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Humanitarian logics in the evolution of international society

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Abstract

This paper argues that humanitarian logics have been integral to the constitution and historical evolution of international society and its primary institutions. Whilst Watson was chiefly interested in the *raison de système* which brought states together in the consolidation and preservation of an international society, he did not dedicate as much attention to how humanitarian concerns have historically been embedded in the structure of both statehood and international society. We introduce the concept of *raison de l'humanité* to capture this fundamental concern for protecting human lives, alleviating human suffering and mobilising compassion and solidarity in politics. We show how this *raison de l'humanité* has historically complemented and reinforced (rather than undermined) the workings of international society and its *raison de système*. We illustrate this argument by examining the humanitarian responsibilities historically associated with sovereignty and their contemporary expression in the responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine. Instead of uncritically celebrating this *raison de l'humanité* as a universal and morally progressive force in global politics, however, this paper stresses the need to attend to the hierarchies, exclusions and sacrifices produced by appeals to humanity and humanitarian logics. Taking this *raison de l'humanité* seriously therefore requires tracing how throughout history, appeals to humanity have oscillated between solidarity and violence, inclusion and exclusion, equality and hierarchy. This brings us back, in turn, to Watson's project of historical documentation of the varying workings of international society.

Keywords Adam Watson · English school · Raison de système · Humanitarianism · R2P · Historical IR

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Introduction

The Evolution of International Society has been described as a ‘masterful piece of theoretical and historical analysis’ (Vasquez 2002) and as the culmination of the historical comparative work of the British Committee (Buzan and Little 2009). Watson indeed provided an ambitious review of the workings of major historical international societies and systems from the ancient Sumer state system to the emergence and globalisation of the European society of states. In doing so, Watson (2002, [1992]) introduced the important (and arguably underutilised) concept of *raison de système* to capture the interest that members of a given international society have in preserving the good functioning of the existing system.¹ Yet whilst Watson was chiefly interested in the institutions, rules and codes of conduct which brought states together in the consolidation and preservation of an international society (*raison de système*), he dedicated less attention to the role played by humanitarian concerns in the evolution of international society.

The period immediately following the publication of *The Evolution of International Society* would coincide with important humanitarian developments at the multilateral and global levels. In 1992, the United Nations Security Council authorised the use of all necessary means (including the use of force) to ensure a ‘secure environment for humanitarian relief operations in Somalia’ (UNSC 1992, para. 10). Two years later, the United Nations Development Programme (1994) advocated for a broadening of the traditional conception of security (which equated the latter with the protection of the nation-state) to include ‘human security’ (the security of persons and people). Commentators have spoken of this period as marking the birth of ‘humanity’s law’, with the rise of humanity-centred discourses, values and institutions (Teitel 2011); and as reflecting the ‘humanisation of international law’ (Meron 2006) or ‘humanisation of global politics’ (Gholiagha 2022).

These developments have been interpreted within English school scholarship as evidence for the rise of solidarism within the international society of states (Wheeler 2002; Linklater 2009), or even as marking the growth of the element of world society—which takes human beings (or agents acting on their behalf) at the centre of global political identities and arrangements, and ultimately seeks to transcend the international state-system (Buzan 2014b, p. 13). A growing body of works have examined the institutional basis for these developments, focusing for instance on practices of international refugee protection (Nantermoz 2020), environmental stewardship (Falkner and Buzan 2019), humanitarian intervention (Wheeler 2002; Turan Zara 2019), and international criminal justice (Moghalu 2008).

What we wish to argue in this paper, however, is that humanitarian logics have played a more fundamental and enduring role in the historical evolution and consolidation of the modern society of states. That is, rather than seeing humanitarian concerns as a rhetorical discourse mobilised by self-interested state actors, we argue

¹ As Nicolás Terradas (2023, p. 4) argues in this issue, this concept of *raison de système* gives substance and coherence to the English school theorisation of international society, setting it apart from other theoretical traditions in international relations and international political theory.



that humanitarianism has represented a durable practice within the society of states, that has historically been integral to the definition of the standards for legitimate sovereignty and responsible statehood and of the patterns of legitimate interactions between states (Buzan 2004, p. 167).

We introduce the term '*raison de l'humanité*' to capture this fundamental concern for protecting human lives, alleviating human suffering, and mobilising compassion and solidarity in politics. Rather than seeing *raison de l'humanité* as antithetical to, or rooted in the transcendence of, the current workings of the international society of states, we show how this logic of *raison de l'humanité* includes the preservation of human life within the calculations of a state and the rules presiding the functioning of international society, and has therefore acted as a fundamental organising principle in the constitution of international society. This *raison de l'humanité* has indeed historically interacted with and informed the constitution of key primary institutions of international society, that is, the more fundamental, durable sets of intersubjective understandings and shared practices aimed at the realisation of common goals in the society of states (Bull 1977). Besides sovereignty, this *raison de l'humanité* has deeply informed the institutions of war and international law—by placing limits on acceptable conduct during armed conflict to minimise unjustified human suffering, and by providing individuals with fundamental rights and avenues for protection. This *raison de l'humanité* therefore forms an integrant part of the 'historically constructed normative structure' of international society (Alderson and Hurrell 2000, p; 27).

