding of the discipline of IR at the meta or ontological level. The third section, ‘After IR?’, considers how the ‘strange death of liberalism’ is concealed by understanding liberalism purely at the ontic level of policymaking and institutional actions, and thereby only to have been problematised under recent US policy shifts cohered under Trump 2.

The Strange Death of Liberalism in IR

Despite the fact that IR considers itself (and is often taught) as a discipline that dates from the Peloponnesian Wars,³⁴ and occasionally from the First World War onwards (as

approaches of ‘Hovercraft IR’; any attempt to secure will thereby produce further insecurities, any attempt to resolve a discrete problem will only defer or redistribute it and create problems elsewhere, see Chandler, ‘Resilience and the End(s) of the Politics of Adaptation’, *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* 7, no. 3 (2019): 304–314.

29. By liberal on a meta or ontological level, I mean the level of broader, structural understanding. It was from the perspective of liberal social contract assumptions that the international sphere was consigned to a pre-liberal state of nature; understood as non-liberal ontically, without shared civil society or legal and ethical bonds.

30. See note 49 below.

31. Koskenniemi, *From Apology to Utopia*.

32. See, for example, the reworking of survivance in the language of plenitude and possibility in More Worlds Collective, *Fear of a Dead White Planet* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025), 115–37.

33. The ‘strange death of liberalism’ plays on George Dangerfield’s classic text, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London: Constable & Co., 1936), available at <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.175390/page/n11/mode/2up>.

34. Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, ‘The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations’, *International Organization* 48, no. 1 (1994): 131–53.

a modern academic pursuit),³⁵ this article argues that ‘after IR’ can best be understood in relation to the ‘world’ that was critically imagined to have come into being in the 1990s with the implosion of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Cold War geopolitical divide. ‘After IR’ is both empirically and conceptually framed in opposition or in distinction to the imaginary of many critical scholars working in IR in the 1990s and early 2000s; that is, in distinction to the critical universalist assumptions of IR’s ‘globalisation’. The critical or ‘global’ turn in IR imagined a discipline transformed. It imagined a discipline that had finally been able to access a liberal ‘world’. A world that was full of transformatory, emancipatory, possibility now that politics could take the place of real-politik. It is the rejection of this critical imaginary that enables ‘after IR’ to finally be a timely discipline.

In its rejection of the critical, global, human-centred, imaginary of the 1990s, ‘after IR’ is not merely rediscovering IR before the ‘global’ or ‘critical’ turn but also recasting itself in affirmative rather than negative terms, in terms not of lack but of plenitude. The suggestion here is that the discipline may have moved beyond critique, but this should not be confused with moving ‘after IR’. Indeed, IR could be understood to be the academic discipline that was always most at home with the disavowal of the ‘world’ of the universal critical imaginary. However, what is analytically key for the argument of this article is the outlining of a very important change in the context in which IR has rediscovered the discipline it has always been: the strange death of liberalism. Before the 1990s, IR’s lack of a liberal paradigm, its lack of a universal temporality, lack of universal ethics, IR’s lack of a ‘world’, was considered to be a major barrier. IR was a sad subdiscipline of political science because, in lacking a state, a sovereign actor, there could be no ‘civil society’. In a world where liberal political understandings were *de rigueur*, IR was a discipline that lacked content and importance and was stuck in the ‘state of nature’, lacking a separated sphere of functional politics and law.

It is fortunate, or maybe ironic, that everything that IR lacked is no longer considered to be an attribute. IR’s move ‘beyond critique’, IR’s return to pragmatism and the reality of differences and contingencies is now considered to be an advance on the failed liberal imaginary. The fact that IR can be imagined as having had a world and to have lost or rejected it provides the material to rework and reimagine it as a discipline. The loss of (a liberal) world is now imagined positively as, in fact, finding or opening up to a ‘world of many worlds’.³⁶ The loss of the human-centred imaginaries of critical IR theorists is now seen positively as discovering the virtues of more-than-human assemblages and more environmentally and planetarily aware approaches that expand understandings of the political. Pragmatism, in the questioning of the one-size-fits-all, abstract, linear and reductionist understandings of international development, peacebuilding and security discourses, seems to be a hard won and critical advance.³⁷ The new ‘after IR’ can be celebrated not as lacking, not as apologia, not as disavowal, but as a radical and critical

35. Jan Stöckmann, *The Architects of International Relations: Building a Discipline, Designing the World, 1914-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

36. Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser (eds), *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

37. As will be illustrated in the following section.

openness that prizes humility over hubris, difference over homogeneity and experimentation over critique.

The world 'after IR' is the world after the liberal world of the universal human subject, the world after the world imagined to be available to be instrumentalised as a standing reserve for liberal progress and development. In fine, the world after IR is after the world that was alleged to have come into being with the end of the Cold War and the rise of universal, critical understandings that centred (abstract) 'human' needs rather than the narrow interests of states. These needs were articulated under the critical rubrics of 'human security', 'human development', 'human rights', 'humanitarian intervention' and through new regimes that declared 'ethical foreign policy' had displaced the 'national interest'. In the 1990s, many critical IR scholars were very far from rejecting the liberal 'world', in fact, they were just discovering it, believing the discipline to be potentially reaching its promised consummation, finally winning itself a modernist 'world'. A world which (as we now know) it was to lose shortly thereafter.³⁸

Today, as analysed above, it is precisely the loss of this world which is now understood to be positive, as liberating and as transformative. However, if we zoom out a little, we can see that IR as an academic discipline has never really been at home in the liberal 'world'.³⁹ When liberal modernity was taken for granted in Western academia, IR was an outlier. IR had the unusual task of explaining why there was no shared 'world' for the purposes of international study. Questions of ethics, justice, democracy and civil rights were the concerns of nation states rather than of international order with its colonial and imperial legacies which continued to shape both the discipline and the institutional structures.⁴⁰ In the terminology of Martin Heidegger, IR could be understood to have been 'poor in world'.⁴¹ IR was characterised by its lack in relation to the fullness of the world constituted inside its nation state actors. The sphere of the international itself was that of

38. IR had won itself a 'world' because finally the international realm could be imagined to be 'global', that is, as available for imaginaries of emancipation and inclusion, with the separation of a sphere of governing power and subjects and problems to be governed. Even if the international sphere lacked the formal institutional structures of a supranational state body, the governing imaginary of a world as human- rather than state-centred was key to the discipline's critical self-understanding; see Chandler, *Freedom vs Necessity in International Relations: Human-Centred Approaches to Security and Development* (London: Zed Books, 2013).

