
R2P and the “Thin Cosmopolitan” Imagination

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INTRODUCTION

Focus

In 2005, the UN World Summit adopted the principle known as “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P). This article asks how selected theoretical perspectives on international relations might explain and reduce the gap between the application of R2P in the real world and the requirements of a “thin cosmopolitan” imagination. Thin cosmopolitanism, which views humanity as a singular moral community, represents an imagination of a world free from mass atrocities, in which R2P seems well suited; humanity would benefit from a reduction in the gap between this imagination and reality. Although thin cosmopolitanism represents ideal theory, it prescribes standards that can serve as goals of political change in a non-ideal world.¹

R2P

The 2005 United Nations General Assembly World Summit in New York hosted the largest gathering of state leaders ever up to that point. On September 16, 2005, R2P was included in the General Assembly’s

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Outcome Document, which obliges each individual state to provide protection from mass atrocities, defined as “genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.”² Within this framework, the international community assists states in the exercise of their R2P obligation, and failures call for “appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian, and other peaceful means in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII” of the UN Charter. Should peaceful measures be inadequate, the UN Security Council is prepared to take collective action, citing Chapter VII of the UN Charter, on a case-by-case basis and in cooperation with relevant regional organizations. The Security Council adopted R2P in 2006.³ In 2009, the General Assembly reaffirmed its support with a new resolution,⁴ and R2P has since been endorsed in following reports of the UN Secretary-General.

R2P entered international vocabulary in the 2001 report from The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS).⁵ The ICISS, initiated by the government of Canada, was a response to challenges raised by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Citing the principles of the UN Charter, Annan asked world leaders to oblige themselves on behalf of humanity, referring to the recent UN failures: Rwanda (1994), Srebrenica in Bosnia (1995), and Kosovo (1999). The mandate for the UN mission in Sudan (2006) was the first invocation of R2P for a particular conflict.⁶ When the Security Council adopted Resolution 1973 on Libya in March of 2011, it was the first time the UN authorized the use of military force for human protection purposes against a functioning government.⁷ More recent UN resolutions also refer to R2P, and remind state leaders of their responsibilities. Yet, it has been very difficult to achieve Security Council agreement for collective action since 2011, despite massive human suffering in ongoing conflicts.

R2P is a comprehensive approach. Military response as a component of R2P is the last resort, for use only when other alternatives have proved insufficient or are no longer relevant. Of the responsibilities ICISS discusses as critical to R2P, this article focuses on prevention and reaction.

COSMOPOLITANISM

The Tradition

In the 4th century B.C.E., when the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope was asked where he came from, he answered *kosmopolitès*. He considered himself a “citizen of the world.”⁸ This was a strange answer then, and even today probably not the answer one expects if posing the

same question. Cosmopolitanism encompasses a variation of thoughts, in which the human being is the ultimate unit of moral concern. The central cosmopolitan idea is to treat humanity as a single moral community with priority over national and subnational communities.⁹ This requires justice to be applied on a global scope. While cosmopolitan philosophy is occupied with the theoretical justification of cosmopolitan principles, cosmopolitanism is also a political project committed to establishing supportive political institutions.

That said, there is no general agreement about the exact character of suitable global governance.¹⁰ A marginal branch of cosmopolitanism argues for the replacement of all states by a single global government, in a radical version tracing back to the 18th century Prussian political thinker, Baron de Cloots.¹¹ However, most cosmopolitans today are more familiar with the thinking of another Prussian, the great Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant stands as the greatest source of inspiration for a number of modern cosmopolitan approaches. He feared that a global state, if possible to create, would lead to tyranny, instead proposing the federation of republican states that did not include coercive global institutions. Yet, both in the Enlightenment and today, human beings are inextricably connected and cannot live independent of one another. Violations are felt everywhere.¹²

Ancient Greek philosophy argues that human beings are able to identify with political community beyond the closed *polis*, or city-state.¹³ This line of thinking developed further throughout the rise of the Roman Empire. However, as described by Gerard Delanty, cosmopolitanism is not a genuine western project.¹⁴ The origins of universalistic principles with an inclusive vision of human community come from the emergence of many different civilizations and traditions, such as Greek, Chinese, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian; for example, the Roman Empire itself embraced a great variety of Mediterranean cultures.

