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Citation for published version

Malksoo, Maria (2015) The Challenge of Liminality for International Relations Theory. In: Horvath, Agnes and Thomassen, Bjorn and Wydra, Harald, eds. Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality. Berhgahn Books, New York, Oxford, pp. 226-244. ISBN 978-1-78238-766-4.

DOI

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Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

<CN>Chapter 12

<CT>The Challenge of Liminality for International Relations Theory

<CA>Maria Mälksoo

<HDA>Introduction

The concept of liminality favors a broad interpretation, lending itself easily to disciplinary contexts outside of the original framework of cultural anthropology. Developed by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969) while exploring rites of passage, liminality points to in-between situations and conditions where established structures are dislocated, hierarchies reversed, and traditional settings of authority possibly endangered. The liminal state is a central phase in all social and cultural transitions. It marks the passage of the subject through "a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" and is thus a realm of great ambiguity, since the "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1969: 80–81). Yet, as a threshold situation, liminality is also a vital moment of creativity, a potential platform for renewing the societal makeup.

There is substantial, yet unrecognized, potential for the application of liminality across a range of International Relations (IR) problems, from the study of the preeminent IR concepts—power, security, sovereignty—to the analysis of the agent-structure relationship, state formation and recognition, war and political violence, structural transformation of the international system, extraordinary politics at times of transition, and the constitution of political identities. Applied to IR theory, liminality introduces an emancipatory research agenda, revealing the radical promise political anthropology holds for the study of International Relations.

The logic of transfer for applying the concept of liminality—whether to the study of individual and small-scale communal human experiences or to analysis of full-scale societal systems—stems from the underlying rationale of political anthropology, which neither plays on the opposition between the individual subject and the state, nor separates the international from the domestic sphere, or the "political" from the "social." Instead of assuming an isolated "international political realm" with a functionally defined "logic of anarchy," as has been the rule in many disciplinary traditions of IR, liminality questions the very meaning of such an opposition. Contra the hierarchical setup of traditional levels of analysis in IR, liminality shares political anthropology's assumption about the inherently political nature of "man," connecting it to the deepest, unalienable element of personhood (Szakolczai 2008b: 280). As "being human" means inseparable ties between individual subjects and political communities, liminality as a fundamental feature of the human condition could be legitimately applied to the analysis of International Relations as well.[1]

Yet the application of liminality in IR has been modest at best because, as is suggested below, the concept of liminality goes against the grain of many traditional models of thought within IR theory. Liminality creates fundamental uneasiness for traditional IR theory as it disrupts, by definition, essentializations and foundational claims. Defying set-in categories, liminality disturbs the ingrained "level of analysis" thinking in IR by emphasizing the fundamental ontological interconnection between the "high" and the "low," the "center" and the "periphery," the domestic and the international. It questions the urge for the static crystallizations typical of much positivist-rationalist IR theory, highlighting instead the processual nature of all international life, with a particular interest in the study of social change. It entails a cyclical rather than progressive understanding of international politics, and a relational rather than

absolute conception of power. Or as Turner put it, liminality implies that "the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low" (Turner 1969: 83).

Resisting binary opposition, liminality allows for extended conceptualization of a political subject (i.e., self-liminal-other). This has fundamental implications for the traditional categorization of actors (i.e., state and nonstate) in international relations generally as well as for the dynamics of the politics of belonging, becoming, and recognition in Europe and elsewhere. Based on the premise that we are unlikely to grasp the workings of the core without understanding what is happening at the limit,[2] liminality takes an active interest in boundary zones and peripheries (traditionally conceived) rather than the established centers of international politics. Liminality respects the fundamental polyvocality of the world, instinctively resisting attempts to overtly unify political processes and subjects by forging them into a hierarchical order. As such, it also has implications for the normative agenda within IR theory. Finally, the concept of liminality enables IR as a discipline to seek active intellectual exchange and build mutually beneficial channels for knowledge transfers with postcolonial studies, cultural theory, international political theory, semiotics, and critical geopolitics, which have appropriated the related notions of hybridity, interstitiality, creolization, marginalization, and carnivalization (cf. Bhabha 1994; Bakhtin 1968). Liminality could become a "bridge concept" by which to deepen the interdisciplinary theoretical dialogue between these fields.

