Complex indebtedness: justice and the crisis of liberal order

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Calls for epistemic justice,[1] such as those we see in the movements to acknowledge colonial/imperial violence, to change collective memorializations and to decolonize the curriculum, are not new. In 1902, on observing the US suppression of anti-imperialist revolt in the Philippines, Chinese scholar Tang Tiaoding denounced what he called 'white people's histories', which

> provide plenty of indisputable evidence about the extent of native peoples' primitive customs and ignorance, as proof for why those people deserve to be conquered … In the past, I felt that the situation clearly demanded that these countries and peoples should perish … But now I know that these books were all written by white people, where truth and falsehood are confused.[2]

Tang speaks here to the perennial entanglement of power and knowledge, particularly within imperial orders, which justifies and legitimates domination through misleading representations.[3] In response, Tang called for different accounts, produced by the people themselves: 'Learned people of my country: are there any of you who are getting ready to write our history? Don't let white children, laughing behind our backs and clapping their hands with glee, take up their pens and paper [to write our history for us].'[4]

The liberal international order (LIO) is how many have identified the contemporary international system—consisting of liberal democratic states, governed by the rule of law, international institutions, sovereign equality among states and

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1 We define 'epistemic justice' as a 'fair accounting of the past'; see Christian Reus-Smit and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Polymorphic justice and the crisis of international order', *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 1–22. For a more elaborated account, see Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic injustice: power and the ethics of knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); See also Navnita Chadha Behera, 'Globalization, deglobalization and knowledge production', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 1579–97.

2 Quoted in Rebecca Karl, *Staging the world: Chinese nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 107. On race in world politics, see the special issue of *International Affairs*, 98: 1, 2022, edited by Jasmine K. Gani and Jenna Marshall.

3 See e.g. Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, 'Decolonizing the Cuban Missile Crisis', *International Studies Quarterly* 52: 3, 2008, pp. 555–77.

4 Quoted in Karl, *Staging the world*, pp. 107–8.

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norms such as market economies, free trade and human rights.[5] Calls for a fair accounting of the past (epistemic justice), and for an acknowledgement and redress of past harms (historical justice), especially those rooted in slavery, colonialism and empire, cut directly against the LIO's representation of itself.[6] Simply stated, the LIO is widely understood—at least by its defenders—as *the* expression of justice in world politics, in both intrinsic and consequential terms. In the words of John Ikenberry and Daniel Deudney, a world with 'more liberal democratic capitalist states will be more peaceful, prosperous, and respectful of human rights'.[7] However, such claims depend logically on the character of 'actually existing liberalism' as in fact being this way. If, as anti-imperial critics have long argued, such characterizations misunderstand the functioning of international order, then we need to look elsewhere for (a) an account of how this order operates and (b) an alternative sense of what global justice might mean.

Indeed, as Christian Reus-Smit and Ayşe Zarakol argue in the introduction to this special issue, not only do we need to appreciate the many links between order and justice in the international sphere, we also need to understand their polymorphic and multiscalar dimensions.[8] To do this, we agree that it is necessary to ask what are characterized in the introduction as 'second-order' questions—that is, what is the proper *framing* within which to consider questions of justice? In this article we argue that defenders of the LIO have misunderstood what we call the 'relational structure of the international', that is, the nature and organization of the connections that make the international system hang together.[9] Focusing on the core liberal states, they have understood these relations as in principle consensual, cooperative, mutually beneficial and universal, underpinned by the condition of interdependence. Yet, as we show, this is at best a partial and misleading characterization of such relations, particularly when viewed from the global South.[10] This second-order failure—a failure of description and framing—underpins an inadequate account of order and hinders the pursuit of particular kinds of justice claims.[11]

Building on longstanding claims for historical and epistemic justice from the global South—what Partha Chatterjee referred to as 'most of the world'[12]—we

[5] See e.g. G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: the origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[6] See e.g. Jasmine K. Gani and Jenna Marshall, 'The impact of colonialism on policy and knowledge production in International Relations', *International Affairs* 98: 1, 2022, pp. 5–22.

[7] G. John Ikenberry and Daniel Deudney, 'Liberal world', *Foreign Affairs* 97: 1, 2018, p. 16.

[8] Reus-Smit and Zarakol, 'Polymorphic justice', pp. 1–22.

