

# International Relations and the Human: A Commentary

Written by Zeynep Gulsah Capan, Siba N. Grovogui, Amy Niang and  
Giulianna Zambrano

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# International Relations and the Human: A Commentary

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ZEYNEP GULSAH CAPAN, SIBA N. GROVOGUI, AMY NIANG AND GIULIANNA ZAMBRANO, JAN 20  
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*During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.* – Nelson Mandela, speech from the dock at the Rivonia Trial, April 20, 1964

## The Reason Of The Sovereign

The human has ostensibly been central to all of our disciplinary concerns. They include security, or the ability to function free of molestation, the good life (the ability to maintain life), and the ability to produce and reproduce ethical lives, through collective endeavors, mutual responsibility, and the political economy. Humans built societies, institutions, and instruments to these ends, including the production of knowledge leading to security and the good and ethical life. The discipline of international relations emerges in this context as an instrument toward this end. However, from its inception to date, it seems to have paid greater attention to the institutions and instruments of deliverance of the goods. It has done so according to one of its predicates, or the spatial distributions of the above, mistaken for 'the international'. This misnomer is not the only reason that the human disappears from disciplinary concerns. The human disappears because of the sovereign claim of dynasties and states after them on life, its purpose, the means of its reproduction, and the terms of death.

In deference to the sovereign, or perhaps in complicity, the discipline has bowed to the exigencies of states, their governors, and their economies of production of life, security, and goods. The human appears thus only secondarily in the state's concerns today as citizen, consumer, 'agent', and the like of 'international' processes to which it is merely witness, bystander, or **by-product**. In these capacities, the human enters in 'international relations' only through the *sovereign mediation* of state, nations, societies, and markets. Its faith and condition cease to be the organizing principles of sovereigns and international thought. It is this paradox of thought, that must be corrected for the discipline to return to the primary principle of social life: the individual, her relations, moral commitments, and ethical engagements, all of which now obfuscated by the focus on state, sovereignty, market, and their agents, actors, and subjects. The central claim of this commentary is that the occlusion of the human in International Relations restricts the field of possibilities for understanding its objects of inquiry. The vocabularies through which the main questions of the field have been posed (such as security and the good life) were developed through sovereign mediations.

The International itself came about as an outcome of encounter -a world coming together *through relations*- between the West and the rest of the world. This encounter of differences produced Difference conceptualized variously in International Political Economy (IPE), International Law, Political Theory, Anthropology and so on, on the basis of binary distinctions between moderns vs. non-moderns and similar constructs. At stake in the revision of these bodies of knowledge are questions of clarification of history (what happened), the recognition of the Colonial and Imperial violence that pervades global history (how it happened), and the confrontation of the obliteration of the Other in the Self, therefore the source(s) of justification of a world inhabited by hierarchized subjects entitled to different rights to life and humanity. Both ontological violence and colonial violence frame and continue to frame—in their very

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occlusions—the reflexes and the discipline’s objects of knowledge. For instance, the constricted ontologies that flow out of foundational constructs of ‘global governance’ and humanitarianism ultimately appear to be nothing more than the will of the Emperor or the sovereign as the moral fund from which the general will should flow. Without these, the discipline itself would collapse. At stake therefore is the very existence of a discipline made of fragile constructs.

The occlusion of the human has many dimensions, one of which is the conflation of difference with hierarchy and related modes of differentiation of values, norms, and other indicators of evolution or civilization. These modes of differentiation relate human faculties, capacities, and achievements to time and space, particularly geography, race, religion, and cultures, highlighting life, life forms, and ways of being. The underlying perceived ‘differences’ generated hierarchies of needs, entitlements, and expectations that also structured thoughts around rights and access to the good life, property, and security. All of the above manifested themselves in immanent notions of international order, international law and ethics, including humanitarian law. Hence, under empire as well as today’s international politics, order, international security, and peace and the prevention of conflict rely on the unspoken but persistent predicate of the pacification of the racialized and culturally and geographical distant other of the West. This distance itself is measured in time (as in ideas of development and morality) and symbolic mentalscapes of zones of actual and potential disorder, disturbances, illegality, and immorality to be contrasted with a geography of legality, order, peace, and good and unimpeachable intentions. ‘Naturally’, the multiplicities amalgamated under the first category are expected to uniformly and unquestionably abide the second. This, the West, is now supposed to be by dint of ‘providence’, ‘reason’, and ‘fact’, the legitimate legislator, enactor, and adjudicator of the general will, the collective good, and the universal desire.

## **Recovering The Human**

The human thus appears to be the unfulfilled account that haunts the incomplete, lopsided framing of knowledge in the discipline. One will be thus forgiven to linger over the notion of the human as central to disciplinary practice, without being restricted by a ‘humanist’ bias, in other words a reification of the human as highest value, and without running the risk of turning the discipline into a moral science.