However, cosmopolitanism should not be confused with globalization. While the latter is not a recent phenomenon, cosmopolitanism is still much older. In fact, cosmopolitan solutions

can perhaps answer some of the challenges caused by globalization processes in an interconnected world. Delanty sees cosmopolitanism as one of the

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key dynamics of modernity. It represents ongoing, dynamic, and creative processes opening normative questions, not stable conditions or concrete identities.¹⁵ Cosmopolitanism extends the unit of analysis beyond national frameworks and borders, raising debate on how best to approach the effects of globalization methodologically.¹⁶

Thin Cosmopolitanism

All cosmopolitans envision attachment to and responsibilities at the global level in one form or another, but “thick” and “thin” cosmopolitanism differ in their interpretation of these. “Thick” cosmopolitanism insists that any attention to others must include all of humanity. No room exists for special attention to any particular person or group. However, thin cosmopolitanism, the framework for this article, accepts different spheres of moral responsibility, allowing for greater degrees of attachment to close others.

Three interlinked concepts compose thin cosmopolitanism. The first is the human being as the ultimate entity entitled to universal human rights: rights are inherent simply in being a member of humanity. This forms a basic premise for this discussion. As Richard Shapcott expresses, “If there is one issue in international relations today which most directly speaks to the concern of a thin cosmopolitanism, it is the idea of universal human rights.”¹⁷ States and other associations are valued only insofar as they respect these human rights. The second concept is that of open, inclusive debates across cultures and civilizations. Dialogue and consent are central for the thin cosmopolitan project.¹⁸ Thirdly, as stated by Andrew Linklater, no loyalties are absolute in a cosmopolitan political community,¹⁹ which in turn has implications for our understanding of state sovereignty.

Selected Theoretical Perspectives

Relevant theoretical perspectives to R2P in a cosmopolitan context are the English School, constructivism, and critical theory. Although the English School is a normative, not a cosmopolitan perspective, its focus on the extent that values and norms guide international action is relevant in a discussion of the gap between R2P in the real world and R2P within a thin cosmopolitan framework. Constructivism does not rely on any particular philosophy, but frames the concepts we use to describe the social world as interpreted constructions, which gives us an alternate lens to understand certain norms and structures. Constructivism’s ontological position

of mutual constitution between actors and structures challenges identities, and may change practice. Finally, critical theory embraces a cosmopolitan vision of the world and questions borders from a moral perspective. As a normative approach, critical theory attempts to identify how the international order can better develop.

R2P, THIN COSMOPOLITANISM, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

While human rights praxis around the globe is hardly impressive, the formal recognition of human rights as an international issue of utter importance is difficult to deny. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights²⁰ is the most important normative document in UN history. The UN Charter lists respect for human rights among its main purposes.²¹ The largest international conference ever to discuss human rights issues, the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, treated the universal nature of all human rights as beyond any question.²² Because mass atrocities are human rights violations on a large scale, the principle of R2P is very much about human rights. R2P offers preventive and halting tools for atrocities, and it is consistent with the expectations of a thin cosmopolitan community for an applied moral universalism beyond the morality of states.

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On the other hand, the English School²³—as most prominently represented by Hedley Bull writing during the Cold War—offers a “society of states” as the alternative to an international anarchy dominated by calculative behavior,²⁴ rather than a cosmopolitan community. Bull explains this framework thus:

A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and in share in the working of common institutions.²⁵

From the English School perspective, the conditions for R2P in the real world do not match the requirements of thin cosmopolitanism because the above society of states is realized only to some degree, despite a huge body

of signed human rights documents and relevant international organizations at all geographical levels. Bull called the international order he observed an “anarchical society,” where anarchy coexists with values, norms, mutual trust, and hope. Although this order is vulnerable, it is possible to cultivate its societal features, with a normative understanding of international relations as a landscape of human experience. However, while individuals acting on behalf of their states grapple with difficult moral choices, international organizations are limited in their autonomy and ability to act by their member states.

Similarly, although a “society of states” implies that states are bound together by mutually accepted laws in a form of order, order is not enough for dedicated cosmopolitans. While Bull considered order the condition for the realization of other values—because “not only is order in world politics valuable, there is also a sense in which it is prior to other goals, such as justice”²⁶—this does not imply a preference for order over other norms. Shapcott states that “the commitment to human rights suggests that states, as well as individuals, have obligations and duties to humankind that are superior to the obligations they have to maintain order.”²⁷

From both the English School perspective and a dedicated cosmopolitan point of view, it would be desirable to call R2P an established international norm. However, the literature is not always precise: R2P has been called a concept, principle, and norm, with different implications for each term. A “concept” implies an idea that may not be concretely applied, and requires further elaboration on R2P’s role. “An emerging principle,” the formulation used by ICISS,²⁸ indicates a certain common understanding of R2P’s meaning and validity. A “norm” further specifies expected and acceptable actions: it is prescriptive in nature. Thus, the choice of term matters, as the language used may influence the status of R2P.²⁹