Yet despite its interdisciplinary origins and the relational bent of its title, the discipline of IR traditionally has hardly focused on what falls between neat, clean-cut categories and concentrated instead on the construction of rigid formal dichotomies. This is particularly striking, considering that most of international politics happens precisely *in between* different political

subjects that are themselves inevitably "happening" as a result of multiple relational links to others. Apropos, *betwixt and between* could serve as a slogan for IR as a field of thought and practice between scholarly and practical knowledge in general—that is, if we subscribe to the argument of all political concepts inhabiting a liminal space between theory and practice. It is inherently difficult to utterly suspend essentially political concepts from politics and distil them into perennial categories, though that has been the urge of IR theorizing more often than not. Epistemologically and methodologically, we should rather recognize the intrinsic *inbetweenness* of political categories (e.g., "security," an essentially contested concept between theory and policy), and consequently engage the contradictions and normative implications of the contextual definitions of these notions (Ciută 2009). The curious absence of liminality from most theoretical elaborations of IR demonstrates no less curiously the limits of the contemporary political imagination.

This chapter seeks to rectify the situation by building a concise case for serious engagement with liminality in IR theory. The argument is advanced in four sections. After taking stock of the general implications of engaging liminality in IR theorizing, the discussion moves to explicate the value added by liminality against the backdrop of similar claims raised by scholars writing from the critical tradition in IR. Next, it sketches out the structure-generating potential of liminal conditions in international politics and liminality's analytical utility in studying war. The chapter concludes with reflections on the normative ramifications of embedding liminality deeper in IR theorizing.

<HDA>Implications of Engaging Liminality in IR Theory

Liminality, as applied to IR theory, has two major consequences for the traditional ontology and

epistemology of international politics. First, what it makes central to the investigation of the workings of world politics are not prefixed categories at clearly separable levels of analysis (state, international system/society) and their deterministic interaction, but rather their complex emergence, factual and discursive, via socialization into (and occasional resistance against) historically embedded rules and structural contexts (cf. Kurki 2008: 245–88; Neumann and Wigen 2013; Neumann 2014). Ontologically, then, global political reality is understood as constituted of multiple "products-in-process," entities neither here nor there but always becoming different, without any teleological implications (cf. Wight 2006: 7; Der Derian 2009: 254). That is, liminality does not share an idea of history underlined by the belief in progress.[3]

Second, having rejected attempts to objectify, reify, and temporally fix the multiple states of being, the inquiry should rather focus on genealogical exploration of the processes of becoming, and the intersocietal dimension of social change. Disregarding IR's intrinsic fetish of structure, liminality emphasizes the historical evolution of both the modern international system and the concepts used to describe its operation (cf. Walker 2001: 321–23). The stress on processuality, relationality, and differentiation, and the rejection of essentialization set liminality sharply in opposition to not only positivist/rationalist IR but also many conventional constructivist and Marxist approaches to the study of world politics. Liminality offers a fundamental critique of IR's conventional onto-spatial imagination and its traditional focus on policing the "sensible boundaries" of statehood, sovereignty, international system, identity, and security (Vrasti 2008: 300). Instead, it reveals their contested history, recognizing the inevitable intertwining of logical classifications and hierarchies with social and political ones (see further Durkheim and Mauss 1963).

While mainstream IR theory from classical realism to contemporary neoliberalism has

sought universal laws of international politics, liminality seeks to capture the particular, contingent, and idiosyncratic, always aiming at a sensitive grasp of the context. True, liminality also draws on universals (e.g., the ubiquitous rites of passage), but these are based on observation of human experience, not on the rationalizations of detached analysts constructing abstract notions of universality. Liminality is an intellectual manifestation of an attempt to transform the structuralist understanding of the world into a vital field of immanence where there is no "outside" (cf. Negri 2007: 109–15), but rather a continuous flow between different forms and ways of being. Intriguingly, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, many European languages express the notion of the "outside" with a word that literally means "at the door" or "at the threshold." Accordingly, the outside is not another space residing beyond a determinate space, but rather a passage (Agamben 2005a: 67–68). Thus, in the light of the distinctively in-between quality of liminality, IR's standard topographical division between what is happening inside and what outside of the sovereign state loses its persuasive force.