[9] On the 'relational turn' in postcolonial IR, see Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'The postcolonial moment in security studies', *Review of International Studies* 32: 2, 2006, pp. 329–52; Julian Go, *Postcolonial thought and social theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[10] 'Global South' has three distinct, intersecting meanings: (1) the Third World political project and its genealogy; (2) a set of regions and peoples; and (3) a socio-economic status. See Sebastian Haug, Jacqueline Braveboy-Wagner and Günther Maihold, 'The "global South" in the study of world politics: examining a meta category', *Third World Quarterly* 42: 9, 2021, pp. 1923–44. We stress the first meaning, which also implicates the other two.

[11] There is a long tradition of criticizing the imaginary of liberalism within political theory as unable to account for the nature of political society and its structural injustices. See Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the politics of difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[12] Partha Chatterjee, *The politics of the governed: reflections on popular politics in most of the world* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 8.

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propose an alternative way to understand the relational structure of the international: through the novel framework of 'complex indebtedness'. Complex indebtedness is a way of understanding international order that centres formations of indebtedness—which are hierarchical and asymmetric—as a key basis for relations between polities. It reweights the historical record to include forms of imperial violence, extraction and dispossession until recently largely ignored or marginalized in accounts of liberal order, which create particular imperial formations of indebtedness. We show that despite the international system in the past century moving from a world of empires to a world of formally equal and self-determining independent states, these forms continue into the present day and, although evolving, are often at the centre of contemporary struggles over justice. By understanding contested relations of indebtedness, rather than interdependence and cooperation, as being at the heart of international order, we can interpret its symptoms of crisis more plausibly, and can make better sense of the kinds of transitions that might enable a more just world for the majority of its peoples.

The article is organized as follows. First, we elaborate the ways in which liberal thought, through its understanding of its own ideas, institutions and international interdependence, misrepresents the relational structure of the international. Second, we elaborate the concept of complex indebtedness and show how it enables us to redescribe and rethink this relational structure. Third, we show how this concept helps us make sense of several identified symptoms of the contemporary crisis: (1) calls for reparations and racial justice; (2) forms of white nationalism; and (3) the phenomenon of South–South cooperation. A short conclusion draws out the wider implications of our argument for rethinking the relationship between order and justice.

How liberalism misunderstands international order

Defenders of the LIO do not only make normative claims about how the world should be; they make analytical claims about how the world *is*, and in particular how states and polities relate to each other. In this section we argue, on the basis of a growing scholarly literature, that these claims have fundamentally misunderstood the relational structure of the international system. We organize this argument in terms of key components of this order: its underpinning ideas; its institutional expression, at both domestic and international levels; and the nature of 'interdependence' between states and economies in the international system.

Ideas

The primary ideational construct for imagining social relations put forward by liberal thought has been the idea of the 'social contract'—between those seen as citizens and the state—which sets out the respective duties and obligations of each, mostly with respect to restraint regarding each other. This imaginary is (a) egalitarian, with all citizens entitled to the same treatment before the law; (b)

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domestic, in so far as it imagines only relations within a state with already settled territorial boundaries and a defined population; and (c) public, in its imagination of a division between the public and private realms, with the latter governed by rules around property. However, all three of these purported attributes have been challenged for misrecognizing the actual relational structure of the societies defined by liberalism. Carole Pateman's classic *The sexual contract*, published in 1988, for example challenged (c) and (a) through a discussion of how women were subordinated in liberal societies through forms of contracting such as marriage that established patriarchal control and authority over them.[13] Since then, the international/imperial turn in political theory and the global turn in intellectual history have thrown the classic attributes of the social contract and its relational structure further into doubt by examining the relationship of liberal thought, colonial empire and imperialism.[14] Two challenges to classic social contract thinking are of relevance here to thinking about the relational structure of the international.

First, contrary to its imagined egalitarianism, liberalism has long played a key role in defining and legitimating hierarchies of the human, expressed through forms of racialization and gendering, including in property rights and sovereignty. The implication of this differentiation was to structure relations within and between societies according to the racial qualities of one's ascribed descent in a profoundly unequal way, and in ways which denied full humanity to the majority of people in the world, subordinating them also as property within the private realm in liberal societies.[15] Second, contrary to the social contract's domestic imaginary, as Barry Hindess has argued, liberalism was always about the 'regulation and re-organization of the international sphere', about those who can be 'governed through the promotion of liberty and those who must be governed in other ways'.[16] Thus, relations between those identified as 'liberal' and those identified as 'other' were typically asymmetric in liberal thought. Relatedly, liberal ideas and doctrines were developed in important ways in discussion of settler/imperial relations, rather than being primarily about relations within European societies which were then projected out into the wider world.[17] In this respect, they were concerned with the relations of political *expansion*—justifications for conquest, territorial acquisition, corporate freedoms and so on, rather than the domestic organization of a predefined popula-

[13] Carole Pateman, *The sexual contract* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).