From a constructivist perspective, which studies whether and how norms matter,³⁰ the development of international human rights standards illustrates the relationship between actors and structure as mutually constituted and continually changing. State representatives formulate principles, norms, rules, and procedures. Debates and modifications entail temporal agreement. It is possible to understand the adoption of R2P as structural improvement, which indicates an appropriate response from the international community to certain circumstances. While norms regulate behavior, constructivists also posit that they challenge the way states define their interests—and if common norms become the model for international behavior, this closes the gap between imagination and reality mentioned above. Michael Barnett, however, reminds us that this transformation is

not a given: "Although many international norms have a taken-for-granted quality, they have to come from somewhere and their path to acceptance is almost always rough and rocky."³¹ The constructivist perspective shows relevant processes, but cannot predict concrete outcomes.

Mervyn Frost argues that states nearly always communicate their actions to the wider world in ethical terms because engagement with ethics is a precondition for participation.³² When Resolution 1973 on Libya passed the Security Council, five members abstained from voting. Most interesting was the lack of no-votes. Confronted with a probable massacre in Benghazi, responsible international actors would have found it difficult to defend voting no. In contrast, the current disagreement around Syria reaches beyond the most appropriate way forward. There is no consensus about the nature of the problem.³³ Meaningful discussion about measures, among them the possible intervention by military force, presupposes Security Council agreement of R2P relevance. The English School theorist Raymond J. Vincent defined "intervention" as an "activity undertaken by a state, a group within a state, a group of states, or an international organization which interferes coercively in the domestic affairs of another state."³⁴ Effective humanitarian intervention is an act of power. It includes taking sides,³⁵ but as demonstrated by the conflicts in the Middle East, choosing which actor to support is not always easy.

Critical international relations theorists argue that traditional theory fails to question the morally arbitrary significance of geographical borders.³⁶ By establishing boundaries between "us" and "them," states promote exclusion. However, to treat the internal and external domains as two separate spheres of moral obligations is unjust because it undermines the idea of human fellowship. Universal human rights give human beings equal worth independent of nationality, race, gender, religion, or other differences. No variant of cosmopolitanism questions that. The move from rights to obligations, however, severely increases complexity, bringing in a discussion of positive and negative duties in cosmopolitan obligations. Negative duties imply that the person on whom they are imposed must refrain from an action. Positive duties are duties to act, which include general duties to create a just social order and to aid those in need and who suffer unnecessarily. These moral duties are not charity provisions: to refrain from acting would be morally wrong. Yet, while the scope of cosmopolitan obligation is in principle universal, there is no single answer among contemporary cosmopolitans about what positive duties require from different international actors. This idea of a positive duty, although difficult to define clearly, underlies the concept of R2P.³⁷

Membership in a common humanity is a thin type of bond.³⁸ According to David Held, the literature on cosmopolitan obligations distinguishes between two broad positions. “Thick” cosmopolitanism insists that all moral principles must be directly universal. Special relationships, for instance, to family, friends, kin, nation, or religious group, can only be justified insofar as they nurture or honor the cosmopolitan interest. “Thin” cosmopolitanism, however, accepts two different sets of obligations. One treats all human beings as equal regardless of relationship, while another is restricted to those closest.³⁹ International obligations are compatible with this division, since states can extend their web of social relations and induce a variety of international practices.⁴⁰ However, bringing those who suffer close enough to generate action in the cosmopolitan framework is a severe challenge for R2P in the real world, just as it is a challenge for critical theorists to suggest realizable solutions from a thin cosmopolitan perspective.

Neither set of obligations allows for selective responses to humanitarian crises. While states holding veto power can block any Security Council proposition they dislike, a world where the need for help is trumped by other considerations is not cosmopolitan. This dilemma represents a serious challenge for any attempt to infuse the real world with the requirements of a cosmopolitan ethos. Selective response may be better than no response at all—but if this is the best case scenario, R2P becomes a soft international norm vulnerable to manipulation, where some perpetrators are targeted and others are not. The result is a subordination of law to the dictates of power.⁴¹

R2P, THIN COSMOPOLITANISM, AND OPEN INCLUSIVE DEBATES

The second theme characterizing thin cosmopolitanism is the call for open, inclusive debates, but there is a gap in execution between these and real-world debates.

English School theorists emphasize “diplomatic dialogue,” where states and people discuss how to restrain force, promote mutual understanding between cultures, and explore the prospects of cooperation.⁴² These dialogues include the conduct of foreign policy as well as claims about rights and obligations. Because the anarchical society is a society of states, participants will be state representatives.