To accept liminality as a fundamental feature of political subjectivity in IR is to radically depart from reliance on concrete classifications, which seek to control the subject through the very "attack" of naming it in a particular way. All classifications, including the distinction between the inside and outside of the sovereign state, nurture the hope of successful management of a situation, as if inability to classify would signify open recognition of humans' fundamental helplessness in the face of the world (see Szasz 1970: 97–98). The metaphysics of modern security (or rather the lack thereof) demonstrates states' growing inability to use the traditional instruments of "national security" to neatly organize their safety and well-being into distinct spheres of internal and external security. It is as if the whole phenomenon of security has become liminal—quite like a Möbius strip, continually on the threshold of either one state or the other—

thus eroding the traditional topology of security along with the distinction between the local, national, and international (Bigo 2001: 115). Unlike IR, with its penchant for seeking ontological safety in the certainty of timeless categories, liminality recognizes discontinuities and ruptures in world politics as the standard rather than exception. Understanding that liminality is a central fact of international political life implies concurrent recognition of our exposure to the open and de facto acknowledgement of the inevitable chaos of a world without lines of distinction (Edkins 2007: 90–91).

What value, then, does liminality add, considering that scholars writing from the critical tradition in IR have raised similar claims without making explicit use of the notion? In my reading, no other social scientific concept better drives home the old truth of the connection between how we look and what we thus see. By illuminating the flow between different states and forms of being, liminality helps us reimagine the ways we think about and relate to the international political reality. It requires us to accept disorder along with the fact that there are limits to what we can possibly know, for in liminality the outcome is never certain. Liminality allows for deeper understanding of what happens during "constitutive" or "axial" moments in national and international politics, and enables specification of the effects of these critical experiences. It embraces both the spatial and the temporal dynamic of international life, and captures the ultimate unresolvability of the agent-structure problem in IR. Though poststructuralists have long argued for a relational understanding of identity and its complexity beyond a simple self-other dichotomy, they have yet to grasp liminality's potential to explain the "problem of difference" in the construction of identities and the related processes of securitization (cf. Hansen 2006; Rumelili 2012).

A number of distinctly liminal states cropping up in the realm of international politics

deserve further exploration. These include the ritual liminality of the processes of political transition; the suspended, or even permanent, liminality emerging from the ordeal of a prolonged state of political ambiguity; and the physical liminality experienced by political subjects living on the border. Understanding societal reactions to liminal experiences, or the ways political communities are shaped by liminality, permits further insights into the foregrounding of agency against set-in structures. Just as classical anthropological works studied liminality from both chronological and spatial angles, IR could equally address the possible uses of the notion as a temporal and a spatial category, as well as a characteristic experience accompanying transformative situations and transitions in international politics. These transitions can be sudden, as is the case with riots and revolutions, or prolonged, as in wars or states of enduring political instability.

Liminality helps to illuminate and understand multiple practices of global politics, from the study of political dissidents, participants of social movements, refugees,[4] stateless people, ethnic or sociopolitical minorities, and (illegal) immigrants to the analysis of states and spaces of exception in the contemporary juridical-political order of world politics (cf. Agamben 1998; Huysmans 2006). For example, it could be applied to analyze power, violence, and resistance in the context of the long "War on Terror," practices of security-political global governmentality, and acts of commemorative politics as expressions of temporal liminality (see, e.g., Edkins 2003). Critical IR scholars' recent burst of interest in Giorgio Agamben's ideas of bare life, sovereign power, and the state of exception as the biopolitical paradigm of contemporary international politics has yet to spark an imaginative leap connecting these notions to the concept of liminality. Just as the liminal state proper—the state of exception, as described by Agamben— is a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all previous determinations and distinctions

are deactivated (Agamben 2005b: 50), periods of broad-sweeping anomie and crisis in international relations are marked by the collapse of normal social structures. In crisis, social functions and roles can break down to the point where culturally conditioned behavior is completely overturned, and all previously relevant social relations and customs suspended and altered (Agamben 2005b: 65–66).