[14] See e.g. David Armitage, 'The international turn in intellectual history', in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds, *Rethinking modern European intellectual history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 232–52. For the purposes of our argument here, we understand imperialism broadly as a structure in which one political entity exerts hierarchical and often forcible control over the social, political, economic and/or cultural life of another, either directly or indirectly, but compare Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, *A theory of imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[15] See e.g. Charles Mills, *The racial contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: a counter-history* (London: Verso, 2011).

[16] Barry Hindess, 'Liberalism—what's in a name?', in Wendy Larner and William Walters, eds, *Global governmentality: governing international spaces* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 30.

[17] Onur Ulas Ince, *Colonial capitalism and the dilemmas of liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Robert Nichols, 'Indigenous Peoples, settler colonialism, and global justice in Anglo-America', in Duncan Bell, ed., *Empire, race and global justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 228–50; Jeanne Morefield, *Empires without imperialism: Anglo-American decline and the politics of deflection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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tion within agreed boundaries. These conditions of appropriation are evident, for example, in the Lockean account of private property.[18]

As Charles Mills has argued, however, central to the self-presentation of this ideational framework has been what he calls an 'epistemology of ignorance'—in our terms, both historic and epistemic injustice—which denies or erases these inequalities and forms of violence and exploitation.[19] That is to say that the classic social contract imaginary of liberal thought has systematically erased, denied or repressed these aspects of its historical instantiation, which have the effect of preserving forms of social privilege by denying or occluding their historical basis, thus deflecting claims for justice on these lines.

Institutions

This misrecognition of liberal ideas is mirrored by a misrecognition of domestic institutions in liberal states, which have usually been framed as located in discrete territories, with national histories, involving political and economic rights for citizens, and democratic government characterized by internal checks and balances. Such perceptions have been central to arguments about how such states relate to others internationally, for example in the democratic or liberal peace thesis.[20] Yet leading liberal states including Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Israel, Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States have also been shown over time to operate through relations of hierarchy and exclusion, including practices of settler colonialism, land expropriation, treaty abrogation, suppression of the franchise and systematic racial discrimination.[21] Rather than restraining such practices, liberal judicial institutions have often upheld impunity for state agencies and privileged imperial/settler-citizens in these matters, reinforcing the constitutive hierarchical political relations within the country and the forms of dispossession or violence they entail.[22] Moreover, the colonial/imperial constitution of these states has been a significant factor in enabling forms of wealth creation, land ownership, welfare states and social democracy for poorer white citizens.[23] To understand the domestic institutions of liberal states as so constituted—both domestically and internationally—is also to question the liberal democratic approach that supposedly informs their international relations.[24]

[18] Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial lives of property: law, land, and racial regimes of ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

[19] Mills, *The racial contract*, p. 18.

[20] Sebastian Rosato, 'The flawed logic of democratic peace theory', *American Political Science Review* 97: 4, 2003, pp. 585–602.

[21] See e.g. Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of history: elementary structures of race* (London: Verso, 2016); Nick Estes, *Our history is the future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the long tradition of Indigenous resistance* (London: Verso, 2019).

[22] See e.g. Jaskiran K. Dhillon, 'Indigenous girls and the violence of settler colonial policing', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 4: 2, 2015, pp. 1–31.

[23] Kerem Nişancioğlu, 'Racial sovereignty', *European Journal of International Relations* 26: 1 supp., 2020, pp. 39–63; Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood, 'Colonialism, postcolonialism and the liberal welfare state', *New Political Economy* 23: 5, 2018, pp. 574–87.

[24] Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'The imperial peace: democracy, force and globalization', *European Journal of International Relations* 5: 4, 1999, pp. 403–34.

