



Kent Academic Repository

Pabst, Adrian (2014) *Commonwealth and Covenant: The West in a neo-medieval era of international relations*. Telos, 168 . pp. 107-131. ISSN 0090-6514.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/41753/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.3817/0914168107>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

Commonwealth and Covenant: The West in a Neo-Medieval Era of International Affairs

Adrian Pabst

Introduction

We live in troubled times. U.S. military might and European economic expansion can scarcely hide the absence of any substantive accord among Western powers that have dominated the globe for several centuries. As America shifts its geo-strategic focus away from the Euro-Atlantic region, the West seems increasingly split between European and Pacific powers—with Russia stuck in a Eurasian gray zone. Without a shared ideology or overarching narrative, the various parts of the wider West are drifting apart. Indeed, there is a growing gap between an exceptionalist United States, a cosmopolitan European Union, and a reactionary Russia. Whereas America invokes the Puritan promise of a “shining city on the hill” and a “beacon of democracy” to all the nations, Europe pursues Rousseau’s and Kant’s Enlightenment project of a post-national federation of states. Meanwhile Russia seems to follow the counter-Enlightenment of de Maistre and Herder, strengthening the national community against both foreign influence and minority rights claims.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, EU multilateralism and U.S. unipolarity displaced notions of state sovereignty in favor of liberal or neoconservative interventionism. However, as the United States and Europe turn away from their interventionist stance, the whole extent of the strategic void at the heart of the Western world is plain for everyone to see. Compared with its own historical unfolding or even the recent Cold War past, the West today looks bereft of ideas, deeply divided, and incapable of acting as a force for good. It was not supposed to be that way. After the demise of

the Soviet Union, successive U.S. administrations harbored ambitions of global hegemony with the complicit collusion of their European allies. But instead of a global convergence toward liberal “market democracy,” we are seeing the rise of old empires and new elites who combine bureaucratic capitalism with authoritarian plutocracy in a neoliberal-communistic hybrid.¹

Amid global interdependence and volatility, Western countries oscillate between market anarchy and state coercion. They are eschewing global leadership and lasting involvement abroad in favor of managing risks from afar. Across the West there is a growing populist backlash against the dominant forms of globalization and a call to retreat to narrow national self-interest. With a general failure to lead by example, the global power vacuum will be filled by extremist forces of secular nationalism or religious fundamentalism—or, in some cases, both at once. As the boundaries between power and terror as well as wealth and crime are becoming blurred, the world now exhibits a general slide into official corruption, corporate tyranny, the collapse of equity, and a disregard for the rule of law—to which the West is by no means immune. To retreat to an insular powerlessness in the face of these things would be to betray Western identity and incidentally threaten long-term security.

The only alternative to both chauvinist nationalism and abstract cosmopolitanism is to re-envision the West as something like a multi-national association that shares risks, rewards, and resources. This could be a voluntary agreement among participatory nations to offer minimum provisions in both the economic and the social realms and also to meet certain shared standards of “subsidiarity,” or of decentralized control and responsibility. Part of that arrangement could be a pooled promise of financial assistance under inspected control, if any nation found it hard to meet such standards. A true commonwealth of nations would reflect a relational covenant among peoples where social and cultural ties shape our identity more than entitlements and contracts.

1. See Christopher Lash, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995); Paul Piccone, *Confronting the Crisis: The Writings of Paul Piccone* (New York: Telos Publishing Press, 2008); David J. Rothkopf, *Superclass: The Global Power Elite and the World They Are Making* (London: Little, Brown & Company, 2008); Alain Supiot, “Grandeur and Misery of the Social State,” *New Left Review* 82 (July–August 2013): 99–113.

1. The West beyond Secular Superecessionism

The West is commonly associated with one of two narratives: either the progressive unfolding of universal civilization that invented and instituted freedom, democracy, market economy, and human rights, or else a history of colonialism that led to violence, oppression, and capitalist domination across the globe.² Both of these narratives seem to be diametrically opposed but share much more in common than might be at first apparent. First of all, they trace the origins of the West to antecedents in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but they claim that the Western project only came to full fruition in the modern era when it exported its ideas and institutions to the rest of the world—for good or ill. The “long sixteenth century” (ca. 1450–1650) assumes pivotal importance in the West’s ascendancy to hegemonic status.

Linked to this is a second point of convergence, notably that modern history superseded and ultimately replaced all preceding traditions. Such a structuring of historical narrative is based on the idea of absolute breaks in history—the final demise of the eastern Roman Empire in 1453 when Constantinople fell to the Turks, or the discovery of the New World starting in 1492, or the 1555 Peace of Augsburg and the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia that ended the “wars of religions,” or again the French Revolution that abolished the collusion of clerical theocracy with monarchical absolutism. In this light, revolutions are seen as absolute ruptures with the past of which modern Western countries have been the vehicle.

Third, Western hegemony is connected with the fall of Catholic-Orthodox Christendom and the rise of Protestant modernity, which is variously viewed as a harbinger of Enlightenment emancipation or as the source of supremacism. Either way, the secularizing effects of the Reformation are considered to be instrumental in shaping the Western-centric world as we know it. This is reflected in the secular settlement of the Westphalian system, which subsumes all institutions and practices under the absolute sovereignty of national states and transnational markets.

Taken together, these three points of convergence suggest that the transition from Antiquity and the Middle Ages to the modern era was

2. For recent statements of these narratives (with a particular focus on Britain), see, *inter alia*, Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, new ed. (London: Penguin, 2004); Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Penguin, 2012); Richard Gott, *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt* (London: Verso, 2012).

somehow exemplary—either as a universal civilization that is compatible with a more global cosmopolitan (European) or a more national republican (U.S.) vision, or else as a particular tradition of colonialism that seeks to refashion the whole world in its own image. In short, modernity is considered to be both necessary and normative, whether as the beginning of the liberal culmination of history or the liberal transition to an eventual communist outcome.