In introducing this third logic of *raison de l'humanité*, our aim is twofold. First, we wish to re-situate contemporary discussions and institutional developments surrounding humanitarian and human-centred forms of action as part of a much longer historical tradition of providing for the alleviation of human suffering and violence within and beyond state borders. Second, this allows for considering the promotion of humanitarian and human-centred values as not inevitably and irremediably in tension with the protection of state interests (*raison d'état*) or with the preservation of international society (and its *raison de système*). Rather, the question becomes—empirically—how these three logics interact and interplay with one another and what this reveals about the (changing) character of the society of states; and—normatively—how these logics can be brought into balance in the most productive and harmonious way to achieve an orderly and just international society.²

At the same time, we caution against uncritically celebrating this *raison de l'humanité* as a universal and morally progressive force in global politics. Instead, this paper stresses the need to attend to the hierarchies, exclusions and sacrifices produced by appeals to humanity and humanitarian logics in international society. We illustrate our argument by examining the historical responsibilities associated with sovereignty, and their contemporary expression in the concept of a responsibility

² This is not to say, however, that the three logics of *raison d'état*, *raison de système* et *raison de l'humanité* are always working in harmony or in mutually conciliable ways. As we will show in the remainder of this paper (notably through the example of R2P), the demands of these three logics may at times enter in conflict and push in opposite directions.



to protect (R2P). Whilst sovereignty is often understood as representing the core organising principle of the modern society of states, we show that it has long been associated with important limits and obligations for the sovereign. Tracing the evolving relationship between sovereign authority and sovereign responsibility towards individuals, both inside and outside the territory of the state, thus provides a useful marker of the character of both international society and its constitutive units (states).

The concept of *raison de système* in Watson's writings

In *The Evolution of International Society*, Watson traces the workings of past (international) societies. Watson's interest lies in the 'institutions... assumptions and codes of conduct, by which past groups of political entities tried to order and regulate the systems that bound them together' (2002, p. 1). These shared rules, agreements and institutions act as a superstructure to promote order by altering the mechanical workings of the international system (2002, p. 311). They thereby transform the system into an international society, which all members have an interest in preserving and making it work. This 'belief that it pays to make the system work' is what Watson refers to as *raison de système* (2002, p. 14). Importantly, the presence of a *raison de système* does not imply the absence of any conflict of interest; rather, it marks the recognition that the involved parties have an advantage in pursuing the resolution of such conflict within the framework (rules, codes of conduct and institutions) of the given society they are part of. Indeed, as Watson observes, 'most states do, as a matter of observed practice, cooperate most of the time to sustain the system in which they operate, and pursue their interests within its framework and according to its rules' (2005 [1982], p. 187).

The logic of *raison de système* is generally presented as a counterpoint to the realist notion of *raison d'état*, which sees states as putting the pursuit of their national interests above all other (legal or moral) considerations (Buzan 2014b, p. 18). Yet as stressed by Watson, the logic of *raison de système* does not so much displace the logic of *raison d'état*, but instead reconstitutes the latter to include preservation of the wider international society a state is part of. In other words, the expectation is not that in a well-established and well-functioning international society states will free themselves from the demands of *raison d'état*, but rather that these demands (and therefore the content of states' national interest) will in the long run converge towards the protection and preservation of the system itself. In *Diplomacy*, Watson indeed stresses that whilst a responsible leader will pursue the interests of the state, they will not do so 'uncompromisingly' and 'regardless of the confrontations and clashes which such a policy may involve' (2005, p. 187). The responsible leader will instead recognise the 'positive advantage in cooperating with other states and international bodies to make international society function smoothly' (Watson 2005, p. 187). Hence, '*raison d'état* leads [state leaders] to think in terms of the system itself, with its basis of the balance of power, and of the rules and institutions of international society; and to consider to what extent they can further their interests, and limit the net cost of pursuing them, by preserving the system and making the society



work effectively' (Watson 2005, p. 192). *Raison de système* therefore requires the conscious and deliberate efforts of state agents to make the system work: it is 'not a commitment to the status quo, but the management of orderly change [requiring] continual adjustment' (Watson 2003 [1997], fn 6, p. 105, as cited in Terradas 2023 p. 8).

Whilst Watson examines a number of state systems in the ancient world, it is in his analysis of the European society of states (and of its subsequent globalisation) that the logic of *raison de système* finds its full expression. The establishment of the new Westphalian order in the mid-seventeenth century marked the transition from an order grounded on the unity of Christendom (and the superior authority of a pope or emperor) to an order grounded in the recognition of the sovereignty of independent states (Watson 2002, p. 188). The demise of religion as the core source of authority and legitimacy in the international system would in turn require the establishment of new rules and institutions, accepted and shared by the members of the European society of states to regulate the conduct of independent states with one another (and thereby avoid an anarchical international system). Starting from the second half of the twentieth century, the European society of states would incorporate new members—though membership in the society of states remained conditional on the respect of a number of criteria, from acceptance of the rules of conduct set by European powers to reaching an 'acceptable level of civilisation' (as set by the major European powers) (Watson 2002, p. 273).

The Evolution of International Society therefore offers an ambitious historical review of how international societies have functioned over time—with important learnings for the present (though also notable omissions and Eurocentric biases (as noted in this special issue by Jacinta O'Hagan 2023). What is largely absent from Watson's story, however, is the concern of states not only for the preservation of the system itself, but also for the protection of suffering others—that is, the role of humanitarian impulses in the making of international society. It is important to note that Watson himself—throughout his life but especially in his later works—took interest in considerations of justice, ethics, as well as states' wider obligations towards humankind and even the planet. Such an interest was already visible in 1973, when under Watson's coordination, the British Committee directed its work towards questions of ethics, legitimacy and justice in international relations (Vigezzi 2005, p. 251). Keeping with his predilection for comparative historical work, Watson traced aspirations for international justice across societies and time; and inquired into whether recognition of shared basic ethical principles was a precondition for the effective functioning of an international society of states (Vigezzi 2005, p. 266, 275).