On the other hand, a state-centric position does not satisfy cosmopolitan theorists. Open, inclusive debates must involve a much broader scope of international actors that in turn must account for their beliefs in terms intelligible to others.⁴³ Mutual understanding evolves through open, non-

exclusionary dialogues that include all individuals and groups affected by the principle, norm, or institution under deliberation.⁴⁴ As Thomas Pogge explains, “Persons have a right to an institutional order under which those significantly and legitimately affected by a political decision have a roughly equal opportunity to influence the making of this decision.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Richard Shapcott calls thin cosmopolitanism a “dialogical universal moral community.”⁴⁶ Yet, cosmopolitans do not value dialogue primarily for its own sake. Dialogues should produce just outcomes in which the strong cannot impose principles and norms over the weak.

To illustrate this, the work of ICISS included regional round-table conferences and other consultations with broad participation from government agencies, representatives of academia, and various relevant organizations.⁴⁷ The 2009 General Assembly debate about R2P reportedly was one of the liveliest among member-states ever,⁴⁸ but not all those affected had a voice. United Nations members include only states, and the crucial decision-making body for R2P, the Security Council, is an even less inclusive arena, and its decisions often only reflect the imperatives of the permanent members.⁴⁹

The UN Protection Force in Bosnia (1992-95) marked the full application of the right to intervene on humanitarian grounds, but was nonetheless restricted by its mandate of self-defense and protection of humanitarian workers—a mandate that did not include any actions to stop the fighting.⁵⁰ As ICISS was fully aware, such a mandate could have been risky; humanitarian-based interventions have the potential to make matters worse because of unexpected consequences.⁵¹ However, it is easy to criticize humanitarian interventions in hindsight: for example, when we criticize the UN for having done too little too late in Rwanda, we do this with knowledge we did not possess before the genocide, despite many signs of an evolving catastrophe.

Successful use of peaceful means leaves hypotheticals around what might have happened, but effective prevention will generate fewer situations where state leaders must choose to mobilize military force or do nothing.⁵² Within R2P, then, there are compelling reasons for prioritizing the preventive dimension, since it is “better than cure, almost always easier, and morally more defensible.”⁵³ Armed conflict generally is linked to root causes in poverty, political repression, and uneven distribution of resources, and early warning is essential to understand the fragility of the situation. In an ideal situation, early warning allows us to account for the associated risks of intervention, judge which policy measures can make a difference, and mobilize political willingness to apply those measures.

In the real world, however, ICISS describes the early warning praxis they observed as ad hoc and unstructured,⁵⁴ and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon admits the need to strengthen UN prevention capacities.⁵⁵ For cosmopolitans, understanding and responding to early warning signals requires good dialogue accompanied by institutionalized communication-channels. Neville Dastoor proposes that the Security Council to establish a special committee dedicated to identifying trouble spots and to suggest measures.⁵⁶ Committee members should represent the collective international consciousness, not the national interests of their respective states. While this reflects the spirit of cosmopolitanism, it proves challenging to execute in a world with dominant state interests.

R2P, THIN COSMOPOLITANISM, AND STATE SOVEREIGNTY

Loyalties, understood as never absolute, compose the third and final theme of thin cosmopolitanism for this discussion. State sovereignty, as discussed here, is a fundamental institution of loyalty in world politics, but is connected to responsibility. This suits a thin cosmopolitan imagination, but competes with the traditional alternative. The mutual recognition that each state possesses the exclusive right to give and to enforce laws within its defined borders has traditionally been understood as a right with few, if any, limits to deal with domestic affairs. The keyword—non-intervention—is enshrined into the United Nations Charter.⁵⁷

Traditionally associated with realism, the traditional position of sovereignty still has staunch defenders among many in the international realm. Some try to hide a doubtful human rights practice by invoking sovereignty. Still, many small states consider non-intervention as the ultimate protection against the ambitions of more powerful states, which might be cloaked in a humanitarian umbrella. As Jarat Chopra explains, “sovereignty provides finality and determinacy in the international system. In other words, it creates order.”⁵⁸ This presents a dilemma—how to prevent powerful states from covering less ideal motives using humanitarian arguments—that is not new, and requires trust to solve. Without trust among players in the international system, a claim to use force for humanitarian reasons is difficult to separate from national interests in disguise. Interventions not mandated by the Security Council are most problematic: any state with the power to intervene independent of the UN may be suspected of self-interest.⁵⁹ Kofi Annan connects this dilemma to R2P thus: “The emerging global convention of a ‘Responsibility to Protect’ was conceived as a universal principle of protecting fundamental human