Yet one can question this prevailing metanarrative of the West. First of all, it uncritically accepts the conventional periodizations of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modernity, which ignore deep continuities over time—including Greco-Roman law and participation in the *polis/civitas*, Christian constitutionalism and virtues of charity, or the shared tradition of religious freedom, free association, and the dignity of the person.³ If one takes these continuities into account, then one can tell a more balanced story that reveals how change and stasis are always complexly interwoven. This is to embrace a more radical historicity that regards intellectual, social, and political developments in terms of their specifically contingent cultural roots and their equally contingent, if habitually consistent, unfolding both over time and across space.

Second, this metanarrative embraces a supercessionist model of historical change that underpins the liberal and Marxist accounts of progress, which dominate both the humanities and the social sciences.⁴ Variants of progressivism are all part of the “Whig interpretation of history” that Herbert Butterfield rebutted so brilliantly in his eponymous book.⁵ By treating the modern as an exemplification of historical evolution, such approaches commit the fallacy of historicism that treats contingent events as necessary norms.

Third, connected with this is the point that historicism rests on an ahistorical logic. The latter was invented by late medieval secular reason and

3. See, *inter alia*, Brian Tierney, *Religion, Law, and the Growth of Constitutional Thought, 1150–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982); J. H. Burns, “Introduction,” in J. H. Burns, ed., *Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), pp. 1–8; Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History 500–1000* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), esp. pp. 151–216, 253–92; Francis Oakley, *Natural Law, Laws of Nature, Natural Rights: Continuity and Discontinuity in the History of Ideas* (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 87–109.

4. Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013).

5. Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: George Bell, 1949).

progressively instituted by the forces of Protestant confessionalization and the Enlightenment.⁶ In positing absolute historical breaks—which in reality were entirely avoidable, contingent, and arbitrary—this logic is unable to demonstrate its own presupposition that the passage from the Middle Ages to the modern era was somehow inevitable, necessary, and normative.⁷

Fourth, this sort of historicism treats history as a fated and all-determining teleological process based on certain iron laws. Precisely for this reason, the genuine alternative is not to opt for ahistorical, secular categories that are supposedly universal but rather to focus on specific, contingent developments. Far from being isolated events or absolute breaks in history, the emergence of the modern West was part of an era spanning the early fourteenth to the late seventeenth century, during which both ideas and practices already nascent during medieval times achieved fuller maturity and developed into the secular modern phase of the Middle Ages.⁸

Fifth, one can extend the critique of Protestant-liberal historicism and suggest that approaches centered on notions of *long durée* or cognate concepts also lack historicity. The reason is that many late medieval features of the international system endured until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even intensified in scope. This includes the complex connections between central state coercion and global market exploitation, notably the “possessive individualism” of the social contract, agrarian surplus extraction, and piratical forms of trade.⁹ For these reasons, one can suggest that the modern Western system of national states and transnational markets marked an intensification of certain late-medieval developments rather than a new phase of history.

6. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond secular reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006 [orig. pub. 1990]); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007); Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay on the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1993); Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008).

7. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), and *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003).

8. See Adrian Pabst, “The Secularism of Post-Secularity: Religion, Realism and the Revival of Grand Theory in IR,” *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 5 (December 2012): 995–1017.

9. C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon 1962); Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (London: Verso, 2003); Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003), esp. pp. 215–75.

Sixth, the logic that underpins the two dominant narratives about the West as a universal civilization or a particular form of colonialism is secular insofar as the Westphalian settlement of sovereign states is not limited to the functional differentiation of religious and political authority or the public settlement of the relationship between church and state that writes faith out of international relations. By subordinating faith to secular categories, the ideas that instituted Westphalia did not merely de-sacralize the public square. They reinvested it with quasi-sacred meaning by sacralizing secularity—the king, the nation, the state, the market, the individual, or the collective. As such, Western secularism does not so much mark the demise of faith or the exit from religion. Rather, it represents an alternative sacrality—a secular capture of sanctity that, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, profanes the sacred and sacralizes the profane.

Seventh, the two dominant narratives about Western civilization and colonialism tend to privilege a narrow, modern secular prism at the expense of a metahistorical account that understands the West in light of its origins during the Axial Age. Simultaneously yet independently, a variety of different traditions in Persia, China, India, and the West produced profoundly transformative thinking in the period from 800 to 200 BC that provided the spiritual and intellectual source for humanity over the following two millennia. The mark of the Axial Age was to fuse philosophy with religion in ways that, in case of the West, led to a synthesis of individual liberty with universal *telos*. In this manner, human agency in the immanent order of being was for the first time in history seen as compatible with a transcendent outlook. This conception departed radically from both deterministic fatalism and the indeterminacy of random flux that had characterized much of pre-Axial thinking. Linked to this was the rejection of political absolutism and moral relativism in favor of a plural universalism that blends particular practices with universal principles such as notions of the dignity of the person or the supernatural Good in God.

The Axial synthesis also outflanked in advance the modern oscillation between metaphysical-political monism and dualism and closely connected accounts of history that were either linear or cyclical. Indeed, the plural universalist vision of the Axial Age in the West shifted the emphasis away from historical narratives of either progress or decline, or else some cyclical alternation between both, to the paradox of fall and redemption—an upward spiral of vice and virtue rather than a linear or cyclical process involving the forces of good versus evil (however defined).