In the course of a prolonged liminal experience, the liminal ordeal is likely to become incorporated into and reproduced in the "permanent structure" of a society. Hence the idea of "perpetual liminality" emerges as a condition characteristic of societies that have long lived "on the limit" and thus proven quite unable to conclusively surpass the experience, in spite of their apparent entrance into the phase of societal reaggregation. This development could be most intriguing from the perspective of IR, as it would enable a culturally deeper and thicker analysis of a whole gamut of societies and states going through crisis or dissolution and collapse of a previous order. Recognizing the radical propensities generated by the liminal experience, and thus liminality's potential to bring about historical change from mere discontinuity to revolutionary rupture, touches the crux of the notion's analytical utility for IR.

Naturally, there are also clear limits to and modalities of applying the concept of liminality to societies writ large. First, there is the peril of determinism—of making the hyperbolic claim that liminality is to be found essentially everywhere. That would be a logical conclusion drawn from reading Agamben, for instance, who claims the state of exception has become the utmost biopolitical paradigm of contemporary international politics. Accordingly, a condition of permanent crisis has emerged as the new normality of international political reality, as if liminality has turned in on itself and the threshold has consequently become the world, with movement back and forth constrained (see Sakwa this volume). Still, failing to distinguish

between modalities of liminality would totalize and trivialize the concept and thus diminish its analytical usefulness for IR. The acknowledgement that we live in times and a world of change, or the recognition of modernity as itself "permanently liminal" (Szakolczai 2000: 215–27), should be accompanied by close-up contextual analyses of liminal moments and situations of different degrees and types in global politics.

Second, the limitations of stretching the notion from small-scale communities to societies writ large should be clearly acknowledged in each case. Unlike the Ndembu rites of transition that provided the context for the term's original anthropological usage, large-scale societal liminal conditions lack a clear time span, obvious entrance and exit points, and authoritative "masters of ceremonies" to guide the members of the society through the liminal ordeal (Bauman 1994: 17). Therein lies the danger of the conceptual inflation of liminality through overtly metaphoric usage of the term outside of its context of conception. As scholars and practitioners of IR, we should steer clear of simply piling up new empirical evidence from our field to extend the anthropological model and forgoing critical engagement with and substantive enhancement of the original idea of liminality.

Yet another point of contestation, when applying liminality to full-scale societies undergoing dissolution or collapse of the previous order, is the actual subject who experiences the liminal ordeal on a wider scale. Is it just the society's elites, or more or less everybody—or is it really something that can only be a post hoc determination by the analyst? Put differently, how should the connection between liminality and *communitas* (i.e., the community going through a liminal experience) be understood in larger political communities (see Thomassen this volume)? Why do some types of *communitas* emerging from liminal moments turn out aggressive, full of resentment and hatred, instead of bolstering positive solidarity among group members and

thereby increasing their potential for further political mobilization?[5] And what if the ritual

passages of whole-scale societies go wrong and produce effects of most undesirable kind—as

infamously happened with the communist regimes of the twentieth century?[6] To elucidate these

problems, the engagement with liminality still needs to be substantiated by empirical studies in

different fields and theoretical traditions of IR. The "Arab Spring" and the popular reactions to

the debt crisis in Europe would be interesting examples to explore here.

<HDA>Liminality as an "Unstructured" Origin of Structure

Liminality is commonly regarded as the space of new political beginnings, a potential source of

renewal for a community, or even a platform for large-scale societal change. Social and political

thinkers have reflected on the relationship between liminal experiences and the establishment of

permanent structures, or the "lasting effects" of answers produced in "extraordinary moments,"

emphasizing the extent to which "structure" and "order" are indeed always born in liminality

(Thomassen this volume; Szakolczai 2000; Wydra 2001). Given the constitutive potential of

liminal experiences in the crystallization of certain ideas and practices, we should acknowledge

that essentially new structure-like qualities emerge in liminal periods (Thomassen this volume).