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On this point, conventional narratives of the origins and purposes of international institutions, and the relations they instantiate, have also been challenged. These institutions are not seen primarily as functional spaces of reciprocal cooperation between states that are equal before international law, but as upholding various forms of legalized hierarchy that bear identifiable continuities with empire.[25] While it is well known that before the twentieth century a racialized 'standard of civilization' governed admission to the international society of recognized nations,[26] newer scholarship has traced this relational structure well into the twentieth century and indeed up to the present day. The scholarship examining the foundations of key international institutions has shown that the maintenance of imperial and racial hierarchies was a central concern of the architects of the League of Nations and the United Nations,[27] for example, who rebuffed contemporary demands for racial equality and the inclusion of colonized peoples at their foundation. Even with the changes pursued by Southern governments, such as the declarations for human rights, racial equality and decolonization, further reforms such as the New International Economic Order which would have further empowered/resourced formerly colonized peoples were decisively blocked.[28] In a continuation of these patterns, international institutions at the heart of the LIO have produced what has been called 'nuclear apartheid',[29] 'peacekeeping apartheid',[30] and, most recently in a COVID-19 context, 'vaccine apartheid'.[31] Thus, international institutions that are meant to produce forms of reciprocal cooperation and a common legal and normative framework work instead to uphold hierarchies which they say should not exist in an institutional sense. Nonetheless, their self-presentation continues to emphasize the mutual benefits of cooperation for all countries through such institutions.

Interdependence

They are able to do this in part because the primary political and economic relations of the LIO are purportedly characterized by 'interdependence', in respect of both cause and context. This term, although initially used in the 1930s, became popular in the 1970s in the West to describe relations among core capitalist countries

[25] Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, sovereignty and the making of international law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Luis Eslava and Sundhya Pahuja, 'The state and international law: a reading from the global South', *Humanity Journal* 11: 1, 2020, pp. 118–38.
[26] Gerrit W. Gong, *The standard of 'civilization' in international society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
[27] Jacob Kripp, 'The creative advance must be defended: miscegenation, metaphysics, and race war in Jan Smuts's vision of the League of Nations', *American Political Science Review* 116: 3, 2022, pp. 940–53; Mark Mazower, *No enchanted palace: the end of empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[28] Samir Amin, 'NIEO: how to put Third World surpluses to effective use', *Third World Quarterly* 1: 1, 1979, pp. 65–72; Sundhya Pahuja, *Decolonising international law: development, economic growth and the politics of universality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[29] Shampa Biswas, '"Nuclear apartheid" as political position: race as a postcolonial resource?', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 26: 4, 2001, pp. 485–522, quoting the Indian external affairs minister.
[30] Adekeye Adebajo, *The curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War* (London: Hurst, 2010).
[31] Simar Singh Bajaj, Lwando Maki and Fatima Cody Stanford, 'Vaccine apartheid: global cooperation and equity', *Lancet* 399: 10334, 16 April 2022, pp. 1452–53, quoting the WHO director-general.

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following the post-Second World War revival of Japan and West Germany and the oil crisis, and to justify further and deeper institutional cooperation in the protection of mutual interests. 'Interdependence' has, however, become the key analytical term through which liberal thought understands the relational structure of the international.[32] This concept has been invoked to justify a greater role for multinational corporations as stakeholders in global governance, for example, and to create pressure to harmonize fiscal, trade and investment rules to promote further integration.[33] Yet, as global South scholars and public intellectuals have shown, such 'integration' has also served to deepen the extractive dynamics of the world capitalist economy, based on highly unequal terms of trade, the exploitation of labour, commodity extraction and attendant environmental degradation, capital flight and so on.[34] Ben Selwyn has argued, for example, that the empirical evidence suggests that global commodity chains are better understood as 'global poverty chains'.[35] Recent economic analysis has suggested that the value drain from global South to global North economies enabled by these linkages has totalled US$152 trillion since 1960.[36] To the extent that interdependence has been promoted through LIO institutions, such cooperation often serves more narrowly to protect systems of e.g. quasi-imperial preference, monopsony, intellectual property and corporate assets rather than genuinely to open up the world economy.[37] These critiques of interdependence thinking echo those made about liberal ideas and institutions; that while self-presenting as universally applicable, progressive and mutually advantageous, viewed from the South they are central to the maintenance of hierarchies, patterns of exploitation and the denial of political, economic and social rights.

To sum up, across all these areas, we argue that the LIO and its defenders have mischaracterized the relational structure of the international, most particularly when taking the world beyond the West—the majority world—into account. Such understandings suggest we need different analytical tools for understanding the relational structure of the international—a different second-order frame, in Reus-Smit and Zarakol's terms—one which captures these relations of hierarchy, asymmetry, dispossession and exploitation in the past and present. As noted in the introduction to this special issue and across its contributions, these are the source of a wide range of justice claims. By rethinking the nature and basis of order, we

[32] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr, 'Power and interdependence', *Survival* 15: 4, 1973, pp. 158–65; see also the founding documents of the Trilateral Commission from the same year. Cf. R. J. Barry Jones and Peter Willetts, eds, *Interdependence on trial* (London: Continuum, 1984), esp. essays by Richard Little and John MacLean.