Watson was well aware of the increasing interconnectedness of the world and was arguably not disputing the new challenges facing the contemporary society of states, ranging from the threat of nuclear destruction to pollution and population explosion (2005, p. 12). Yet as he observed, states seemed far more eager to attempt to solve these issues within the framework of the society of states ('internationally') than to agree to 'pool their sovereignty' into a world government or world federation that would have the power to take forceful decisions and enforce them (Watson 2005, pp. 12–13). The way forward was therefore through international agreements



negotiated with states—that is, the way of diplomacy (Watson 2005, pp. 13–14). The same position would be re-articulated in *The Limits of Interdependence*. Whilst Watson dedicated a separate section to considering states’ ‘obligations to humanity and the environment’ (2003, pp. 99–101), he saw the society of states as the only practical framework of reference for acting on these issues (2003, pp. 103–104) and found that such demands remained ‘largely nebulous and unformulated’ (Watson 2003, p. 100). The lack of independent agency of humankind—that is, the absence of an authoritative body that speaks for and represents humanity itself—ultimately led Watson to adopt a cautious stance. Demands for more morality and justice in the conduct of international relations would have to be mediated by states and agents acting on their behalf. Whilst some degree of change was possible within the society of states, a more drastic political transformation of the system itself was unlikely.

Watson’s analysis was a prescient one, which arguably still applies today. In fact, Watson’s analysis finds an echo in Buzan’s notion of state-centric solidarism, as a type of solidarism rooted in the society of states rather than in the great society of humankind—that is, seeking not to transcend the states system but rather to move international society towards deeper cooperation and convergence, and a higher degree of shared rules, norms and institutions (Buzan 2014b, pp. 115–118). Yet despite the lack of independent agency of humankind, imperatives to protect humanity have a long history, and have been attached to moral, legal, political and even religious obligations. As we show in the remainder of the article, humanitarian concerns have been embedded in the deep structure of past and present international society(ies), contributing to defining (to give one example only) the standards for legitimate statehood.

The missing element: introducing a *raison de l’humanité*

The notion of *raison de système* is at first sight well-suited to capture the emergence of modern international society and of its ‘classical’ primary institutions, such as sovereignty, territoriality, legitimacy, diplomacy, international law, the balance of power or Great Power Management. The concept of *raison de système*, however, appears ill-suited to account for the aversion to unnecessary suffering in international society, and the ensuing concern for alleviating violence and harm both within and beyond state borders. This concern for minimising human suffering is highly visible today, notably through the rise of relatively new institutions that centre on the protection of individuals and solidarity with fellow human beings—one may think here of refugee protection, human rights, or even environmental stewardship to the extent that it’s grounded in the protection and preservation of the human species. Yet it is important to note that such humanitarian concerns have much older roots than conventionally assumed. They have been embedded in the very structure of statehood and international society,

contributing to defining what counts as responsible sovereignty or what is permissible conduct during warfare. As shown by Andrew Linklater (2011, p. 23), the recognition of a ‘harm principle’—calling for the prevention and alleviation of violence and suffering—has been built deep into the constitution of modern international



society, notably within international law. In the same vein, Charles Taylor (1989) has argued that the imperative to reduce suffering is the foundation of a distinctively modern moral culture, which has motivated (and still motivates) varieties of humanitarian action. Such concerns for minimising unnecessary violence and suffering are therefore not new, but have rather deeply informed the constitution of international society and of its core ‘classical’ primary institutions, such as sovereignty, war or international law.

Hence, capturing the evolution of international society requires grappling with a third logic that we propose to term *raison de l’humanité*—referring to the growing importance of humanity as a referent of international society, and the ensuing concern for protecting human lives, alleviating unnecessary violence and suffering, and mobilising compassion and solidarity in global politics.³ This *raison de l’humanité* is neither antithetical to, nor completely independent from, *raison d’état* and *raison de système*. Just as Watson was seeing *raison de système* as reconstituting *raison d’état* to include preservation of the wider international society, *raison de l’humanité* reconstitutes the other two logics to include the preservation of human life within the calculations of a state and the rules presiding the functioning of the international system.

Whilst resonating with English school conceptualisations of a world society or of a solidarist international society,⁴ the notion of a *raison de l’humanité* enables us to let go of the assumption of universal or cosmopolitan solidarity which has underpinned much of world society scholarship (Buzan 2014b, p. 13; Williams 2014, p. 132). This allows us in turn to critically examine the politics of humanity and the kind of lives which are produced and centred through the deployment of humanitarian affects internationally and transnationally. Doing so requires departing from the assumption that these developments are self-evidently morally progressive or ethically desirable, and instead paying attention to the hierarchies, exclusions and sacrifices produced by this *raison de l’humanité*. Humanity in its dual meaning—as both the quality of being human which draws us towards our fellows (humanness) and the aggregation of all human beings (humankind)—emphasises a common condition, and in turn implies that all lives are equally valuable and sacred (Fassin 2011, p. 248). This common condition of humanity is, however, in permanent tension with the realisation that in practice, lives are fundamentally unequal, and whilst some lives are seen as worth saving or grieving (Butler 2009), others are seen as sacrificiable. As Amy Niang (2020, p. 334) aptly notes, the rise of humanitarian sentiments and of appeals to a shared (international or global) community have historically gone hand in hand with the need to expel categories of humans from the body

³ In articulating the concept of *raison de l’humanité*, we draw from the work of Didier Fassin (2011, p. 1) on humanitarian reason and humanitarian government, which he defines as ‘the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics’.