Although the playfulness of the period of liminality is inherently unstructured, it is nonetheless

highly structuring at the same time. Liminality constitutes a formative experience for the subject,

providing it with a new structure and a new set of rules. Once established, these rules will glide

back to the level of the taken-for-granted. Hence the liminal phase/experience/period could,

somewhat paradoxically in light of the essentially unstructured nature of liminality, constitute the

origin of structure all the same (ibid.).[7] It is nonetheless essential to avoid the common tendency

to retrospectively depict social processes as something whose result was inevitably "known in

advance," almost predetermined. As William Connolly (1999) reminds us, the politics of becoming is really quite indeterminate, as the result that this process might lead to cannot be known in advance. The recognition of liminality's potential to create structure-like properties should not be mistaken for another claim of foundationalism.

The strength of liminality as the phase of pure possibility underscores the potential of agency in the liminal process. Instead of seeing reality as largely "given"—as is still done in some more conventional veins of constructivism, not to mention the traditional positivist IR approaches—the recognition of liminality simultaneously means acknowledging the power of agency in restructuring existing realities and creating new ones. The insiders of a defined political community generally perceive liminal figures as both alluring and endangering because such figures have the power to unsettle existing certitudes, truths, and identities. Situations of crisis and transition also have a positive, productive aspect, as the new setting emerging from these transitions can be better than the old order of things. Nonetheless, the prospect of the possible "permanentization" of liminality still emanates danger because it lacks the promise of reintegration that would reestablish the previous order. Therefore, permanent liminality writ large no longer permits novelty and encourages innovation, but rather imposes formlessness and disorientation as a technique of governmentality. The permanent change is thus indeed effected, but without qualitative transformation (see Sakwa this volume).

Hence, it is vitally important to pay close attention to how societies experiencing a large-scale social drama deal with the liminal period, and how they attempt to bring it to a conclusion. Who will be in charge of the "routinization" of extraordinary situations? Who will become the "carriers" of the new worldview that is eventually institutionalized (see Thomassen this volume)? These key sociological questions should be kept in mind when the notion of liminality

is applied to the analysis of full-scale societal complexes and their interaction.

Standard structuralist approaches to the study of critical events tend to gloss over the fundamental ambiguity of liminal periods by reconstructing the events' historical path, leading up to the previously known outcome. Michel Dobry (this volume) has argued for the centrality of "fluid conjunctures" in international politics instead, emphasizing the importance of avoiding the illusion that the outcomes of a fundamental social experience summarize, mirror, or encompass the processes that produced them. Arguably, the perspective that reconstructs the logic of events according to their outcomes quite simply refuses to accept that the unfolding of a process can turn toward one outcome or another only at the margin. Following the logic that the outcome essentially ascribes its meaning (retroactively) to the event, this position cannot admit that "tiny causes" can often result in "great effects" or may even reverse "structural trends" (ibid.). The contingency of the results of such liminal processes as large-scale crises, revolutions, and wars thus emerges as an important shared epistemological assumption behind the concept of liminality and poststructuralist approaches to the study of international relations. Again, liminality recognizes the freedom of agency: it emphasizes the plasticity of "structures" and their sensitivity to mobilizations and actors' tactics and moves. Drawing a beautiful analogy to matter, which can be found as solid, gas, or liquid, Dobry (this volume) calls attention to the fact that social "structures" (or institutions and social relations more generally) need not necessarily be more "solid" and "stable" than matter. Rather, despite their occasional "objectification" and institutionalization, social structures and relations can equally experience transformations of their states and therefore effectively experience different states. In light of these elaborations, it is difficult not to agree with Arpád Szakolczai (2000: 218), who declares the concept of liminality to be "potentially one of the most general and useful terms of social science," comparable to IR

staples like structure and order.