[33] World Economic Forum, 'Why does our work matter?', https://www.weforum.org/about/why-does-our-work-matter/. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 6 Oct. 2022.)

[34] Samir Amin, 'Accumulation and development: a theoretical model', *Review of African Political Economy* 1: 1, 1974, pp. 9–26; cf. Chakravarthi Raghavan, *Recolonization: GATT, the Uruguay round and the Third World* (London: Zed, 1990).

[35] Ben Selwyn, 'Poverty chains and global capitalism', *Competition and Change* 23: 1, 2019, pp. 71–87.

[36] Jason Hickel, Dylan Sullivan and Huzaifa Zoomkawala, 'Plunder in the post-colonial era: quantifying drain from the global South through unequal exchange, 1960–2018', *New Political Economy* 26: 6, 2021, pp. 1030–47.

[37] Angelos Sepos, 'Imperial power Europe? The EU's relations with the ACP countries', *Journal of Political Power* 6: 2, 2013, pp. 261–87.

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suggest that we can more directly confront and understand the significance of today's various calls for justice and the imperative of meeting them.

International order as complex indebtedness

How else, then, might we analyse the relational structure of the international? Our analysis takes as its point of departure a diverse set of claims for historic and epistemic justice across the global South. Reflecting the persistence of imperial and imperial-derived hierarchies to which we have pointed above, these historic claims include demands for reparations for slavery, as put forward by Caribbean governments; for the return of looted cultural patrimony in Ethiopia and Nigeria, and of indigenous land unceded or protected by treaty in settler colonies such as Australia, Brazil and Canada; and, most recently, for responsibility and reparations for climate change as demanded by flood-devastated Pakistan.[38] Our analysis also contemplates distributional and institutional claims for debt cancellations in Zambia, Sri Lanka and Mozambique, for example, and for food and seed sovereignty by peasant movements across the South. While these claims have their own contours, they are united by a common emphasis on the ways in which hierarchical relations between North and South, between governments, cultural institutions, corporations and peoples, have created ongoing forms of multiscalar and polymorphic injustice.

In this section, we introduce the concept of 'complex indebtedness', which we offer as an alternative account of the relational structure of the international, one which centres the complex relationship between order and justice described in this special issue. It incorporates not only the structure of debts formally recognized in the present system, such as sovereign debts owed from South to North, but also the unrecognized debts generated by imperial practices through forms of violent appropriation, thus seeing the processes through which debts and obligations are recognized as a key terrain of international political contestation. To put it more simply, in a system of complex indebtedness, the key political question is: 'Who owes what to whom and why?', asked in ways which challenge the blind spots of liberal social contract theory. In order to assemble this concept, we build on the broad Third World tradition of analysing world order, which has always made imperial relations central to its account of the international, subsequently carried forward by a growing body of postcolonial international relations (IR) scholarship,[39] as well as more recent literatures on the legacies of empire, the power of debt and the functions of inequality in modern society.

As our opening quote from Tang illustrates, the critique of imperialism gathered considerable prominence, momentum and focus in the early twentieth century as

[38] Nina Lakhani and Shah Meer Baloch, 'Rich nations owe reparations to countries facing climate disaster, says Pakistan minister', *Guardian*, 4 Sept. 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/04/pakistan-floods-reparations-climate-disaster; Chandran Nair, 'IPCC decolonization call—policymakers must listen', *Nature* 606: 7915, 21 June 2022, p. 653.

[39] See e.g. Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial encounters: the politics of representation in North–South relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Branwen Gruffydd Jones, ed., *Decolonizing international relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

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its subjects were increasingly able to 'write back' in their own terms, in print venues and conferences relatively unmediated by imperial control.[40] Thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois were already publishing and widely disseminating critiques of the depredations of racism, colonialism and imperial rule prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, which connected various anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements around the world with critiques of imperial capitalism, seizure of land, the hyper-exploitation of labour and resources, and the violent suppression of movements for change.[41] What became a broadly Third Worldist tradition connected movements from the Philippines to China and from Algeria to Ghana and Mexico, from Ireland to India to Kenya to Jamaica and South Africa, with certain shared sensibilities regarding the imperial structure of world order and the need to resist and transform it.[42]