⁴ Although there is still a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the definition, meaning, existence and significance of world society (Stivachtis and McKeil 2018, p. 4), one influential definition is that of Barry Buzan (2014b, p. 13), for whom world society ‘takes individuals, non-state organisations and ultimately the global population as a whole as the focus of global societal identities and arrangements and puts transcendence of the state system at the centre of IR theory.’



politic—one example being the distinction between ‘genuine’ or ‘deserving’ political refugees and the ‘unworthy’ or even ‘criminal’ economic migrants. Another example can be found in international justice discourses of saving helpless and innocent victims through the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of atrocities (themselves depicted as inhuman and barbaric monsters). The politics of humanity are therefore politics of inequality, of unequal recognition and unequal worth.

These hierarchies of lives and suffering often operate along racial and gendered lines. The victim in need of humanitarian rescue is frequently equated with the image of the Third World sufferer, whose country is unable or unwilling to protect (Clarke 2009, p. 109). The humanitarian imaginary in turn hinges on a particular understanding of how distant Western audiences should react and feel for victims (Hutchison 2014, p. 16), reproducing a social and political hierarchy between the victim-sufferer and the distant spectator (called in to act as a ‘saviour’). This feeds into a type of superior Western mindset, which both invokes and perpetuates the perceived dependency of the Global South (Hutchison 2014, p. 12), providing valence for the idea that the West needs to intervene and come to the rescue (Orford 2003). In foregrounding the (universal) experience of vulnerability and suffering, this *raison de l’humanité* is grounded in a shared ontological condition which appears as completely detached from history and from its violent legacies in the present (Danewid 2017, p. 1683; Niang 2020, p. 344). Global inequality is reframed in terms of suffering, violence in terms of trauma, historical injustice in terms of compassion, responsibility and guilt in terms of empathy (Fassin 2011, p. 8; Danewid 2017). Taking this *raison de l’humanité* seriously therefore requires tracing how throughout history, appeals to humanity have oscillated between solidarity and violence, inclusion and exclusion, equality and hierarchy. This brings us back, we believe, to Watson’s project of historically documenting the varying workings of international society.

Below we trace the historical workings of this *raison de l’humanité* by examining the humanitarian responsibilities and duties historically associated with sovereign authority and legitimacy, and their contemporary expression in the articulation of a responsibility to protect (R2P). We show notably how responsible sovereignty and legitimate authority has long been associated with humanitarian responsibilities towards a state’s population—and in turn, with accountability to other members of the society of states regarding the fulfilment of these duties. This evidences the interdependence between principles of legitimacy within states, and those that govern relations between states (Glanville 2014, p. 4), providing a useful lens to examine the extent to which humanitarian concerns have shaped the constitution of modern international society and its constituent unit, the sovereign state. Importantly, in tracing the extent to which humanitarian concerns have shaped the constitution of international society, we focus on developments originating within the Western world (and most notably Europe) from the sixteenth century onwards. As we have noted above, it is indeed within the European society of states that we see the precursor for the contemporary society of states, the former having progressively expanded and globalised to arrive to the latter. This is not to say that outside of the European society of states, humanitarian concerns were absent or any less important. Whilst reviewing these developments is outside of the scope of the paper, it would provide a fruitful avenue for further research, in line with calls for the English



school to adopt a more reflexive and global approach (Parrat et al 2020; Williams 2023).

Sovereignty as (humanitarian) responsibility

At the 2005 World Summit, Heads of states and governments formally endorsed the principle of R2P (UNGA 2005, paras 138–139). R2P marks the recognition that sovereignty entails a responsibility to prevent atrocity crimes. The international community, in turn, has the duty to assist states in fulfilling this responsibility, and (in last resort) to intervene in situations where a state has manifestly failed to protect its population from atrocities. The adoption of R2P has been celebrated as marking a ground-breaking moment and radical departure from the traditional ‘Westphalian’ conception of sovereignty which had hitherto prevailed. A prominent R2P commentator described the conventional view of sovereignty as having ‘effectively institutionalised the long-standing indifference of political leaders toward atrocities happening elsewhere... sovereignty... meant immunity from outside scrutiny or sanction: what happened within a state’s borders and its territorial possessions, however grotesque and morally indefensible, was nobody else’s business’ (Evans 2008, p. 16). Others have spoken of a ‘centuries-old traditional of non-interference’ (Thakur 2011, p. 12), and of R2P as marking a ‘global normative shift away from the traditional understanding of state sovereignty as guaranteeing rights of non-interference towards acceptance of sovereignty as responsibility’ (Bellamy and Drummond 2011, p. 180). As the story goes, sovereignty had therefore long protected states from external interference and intervention, including in situations where the treatment of their populations left to be desired. The adoption of R2P, in contrast, marked the long overdue recognition that a state’s enjoyment of its rights (to non-interference and sovereign independence) was conditional on the discharge of its minimum responsibilities towards its citizens. In other words, according to this discourse, R2P would evidence the consolidation of *raison de l’humanité* alongside and even within *raison de système* and *raison d’état*.