To claim that it is necessary to bring the discussion on the human back to IR means a shift that puts human encounters and interactions as main concerns of the discipline. Not just as individuals aggregated in groups that interact, but also the human as a notion that inhabits the threshold between being enabled or disabled to live and participate in a political community. As such, it is in what is denied by sovereign mediations that radical notions of humanity, beyond the human as a creature of law and in relation to the state, can emerge.

IR developed with an emphasis on the relation between aggregated notions of the self and the other that conform political communities without making central the discussion of the negative effects in these constructions that sustain our political language and imagination. Nations, states, international organizations, associations, social movements, and political communities in general, accepted this limit between the self and the other and embraced it by making possible to understand the political only through belonging. Although certain subfields in IR, such as Human Rights or International Humanitarian Law, are making claims about the human, that has not necessarily lead to question the limit of belonging and its implications in the realm of the humane that sustains political communities. Thus, IR and the Human inhabit the prison of concepts that occludes radical notions of humanity not necessarily based on the belonging of the citizen or the subject of law.

For instance, it is important to question how can the human in human rights knowledge and practice be sustained when thinking outside of the protective shield of citizenship. In immigration thinking and practice, citizenship is the epitome notion by which sovereign mediation determines who can and who cannot live as fully human. Citizenship excludes “Others” from the conditions to live “the good life” in a new place. If we take the figure of the refugee as an example, it is evident that our political language has failed to encompass the human outside notions of citizenship or legal status. In order to control who accesses legal and political possibilities of realizing one’s humanity, immigration offices instrumentalize sovereign mediations that determine the valid reasons to get in (i.e; the credible fear interview procedure). The ability to imagine other social contracts that allow refugees to participate fully in a political community has been severed by the citizenship ideal that needs to be earned through tests of “credibility”, thus

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reducing the human to mere legal and political constructs. What is left outside of validations of sovereign mediations is fragile recovery of the human which nonetheless carries new critical languages for rethinking the human condition.

The very objective of Humanism is to transcend the notion that there are particular humans; the struggle against apartheid and racial ideology was never about Black people. Nelson Mandela's quote above is precisely about that, the idea that humanism only holds where and when it is an aspiration for a universal human. In fact, the struggle of Black peoples across generations and geographies have always been about a universal humanism in one form or another, from Haiti (to be black is a political choice) to decolonisation projects including the anti-apartheid movement. For Nelson Mandela, the humanist ideal is a cause worth dying for. Such an ideal is neither related to identity nor tethered to power; it rather pertains to *the human as value*. War, like racial discrimination and like other instruments of sovereign mediation, is an example of travesty meted on the human in the name of humanity.

What is therefore at stake in the recovery of the human in International Relations is primarily the possibility of building a concordance between a discipline's object and its methodologies and tools of enquiry. More crucially, it is about replacing at the center of disciplinary concerns of human communities as structures of relations. The commentary aimed to underline the importance of problematizing the way human relations have been made meaningful through sovereign mediations that silence and distort common objects of inquiry.

### Note

[1] This commentary is part of series of reflections by the "Doing IR Differently" collective that was formed in July 2018 at a workshop sponsored by the Universidad San Francisco de Quito on San Cristóbal Island in Galapagos, Ecuador. The sources of inspiration of this collective are varied and widespread, including post-colonial and decolonial work and the non/post/beyond Western debate.

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**Zeynep Gülşah Çapan** is a Lecturer in the chair group of International Relations at the University of Erfurt, where she is also a member of the interdisciplinary Center for Political Practices and Orders (C2PO). Her research focuses on critical theories of international relations, history and historiography, Eurocentrism of the field of IR, sociology of knowledge and postcolonial and decolonial thought. She is the author of *Re-Writing International Relations: History and Theory Beyond Eurocentrism in Turkey* published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2016, has published articles in *Third World Quarterly*, *Contexto Internacional* and *Review of International Studies*. Her most recent publication is 'Writing International Relations from the Other Side of the Abyssal Line', *Review of International Studies*, 43(4): 602-611.

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Francisco de Quito, Ecuador. Her research focuses on the connections between aesthetics and politics; human rights writing, especially related to migration, race and gender; prison art and literature; political repression; and post-catastrophe narratives. She is the author of *Resignifying Social Justice in Chota's Valley*, published in Ecuador by Abya-Yala and FLACSO-Ecuador. And, currently, she is leading the project "Looking in the silence of things", a performance-installation-documentary piece based on the memory of post-catastrophe objects left after 2016 earthquake in Ecuador. She has also published her work in *Perífrasis* and *Iuris Dictio*.