Finally and crucially, the West in its universal, metahistorical sense (rather than its narrow, modern meaning) marks the unfolding of this “organic” plural universalism. Unlike static dynasties in ancient Egypt or revolutionary regimes in the United States and France, the rest of the West is not self-foundational but instead marks the continuous unfolding of the Hellenistic fusion of Jerusalem with Athens and Rome.¹⁰ In the “long Middle Ages” (ca. 500–1300), Hellenized Christianity integrated and transformed other European traditions such as Germanic law, Celtic, Slavic, and other languages as well as cultural-social ties the wider Middle East, North Africa, and Eurasia. But already after the fall of imperial Rome in the late fifth century, three different forces vied for the Roman legacy and shaped the West’s emerging civilization: first, pagan tribes from Germanic, Turkic, and Slavonic territories; second, Christendom and its ecclesial “body” of local parishes and transnational monasteries; and third, Islam’s creation of a caliphate from Arabia to the Iberian peninsula. Of these, as Rowan Williams writes, “the Christian Church is quite simply the most extensive and enduring, whether in the form of the Western Papacy or of the “Byzantine Commonwealth,’ the network of cultural and spiritual connections in Eastern Europe linked to the new Roman Empire centered on Constantinople.”¹¹ For this reason, all attempts to produce secular readings of Western history are ahistorical and deny the enduring presence of Christianity throughout the modern, Enlightenment age.

In the wider West, the Axial Age and Christianity brought about a new polity that distributed both power and wealth between city-states, empires, and the Church.¹² By contrast, modernity replaced the pooling of sovereignty with the single sovereign power of national states and transnational markets. Today we are seeing a resurgence of neo-medieval forms of political organization in a new guise, as the following section suggests.

10. See Adrian Pabst, “Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: A Reply to Luciano Pellicani,” *Telos* 162 (Spring 2013): 164–76.

11. Archbishop Rowan Williams, “Religion Culture Diversity and Tolerance: Shaping the New Europe,” address given in Brussels, November 7, 2005, available online at <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1179/religion-culture-diversity-and-tolerance-shaping-the-new-europe-address-at-the-european-policy-centr>. See also Dmitry Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500–1453* (London: Sphere Books, 1974).

12. Pierre Manent, *Les métamorphoses de la cité: Essai sur la dynamique de l’Occident* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

2. *Globalization and the Neo-Medieval Shape of International Affairs*

The dominant model of globalization has established the primacy of the economic and the political over the social and the ethical. It has imposed rights and contracts at the expense of social ties and civic bonds. As a result, the economy and polity have been evermore uprooted from their traditional culture. Production and trade have been disembedded from society, and social relations re-embedded in an increasingly abstract, financialized economy.¹³ Equivalently, short-term transactions take increasing precedence over long-term relationships. This logic both assumes and further engenders a purely self-reflexive, randomly choosing individual removed from the relational constraints and opportunities of nature, tradition family, and locality.

Crucially, the person is no longer regarded as the union of body and soul but, through a mechanization of Cartesian dualism, is divided into a merely physical brain and a bag of bones and flesh—essentially just an amorphous mass of cells that can be manipulated at will by both the centralized national state and the globalized free market. If the individual as brain has “ownership” of this merely physical body, then he can freely alienate it. For this reason, capitalism has long assumed that one could sell one’s labor while reserving one’s person, which means that the employer of one’s labor need have no regard for that personhood.¹⁴ Equivalently, according to the same biopolitical logic, the Republic has no regard for the citizen save as citizen, which is the dark reverse face of his supposed enlightened power to set up the state with others through a formal social contract (as for Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, or Kant).

So the serf or guildsman appears less absolutely free, yet by virtue of his collective belonging through his own body to the corporate body is treated in the round as a person by his master or colleagues. Likewise the “subject” of a Crown is not part of creating the kingdom, yet in being “subjected” to the monarch is recognized as a human subject or a person and is indeed thereby further “subjectified” or “personified.” By contrast, to be a mere worker or citizen means always to be *objectified*. And in either case, ownership of one’s own body is always partitioned and the aspect belonging to the market or the state is always homogeneously compounded with other bodies to make one single manipulable mass.

13. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Economic and Political Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944).

14. See Suptot, “Grandeur and Misery of the Social State,” pp. 99–113.

This process of objectification has been taken much further in recent times and has been much assisted by the dominant model of globalization, which permits a further degree of remote control of both isolated mental decisions and human bodies. And with the loss of integral persons has gone the loss of the centrality of substantive justice. Since the person is reduced to the randomly choosing subject, the virtue of justice gets replaced by formalist, procedural norms and values of impartiality and fairness that are centered on individual rights and entitlements. Equally, globalization reduces democracy to a set of procedures such as “free elections” and promotes an impoverished utilitarian ethic that maximizes private choice and the pursuit of personal pleasure. The ancient notion of happiness as *eudaimonia*, which means the flourishing of the person, is thereby reconfigured. All this brackets questions of the substantive common good altogether out of the picture.

However, there is another possibility. This is that transport and communications could truly provide the preconditions for the emergence of a global village, in which social bonds and cultural ties really do embed economic transactions and political cooperation. The current mode of globalization mostly destroys locality and interpersonal relationships by subordinating all interactions to formalistic, procedural standards of individual rights and commercial contract and by regarding local taste and custom as irrelevant. But globalization also renders it more and more possible for one community, locality, and even region to communicate directly with another in a totally distant part of the world. In this way it just could once more come to seem “common sense” that the entire economy should be subordinate to social reciprocity and that the polity reflects the relational nature of humankind—including the complex ties of family, community, profession, and faith.

Nor is this a mere possibility on the theoretical horizon. Globalization has already transformed the secular settlement of national states and transnational markets bequeathed to us by the Westphalian system. In a sense we now live in a neo-medieval era insofar as we have outlived the dominant sway of national states and to some extent of undifferentiated markets. Viewed from a wide historical perspective (approximately 5,000 years), the era of sovereign nation-states is very short (less than 500 years) and exceptional compared with the relative norm of imperially organized systems with gradated polities that rest on different kind of suzerainty. The latter describes formal or semi-formal relationships of supremacy and

subordination that are situated somewhere between the absolute equality of independent sovereign states and the direct rule of repressive colonial powers.