Often missing from this story, however, are the deeper roots and historical antecedents of R2P and its core idea of sovereignty as responsibility. The notion that states have responsibilities and duties towards their population (and that they are in turn accountable to other members of international society for the fulfilment of these obligations) is far from the radical departure that R2P advocates portray (Glanville 2014). Indeed, ever since their first articulations in the sixteenth century, notions of sovereignty and legitimate authority have been associated with humanitarian responsibilities within and beyond the boundaries of the state—as we show below.

Historical conceptions of sovereignty and the imperative to protect

The first systematic conceptualisations of sovereignty can be traced back to the works of European theologians and philosophers in the sixteenth century (Glanville 2014). The dominant discourse amongst these thinkers was a defence of ‘absolute



sovereignty’ as the basis for a strong and stable centralised government that would end incessant civil wars and conflict. This conception of sovereignty was absolute in the sense that it gave the ruler independence and full authority internally. Still, rulers were understood to be bound by natural and divine laws, which included the imperative to provide for the protection and safety of their population (Glanville 2014). Sovereign authority was therefore neither unlimited nor unbounded, and went hand in hand with sovereign responsibility. What is more, sovereigns were in turn answerable to neighbouring rulers for the fulfilling of their humanitarian duties and responsibilities towards their people.

Two of the most prominent theorists of ‘absolute sovereignty’ were Jean Bodin (often regarded as having provided the first systematic examination of the nature of sovereignty) and Thomas Hobbes. In his *Six Livres de la République*, Bodin combined an insistence on the absolute and perpetual nature of sovereign authority (which was only bounded by the laws of God and nature) with an emphasis on the responsibilities of the sovereign. Bodin indeed wrote of ‘the mutual obligation between subject and sovereign, by which, in return for the faith and obedience rendered to him, the sovereign must do justice and give counsel, assistance, encouragement, and protection to the subject’ (1955 [1576], p. 20). Bodin provided rulers with a right to intervene when a neighbouring prince does not fulfil their sovereign responsibility and oppress their population, writing that ‘it is highly honourable, and befitting a prince, to take up arms in defence of a whole people unjustly oppressed by a cruel tyrant’ (Bodin 1955, p. 66). Thomas Hobbes (1651) similarly wrote of the importance of establishing a commonwealth—through a covenant whereby individuals would voluntarily submit to the absolute rule and judgement of the sovereign Leviathan—to avoid the chaos and conflict that inevitably arise in a state of nature. At the same time, Hobbes made clear that the individual could never forfeit its right to self-preservation (Hobbes 1651, p. 98). The authority of the Leviathan would therefore only remain legitimate for so long as the former could guarantee the protection and safety of its population. When individuals could no longer be guaranteed their right to self-preservation, they retained the right to rebel against the sovereign (Hobbes 1651). Meanwhile, theorists of the just war provided for the right to wage war when a sovereign breached natural laws by oppressing their own population. Theorisations of sovereignty in early modern Europe therefore included humanitarian concerns and duties for the protection of the population internally (as well as some external accountability to God and/or to other rulers).

The 1648 Peace of Westphalia is widely regarded as the first affirmation of the principles of sovereign autonomy and territoriality, and therefore as marking the origins of the modern sovereign state and of the international state-system (critically, Croxton 1999; Carvalho et al 2011). Less often mentioned is the fact that the treaties of Westphalia enshrined the responsibility of states to protect religious minorities—a responsibility that neighbouring states were obliged to defend and enforce if necessary. Far from a charter of non-interference and non-intervention, the treaties of Westphalia gave to the guarantor powers the right and duty to intervene if a prince failed to respect religious toleration (Glanville 2014, p. 54). In other words, religious freedom was recognised as a matter of international concern and responsibility (Croxton 1999, p. 575). Hence, one can find at Westphalia ‘an emergent



international society with the capacity and willingness to articulate not only rights but responsibilities of legitimate statehood, including enforceable responsibilities for the liberties of subjects' (2014, p. 55).

From the late seventeenth century onwards, the discourse of absolute sovereignty was progressively displaced by the rising doctrine of popular sovereignty, which rested on the idea of the sovereign will of the people and of popular consent as the source of government's authority (Yack 2001; Glanville 2014). At the heart of popular sovereignty was the idea of self-government, later complemented by a right to freedom from external interference.⁵ At the same time, theorists of popular sovereignty conditioned the legitimacy of sovereign authority to the fulfilment of the 'rights of man'. Hence, sovereignty entailed humanitarian responsibilities, and governments were accountable to the people for fulfilling their individual rights (Glanville 2014). More broadly, as Ian Clark (2007, p. 96) has put it, '[d]omestic legitimacy had become itself a function of international legitimacy'. Besides, the right of sovereign states to non-intervention (whilst increasingly consolidated in the writings of late eighteenth century and nineteenth century theorists) was always accompanied by important exceptions. These exceptions notably allowed for intervention to preserve the balance of power, for the self-preservation of a state, to rectify wrongdoing, to prevent religious persecutions or even to protect 'humanity' (Glanville 2014, p. 81; Onuf 2004).