rights—not a license to make war in the name of peace.”⁶⁰

Nowadays, non-intervention is the starting point, and military action is reserved for the extreme and exceptional circumstances.⁶¹ Yet, resistance against internationalizing responsibility for internal problems may be grounded in the fear that this threshold of non-intervention is susceptible to interpretation and change; the rise in humanitarian action may signal that the threshold is even lower than before. Within a country, rebel groups may even try to extend a war because outside help is most likely when human suffering continues. Some critics argue that advocacy for R2P alone implies that war is more acceptable, and that R2P must adopt a more direct focus on peaceful alternatives, with the “Responsibility to Peace” accompanying the imperative protection⁶²

Although R2P is not opposed to state sovereignty, some have invoked the obligation to protect civilians as superseding sovereignty regardless. ICISS, however, approaches the question differently: responsibility is an aspect of sovereignty itself.⁶³ Where legitimate sovereignty does not exist, neither can it be violated. The norm of R2P shifts focus from control to responsibility.⁶⁴ State responsibility accompanies an external responsibility to the international community.

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Re-interpretation is always possible. State sovereignty interpreted as non-interference is for constructivists only meaningful when this is the dominant collective understanding, and thin cosmopolitanism derives sovereignty from universal human rights and responsibilities. When Kofi Annan reminds the present day UN Charter reader of its purpose to protect human beings, not the abusers,⁶⁵ the Charter has not received a new text; this is an attempt to reinterpret the old one. An international reaction when a state fails to fulfill its responsibility to protect its own citizens does not suspend, but rather protects and promotes sovereignty. Dr. Francis Deng, former UN Special Advisor on the Prevention on Genocide, clearly agrees, framing sovereignty as a positive obligation rather than “a negative concept enabling [states] to barricade [themselves] against the world.”⁶⁶

Sovereignty as responsibility is not solely a cosmopolitan idea, and responsibility needs an additional international anchor. By signing the World Summit Outcome Document, world leaders formally accepted an expanded scope of justice beyond the border of each individual state.

Cosmopolitans demand this scope in one way or another to be global. Legitimate sovereignty in a cosmopolitan framework promotes individual human rights. Although written in 1982, almost 20 years before the introduction of R2P, critical IR scholar Andrew Linklater touched the core of the recent debate: “By adopting an external concept of obligation, the state accepts that its rights are negotiated, and must ultimately be subject to renegotiation if necessary, by the whole society of states.”⁶⁷ Linklater recognizes that the existence of states should not obstruct justice across their borders. He anticipates a thin cosmopolitan framework of sovereign states embedded in structures of global governance, with shared and institutionalized political and moral norms.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed how selected theoretical perspectives on international relations can explain, and suggest ways to reduce, the gap between R2P in the real world and the requirements of a “thin cosmopolitan” imagination.

We can expect the English School to explain the gap through the existence of an international sphere with a society of states realized only to a limited extent. Greater integration of state society, which means more

..... adherence by states to shared moral norms and principles, does not fully satisfy the requirements of thin cosmopolitanism. Still, it will bring the two closer, even though real-world norms and principles compete with self-interests and calculations, because state and individual actors in international affairs still possess the capability to let moral considerations guide their decisions.

The practice of R2P must also expand the scope of participants involved in international debates and decisions, and locate sovereignty on different levels in a revised global structure, where boundaries no longer decide who can expect protection and who cannot.

Constructivism does not favor any particular political order, but constructivists show us possibilities for change through processes where actors and structures mutually constitute each

other. Challenged identities and dominant interpretations may undergo changes and pave way for a possible new praxis where state sovereignty, connected to responsibility, no longer impedes R2P.

Finally, critical international relations theorists have a cosmopolitan vision for the world. For R2P in the international sphere, the general agreement around the principle must materialize to better protect human rights in all settings and enable the international community to take action when necessary. The practice of R2P must also expand the scope of participants involved in international debates and decisions, and locate sovereignty on different levels in a revised global structure, where boundaries no longer decide who can expect protection and who cannot.^f

ENDNOTES

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- 4 UN General Assembly Resolution 63/308, September 15, 2009.
- 5 ICISS: The Responsibility to Protect, Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, Ottawa Canada, December 2001.
- 6 UN Security Council Resolution 1706, August 31, 2006.
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- 17 Richard Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 225.
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- 21 The UN Charter Chap. 1 Articles 1.3, 13.1 and 55c.
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- 23 Developed mainly at London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

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- 27 Richard Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations*, 225.
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