Even if the dominant modern institutional legacy will endure for some time to come, the exceptional era of the Westphalian settlement appears to draw to an end.¹⁵ We seem to have entered an interregnum in which the shape of things to come is best described as *neo-medieval*.¹⁶ Far from indicating a return to, or repetition of, the Middle Ages, this notion suggests a reversion to long-standing patterns that reflect the sociocultural realities in which forms of political and economic organization are grounded. Most critics of neo-medievalism in IR have adopted a curiously literalist interpretation that posits some kind of identity or equivalence between the Middle Ages and our present situation, which would be guilty of the same ahistorical logic as secular supercessionism.

However, to say that the contemporary world is not the same as the Middle Ages does not mean that the notion “neo-medieval” is redundant. On the contrary, it can be used as a metaphor that helps both political thought and IR theory break out of conventional conceptual frames and that opens up new possibilities of recognizing alternatives to the sovereign power of both national states and global markets. Such alternatives include hybrid institutions, overlapping jurisdictions, polycentric authority, and forms of multi-level government or governance, which are all characterized by disperse and diffuse power structures and degrees of suzerainty that are not captured by modern paradigms of sovereignty and balance of power.

Signs abound that contemporary international affairs exhibit a neo-medieval shape. The three “political forms” that characterize the West from Antiquity to the late Middle Ages—the City, the Empire, and the Church—are all resurgent in new ways. Big cities are often trading more with other cities across the globe rather than with towns or regions within their national borders. This is not only true for old and new city-states such as Singapore, Hong Kong, or Dubai and indeed long-established

15. See, *inter alia*, Joseph A. Camilleri and Jim Falk, *The End of Sovereignty? The Politics of a Shrinking and Fragmenting World* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1992); Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Atlantic Press, 2003).

16. The clue is in the prefix “neo-,” which explicitly expresses the novel character of the contemporary situation—not some identical repetition of, or linear continuity with, an earlier arrangement during the Middle Ages.

metropolises like London, New York, or Tokyo but also applies to new mega-cities—including Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico-City, Kuala Lumpur, or Jakarta—not to mention the booming metropolitan areas in China and India.¹⁷

As Benjamin Barber suggests, “[t]he nation-state is failing us on the global scale. It is utterly unsuited to interdependence. The city, always the human habitat of first resort, has in today’s globalizing world once again become democracy’s best hope.”¹⁸ Barber writes off the state too hastily and ignores the need to think cities in relation to their natural, rural environment, but his point about the rise of autonomous cities as powerhouses of political transformation is surely right. The resurgence of global cities witnesses to the general rural exodus that reinforces the divide between urban and rural areas, but it also offers new opportunities to build more horizontal relationships between individuals, groups, and communities that are not subject to central state control.

Similarly, the global resurgence of religion is much remarked-upon but little understood. There is no return to faith, as if it had ever gone away. Rather, the intellectual and moral collapse of secularism provides new opportunities to rethink religion in international affairs in non-secularist ways.¹⁹ Amid the global flow of ideas and practices, it is often religious ties that bind together persons and communities both within and across national borders. Unlike the impersonalism of rights and contracts, the bonds of faith can nurture the kind of trust and cooperation on which societies ultimately depend. Globalization has reinforced formal connections of bureaucratic control and capitalist commodification, but it has also promoted new religious networks. Scott Thomas puts this well:

[T]he global and the local are becoming more closely linked together in a kind of “global particularity.” One key example is . . . “globalized Islam,” in which types of radical Islam around the world blur the connection between Islam, a specific society, and a specific territory. Another example is the transnational links between churches and denominations that make up global evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity. . . . These global links or networks do not just happen; they are not free-floating, but are social networks, embedded in religious diaspora communities

17. See, *inter alia*, Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (London: Sage, 2011).

18. Benjamin R. Barber, *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2013).

19. Pabst, “The Secularism of Post-Secularity,” esp. pp. 1003–17.

that are a key aspect of religious transnationalism. . . . [S]uch social and information networks have been part of much of human history, and a part of the main world religions for centuries, and existed long before the modern international system.²⁰

Finally, the Westphalian idea of equality between sovereign states has turned out to be a bit of a myth. Amid the shift in power from the west and the north to the east and the south, global geopolitics is marked by the crisis of the nation-state and the resurgence of pre-modern empire, besides and sometimes along with a new permutation of the modern, colonizing empire. One can approach this matter by noting that the core UN principle of national self-determination and territorial integrity along with non-interference in internal affairs is not really compatible with the new UN doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). So, on the one hand, ever smaller territorial entities can break away from their larger parent country in the name of the right to self-rule—South Sudan, Kosovo, South Ossetia, to name but the most recent cases. Perhaps in consistency with this, R2P has been used to protect populations from the brutal force of tyrannical rulers (such as Col. Gaddafi’s imminent onslaught on the people of Benghazi in 2011). But less compatibly it has also served as a justification for regime change encouraged (and sometimes brought about) by greater powers that enjoy an effectively quasi-imperial sway. The 2011 intervention in Libya encapsulates this ambivalence. Here the modern state is in tension both with imperial traditions that have long modern and pre-modern roots and also with contemporary realities that cannot be navigated with a merely Westphalian compass.

So the spread of globalized capitalism has led to a paradoxical combination of national fragmentation and imperial consolidation, which complicates any post-Soviet and colonial idea of an “end of history” or worldwide convergence toward liberal “market democracy.” In the category “economically imperial” belong global capital movements and supranational institutions like the IMF or the WTO, which represent a pooling of economic and political sovereignty that constrains the power of states. Meanwhile a new political imperialism is exemplified by powers as diverse as Turkey, Iran, Russia, and China. Their leaders look back to pre-modern imperial traditions in order to define national roles in a

20. Scott M. Thomas, “Religions and Global Security,” *Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali* 12, no. 2 (2010): 4–21 (quotes at pp. 10, 12).

“multi-polar” world and forge links independently of Western countries and institutions. This is why Moscow speaks of its post-Soviet “sphere of privileged interests” and Beijing considers Taiwan as a renegade region that must be reintegrated into the Middle Kingdom. Equally Tehran’s power projection across the wider Middle East is raising fears of revived Persian imperial ambitions.