39. As a growing number of studies are revealing, IR as a colonial or imperial discipline, has, in fact, historically lacked the universalist conceptions of the human subject at the heart of the 'critical' or 'global' turn in the 1990s. See, for example, Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Alexander E. Davis, Vineet Thakur and Peter Vale, *The Imperial Discipline: Race and the Founding of International Relations* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); David Long and Brian C. Schmidt (eds), *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006); John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

40. As argued in the footnote above.

41. Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 184.

unreason, where good intentions (the pursuit of state interests) risked global destruction, where securing internal harmony inside states risked international anarchy and conflict.⁴² Even the rise of social constructivist understandings,⁴³ where state interaction shaped interest perception, emphasised the emergent, unplanned and non-linear nature of policy outcomes.⁴⁴

The international was the necessary constitutive outside of the world of liberal political thought.⁴⁵ This 'outsider' status was relished by some in the post-war academy of the 1950s and 1960s. IR, as an American social science dominated by behaviourism, sought to rationalise and at the same time to disavow the ongoing reality of colonial hierarchies and geopolitical division.⁴⁶ IR literally removed this world in its methodological abstractions of states as billiard balls,⁴⁷ analogous to individuals in a Hobbesian 'state of nature', a war of all against all. While time was everywhere – colonial time, postcolonial time, the time of the non-aligned – IR worked without a temporality.⁴⁸ Most importantly, IR worked without a universalist imaginary beyond the level of state rivalries.⁴⁹ IR was pragmatic, contextual, relational; because of constantly shifting forces and relations, there was no possibility of closure, of prediction or control. The lesson that the great theorists of IR in the 20th century taught was that any belief in universal views of law, rights or ethics was delusional.⁵⁰ This is why IR theorists, according to Immanuel Kant,

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42. This is the famous 'security dilemma', coined by John Hertz, 'Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma', *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (1950): 171–201 and at the centre of debates and the elucidation of Realist approaches, see Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.
 43. See, for example, Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425; Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander (eds), *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and his Critics* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2006).
 44. In a constructivist framework, outcomes are emergent products of interaction rather than predetermined and therefore are 'non-linear', that is, they are determined by relational context rather than a state's military or economic power, for example.
 45. See, for example, R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
 46. See note 39.
 47. Originally proposed by Arnold Wolfers, 'The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference', *World Politics* 4, no. 1 (1951): 39–63.
 48. Martin Wight, 'Why Is There No International Theory?' *International Relations* 2, no. 1 (1960): 35–48.
 49. IR as a discipline lacked a universal imaginary because there was no positionality or vantage point above the pluralised and divided world of inter-state competition. As epitomised by the key principle of IR's founding document, the Treaty of Westphalia, in 1648, 'cuius regio, eius religio' ('whose territory, his religion'), in which the prince of a state determined the official religion for the inhabitants of that territory, rather than having an external religious authority dictate it.
 50. See, for example, Edward H. Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), first published in 1939; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1978). Of course, as Carmen Chas states, classical realist scholars, such as Carr and Morgenthau, were ethically engaged

were ‘miserable comforters’, rationalising and adapting to realities rather than attempting to challenge them.⁵¹

Thus, gaining a ‘world’ with the rise of critical approaches in the discipline at the end of the Cold War in 1989, the rise of liberal internationalist imaginaries, and the rapid discovery of globalisation soon after, transformed the academic discipline. It is in the aftermath of the unravelling of this critical global imaginary, the loss of this liberal internationalist world, that this contribution grounds contemporary discussion of ‘after IR’. IR could only be imagined to be ‘after IR’ once IR theorists assumed that they were no longer lagging behind liberal universal imaginaries but, rather, were now beyond them: that they had rejected the liberal ‘world’ by choice rather than being refused access to it. Whether this was actually the case is the subject of the next section.

Misreading the Critical Turn

Post-war IR, as an academic discipline, had been very much trapped in its own bubble, isolated from the worlds of political and social theory, and suborned to US-led rational choice modelling and game play. For IR theory as it developed post-1945, the abstract analogy with political theory constituted nation states as political subjects, possessing equal powers of autonomous self-determination prior to the establishment of the social contract. This was encapsulated in Kenneth Waltz’s groundbreaking 1959 monograph *Man, the State, and War*,⁵² in which he argued for a ‘third image’ whereby conflict would always be possible if there was no such overarching power. Thus, the causes of war were not merely internal political questions or those of bilateral inter-state relations but also necessarily systemic. It was this focus upon the systemic nature of IR that then enabled the rise of system theories and other game theoretic approaches based upon modelling systemic interaction.⁵³

This abstraction from the world was only really problematised by critical theorists with the waning of the Cold War.⁵⁴ Partly, it was this late turn towards more reflexive and critical theoretical approaches that explained why the shifting international structures in the 1990s were interpreted through the lenses of the disciplinary canon which crudely

in a practical or pragmatist sense, *Realism Versus Global Arms Control and Disarmament: Ethics and Force in Carr, Morgenthau, and Schwarzenberger* (London: Edward Edgar, 2025), 8; see also Sean Molloy, ‘Pragmatism, Realism and the Ethics of Crisis and Transformation in International Relations’, *International Theory* 6, no. 3 (2014): 454–89. The point is that there could be no abstraction of ethics from the specific context, precisely because of the lack of a universalisable ‘world’.