Later in the twentieth century, alongside the achievement of formal political independence, this tradition produced frameworks for theorizing unequal relations within world order and its institutions—specifically extractive, dispossessive and hierarchical tendencies—through concepts such as uneven and combined development (Trotsky), neo-colonialism (Nkrumah), underdevelopment (Rodney), dependency theory (Prebisch) and world-systems theory (Wallerstein).[43] While these frameworks primarily centred on material factors, others such as racial capitalism (Robinson) and modernity/coloniality (Quijano) emphasized the role of ideas of racial and civilizational hierarchy in underpinning these widening inequalities.[44] The implication of such analysis—which was committedly transnational and multiscalar in nature—was to call into question the basis for the global economic system, by highlighting the role of the South in the creation of wealth in the North—in the words of Frantz Fanon: 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World.'[45] At the same time, it also criticized the erasure from European discourse of the role played by the South in creating its own greatness, thus pointing to the significance of history, memory and knowledge itself in the production and maintenance of international hierarchies. By talking about the ways in which hierarchy and asymmetry have been maintained within international relations outside the direct use of force and buttressed by particular ideas (e.g. developmentalism, racism), this tradition therefore offers a rich account of the relationship between different multiscalar ordering practices and the creation of polymorphic forms of injustice—historical, epistemic, institutional and distributive.

[40] See Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after empire: the rise and fall of self-determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[41] W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The African roots of war', *The Atlantic*, May 1915, pp. 707–14.

[42] Vijay Prashad, *The darker nations: a people's history of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2008).

[43] Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008); Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: the last stage of imperialism* (London: Nelson, 1965); Walter Rodney, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (Cape Town: Pambazuka, 1981); Raúl Prebisch, 'The economic development of Latin America', in Ricardo Bielschowsky, ed., *ECLAC thinking, selected texts (1948–1998)* (Santiago: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016), pp. 45–84; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The capitalist world-economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[44] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: the making of the black radical tradition* (London: Zed, 1984); Aníbal Quijano, 'Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad', *Perú Indígena* 13: 29, 1992, pp. 11–20.

[45] Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 102. See also Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

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While this broad and still vibrant tradition provides the general basis for our rethinking of the relational structure of the international, we further develop and sharpen our concept of complex indebtedness through engagement with three more recent bodies of scholarship: (1) the imperial/global turn; (2) the new literature on debt; and (3) critical race scholarship. The imperial/global turn in history, anthropology and social studies has been under way for over three decades, moving beyond the perspective of the nation-state into a rich set of macro- and micro-level accounts of the fundamentally imperially and globally connected character of modernity. Such scholarship has foregrounded the role of empire in the production of key modern institutions such as the territorial state and its bureaucracy, and the significance of imperial–modern infrastructures, corporations and capitalism, and has worked through methodological and analytical concepts such as 'connected histories', 'entanglements', 'intimacies' and 'friction' to describe the nature of these encounters.[46] This significant shift in emphasis from, broadly speaking, the national to the imperial/global in the study of the modern world has been known to IR scholars for some time and, particularly over the past decade, has become increasingly prominent in the discipline.[47] The transformative analytical potential of this literature is beginning to show in historical–sociological works which take imperial orders and formations seriously as the foundation of the international system.[48] While many of these arguments work at the macro level, we propose an approach which takes technologies of imperial governance, namely the creation and management of indebtedness, as both a reality and a wider metaphor for how relations of power were organized, and how these continue to resonate in the present.[49]

Leading on from this, in second place, the theme of debt as a global technology of power and feature of modern capitalism is being explored within what we might call the 'new debt literature'—an unusually interdisciplinary conversation energized by the global financial crisis of 2008 and its political consequences in terms of public austerity and the recapitalization of the financial sector. It is also informed by longer-standing debates on, for example, debt cancellation for developing countries, the role of international financial institutions (IFIs) in the global South and, from a different angle, the origins of money.[50] Authors rooted in the

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[46] See e.g., C. A. Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914: global connections and comparisons* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004); Lisa Lowe, *The intimacies of four continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Andrew Phillips and Jason Campbell Sharman, *Outsourcing empire: how company-states made the modern world* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[47] Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'Retrieving the imperial: *Empire* and international relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 31: 1, 2002, pp. 109–27.

[48] See e.g. Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking modernity: postcolonialism and the sociological imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Julian Go, *Patterns of empire: the British and American empires, 1688 to the present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *How the West came to rule: the geopolitical origins of capitalism* (London: Pluto, 2015); John M. Hobson, *Multicultural origins of the global economy: beyond the western-centric frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[49] See e.g. Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Kojo Koram, *Uncommon wealth: Britain and the aftermath of empire* (London: John Murray, 2022).