In line with the same trend, Ankara’s assertive foreign policy has transformed Turkey’s role from being a bridge between Europe and Asia to exercising hegemonic influence in the lands that formerly constituted the Ottoman empire. Cuneyt Zapsu, an adviser to the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, was quoted as saying that “We are the Ottomans’ successor and should not be ashamed of this.”²¹ Indeed, the governing AKP party’s foreign policy strategy has been described as a “double-gravity state” that seeks to balance its shared values as a member of the Euro-Atlantic community with its interest in the Greater Middle Eastern neighborhood.²² Taken in combination these attitudes compose a neo-imperial outlook—the revival of Ottoman traditions novelly borne by newly self-assertive, “Great Power” Turkey, which seeks to act as an imperial force rather than a modern nation-state.

The resurgence of old imperial powers is not limited to these four emerging markets. Across the globe we are seeing the rise of ancient empires or trans-national political configurations that never disappeared entirely. In Latin America, Brazil is exercising a continental leadership role. In Africa, countries such as Nigeria and South Africa deploy cross-tribal and cross-cultural linkages that project their power well beyond their national borders. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines are engaged in struggles to secure their respective zones of influence. In the Middle East, the growing conflict between the Saudi-led Sunni arc and the Iranian-led Shia crescent shows just how dangerous the revival of imperial power can be when allied to a sectarian struggle whose origins go back to Islam’s formative period. None of these developments can be captured either by the realist focus on sovereign states, or by the liberal emphasis on

21. This is set out in the 2001 book *Strategic Depth (Stratejik Derinlik)* by Turkey’s long-serving foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, as well as in his article “The Clash of Interests: An Explanation of the World (Dis)Order,” *Journal of International Affairs* 2, no. 4 (December 1997–February 1998).

22. See Philip Robins, “A Double-Gravity State: Turkish Foreign Policy Reconsidered,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 33 (November 2006): 199–211.

inter-state relations, or indeed by the cosmopolitan accentuation of post-national identity. All three approaches view the modern state as given and underplay the importance of social, cultural, and religious ties that precede modern statehood and endure in international affairs.

3. Imperial Power and Liberal versus Associative Interventionism²³

Political power tends to become ultimately imperial for three distinct yet related reasons. First of all, to stabilize volatile backyards, for example the United States in Central and Latin America, or China in the South China Sea, or Turkey and Russia in the wider Caucasus and Eurasia, or indeed the EU in the Balkans. Second, to secure natural resources and market outlets, for instance the EU's trade agreements with Africa and the West, or China's expansion in Africa and Latin America, or Russia's proposed Eurasian Economic Union. Third, to pursue a "civilizing mission"—whether the U.S. export of democracy by "hard" and "soft" power, or the EU's promotion of human rights, or China's neo-Confucian project of global harmony. Of these, the EU is perhaps the best example of a "neo-medieval" empire that seeks to project normative power by syndicating its values worldwide.²⁴

If power is ultimately imperial, then the question is what this means for relationships between empires—old or new—and other countries. Arguably, there is a choice between forms of colonialism and exploitation, whether through direct conquest or indirect control, on the one hand, and more virtuous forms of protection and cooperation, on the other hand. In the first case, we can see an illustration of the paradox of the "free" laborer and "free" citizen, as Justin Rosenberg pointed out.²⁵ Colonies are "liberated" along with their citizens but in reality into a more absolute mode of contractual slavery at the hands of new internationally oligarchic masters (both states and corporations) who are more indifferent to their true well-being than even the more avowed masters of the colonial past. Rosenberg's analysis (and his Marxism) is here more rigorous than that of much "post-colonial" writing.

23. This section draws on material from a book I am currently co-writing with John Millbank.

24. Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006); and "Europe as a Global Actor: Empire by Example?" *International Affairs* 84, no. 3 (2008): 471–84.

25. Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 157–79.

Thus contemporary “great powers” operate a tributarian system with smaller neighbors and other states across the world. They provide military security in exchange for market outlets and inexpensive imports. For example, the United States sells military equipment to its allies worldwide—notably smaller imperial powers such as India or Saudi Arabia but also client states like Egypt and Pakistan. At the same time, it buys cheap consumer goods from abroad in order to fuel a consumption binge that papers over growing income and asset inequalities, while also importing cheap (often unskilled and illegal) labor to maintain a young population and keep wages low.

For its part, China needs primary commodities to sustain its buoyant economic growth, which it extracts in the resource-rich regions of Africa and Latin America. Beijing has also established a system of client states that provide either cheap sweatshops (e.g., Vietnam and Cambodia) or market access for its cheap consumer goods. In the new Great Game, the geo-economics of energy and financial security matters just as much as the geopolitics of territorial control. Instead of national states and liberal market democracy, we are seeing the rise of old empires and new elites who combine bureaucratic capitalism with authoritarian plutocracy in a neoliberal-communistic hybrid.²⁶

Faced with this system, there is an urgent need for a much more equitable and more cooperative approach to international affairs, which can replace “liberal interventionism” and neoconservative crusades with an “associationist interventionism” upholding genuine transnational trusteeship and partnership in a fashion that respects local peculiarities and traditions. This is preferable to either an isolationism or supposedly principled “non-interventionism” of a pure “realist” stamp, which is now either dangerous or impossible or indeed both at once.

In international relations, the notion of trusteeship describes a relationship in which one state, country, or nation assumes responsibility for the security and flourishing of another state, country, or nation that is (thought to be) unable to manage its own affairs without doing damage either to itself or others.²⁷ In the contemporary world, there are many cases where this might apply—including transition economies, post-conflict countries, or “failed states.” In the absence of trusteeship, there is always the strong

26. See references in note 1.

27. William Bain, *Between Anarchy and Society: Trusteeship and the Obligations of Power* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003).

risk that purely self-interested powers will fill the vacuum. Thereby they will ensure that a priggish absolutism with regard to national boundaries produces not the best but the worst, and not even a compromise, which “associationist intervention”—committed to a cooperative approach but not to all and every tolerance of the behavior of the other—is more likely to achieve.