51. Immanuel Kant, ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’, in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 93–130.
52. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), first published in 1959.
53. Duncan Snidal, ‘The Game Theory of International Politics’, *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (1985): 25–57.
54. See, for example, the path-breaking work in the early 1990s of Ken Booth in critical security studies, ‘Security and Emancipation’, *Review of International Studies* 17, no. 4 (1991): 313–26, and Rob Walker in IR theory, for example, ‘State Sovereignty and the Articulation of Political Space/Time’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (1991): 445–61. It should be noted that the term ‘critical theorists’ covers a broad range of

counterposed 'Realism' and 'Liberalism' as key paradigms for interpreting inter-state relations.⁵⁵ On its own, the 'Realist vs Liberal' heuristic provides a partial understanding of the disciplinary imaginary – that the end of the Cold War was to issue in a new liberal international order – but misses out a key affective aspect underpinning the expectations of academic IR, particularly the affective expectations of many critical theorists within the discipline. IR as a disciplinary framework cannot be understood without attention to the ways in which IR was perceived to be held back by its 'lack' that was seen to make it inferior intellectually and morally, particularly in relation to its parent discipline of liberal political theory.

This lack had shaped the intellectual history of the Western discipline of IR from Kant's 'Perpetual Peace' of 1795 onwards. For Kant, the reality of IR as an arena of study was that of venality and dishonest theorising. The only solution to the problem was the utopian promise of a global system of governance analogous to the domestic nation state, capable of wielding a monopoly on violence and (re)constituting states as members of a global 'civil society'.⁵⁶ Thus, an increasingly compelling alternative to the abstract gaming scenarios of Realist system theories was a critical utopian imaginary of an IR 'to come'.⁵⁷ For many critical theorists, it was possible to imagine a telos of rational interest driving greater international cooperation as the world was seen as becoming increasingly interdependent.⁵⁸ The international realm then becomes a promise to come or reimagined as a transcendental journey towards a more harmonious world.⁵⁹ Kant's 1795 essay 'Perpetual Peace' was the first to make this critical liberal claim that the 'human race' can be brought 'nearer and nearer to a cosmopolitan constitution' and world citizenship.⁶⁰ In the 1970s and 1980s, many critical IR theorists increasingly bought into a Kantian imaginary of an IR 'to come', of the immanent potentiality of a global liberal order. It is

critical perspectives. Disagreements within the critical IR community often cohered around understandings precisely of the 'critical turn' in IR in the 1990s and how the universal, human-centred imaginaries of IR were to be grasped; see, for example, the collections, Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams (eds), *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997); Booth, *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*.

55. 'Realism' and 'Liberalism' are capitalised when referring to paradigmatic approaches within the discipline of IR.
56. See Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994).
57. 'To come' is in quote marks to highlight the analogy with Derrida's critical and deconstructive use of the concept; see, for example, his reflection in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 88. The global order of the liberal imaginary could never arrive without producing its own problems of totalising closure, of an end to an 'outside'. In this respect, the critical promise was one that could never be delivered upon without unravelling, without closing, the futural horizon, which operates in this context as a 'mechanism of disavowal', see Elizabeth Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 38.
58. See, for example, Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, 'Power and Interdependence', *Survival* 15, no. 4 (1973): 158–65.
59. See also Chandler, 'Un-cancelling the Future': Kantian Ethics and the Ukraine War', *New Perspectives* 33, no. 3 (2025): 262–275.
60. Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', 106.

this imaginary that many believed to be coming into being in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War divide.⁶¹

The drive behind reimagining the 1990s as a liberal moment for IR as a discipline is connected to its unique disciplinary history. Up until this point, IR was understood to be highly elitist. IR was concerned with the problems of princes, of *realpolitik*, of state sovereigns, of matters of state, not matters of society. The opening up of the discipline in the 1990s meant that IR's concerns expanded. Shifting from a state-based 'Realist' imaginary to a critical 'human-centred' one, meant that IR could confront an internally urgent task of becoming less 'stale, pale and male'. The affective and intellectual context in part explains why the discipline of IR was perhaps a little out of step with other disciplinary fields in the humanities and social sciences. While other fields were increasingly disillusioned with a liberal imaginary, much critical scholarship in IR was keen to be included within and to partake of it. It is this disciplinary disjunction that underpins the fact that many academics within IR read the critical turn in a narrow and idealist way, as undermining the power of states and thereby revealing a shared communal reality⁶²; laying the grounds for an emancipatory order that could qualify IR as a liberal political discipline bounded by global imaginaries of power and their co-constitutive universal human subject.

Theories of a new cosmopolitan liberal ordering or 'cosmopolitan democracy', with leading liberal powers shaping a new international order of global governance were rapidly recycled across the discipline.⁶³ The restructuring of the international order required careful analysis but instead, much of the disciplinary work in IR struck a celebratory tone, with an atmosphere of positive expectation and a largely unquestioned understanding that this was the final 'realisation' of liberalism.⁶⁴ This critical 'understanding' was largely based on wishful thinking and hagiographic repetition of the celebratory speeches and claims of international political leaders such as the US President Bill Clinton and the UK Prime Minister Tony Blair.⁶⁵ Those seeking to problematise this shift still bought into the critical imaginary that the international realm was no longer fragmented but now a unified one. This was reflected in the speed with which IR theorists were drawn to Foucauldian frameworks of critique, precisely on the basis of accepting that this was a new global liberal order,⁶⁶ while the Deleuzian Marxism of Michael Hardt and Toni

61. One of the few substantial IR critiques of this imaginary of a qualitative transition was Rosenberg's *The Follies of Globalization Theory: Polemical Essays* (London: Verso, 2001).