[50] See e.g. James Boyce and Leonce Ndikumana, *Africa's odious debts: how foreign loans and capital flight bled a continent—African arguments* (London: Zed, 2011); Lucí Cavallero and Verónica Gago, *A feminist reading of debt* (London: Pluto, 2021); Richard Dienst, *The bonds of debt: borrowing against the common good* (London: Verso, 2017); David Graeber, *Debt: the first 5000 years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011); Miranda Joseph, *Debt to soci-*

Third World tradition have also seen sovereign debt patterns and crises in the direct lineage of colonial governance.[51] From this wide-ranging literature, we extract four insights that are critical for our purposes here: first, that exchanges and their attendant obligations have been historically central to human societies, and money has been a means of accounting for such debts in some but not all contexts;[52] second, that modern statecraft under capitalism has been centrally concerned with the ability to create permanent public debt obligations in order to fund warfare and statebuilding in national and colonial contexts, with the protection and power of private creditors and of the value of money as a result;[53] third, that in today's world, wealth accumulation via financialization and debt creation, rather than through trade in 'real goods', constitutes the overwhelming basis of the global economic system in terms of monetary value and, crucially, attendant political regulation;[54] and fourth, that the condition of being indebted (in both moral and financial terms) has significant political consequences for attitudes and behaviour across the board, debt being a very significant relation of power, compliance and control.[55] In short, debt is an underrated but significant technology of power in modern society.

The third literature that informs the move to complex indebtedness is critical race scholarship, broadly understood.[56] This scholarship, along with feminist scholarship,[57] has shown how racialized and gendered inequalities are not a historical accident or quirk based on individual prejudices, but have played an important role in the organization of political, economic and social institutions. Such institutions needed to restrict the groups of people understood as fully 'human' with full political entitlements, in order to facilitate the exploitation of labour and bodies, the expropriation of land, preferential access to credit and state support, and the cheap reproduction of households, and to secure the polity against resistance to this by punishing and/or controlling those who might resist. For example, the invention of 'whiteness' as a human category served this function in the New World in the seventeenth century in the context of establishing plantation economies and managing the attendant social order.[58] In short, this literature explodes the

ety: accounting for life under capitalism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Tim di Muzio and Richard H. Robbins, *Debt as power* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

[51] James Thuo Gathii, 'Sovereign debt as a mode of colonial governance: past, present and future possibilities', *Just Money*, 13 May 2022, https://justmoney.org/james-thuo-gathii-sovereign-debt-as-a-mode-of-colonial-governance-past-present-and-future-possibilities/.

[52] Graeber, *Debt*.

[53] Di Muzio and Robbins, *Debt as power*, p.7.

[54] Carla Norrlof, Paul Poast, Benjamin J. Cohen, Sabreena Croteau, Aashna Khanna, Daniel McDowell, Hongying Wang and W. Kindred Winecoff , 'Global monetary order and the liberal order debate', *International Studies Perspectives* 21: 2, 2020, pp. 109–53.

[55] See e.g. Andreas Wiedemann, 'The electoral consequences of household indebtedness under austerity', *American Journal of Political Science,* Online First, 30 April 2022, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajps.12708.

[56] See e.g. Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning from the outsider within: the sociological significance of black feminist thought', *Social Problems* 33: 6, 1986, pp. S14–32; Cheryl I. Harris, 'Whiteness as property', *Harvard Law Review* 106: 8, 1993, pp. 1707–91; Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, 'Rethinking racism: toward a structural interpretation', *American Sociological Review* 62: 3, 1997, pp. 465–80.

[57] See e.g. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004).

[58] Theodore W. Allen, *The invention of the white race*, vol. 1 (London: Verso, 2012).

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myth that the expansion of western institutions meant a progressive move towards human *equality*, showing rather how that very expansion was often premised on the structured maintenance of *inequality*.

How do these literatures help us develop the idea of 'complex indebtedness' as an account of the relational structure of the international? To summarize, they show us (1) the importance of imperial relations in international order; (2) the power of indebtedness as a technology of modern political power; and (3) the maintenance of inequality in liberal political systems through mutually reinforcing systems of differentiation (e.g. racism/sexism and the allocation of property). By *synthesizing* these insights, we can sketch out some substantive propositions about how to think differently about the relational character of the international in ways that make better sense of claims for justice within and against the LIO.