<HDA>War as a Liminal Situation *sui generis*

War is one of the generative diseases of world politics that the notion of liminality helps us understand. All wars are essentially liminal experiences, moments of radical contingency and uncertainty accompanying the birth and demise of eras. Recognizing war as a liminal experience sheds light on war's constitutive function for politics and societies, that is, its profoundly productive power over the structure and substance of the international system and its discontents (see Barkawi and Brighton 2011). As for liminality in general, "the final element of war's ontology is its power to remake what is unmade" (ibid.: 140). Conventional veins of social and political inquiry have understood war not as a generative force but rather as an interruption in the normal peacetime processes of society, using periodization and separation to bracket it off from the inevitable march toward liberal modernity. Conceiving of war as a liminal situation *sui generis* helps to avoid the tendency of most IR theoretical traditions to reduce war to terms of analysis derived from peacetime society, or to another social domain (cf. Barkawi 2010, 2011). Instead, understanding war through the lens of liminality underscores its unique nature among other social activities, "its own character and logic that cannot be reduced to any ordinary social dynamic" (Shaw 1988: 11).

Like liminality writ large, war is fundamentally a situation of uncertainty. War constitutes a central phase in the escalation of violence and can shake existing societal structures and international system to the core. The postwar process of reconstruction can, in turn, be conceived of as a rite of reaggregation—the beginning of coming to terms with the experience of a major collapse of the existing order, healing wounds, and moving on (Szakolczai 2000: 223). But the

road of transition from war to peace is hardly straightforward or fixed. The postwar phase is often marked by a prolonged state of juridical-political limbo (as in the case of Kosovo) that can result in de facto quasi-autonomous states (e.g., Transnistria in Moldova) or the separatist regions recognized by some but not most of the international community (e.g., the dubious status of North Ossetia and Abkhazia after the Russian-Georgian war in 2008).

The American cultural historian Paul Fussell (2000) has provided a remarkable account of war as a liminal experience of its own kind.[8] Besides the strikingly spatial liminal character of World War I trench warfare, that is, the distinct liminality of no-man's-land, Fussell points to an interesting pattern in the war-fighting practice and thought processes of the soldiers in World War I. There were three separate lines of trenches in the Great War—front, support, and reserve—and a battalion normally spent a third of its duty time in each. The routine in each line was similar: the unit was divided into three groups, two of which stood down while the third kept alert. Universally applicable everywhere from artillery to submarines, the daily pattern of participating in this tripartite way of dividing things for an extended period inevitably contributed to the tendency to see "everything as divisible as threes" (ibid.: 125). The magical threes of traditional myth and ritual further donated some of their meanings and implications to "military threes." As a result, the military triad took on a mythical or prophetic character that elevated military action to the level of myth (ibid.). This course is further supported by the essentially threefold conception of the military training process: first preparation, then execution, and finally critique. War memoirs replicate this process accordingly, matching the war experience of moving between the line, battle, and recovery to the existential dimensions of quest, death, and rebirth (ibid.: 130–31).

Being quite clearly distinguishable and therefore largely symmetrical with the tripartite

structure of ritual processes as described by the anthropologists quoted above, these three zones of war were characteristic of the so-called traditional, or conventional, wars of the twentieth century. The Cold War, with its recurring rupture points between war and peace, and today's asymmetrical, protracted conflicts, such as the current Western war in Afghanistan, vividly illustrate the idea of permanent liminality—a prolonged condition of being stuck in the in-between zone of war and peace. Western soldiers fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda—and perhaps equally so vice versa—find that the nature of contemporary conflict forces them to face the condition of ultimate, protracted liminality: they live in a perpetual potential war zone, in persisting tension that could burst into a life-endangering confrontation any given moment. Moreover, modern-day terrorism leaves us with hardly any "reserves" in the traditional sense of the term, as any civilian could find her- or himself at the hottest "front" of the conflict if caught in the midst of a suicide bomber's attack. Modern international conflict has turned the condition of perpetual liminality into a universal experience.[9]