62. See Chandler and Nik Hynek, 'No Emancipatory Alternative, No Critical Security Studies', *Critical Studies on Security* 1, no. 1 (2013): 46–63; Chandler and Hynek (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Human Security: Rethinking Emancipation and Power in International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

63. See David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Daniele Archibugi (ed.), *Debating Cosmopolitics* (London: Verso Books, 2003).

64. The 'End of History' as argued by Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 2012), first published in 1992.

65. See, for example, Dunne and Wheeler, *Human Rights in Global Politics*; Karen E. Smith and Margot Light (eds), *Ethics and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

66. See, for example, Mick Dillon and Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

Negri cast the new global order in terms of the post-state 'global war' between *Empire* and *Multitude*.⁶⁷

The new global order was read to be inclusionary, with the Global South now contributing increasingly more international peacekeepers than Western states,⁶⁸ and the redistribution of questions of security, development and democracy to international bodies and NGOs. The only problem was that Western government policy practice greatly differed from the critical IR imaginary. If anything, there was a withdrawal from the international sphere. With the end of the Cold War, there was much less at stake in non-Western parts of the world. Western states increasingly shed their international interests and used the international arena more as a stage for ethical declarations than for considered real-politik.⁶⁹ Direct political clientelism was increasingly less important and rather than direct relations of patronage, management of other states and regions, considered increasingly peripheral, was delegated to UN institutions and NGOs.

Many critical IR scholars, however, imagined that a Kantian dream of a league of democracies, armed for 'Perpetual Peace', was in the process of emergence.⁷⁰ This tended to contrast with some more innovative work in other disciplines, especially the fields of geography and sociology. For example, Arjun Appadurai,⁷¹ Saskia Sassen,⁷² John Agnew,⁷³ Manuel Castells,⁷⁴ Anthony Giddens⁷⁵ and Ulrich Beck,⁷⁶ all presented less celebratory understandings of globalisation, highlighting the downsides and the challenges to traditional modes of policymaking. The difference was at times striking. Even though these scholars were often integrated into IR forums,⁷⁷ their understanding of globalisation

67. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) and *Multitude* (London: Penguin Books, 2005); see also Vivienne Jabri, 'War, Security and the Liberal State', *Security Dialogue* 37, no. 1 (2006): 47–64. For a critique, see Chandler, *Hollow Hegemony: Rethinking Global Politics, Power and Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

68. See, for example, Philip Cunliffe, *Legions of Peace: UN Peacekeepers from the Global South* (London: C. Hurst, 2013).

69. Chandler, 'Rhetoric Without Responsibility: The Attraction of "Ethical" Foreign Policy', *Political Studies* 5, no. 3 (2003): 295–316.

70. Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); see also Andrew Linklater, 'Towards a Sociology of Global Morals with an "Emancipatory Intent"', *Review of International Studies* 33 (2007): 135–50.

71. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

72. Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

73. John Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory', *Review of International Political Economy* 1, no. 1 (1994): 53–80.

74. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Williston, VT: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

75. Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalisation Is Reshaping Our Lives* (London: Profile Books, 1999).

76. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).

77. For example, Ulrich Beck worked in close collaboration with Mary Kaldor's Global Civil Society research unit at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). See, for example, Centre for Civil Society (ed.), *Global Civil Society Yearbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

as limiting the possibilities for liberal governance was slow to sink in. Beck, for example, argued that globalisation changed everything; that the liberal telos of progress was over now that there was no ‘outside’ of nature. IR needed to reject the ‘methodological nationalism’ of the state-based approaches of Realism and Liberalism,⁷⁸ and instead adopt ‘a new critical theory to look at the past and the future of modernity. The words for this are neither “utopianism” nor “pessimism” but “irony” and “ambivalence”’.⁷⁹

Ulrich Beck’s argument was that the globalised world risk society was very different from the liberal universalist governmental imaginary of IR articulated by critical scholars like Andrew Linklater, Ken Booth and Mary Kaldor: ‘Cosmopolitanism does not mean as it did for Immanuel Kant an obligation, a task, that is to order the world. Cosmopolitanism in world risk society opens our eyes to the uncontrollable liabilities . . .’.⁸⁰ What Beck analysed as the ‘cosmopolitan condition’ was the unintended consequence of industrial modernity, leading to the ‘disempowerment of Western states’ in what he called ‘reflexive’ or ‘second modernity’.⁸¹ Whereas the first modernity was held to empower states, globalisation, world risk society or second modernity, disempowered them because industrial modernity had removed imaginaries of linear causality, universal laws and fixed Cartesian or Newtonian understandings of time and space.

In fine, rather than gaining a world, these critical IR theorists were arriving just as the party was over, at the same time as other social science disciplines were rejecting the liberal political ontology underpinning this imaginary of both ‘world’ and ‘subject’. Critical IR discovered modernity⁸² just as Bruno Latour was declaring that *We Have Never Been Modern*,⁸³ and social contract theory was being roundly dismissed from positions that problematised the view of the (white, Eurocentric) universal human, the cut of ‘civil society’ from ‘the state of nature’, and the contract’s ontological divide between state societies and the natural environment.⁸⁴ As Mark Usher has argued, outside the bubble of this critical IR scholarship, the ‘global’ was a post-structuralist rather than a critical liberal imaginary, one in which space was increasingly imagined as differentially and socially produced.⁸⁵ The shift to the global may have catapulted the

78. Ulrich Beck, ‘The Cosmopolitan Condition: Why Methodological Nationalism Fails’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007): 286–90.