Associationist approaches would assume that the international system is not so much a society of sovereign states (as in the work of the English School, especially Hedley Bull and Barry Buzan) but rather a society of nations and peoples who are bound together by social ties and cultural bonds that are more primary than state-guaranteed rights and market contracts. Up to a point, this is true of the countries that compose the British Commonwealth, other members of the *Francophonie*, or the association of Ibero-American states, or even certain parts of the post-Soviet space.

Such advocacy is by no means unmindful of the danger that the virtue of cooperative assistance can “flip over” and turn into the vice of oppressive tutelage. This is true for all relationships that include forms of hierarchical dependencies—from the family via communities and states to the international society of nations and peoples. However, the risk of exploitative domination is counterbalanced by the pursuit of mutual flourishing, which can only be sustained by an equally shared vision of a substantive common good in which all can share. Without this common pursuit, one is left with the formalist vacuum of a purely legal and contractual equality that inexorably engenders its own substantive opposite, namely, the domination of the powerful and the wealthy. With “associationist interventionism” the latter is an admitted risk, but with the apparently greater radicalism of a non-paternalist liberalism, the risk is rather an inevitability. For liberalism, different degrees of development remain in the end but the outcome of chances in a game played according to fair rules, and therefore they are ultimately a matter of indifference. But for a “post-liberal associationism,” shared virtue permits of a common horizon of human concern between richer and poorer who may well be richer in depth of life, while the open advocacy of virtuous guardianship ensures that no relative failure consigns one to biopolitical unconcern.

But to realize this requisite, even in any degree, would require some progress toward the genuine practice of international government, international policing, and the international rule of law. And this cannot be done merely in the name of acting for humanity or the cause of human

rights. For the problem with a lot of Western interventions in the Near East or North Africa—as in the case of the 2011 regime change in Libya, for example—is that if you are only intervening on that basis you will not possess a more concrete plan of medium-term trusteeship, which though it might involve something more paternalistic, could also prove to be of far more sympathetic use.

For in effect recent interventions in the Near East can all be construed as either too much or too little. If we are to avoid always saying “too much” in the name of a realist purism, then surely we must inevitably be putting an arbitrary block on our ethical sympathies and imperatives in the name of that debatable absolute which is “the nation.” But any intervention is likely to remain an irresponsible “too little” if more powerful nations are not prepared to engage in long-term strategic assistance. And here an admittedly problematic paternalism is greatly mitigated by the fact that any substantive assistance would have to take seriously local customs and habits and not override them in the name of “democracy” and “rights,” whose status can never have the absolute and eternal ring of “justice” or “the human good.”

But this sort of “thick” international engagement cannot be delivered by a formal alliance of nations sharing only abstract liberal principles in common, as the Catholic metahistorian Christopher Dawson already realized in relation to the former League of Nations.²⁸ Such an organization, like that of the United Nations, suffers a double deficit, doubly linked. The merely formal principles prevent it from communicating any substantive vision of a desirable political and cultural way of life, while the merely formal alliance of powers ensures that it lacks any power of real enforcement. The mutual linkage arises because principles of themselves engender no concrete unity or power, while contract divorced from a power of enforcement (which always proceeds from a more concrete, ineffable unity) is generative of no concrete agreement.

For these reasons, either the UN has been paralyzed by the veto power of one of the permanent members of the Security Council, or else the power of the UN has been in reality the power of the United States (or in the future, perhaps China). That power is not bad in itself, and might in theory have been exercised in terms of its often hidden and perhaps deeper

28. Christopher Dawson, *The Judgement of the Nations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942).

associational genius. But unfortunately the United States and other Western powers, such as the UK since the 1990s, have sought to impose on other countries merely formalistic and economic principles that derive from their own theory of themselves more perhaps than from the truth of the way they have worked in practice. The West has offered this thin gruel rather than the solid sustenance of a deep-rooted Western culture with which other cultures might enter into conversation. And since culture abhors a vacuum, the formalism is in reality complicit with the offer of pop music and a permanent lust for the ephemeral.

Ever since the Wilsonian and Weimar era of the 1920s, it is this mode of liberal imperialism that has taken the global initiative. But in that era such a commitment to the empty freedom of culture taken as “human choice as such” generated its dialectical counterpart of totalitarian commitment to merely material or “animal” values of biological flourishing—whether “materialist” or “racial.” And it can be noted that this commitment still augmented the cultural human will as a “general will,” while concomitantly the liberal democracies pursued evermore a biological control of their own populations.

Today it may be that just the same dialectic is at work, as liberalism once more automatically produces various totalitarian reactions (of course in new mutations), while on the other hand the contrast of liberal and totalitarian modes of the biopolitical is somewhat less apparent. For in either case neoliberal market and bureaucratic oligarchy imposes an economic mediation between a massive spectacular authority on the one hand, and an appearance of individual choice on the other. At the same time the authoritarian “market-state” polices any aberrantly real choices with an ever-increased surveillance. Not accidentally, this double idiom can be parodied by large criminal consortia, as in Mexico and indeed elsewhere.²⁹

If the contrast between liberal and totalitarian is being qualified in a globalized era, and partly for reasons of increased abstraction and dialectical merging of far and near, then so too is the contrast between licit and illicit, in the same context and for the same reasons. Today power and crime are very often entangled—both reciprocally reinforcing through

29. On the simultaneous expansion of the capitalist and the black market, see Nils Gilman, Jesse Goldhammer, and Steve Weber, *Deviant Globalization: Black Market Economy in the 21st century* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

mutual refusal and through covert collaboration. It is possible to read the phenomenon of political terror, which is again perpetrated by both states and outlaws, as in one respect an intensification of this situation. In the case of both organized crime and organized terror, one has a terrible fusion of archaic but now dispossessed tribal and other archaic factions with all-too modern aims, procedures, and discourses.³⁰