These exceptions to the general principle of non-interference created a certain tension between the idea of self-government and freedom from interference (which represented the core of the idea of popular sovereignty) and the increasingly widely accepted doctrine of humanitarian intervention. This tension was alleviated by the uneven application of these principles and differentiated set of rules that would separate between the European society of states and its periphery. Many of the theorists mentioned above indeed reserved the privileges of sovereignty to the 'civilised' world led by the Europeans. Meanwhile, the perceived failure of non-European states to abide by the 'standard of civilisation' (Gong 1984) set by the European powers was used to justify interventions abroad, as in the case of the multiple European interventions in the Ottoman empire throughout the nineteenth century (Glanville 2014, pp. 105–106). The standard of civilisation supported a racialised division of the world between the 'civilised' (European states representing the self-proclaimed embodiment of civilisation), the 'semi-civilised' and the 'savage' (Buzan 2014a). Whilst the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference applied within the European society of states, in the periphery the standard of civilisation served as justification for the rights of the Europeans to control and colonise non-European societies, to bring forceful 'progress' to 'barbaric' and 'backwards' peoples and to reform their governing structures (Keene 2002; Linklater 2016). The

⁵ The association of sovereignty with the right to non-interference would not appear until the mid-eighteenth century, notably in the writings of Emer de Vattel. Vattel did not, however, conceive of the right to non-interference as absolute. Instead, he provided for a right of intervention 'to succour an oppressed people who implore [the] assistance' of a foreign state and 'to assist brave men in the defence of their [religious] liberties' (2008 [1758], p. 290).



notion that states had a responsibility to intervene when witnessing the persecution of people abroad was therefore a key justification for colonial and imperial projects. Notably, the colonisation of Africa by European powers was justified in reference to the civilising mission, that is, the responsibility of the Europeans to improve and protect native populations and bring development and free commerce to the continent (Conklin 1997; Barth and Hobson 2020).

Hence, historically, invocations of the ideas of humanity, civilisation, and the humanitarian responsibilities of the sovereign (both towards their own populations and towards the suffering or oppressed people abroad) have gone hand in hand with forcible interventionism abroad, imperial domination and exploitation, and hierarchies of humanity. As Talal Asad (2015) has shown, humanitarianism and its core notion of a common humanity were born and cultivated in the crucible of early modern conquests and the expansion of European colonial empires. The core ideas which underpin the responsibility to protect today—including self-government combined with external accountability, individual rights combined with forcible intervention—were historically both framed by the experience of empire and also put to work to justify empire' (Glanville 2014, p. 222).⁶ This selective understanding and arbitrary application of humanitarian interventions would create tensions that to this day permeate the functioning of a global *raison de l'humanité*. Indeed, the tendency by the 'civilised' world to appropriate this logic of *raison de l'humanité* by defining whose suffering matters and when forcible intervention is justified, has been received with increasing suspicion and even backlash in the rest of the world, these legacies continuing to frame understandings, mobilisations and reactions to the idea of R2P today. Below we offer a brief overview of the articulation of R2P in the early 2000s, showing how whilst the ideas and principles at the core of R2P are not new, the articulation of R2P participated in the gradual but incomplete institutionalisation of a *raison de l'humanité*.

The adoption of R2P: the institutionalisation of a *raison de l'humanité*?

The concept of the 'responsibility to protect' was coined in 2001 in an eponymous report from the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) (2001). The ICISS was established in 2000 by Canada to grapple with the 'intervention dilemma' (ICISS 2001, p.1). The successive humanitarian crises of the 1990s had laid bare the limits of international society in addressing widespread violence and suffering. They had also put in sharp relief the controversial and divisive status of humanitarian intervention. Whilst the legality (and possibly legitimacy) of forced interventionism was questioned in the case of Kosovo, the failure of the international community to appropriately respond to the genocidal violence in Rwanda showed that international inaction was equally condemnable. In his Millennium report to the General Assembly in 2000, then-Secretary General Kofi Annan articulated the challenge of balancing between the demands of *raison d'état*

⁶ See also Siba Grovogui (2012), arguing that the original language of R2P can be traced back to the legal foundations of colonial protectorates.



(sovereignty as independence), *raison de système* (the preservation of the existing international society with its established rules, practices and institutions) and *raison de l'humanité* (the protection of fellow human beings and the appeal to a common humanity):

if humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica – to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity? (UNGA, 2000, p. 34)

The ICISS was tasked with meeting this challenge, by examining the ‘problem of reconciling intervention for human protection purposes and sovereignty’ (ICISS 2001, p. 2). The ICISS’s articulation of R2P rested on three pillars: a responsibility to prevent conflicts and atrocities, a responsibility to react to situations where there is a compelling need for human protection and a responsibility to rebuild for durable peace, to promote sustainable development and good governance (ICISS 2001). The second pillar—on the question of intervention—was, however, the main focus of the Commission and would remain the most discussed and contentious aspect of R2P (Bellamy 2008).

As noted above, R2P was later endorsed by world leaders at the World Summit of 2005. The outcome document from the World Summit evidences the desire to reconcile the demands of the three logics of *raison d'état*, *raison de système* and *raison de l'humanité*. The language adopted reaffirms the primacy of the responsibility of the state in protecting its population, and the duty of the international community to assist states in fulfilling this duty of protection (UNGA 2005, para 138). The document further provides for the possibility of collective action through the UN Security Council and according to the rules set out in the UN Charter, in cases where a state would manifestly fail at protecting its population from atrocity crimes (UNGA 2005, para 139). The logic of *raison de l'humanité* therefore does not displace the other two logics, but rather comes to reconstitutes conceptions of legitimate sovereignty and authority (*raison d'état*) as well as what constitutes a matter of international concern and responsibility (the protection of individuals from atrocity crimes being integrated within the objective of preserving international peace and security, and the *raison de système* more broadly).