79. Ulrich Beck, ‘Living in the World Risk Society: A Hobhouse Memorial Public Lecture Given on Wednesday 15 February 2006 at the London School of Economics’, *Economy and Society* 35, no. 3 (2006): 329–45, at 331.

80. *Ibid.*, 341.

81. Beck, ‘The Cosmopolitan Condition’, 287, 289.

82. IR discovered modernity in the sense that new institutional arrangements of global governance were imagined to bring universal legal and ethical frameworks into policymaking and enable a universal human subject to come into being, giving human rights a content beyond political and ideological contestation and enabling a new, supposedly objective or interest-free approach to international problems of conflict management, sustainable development and good governance.

83. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), first published in 1991.

84. See, for example, Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995) first published in 1992; Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

85. Mark Usher, ‘Territory Incognita’, *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 6 (2019): 1019–1046.

discipline of IR from the doldrums of political science into a dynamic arena (in much the same way as International Law was transformed within legal studies) but IR itself, appeared stuck between a 19th century imaginary of liberal modernity – with global governance imagined as overcoming the conceptual and ethical void at the heart of the discipline – and a contemporary post-structuralist imaginary of contingency and differentiation.⁸⁶

The awkward relationship between much critical IR scholarship and cognate disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, regarding the attachment to a universalist liberal imaginary, has been slow to dissipate. In increasingly drawing upon post-critical, decolonial and post-structuralist theorists from outside the discipline, IR itself has largely assimilated these approaches into its ontological imaginary. This applies as much to the spatial and temporal disruptions of quantum mechanics,⁸⁷ as to the flat ontologies of new materialism,⁸⁸ or the relational cosmologies of Indigenous communities.⁸⁹ This appropriative power has been particularly clear in the way that relational ontologies have been taken up (whether articulated through imaginaries of Indigenous knowledge or as speculative readings of work in Science and Technology Studies) as providing a more ‘inclusive’ and ‘totalising’ understanding of ‘reality’ and therefore providing a literal second chance for less hubristic policymaking adapting to the requirements of life’s immanent inner workings.⁹⁰

It seems that just as globalisation was reconceived as enabling a critical enlargement of IR, geographically and in terms of race and gender, so the Anthropocene has been given a positive gloss, enlarging IR to include environmental rather than just economic and social issues and agential assemblies that stretch beyond the human. Since the shift to the global transformed IR into a mainstream academic discipline, there has been little interest in rethinking the ‘critical’ interpretation of the global turn and its ‘after’. The Anthropocene as an intellectual problematic or temporal and spatial ‘condition’ has largely passed IR by as the discipline has processed the rise and fall of the liberal order as a literal or ontic event rather than an ontological concern.

IR’s assimilation of non-liberal theories and approaches has been relatively unproblematic for the discipline.⁹¹ This is so much the case that the crisis of the liberal order is

86. Well reflected in the work of Jan Aart Scholte; see, for example, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction, Second Edition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

87. See, for example, Der Derian and Wendt (eds), *Quantum International Relations*; Milja Kurki, ‘Relational Revolution and Relationality in IR: New Conversations’, *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022): 821–36.

88. See, for example, Mark Salter (ed.), *Making Things International 1: Circuits and Motion* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); William Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Michele Acuto and Simon Curtis (eds), *Reassembling International Theory: Assemblage Thinking and International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

89. David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, ‘Worlding, Ontological Politics and the Possibility of a Decolonial IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45, no. 3 (2017): 293–311. For a critique, see Matt Gravin, ‘All My . . . Non-Relation: Critical Indigenous Theory in the Anthropocene’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 53, no. 2 (2025): 442–67.

90. See, for example, Cudworth and Hobden, *Posthuman International Relations*.

91. See also, Wanda Vradi, ‘The Strange Case of Ethnography and International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008): 279–301.

understood largely ontically, as a problem of inter-state relations, rather than ontologically as a crisis of liberalism as a paradigm of thinking. Non-liberal imaginaries have been integrated into IR as a discipline because liberalism, and IR itself, precisely as a liberal discipline, requires discourses of difference as well as those of universality. Problematisations of critical IR approaches have tended to take liberalism at face value as a discourse of universal equality and rights rather than a disciplinary framing that constitutively requires bifurcation, as seen in the necessary articulation of both the public and private, the formal and the informal, the universal and the particular, the sphere of law and the sphere beyond the law, insides and outsides, and the division between the sphere of politics and the sphere of IR.⁹²

After IR?

This article has argued that ‘after IR’ essentially means after disillusionment with the critical imaginaries of IR finally gaining a ‘world’ in the 1990s. This ‘world’ of the global was imagined to be analogous to the universal imaginary of politics inside the sovereign state, a world where reason was possible, where global ethics could be shared, and where ‘progress’, objective ‘problem-solving’ free of great power competition, was possible. The modes through which many in the discipline assimilated, firstly, globalisation and, secondly, the Anthropocene cannot be understood without an analysis of the stakes of a global liberal imaginary for the transformation of IR’s academic institutional standing and ethical self-image. In the 1980s, IR was hardly studied, perhaps just as one module in a politics or social science degree, dealing with rational choice and game theory, stuck in a white, male world of hierarchy and military conflict. In the late-2020s, IR is a huge university business, massively expanded across the English and non-English speaking world. This seeming rise of liberalism was critically understood as a process of enlargement and inclusion, expanding the disciplinary areas of concern and the range of actors and interests involved. The rejection of liberalism has merely intensified this process, in a second wave of disciplinary expansion. In the disciplinary imaginary of today’s post-critical IR, there appears to be no limit to what can be known and accessed, from Indigenous knowledge, to interspecies assemblages and oceanic modes of computation and communication. IR seems capable of assimilating all these ‘post-critical’, more-than-human, alternatives through a process of addition and pluralising.⁹³

As considered above, this imaginary of discovering a ‘world’ that is effervescent (and becoming more lively by the day) is in stark distinction to the shrinking of the discipline’s formal subject matter as the international sphere continues to decline in importance without the rivalry of the Cold War. This shrinking of IR’s ‘world’ was expressed in critical discourses of international security, democratisation and statebuilding, where responsibility was put on to international organisations and institutions precisely because of a decline of ideological contestation, great power competition, and established modes

92. As Rob Walker and others have consistently argued, there can be no liberal order without these violent cuts and exclusions, see, for example, Walker, *Inside/Outside*.