The new triple threat of official anarchy, crime, and terror may be one reason why certain modes of religion are now once more to the fore. We cannot quite allow either individual anarchy or collective power to be the ultimate principle, without admitting that we are now under the sway of a post-modern, post-historical, post-metaphysical, and post-theological “animalistic” anarchy—even though that is indeed the case. Therefore, to avoid this conclusion, voluntaristic modes of belief—whether Sunni Islamic or Christian Evangelical—claim that legitimacy derives from some sort of hidden providential (rather than ethical) mediation between the individual or locally communal self-interested actor, on the one hand, and political collectivities, on the other hand. In this way, essentialist, racist, biopolitical identities, such as the Arab or the Anglo-Saxon worlds, get re-construed as providential totalities bearing the secret of private salvation.

At the same time, rigid revealed codes of mainly private personal conduct serve to ensure at least some boundary against incipient anarchy and some residual sphere in which people will be restrained by that degree of discipline which remains necessary to market performance. The latter is in varying degrees fused with the operation of the pleasure principle beyond anything foreseen by Weber and even the Frankfurt School. Indeed, if work is now also pleasure (both mainly involve the virtuality of cyberspace), then, significantly, charismatic Christianity endorses this equivalence at a more elevated level with its blending of piety and ecstasy. Perhaps the Islamic equivalent is one-sidedly to do with insistence at once upon the duties and the pleasurable rewards of the Muslim male.

The postmodern era (tentatively beginning after World War I), beyond the sway of the nation-state and its extension into national empires, is

30. See Akbar S. Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2013). However, this book is not sufficiently critical of certain Muslim traditions that are compatible and complicit with Islamic fundamentalism.

therefore the era of liberal empire collusive with totalitarianism and the rise of ersatz, voluntaristic religion. Prior to that one had the age of Christian empire and prior to that again the age of pagan empires. Every human age has been an age of empires, in a way that the phrase “post-imperial” may all too easily ignore.³¹ Similarly, one tends to overlook the fact that a nation-state is every bit as much a product of original and often unjustifiable violence as is every imperial formation.³²

4. *Commonwealth and Covenant*

To avoid both neo-isolationism and neo-colonialism, the alternative of “associationist intervention” requires an account of virtuous “imperial” power. Here the notion of commonwealth is key, as it is a central concept in realism, cosmopolitanism, and other traditions of both political thought and IR theory. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes distinguishes commonwealth by free, contractual institution from commonwealth by forceful, violent acquisition. But in either case, creating a commonwealth marks the imposition of an artificial, political order on the violent state of nature.³³ Hobbes’s anthropology leads him to view mankind as essentially atomized and violence as more fundamental than peace. Thus the polity is governed by will and artifice, not the intellect and the real nature of things. This nominalist and voluntarist ontology underpins the realism that is commonly associated with Hobbes’s political thought.

Similarly, Kant naturalizes violence within the order of being and considers inter-state warfare as a natural mechanism to regulate cosmic anarchy. Both nationally and internationally, politics rests on the idea of asocial sociability: human beings are naturally self-interested and jealous

31. For a critical account of the endurance of imperial powers, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010).

32. Charles Tilly, “Reflections on the History of European State-Making,” in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983), pp. 3–83; Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1987); Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

33. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (1651), ed. and intro. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), pt. 2, chap. 17–20, pp. 109–36.

vis-à-vis other human beings, which leads to some kind of competitive order. In turn, regulating the hostility between the individual parts takes the form of a central sovereign authority who rules over the whole (as for Hobbes). War is the process through which antagonism is transformed into stability, with human conflict somehow mirroring natural violence:

Nature has therefore once again used the incompatibility of human beings, even of great societies and state bodies . . . as a means to seek out in their unavoidable antagonism a condition of tranquility and safety, i.e. through wars, through the overstrained and never ceasing process of armament for them . . . nature drives them to what reason could have told them even without so much sad experience: namely to go beyond a lawless condition of savages and enter into a federation of nations.³⁴

So like Hobbes, Kant views warfare as a necessary evil to regulate the original violence that is our fundamental condition in the order of being. Only war will lead to the formation, destruction, and reconstitution of states until such time that national and international arrangements permit the creation of “cosmopolitan commonwealths.”³⁵

Arguably, Hobbes’s and Kant’s conception of commonwealth shows the convergence of realism and cosmopolitanism in IR theory around notions of original, natural violence, which requires the imposition of an artificial social contract and legitimates the biopolitical power of the sovereign—whether at the level of a single state or a federation of nations. Liberal accounts of international affairs share realist-cosmopolitan conceptions of the violent order of nature and fuse market with state power to police natural anarchy.

Therefore the only alternative account is to reject the claim that the order of being is foundationally violent and that concomitantly international society is fundamentally anarchic—a global “war of all against all” that mirrors the violent “state of nature” at the national level. That is because the most primary ties, bonds, and connections between human beings are not confined to national borders. They are transnational and indeed universal: language, cultural customs, music, art, literary modes, fashions in manners and dress, as well as religion. Therefore, as Catherine

34. Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History (1784),” in *Anthropology, History, Education*, trans. R. Loudon and G. Zöllner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 107–120, quotation at p. 114.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 114–15.