At the same time, the adoption of R2P evidences the limits to the institutionalisation of *raison de l'humanité* in an anarchical society of states (Bull 1977). Firstly, the endorsement of the concept by world leaders in 2005 limited the scope of R2P to ‘core’ international crimes (genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing) instead of the broader notion of a ‘large scale loss of life’ envisioned in the ICISS report (Welsh 2013, p. 374). Whilst this narrow scope was a strategic choice to maximise support for R2P and facilitate its rapid implementation (not least to overcome the scepticism of some towards the real intentions of Western powers), it further reifies a hierarchy of suffering and harm. The focus is predominantly placed on spectacular forms of violence (often involving acts of killing and bodily harm) (DeFalco 2022). Meanwhile, R2P excludes structural and systemic violence, and notably violence stemming from a fundamentally unjust and stratified world order. This prioritisation of spectacular forms of violence is particularly notable in



Gareth Evans' (co-chair of ICISS) characterisation of R2P as 'a mobiliser of instinctive, universal action in cases of conscience-shocking killing, ethnic cleansing, and other such crimes against humanity' (Evans 2008, pp. 64–65).

Secondly, whilst the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document marked a new political commitment of states to prevent and protect populations from atrocity crimes, it did not create any new legal obligations for states to do so, nor did it establish a new international authority with the power to take executive action for humanitarian and protective ends (Welsh; 2013, pp. 375–376; Orford 2011; Ralph and Gallagher 2015). Instead, the document embeds R2P (and its more coercive aspects) within the existing collective security arrangements provided under the UN Charter. As Jennifer Welsh has noted, the Outcome Document falls short of 'explicitly articulat[ing] an *international* responsibility to protect, which would be automatically activated if the state's primary responsibility to protect its population from mass atrocity crimes is not fulfilled' (2013, p. 377). Rather, the language merely states that governments are 'prepared to take collective action... on a case-by-case basis' (UNGA 2005, para 139). Given the anarchical nature of international society, these provisions left the door open for states to respond inconsistently and selectively, weakening the status of R2P and generating deep criticism and scepticism. In short, whilst the articulation of R2P provides a visible sign of the workings of *raison de l'humanité*, it remains framed within the rules and values of an anarchical international society. We examine some of the challenges and inconsistencies resulting from this predicament below.

R2P in practice: Libya, Darfur and beyond

The emergence of R2P was framed as a way to break free from the problematic legacies and politically driven practice of humanitarian intervention. While humanitarian interventions triggered a visceral reaction amongst the developing world (not least because of the double standards which had presided its application, and its tendency to becoming a cloak for the defence of the West's hegemonic interests), R2P brought the promise of putting victims and peoples first (Thakur 2013, pp. 65–66). In other words, R2P would shift the focus away from the preferences, interests and priorities of the intervener, and instead towards the real needs of the most vulnerable.

This has, however, so far not been the case. As has been rightly noted, 'responses to conscience-shocking situations have depended on political conditions and interests at stake in the conflicts in question, as well as on the willingness and capabilities of various actors... to react' (Badescu and Bergholm 2009, p. 289). Hence, when confronted with the humanitarian emergency resulting from the conflict in Darfur—arguably the first test for R2P (Mepham and Ramsbotham 2006)—the international community failed to mobilise a united front. Whilst the use of the language of R2P contributed to maintaining a high level of international attention on the situation in Darfur, the lack of sufficient political will from states to agree on a common and decisive response to the conflict ultimately meant that the international community took little more than symbolic measures



to protect civilians (Badescu and Bergholm 2009, p. 302). Besides, the Security Council proved its unwillingness to authorise an intervention in Darfur absent the consent of the Sudanese government, suggesting that the protection of civilians in Darfur appeared secondary to the respect of Sudan's sovereignty and independence (Badescu and Bergholm 2009, pp. 302–303).

The decision by the international community to intervene in the Libyan civil war in 2011 is often cited as the first 'road test' of R2P's third pillar (the coercive element of intervention) (Thakur 2013, p. 61). From the onset of the crisis, discussions at the UN level were framed in terms of a responsibility to protect with warnings of an imminent threat of mass atrocities (Williams and Bellamy 2012, p. 276). The escalation of violence and the use of extraordinary force and repression against civilians was widely condemned by world leaders, prompting members of the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Libya to the International Criminal Court and to impose an arms embargo in the country (UNSC 2011a). In March 2011, the Security Council decided for the first time to invoke the coercive element of R2P, authorising member states 'to take all necessary measures... to protect civilians and civilian-populated areas under threat of attack' in Libya (UNSC 2011b, para. 4, p. 3; Thakur 2013).