The cyber component of modern conflicts further illuminates the liminal nature of contemporary warfare. Following Turner by understanding liminality as essentially becomingness, we could regard the virtual space of waging war as liminal *par excellence*. Slavoj Žižek (2003: 9) has addressed Gilles Deleuze's notion of the virtual as "pure becoming without being," which is "always forthcoming and already past" (Deleuze 1990: 80) but never present or corporeal. The virtual is a liminal space constituted only by its state of becomingness; it is not an actual being or object to become. It exists as pure becoming that suspends both "sequentiality and directionality," being a passage without a concrete line of passage (Žižek 2003: 9-10). Standard IR approaches, as Der Derian's work (2009: 255) has evocatively shown, are not equipped to explore the "interzone of the virtual, where simulacra reverse causality, being is

simultaneously here and there, and identity is deterritorialised by interconnectivity." In this context, it is hardly surprising that modern security organizations like NATO are struggling so hard to accommodate cyber attacks within the traditional framework of understanding an "armed attack," and to determine whether this type of warfare could also invoke the collective defense provision of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty with a legitimate case for the use of force. Cyber warfare is by definition a liminal activity: it is difficult to track down, has no clear entrance or exit points, and last but not least may be a transition to or a phase accompanying full standard warfare.

Regardless of the "new" or "old" nature of contemporary wars, the concept of liminality holds obvious analytical purchase for the reinterpretation of major crises such as political revolutions, or for studying war's impact on the rise of the modern world by considering its institutional structure as being essentially the product of liminal crises (Szakolczai 2008b: 278).

<HDA>The Return of Play to the Scholarship and Practice of International Politics

Raising liminality's status as an epistemological category for the study of international politics is a critical move with fundamental implications for responsible scholarship and ethical practice of international relations. The ubiquity of liminal situations and phenomena in international politics, which this chapter has aimed to illuminate, calls for recognizing, rather than negating and suppressing, ambivalence as a constant fluctuation between different ways of being. The concept of liminality acknowledges the complexity of ambivalent situations, allowing for improved analysis of the modalities of various kinds of conflicts by genealogically tracing their conditions of emergence. Because liminality embraces difference without assuming or imposing hierarchy, it has clear normative appeal for transcending the "problem of difference" that allegedly

pervades international society as a tendency to interpret difference as inferiority, destining it thereby to eradication (Inayatullah and Blaney 2006).

It would only be empirically relevant and normatively rewarding to view international politics as a "giant fugue of interweaving themes and voices, of subject and reply" (cf. Symes 2006: 317). The notion of liminality calls for recognizing an entire constellation of different "voices" of international political reality, and for reading them contrapuntally, as always engaging with each other. As outlined by Edward Said, the contrapuntal approach envisions cultures not as pure, distinct, monolithic beings, but as largely overlapping and interdependent entities in which patterns of power and domination are always accompanied by resistance and subversion, thus constituting a flow of points and counterpoints (ibid.). In a similar spirit, world politics could be regarded as made of processes and crossings rather than clearly distinguishable blocs; as a combination of fragile and mixed identities, of different figures inhabiting different edges of the international reality, of ambiguities, frustrations, and uncertainties. Instead of attempting to draw rigid boundaries (and be thus destined to continually police them) in order to represent international reality as made up of distinct entities and structures, we would benefit epistemologically by recognizing the pervasiveness of liminality in international political life.

Bringing liminality to the conceptual center of IR strongly resonates with Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney's suggestion to revise and redesign IR as a theory of intercultural relations, or the study of differences (2006: 17). Traditional IR's inability to make a unique contribution to social theory has arguably stemmed from its persistent avoidance and denial of the problem of how to handle cultural difference. Accordingly, traditional IR theory shares the spirit of modernization theory, which attempts to establish human commonality, or universality, by employing two binaries: the spatial demarcation of inside/outside, and a developmental