93. Felix Anderl and Antonia Witt, ‘Problematising the Global in Global IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 49, no. 1 (2020): 32–57.

of cohering national interests. This is the same trend that has continued up to today in the decline of influence of these bodies and institutions as finances and specialist expertise are cut back further.⁹⁴

Because of the failure to reflect upon the underpinnings of both international policy and academic shifts in approach, IR misreads the contemporary moment as well. The understanding of being ‘after IR’ recognises the problems with the critical imaginary of a liberal international order; however, this decline is often understood to be a relatively recent shift, enabling IR’s misreadings of both globalisation and the Anthropocene to remain uncontested in disciplinary textbooks and hagiographies. IR, we are led to believe, really did experience a liberal moment, a ‘Liberal International Order’, its Kantian moment, only for this to be destroyed by renewed international rivalries and contestations which have been amplified by the rise to power of authoritarian parties and leaders, such as Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu.

The death of liberalism and the move ‘beyond critique’ is thereby staged ontically as a problem of the collapse of the global liberal ‘rules-based’ regime, whereby Trump stands for everything that is wrong with the international order. This is nicely captured by Kathryn Yusoff’s illustration of the neoliberal order using Trump as the figure of ‘Man 3’,⁹⁵ and Bruno Latour’s use of Trump to illustrate the backward understanding of escape from planetary responsibilities.⁹⁶ The problematisation of this irrational, self-interested approach of realpolitik is enhanced today by a broader understanding that is focused not merely on empty strategic (re)alignments but also understandings of racial capitalism and environmental extractivism. However, what is key to ‘after IR’ is not the critique of the immoral and irrational reality of international politics. This was shared by Kant and has been the ‘bread and butter’ of the academic discipline of IR since the ‘science of empire’⁹⁷ was formally constituted in Aberystwyth in the wake of the First World War.

What is distinct about ‘after IR’ is not the problematisation of the ontic politics of the international order but the alternative that theorists propose to this order. While normatively IR theorists tend to see the decline of the liberal order as problematic, there has been a marked decline of critical universalist imaginaries as an alternative to realpolitik. The loss of a liberal ‘world’ has been unreflectively integrated into both new ‘post-critical’ IR approaches and, increasingly, into policy advocacy, required to adapt to a loss

94. See, for example, Lee Jones, ‘Trump’s Tariff Gamble and the Decay of the Neoliberal Order’, *American Affairs* IX, no. 2 (2025), available at: <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2025/05/trumps-tariff-gamble-and-the-decay-of-the-neoliberal-order/>.

95. Playing on Sylvia Wynters’ understanding of the ‘overrepresentation of Man’ – see Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – an Argument’, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, No. 3 (2003): 257–337; Yusoff, ‘The Inhumanities’, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111, no. 3 (2021): 663–76, at 670.

96. Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 33–38.

97. Jude Rowley, ‘International Relations and Aberystwyth: Crucible of Imperial Science’ (Paper Presented at British Society for the History of Science Annual Conference, 10–13 July 2024, Aberystwyth, UK).

of international support for policy intervention in the Global South. 'After IR' reflects the decline of the purchase of liberal political theory and understanding, but refracts this decline through a disciplinary imaginary caught up in international rhetoric and affectively driven by its own disciplinary biases. This decline – the strange death of liberalism – is a product of shifts within social and philosophical thought which took the end of the Cold War to percolate into the discipline of IR. It is a strange death of liberalism because it is unacknowledged as a broader trend across the humanities and social sciences. Liberalism was, in fact, already exhausted as an academic framework for critical understanding before the discipline of IR necessarily staged its ontic reality, its 'discovery' and then its 'loss'.

Losing its world, confronting the imagined failure of the liberal paradigm to explain the international order, not only restores IR to its original world of 'lack' but also transforms this world. IR's return to its condition of a lack of liberal imaginaries of world and subject is now in line with broader academic and social subjective understandings rather than a miserabilist outlier.⁹⁸ In making this return, IR is transformed as a discipline best placed to understand the limits of colonial, Eurocentric and Western hubris. The liberal imaginary of IR, where the problems of the global order could be resolved by the advance of critical reason, universal ethics and the constitution of a sovereign-like authority of the UN or other bodies, has been exposed as a fantasy. There was no natural liberal 'reality' of equality and justice waiting to come into being. The hidden secret of the liberal political ontology, the hidden secret that banished IR to the pre-contract world to enable Politics as a discipline to assume the natural autonomous rights-bearing subject, was exposed as soon as a global 'liberal' imaginary sought to remove the barriers between the two disciplinary arenas.

The critical imaginary, in being 'realised', was discredited. It became clear that there were no 'objective' policy solutions to enable development, peace and security, that were somehow being obstructed by *realpolitik* competition. The reality of IR was, in fact, the opposite: that the discipline of IR (like all liberal imaginaries) needed an ontology of difference as well as of universality in order to explain the reproduction of extreme inequalities. The task of the discipline of IR, of legitimising and rationalising the inequalities of the international order, was initially undertaken in a colonial world in which racial thinking rationalised the imperial order.⁹⁹ After the discrediting of overt racial thought, with the Second World War, the key difference that explained why the liberal order could not deliver its promised world of equality and justice, was that of the mantra of post-war IR, that without a global sovereign there could be no equality and justice and states had to pursue their self-interest at the expense of others. The liberal political imaginary is always a bifurcated one, between difference and universality, the state of nature and the state of civil society, slavery and freedom, formal equality and substantive inequality.