Pickstock points out, “one reason why different countries do not wage war all the time is the widely-diffused sense of shared culture and common sensibility which can stretch even across vast geographical distances.”³⁶ Against the New Whigs, Edmund Burke emphasized “traditioned” association as the most universal mode of human interaction:

Men are not tied to one another by papers and seals. They are led to associate by resemblances, by conformities, by sympathies. It is with nations as with individuals. Nothing is so strong a tie of amity between nation and nation as correspondence in laws, customs, manners, and habits of life. They have more than the force of treaties in themselves. They are obligations written in the heart. They approximate men to men, without their knowledge, and sometimes against their intentions. The secret, unseen, but irrefragable bond of habitual intercourse holds them together even when their perverse and litigious nature sets them to equivocate, scuffle, and fight, about the terms of their written obligations.³⁷

In other words, Burke inverts the modern primacy of rights and contracts by arguing that the mutual moral obligations of interpersonal relations are more primary than abstract, formal, and procedural standards linked to activities for either state-administrative or market-commercial purposes. Crucially, this extends to ties across nations and sovereign states, which suggests that the family of nations and peoples embeds the society of states and markets.

Against both the realism of Hobbes and Herder and the cosmopolitanism of Rousseau and Kant, Burke argues that “common-wealths are not physical but moral essences. They are artificial combinations, and, in their proximate efficient cause, the arbitrary productions of the human mind.”³⁸ Here it is crucial to note that by “artificial combinations,” he means human habit and creativity that blends nature with culture—the order of being with the order of knowing and “making.” In this manner, “customs, manners, and habits of life” provide the bonds and ties that infuse the immanent

36. Catherine Pickstock, “Numbers of Power, Lines of Transition: The Decay of Metaphysics and the Loss of International Order,” in Will Bain, ed., *International Relations and the Medieval Imagination* (London: Routledge, forthcoming in 2015).

37. Edmund Burke, “Letters on a Regicide Peace” (extract), in *International Relations in Political Thought: Texts From the Ancient Greeks to the First World War*, ed. Chris Brown, Terry Nardin, and Nicholas Rengger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 292–300, quotation at p. 296.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

political order with a transcendent, cosmic outlook. Such a Burkean perspective shifts the focus from an artificial commonwealth that coercively regulates natural violence to a natural-cultural commonwealth that upholds peace beyond rivalry. It is the principle of association that underpins the alternative to both biopolitical coercion and impersonal contract.

Based on associative commonwealths, globalization has the potential to promote a plural search for the shared common good and substantive ends that can mediate between the individual and the collective will and thus help bind together members of diverse bodies and polities. It challenges the view that the incommensurability of rival values either requires central sovereign power to arbitrate conflict or else leads to a fragile *modus vivendi*—a situation in which peaceful coexistence merely regulates a violent state of nature that rules out the ontological possibility of a just, harmonious order.

To suggest that competing values are incommensurable (especially in the late modern context of multiculturalism and the global clash of fanatical faiths) is to assume that different values have equal claim to normative validity and that no hierarchical ordering can command popular assent. In the absence of higher-order universal principles from which particular norms derive their moral character, general values such as freedom, equality, and security constitute their own foundation and finality. However, no value is valuable in itself or as such, not even ancient liberties or modern human rights. Values are valuable because they originate from an “invaluable” source and because they are ordered toward an equally “invaluable” end—a transcendent principle that provides an intelligible account of what is valuable and how it ought to be valued, blending the empirical with the normative. For example, the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person underpin the principles of liberality like fair detention, fair trial or *habeas corpus* that are central to notions of freedom, equality, and security.

Crucially, this argument shifts the focus away from unilateral practices centered on self-interest and individual entitlements toward more reciprocal arrangements that rest on the balance between rights and responsibilities—what the English IR scholar Martin Wight called the link between “common interest” and “common obligation.”³⁹ Connected with this point about the common good is the re-invention of “constitutional corporatism” in a more plural guise against both market individualism and

39. Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, 2nd ed., ed. Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1986), pp. 293–94.

state collectivism, in particular the principle of “mixed government” and the role of corporate bodies in both politics and the economy. This non-statist corporatism diffuses sovereign power away from the institutions of the central state and the free market by promoting the constitutional recognition and political participation of mediating institutions such as professional associations in both the public and the private sector, manufacturing and trading guilds, cooperatives, trade unions, voluntary organizations, universities, free cities, and indeed old empires in a new guise.

Concluding Reflection

More so than the formalist separation of powers that ends in institutional stalemate or the primacy of executive power, the constitutionalist principle of “mixed government” can help balance the three branches while at the same time upholding the autonomy of both individuals and corporate bodies within the free, shared social space—the realm of civic institutions and civil society that is more primary than either the national state or the transnational market associated with the modern secularist settlement. As Wight put it, in modernity “[s]overeignty had indeed passed to different states, by social contracts, but the original unity of the human race survived.”⁴⁰ It is the task of the West and its worldwide partners to preserve, renew, and extend the social and cultural ties in which individuals, groups, and institutions are embedded both nationally and globally.

An imaginative approach to international affairs by the West would call to abandon false and dysfunctional either-ors in favor of strangely possible paradoxes. Not Pacific or Europe, state or market, religion or the secular, or nationalism versus globalization. Instead, intimate reciprocities in ever-widening circles from your street to the planet can dimly reflect a family of nations and peoples in which states and markets serve the needs of persons, communities, and associations within and across state borders. Compared with the logic of abstraction that underpins realist, liberal, and cosmopolitan ideas, such an “associationist alternative” would link political to economic and ecological purpose in the name of mutuality, reciprocity, and social recognition.

The idea of commonwealth can help build multi-national associations of peoples. Linked to this is the notion of covenant—people, partly under

40. Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, ed. Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1991), p. 38.

religious inspiration, who are covenanted to one another in the interest of mutual benefit. Far from being utopian, relational covenants can balance the freedom and dignity of the person with mutual obligations and interpersonal relationships. Against the impersonalism of state and market, covenantal arrangements enable people to partake of both power and wealth in the sense of greater democratic participation and a shared material and spiritual well-being for all.

The West can either fracture and split permanently, abandoning international relations to unipolar hegemony or multipolar anarchy. Or else it can redefine its covenantal destiny, aspiring to be a genuine beacon to the rest of the world and to cooperate with other nations toward the same, shared ends of virtue, honor, and mutual flourishing.