sequence from tradition to modernity (ibid.: 94–97). The potentiality that liminality is loaded with, however, is a powerful celebration of the claim that cultural difference offers not merely problems but also opportunities. Conceiving of human existence primarily as potentiality, or possibility, opens up the space of extended movement for subaltern agencies, recognizing their transformative capacity. Furthermore, dialogue between those holding different visions and experiences of the world can catalyze self-reflection amongst the bold and powerful of this world as well, leading them to introspect the "other" within "themselves" (ibid.: 158). Greater sensitivity to the numerous manifestations of liminality in international politics thus also enables greater awareness of our own selves and our own frames of thinking and interpretation. As in music, where the counterpoint marks a supplementary melody as distinct from the main theme, applying a contrapuntal approach in IR scholarship would essentially mean writing against the mainstream. Bringing liminality to the discipline's conceptual center could turn out to be empowering for exploration of previously unsought avenues of thought, as the study of liminal conditions in international politics brings the examination of potentiality to the fore of the study of international actuality (cf. Edkins 2007: 77).

The fact that liminality is full of potency and potentiality, as well as creativity, experiment, and play, has major implications for the scholarship and practice of IR. It calls for polyvocality in both the politics and scholarship of IR, for indeed:
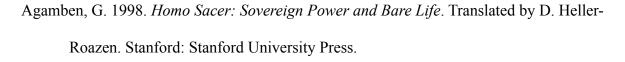
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There may be a play of ideas, a play of words, a play of symbols, a play of metaphors. In it, play's the thing. Liminality is not confined in its expression to ritual and the performative arts. Scientific hypotheses and experiments and philosophical speculation are also forms of play, though their rules and controls are more rigorous and their relation

to mundane "indicative" reality more pointed than those of genres which proliferate in fantasy. One might say, without too much exaggeration, that liminal phenomena are at the level of culture what variability is at the level of nature. (Turner 1979: 466)

<FL>Hence a normatively exemplary IR scholarship could function as a special kind of a liminal-like or liminoid genre aimed at exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, immoralities, and alienations generated by mainstream modern economic and political structures, processes, and ways of thinking about them (ibid.: 494). As a discipline, IR has innate potential to become a critical practice of a very special kind, always aiming to provide clear-headed, engaged analysis of the established order of international politics.

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<HDA>Notes

This chapter is a reprint of M. Mälksoo's (2012) "The Challenge of Liminality for International Relations Theory," originally published in *Review of International Studies* 38 (2): 481–94. Initial research for the essay was supported by the European Union through the European Social Fund's (ESF) Doctoral Studies and Internationalization Programme DoRa, the ESF's Mobilitas postdoctoral program, and the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) *Memory at War* project.

1. For the application of the notion of liminality to the study of liminal experiences of societies writ large, see Eisenstadt (1995); Szakolczai (2000, 2003, 2008a); Wydra (2001); Norton (1988). In IR, the concept of liminality has been put to use in different empirical contexts by Neumann (1999, 2012); Rumelili (2003, 2012); Morozov and Rumelili (2012); Kuus (2007); Mälksoo (2009, 2010, 2012); Stoicescu (2012).

2. Along with many poststructuralists in IR, anthropologist Abner Cohen (1969) has vividly demonstrated the significance of boundary maintenance in the development of political distinctiveness.

3. Cf. Walter Benjamin's work on passages and his idea of nonlinear time in *The Arcades Project* (1999).

4. Cf. Lebow's (2012) captivating account of the initial psychological state of the German scholars who emigrated in the United States in the 1930s.

5. This problem is further analyzed in the context of the contemporary "memory wars" between Russia and its former satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe in Mälksoo (2012).

6. Arpád Szakolczai (2000: 223) has described Soviet communism as a specific kind of

permanent liminality, as under this regime "the Second World War never ended."

7. Turner often pointed to liminality as an "original state" of a kind, the formless reality out of which new forms emerge, the zone of new beginnings. He touched on the crux of the matter in his famous essay "Betwixt and Between" (1967: 97) as follows: "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise."

8. I am grateful to Prof. Richard Ned Lebow for pointing me toward Fussell's work.

9. Drone warfare is yet another example of doing away with the traditional boundaries between war and peace, as the populations under the surveillance and potential attacks of drones live in a zone of constant possibility of being killed. See further Ansorge (2012) and Gregory (2012).