98. For a positive affirmation of 'worldlessness', rather than seeing this as a point of privation or loss, see Roland Végso, *Worldlessness After Heidegger: Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

99. See Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam (eds), *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics*, 288.

IR's 'critical turn' with its liberal universalist imaginary of the 'global' was out of step with its subject matter from the get-go. Behind the world of realpolitik and superpower rivalry there was no 'reality' of a shared global world. In the Cold War, international policymaking was a matter of either imposing United States or Soviet interests on client states. Once the necessity for maintaining tight reigns of control and dependency had lessened and the ideological coherence of policy advice had waned, policymaking lacked clear goals or commitments. This can be briefly illustrated in the international policy field of economic development where the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were immediately exposed. The key institutions for disciplining and controlling the Global South had no idea how to operate outside the ideological framework of clientelism and imposed conditionality.¹⁰⁰ It was the policy advisors operating in these global international financial institutions who drove conceptual innovation, reworking and rationalising the divide between universal understandings (the 'One World World') and the appearances of entrenched differentiation.

The provisional solution was the processual understanding of relational becoming (which in the discipline of IR is often considered a critical post-structuralist perspective).¹⁰¹ For Douglass North and other institutional economists, time was understood to be non-linear, in other words that differences make differences.¹⁰² These differences were called 'path-dependencies'.¹⁰³ Rather than a universal world with linear causality and a telos of learning or progress, there was a telos of differentiation. In this world, there could be no centralised power or authority because there was no universal 'world': different policy interventions were required for different contexts and it was not possible to know in advance how states, societies or communities might respond to external policy assistance any more than it was possible to know, before the event, how systems will respond to external shocks and perturbations.¹⁰⁴ This non-linearity is the result of the fact

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100. Nobel Prize-winning economist and World Bank advisor Douglass North described the experience of policy directing in the early 1990s as 'playing God' without any idea of policy outcomes, see 'Dealing with a Non-Ergodic World: Institutional Economics, Property Rights, and the Global Environment', *Duke Environmental Law & Policy Forum* 10 (1999): 1–12.
 101. For critical theorists, such as Jairus Grove, difference is in itself a positive, enabling relational interactions to expand in the face of the homogenising universalism of the 'Eurocene', see Grove, 'The Geopolitics of Extinction: From the Anthropocene to the Eurocene', in *Technology and World Politics: An Introduction*, ed. Daniel R. McCarthy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 204–223.
 102. North uses the concept of 'non-ergodic' but the concept is indistinguishable from that of 'non-linear', see North, 'Dealing with a Non-Ergodic World'.
 103. Path-dependencies are the unintended choice-shaping social and institutional frameworks which bound decision-making and undermine abstract understandings of perfect conditions for competition, see Douglass North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), also discussion in Ian Greener, 'The Potential of Path Dependence in Political Studies', *Politics* 25, no. 1 (2005): 62–72.
 104. Therefore, in a world, increasingly grasped as relational, understood as in constant becoming, there can be little room for fixed understandings of causality and centralised control,

that entities can be understood to evolve relationally rather than having some sort of pure essence. This being the case, there can be no centralised policymaking authority, solutions (which can only ever be contingent) lie at the local level and with local agency and relational entanglements.

This processual approach with attention to differentiation and to, what became known in the 1990s as ‘bottom-up’ approaches, can be seen across the international policy world in response to the collapse of the Cold War divide.¹⁰⁵ Outside the international financial institutions, the United Nations Development Programme, pursued ‘human security’ and ‘human development’, not as universalist approaches, as imagined by critical IR theorists, but rather as understandings of differentiation and bottom-up agency. Nobel prize-winning development economist Amartya Sen’s book *Development as Freedom* placed processual understandings at the heart of ‘human-centred’ understandings and the international policymaking agenda.¹⁰⁶ Sen deconstructs representative categories, such as GDP, for failing to capture development as a process of enabling individual agency. He thereby critiques the false metrics of universalist approaches of representation: development is not about quantities of outputs, wealth, income any more than freedom is about formal institutional frameworks. Both are constructed processually in terms of the power of individual differentiation, to become otherwise.

This approach of deconstructing development has recently been extended further in the policy lessons drawn by Mareike Schomerus, a Programme Director at the UK Overseas Development Institute, who argues that international development agencies need to see beyond the given of appearances to think about the potentiality of relational responsivities rather than the actuality of entities.¹⁰⁷ For Schomerus, the key problem revealed by international policy practice is hubris, the Eurocentric, colonial idea that international actors know better than others based upon liberal universalist assumption of entities with essences in a world of linear time and space. Instead, what is needed is humility based on integrating a relational understanding that entities can only be grasped in their fluid contexts, whereby interactions and entanglements bring new characteristics

instead of ‘mastery’, the task is one of experimental learning and of ‘working with’ rather than ‘working on’, see, for example, Andrew Pickering, ‘Cybernetics in the Anthropocene’, *e-flux Architecture*, September 2025, available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/intensification/6782965/cybernetics-in-the-anthropocene>.