The deployment of R2P in Libya initially appeared as a triumph for the concept, demonstrating the potential for a timely and coordinated response from the international community to intervene and protect victims of a tyrannical and brutal regime (Gözen Ercan 2016, p. 2). The adoption of Resolutions 1970 and 1973 seemed to signal that UNSC members were following on their commitment to place the protection of victims and the quest for justice over an absolutist understanding of sovereign rights and non-interference. In short, the Libyan case generated optimism that a healthy balance could be found between the demands of *raison d'état*, *raison de système* and *raison de l'humanité*. This hope and optimism were, however, short-lived. Despite the careful crafting of Resolution 1973 that strictly delineated the scope for international intervention (and limited it to the goal of humanitarian protection), NATO forces overstepped and began directly targeting the Gaddafi regime, in a de facto attempt at regime change (Thakur 2013, pp. 69–70; Paris 2014, p. 582). This shift from civilian protection to regime change was strongly criticised, especially by the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) (Thakur 2013). This resuscitated fears that R2P would represent nothing more than a 'trojan horse' to lend legitimacy to external interventions undertaken with ulterior motives and in service of political interests (Bellamy 2005; Ralph and Gallagher 2015).

This would have enduring consequences on future mobilisations (and the lack thereof) of R2P. When the civil war erupted in Syria, Russia and China vetoed any Security Council Resolutions that would have allowed external military intervention in the country, condemning Western draft resolutions as thinly veiled attempts to pursue regime change through armed intervention (Thakur 2013, p. 71). Both China and Russia cited the abuse of Resolution 1973 in Libya as part of their recalcitrance to allow decisive action in Syria (Paris 2014, p. 587). This stalemate led some commentators to call R2P dead (see Rieff 2011; Nuruzzaman 2013; Renshaw 2022), and



others to speak of an ‘utterly meaningless’ (Gerson 2014) and ‘hollow doctrine... that can be used only against the weak’ (Granatstein 2012).⁷

The example of R2P reveals that the institutionalisation of *raison de l’humanité* is incomplete precisely because it remains embedded in the framework of an anarchical international society, where the demands of the three logics sometimes clash and cannot be easily reconciled. Whilst the substantive value of civilian protection has become universally accepted by international society, its implementation and enforcement remain complicated. In other words, despite important normative and institutional developments, R2P suffers from constrained and weak implementation and enforcement mechanisms, and has remained a political rather than legal commitment. This is not least due to the debate surrounding the question of how international society should meet this responsibility to protect populations at risk, and who is given the authority to make such determinations (Ralph, and Gallagher 2015, pp. 568–570). At the same time, the political contestation surrounding R2P also reflects a wider perceived legitimacy deficit in the ordering structure of international society (Ralph and Gallagher 2015, pp. 553–554).

Conclusion

Early English school scholarship has been marked by a concern for the preservation of order in the international society of states. Scholars therefore directed their attention to the shared rules, codes of conducts, principles and institutions that maintained international order. In this tradition, Adam Watson extended his interest to past international societies and systems and their historical workings. Watson advanced the concept of *raison de système* to explain the interest that members of a given international society have in preserving and making the system work. *Raison de système* would come to reconstitute states’ conception of their national interest (*raison d’état*) to include international cooperation to protect the efficient functioning of international society and its key institutions. At the same time, Watson was more sceptical of the place for humanitarian values and purposes in international society: in the absence of an authoritative body above states, he saw demands for justice, morality and ethics as necessarily mediated by states and agents acting on their behalf. Whilst not disputing this finding, our paper has argued that humanitarian logics have played a more fundamental role in the historical constitution of international society, representing a durable practice within the society of states and shaping its key primary institutions of sovereignty, international law and war (to mention a few only). We have introduced the concept of *raison de l’humanité* to capture this concern for protecting human lives, alleviating suffering, and mobilising compassion and solidarity in international politics.

⁷ The discrepancy between the strong action taken in Libya, and the absence thereof in Darfur, can also be linked to the specificities of the situation, and notably Gaddafi’s open call for mass killings, the rich resources and massive foreign investment in Libya, its lack of international partner, and the support of the Arab world for such an intervention.



We have traced the workings of this *raison de l'humanité* by examining the humanitarian responsibilities historically associated with sovereignty, showing how standards for responsible sovereignty and legitimate authority have long included humanitarian duties towards individuals within and outside the state borders. Hence, rather than seeing *raison de l'humanité* as antithetical to, or rooted in the transcendence of, the current workings of the international society of states, we have shown how this logic of *raison de l'humanité* includes the preservation of human life within the calculations of a state and the rules presiding the functioning of international society. This *raison de l'humanité* has arguably become even more visible and institutionalised since the 1990s, with the creation of an international apparatus to prosecute and punish perpetrators of international crimes, protect refugees, deliver humanitarian aid, or prevent and mitigate mass violence, to mention a few examples only. The articulation of R2P in the early 2000s evidenced a concern from states to reconcile the demands of *raison d'état*, *raison de système* and *raison de l'humanité*, by balancing protection of a state's sovereignty with the imperative to prevent, mitigate and intervene when confronted with mass human harm. R2P has not fundamentally transformed or displaced the existing framework of an international society of states, but rather been inscribed within the latter and the existing rules and practices presiding to its functioning. At the same time, the anarchical nature of international society and enduring pluralist forces place limits on the implementation and enforcement of R2P—in other words, the institutionalisation of this *raison de l'humanité* has remained incomplete. R2P has stayed at the level of a political commitment (with no new legal obligations for states), leading to uneven application in situations of mass atrocities. Through our analysis of the situation in Darfur, Libya and Syria, we have shown that the application of R2P remains conditional on the political context, interests and political will of states.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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