105. Monica den Boer and Jaap de Wilde, ‘Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches to Human Security’, in *The Viability of Human Security*, eds. Monica den Boer and Jaap de Wilde (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 9–18; Jon Harald Sande Lie, ‘Bottom-Up Development as Framed Freedom: Developmentality and Donor Power’, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 45, no. 4 (2024): 613–33; Chandler, ‘Peacebuilding and the Politics of Non-linearity: Rethinking “Hidden” Agency and “Resistance”’, *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (2013): 17–32.
106. Amartya K. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); see also Chandler, ‘“Human-Centred” Development? Rethinking “Freedom” and “Agency” in Discourses of International Development’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 42, no. 1 (2013): 3–23.
107. Mareike Schomerus, *Lives Amid Violence: Transforming Development in the Wake of Conflict* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

to the fore. Essentially, the world of appearances is an opaque one of ‘black boxes’, where key to policy outcomes are the unseen relationalities and interdependencies. As Schomerus states, villages may look the same but the ways they may respond to perturbations, be these external conflicts, economic crises or zoonotic diseases, cannot be predicted in advance.¹⁰⁸

This world is one in which what is important is the ability to respond to opportunities, fluxes and contingencies.¹⁰⁹ This is captured well by Randy Martin’s *Knowledge LTD*;¹¹⁰ he argues that while in modernity knowledge was key, in today’s world it is opacity, the unknown. It is openness rather than closure, contingency rather than causality, and doubt rather than certainty, that are the key tropes of IR today as post-structuralist scepticism begins to dominate the academic discipline. In a world of flux and emergence, policymaking is always provisional, never final, problems are always processual, never solved, never over. The world of plenitude and possibility is also a world without stabilised grounds, necessary for allocating blame or accountability. This world may be fuller than ever before but it is no less opaque or immune to policy solutions than the world of IR. The difference is that IR could now rediscover its ‘world’ as both a policymaking and an ethical advance on global liberalism. For example, whereas critical frameworks of understanding articulated peace as a goal with an inclusive peace settlement, experimental post-critical thinking in IR articulates peace as a process that should avoid closure.¹¹¹

Peace settlements lead to wars in the same way that building dams and sea walls lead to increased risks of flooding and the development of new antibiotics leads to more dangerous viruses. This is very much in line with Ulrich Beck’s post-critical view of processual modes of governance,¹¹² of always already being in the process of governing, where the world itself sets the normative agenda. In the past, IR was the object of liberal disdain, lacking a state and the separation of civil society from the state of nature. Today this lack of binaries and separations is an asset, enabling IR to reject liberal imaginaries of control,

108. Ibid., 183.

109. See, for example, Peter J. Katzenstein, *Entanglements in World Politics: The Power of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026); Paul James, *Global Crisis and Insecurity: The Human Condition, Darkly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025); Eva Lövebrand and Malin Mobojörk (eds), *Anthropocene (In)Securities: Reflections on Collective Survival 50 Years After the Stockholm Conference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Adam Day, *The Forever Crisis: Adaptive Global Governance for an Era of Accelerating Complexity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025).

110. Randy Martin, *Knowledge LTD: Toward a Social Logic of the Derivative* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015).

111. See, for example, Jan Pospisil, ‘The Ungovernance of Peace: Transitional Processes in Contemporary Conflictscapes’, *Transnational Legal Theory* 11, no. 3 (2020): 329–52; Thania Paffenholz, ‘Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 3 (2021): 367–85.

112. Ulrich Beck, ‘Emancipatory Catastrophism: What Does It Mean to Climate Change and Risk Society?’ *Current Sociology* 63, no. 1 (2015): 75–88.

of progress and of universal subjects. In fact, IR's liminal status, of being a liberal discipline but recognising there is no liberal 'world', provides an ideal governance framework. This is an ideal governance framework as little is expected from international institutions and from international policy interventions seeking to impose external agendas and goals. IR as an academic field works to lower expectations and to discipline humility, to rationalise the world as it is, while at the same time freeing up space for experimental engagements which celebrate the open-ended possibilities this affords for free play at the margins.

Conclusion

This article has argued that IR is a distinct discipline in having a liberal set of ontological assumptions but realising that its 'world' is not a liberal one. In the past, IR was understood to be 'before' the liberal world, today IR is 'after' the world of the liberal imaginary. IR 'after IR' remains a discourse of apologia and disavowal but the conceptual articulation of IR as an academic discipline has been transformed via its critical engagement with the becoming of a liberal imaginary in the 1990s. It is this strange death of liberalism, projected ontically onto the international sphere, that has enabled IR to transition from a discipline of lack – a discipline that was 'pre-liberal', struck in the timeless 'state of nature' – to a discipline of fullness that is 'after IR' or 'beyond critique'. One able to assimilate the world in ways that liberalism cannot, by going beyond the human/nature divide, beyond Eurocentrism, beyond every liberal imaginary of binaries and hierarchies.

IR as a discipline did not need a liberal world order and was in fact built upon its necessary absence. IR was never comfortable with liberalism's universalist assumptions or its telos of progress. IR's seamless transition from pre-liberal to post-critical framings via the short decades of the 'critical turn', illustrates a continuity that has enabled this flexibility. 'After IR' can only be grasped once it is understood that a liberal ontic order is contingent on social and political processes of contestation while a liberal ontology is all that is necessary for governance, for apologia and for disavowal. IR was a discipline of the 'miserable comforters' who rationalised away conflicts, hierarchies and inequalities. Even the critique of this miserablism was based on an understanding that IR would always lack any progressive social and political potential as long as the international was divided without a shared world. Today's IR argues essentially the same, except that now we know that a shared world is impossible, that this critical imaginary of a universal civil society depended on racial and extractivist epistemological and ontological assumptions that are no longer tenable. The loss of world and the loss of a universal 'human' are no longer construed as a 'lack' but as a gain in knowledge and experience. IR's time has come at last. IR needed to be 'after IR' and 'beyond critique' in order to find itself at home in this world after 'the' world.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the students who have participated in various iterations of my University of Westminster MA programme module 'Beyond IR: Imaginaries of the International, the Global and the Planetary'; your feedback and contributions have been invaluable to my thinking about these

questions. I would also like to thank the *Millennium* journal editors and the reviewers for their generous and insightful comments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

David Chandler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2766-7169>