The first point is that we can think of empires not only as 'imperial formations', following Go and others, but as 'imperial debt formations'—that is to say, we can understand empires as machines for organizing debt and indebtedness, in a concrete historical sense.[59] Imperialism thus understood is the capacity to set the very terms of obligations and entitlements in the international system, and to police their observance. It has been shown historically that one key way in which European empires developed from localized trading arrangements into durable transnational infrastructures of governance was the capacity to raise unpayable debts in bullion or sterling, e.g. for arms or manufactured goods, which were then traded for footholds, concessions, monopolies, alliances, territories and so on when the relevant debtors were unable to pay. In turn, imperial taxation strategies also created burdensome and often unpayable debts on ordinary citizens via 'hut taxes', which would have to be paid off in producing export commodities of choice (from cotton and opium to indigo), or if not then in bonded (i.e. indebted) labour for imperial agricultural and infrastructure projects at home or abroad, or indeed in military service for some. The creation of these debts was based on differentiating between the rights and obligations of colonial subjects and 'natives'. In later colonialism, colonies had to 'pay for themselves' by producing not only the relevant surplus goods for the metropole but also financing the administrative, physical and military infrastructure for their own imperial rule (or, as in the case of India, that of others). It is also well known that the abolition of slavery produced large debts among the enslaved which had to be paid off to the enslavers for the loss of their 'property'—a debt worth billions which formerly enslaved Haitians paid to France and then the United States from 1825 until 1947, for example.[60] Imperial companies, however, used the enslaved not only as property and productive assets but as collateral for borrowing, slave revolts for example having notable impacts on credit markets in Amsterdam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[61] At the wider discursive level, empires also created cross-cutting forms of social and political indebtedness

[59] Gathii, 'Sovereign debt'.
[60] Lazaro Gamio, Constant Méheut, Catherine Porter, Selam Gebrekidam, Allison McCann and Matt Apuzzo, 'Haiti's lost billions', *New York Times*, 20 May 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/20/world/americas/enslaved-haiti-debt-timeline.html.
[61] We are grateful to Anthony Bogues for this point.

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that were entangled with material debts, from the obligation to 'develop' or 'civilize' to the obligation to serve the empire through military service.[62]

Thus, within empire, debt and indebtedness have served as a principal mechanism for creating and exercising imperial power—the connective tissue linking military force, capital accumulation, labour exploitation, and jurisdiction-making and social obligations, which extends far beyond the formal assertion of imperial rule. Such a constellation of relations is what we understand as an 'imperial debt formation'. The implication of such an arrangement in occasioning historical justice claims for reparations from imperial powers is clear, for these imperial debt formations were very effective at extracting value, in coin and in kind, from the spaces in which they operated, depleting the human and natural resources of the polity, suppressing forms of productive industry and so on. In the case of India, it is estimated that the 2017 value of what Britain extracted from India in these arrangements came to £45 trillion.[63]

The second key point here is that at the 'moment' of independence from colonialism, such powerful structures of indebtedness did not cease, but evolved along with the former colonizers and colonized, particularly as the United States rose to global pre-eminence.[64] The need to purchase imports of energy, weapons and manufactured goods on terms of trade and in currencies established under imperial rule continued, as did monopolistic 'preferential trading arrangements' for commodity production exported cheaply, and as often did the imperial and settler ownership of property, despite various attempts to 'nationalize' assets, and the wider obligation to 'develop' along lines defined by the global North. Borrowing was defined by perceived creditworthiness, meaning that newly independent states could borrow only at much higher rates than their former rulers. These factors, along with the sharp increase in oil prices and the 'Volcker shock' of the early 1980s, in turn produced the 'Third World debt crisis', commonly attributed to immaturity and mismanagement rather than the structurally hierarchical and extractive nature of the global economy—something which the effort to create a New International Economic Order in the 1970s attempted to challenge.[65] The remedies applied have included heavily monitored borrowing from the IFIs at concessional rates, programmes of austerity (structural adjustment), and regulatory measures that protect elite property and financial institutions from redistribution attempts, and limit democratic control over public resources and decision-making. Such mechanisms were commonplace in the global South for decades, but now, especially since the 2008 financial crisis, characterize political governance all over the world. They are of course overlaid with a longer-term interpretation of development and humanitarian aid as a gift to the global South for which gratitude and deference is owed—i.e. a moral debt to the global North.[66]

[62] Di Muzio and Robbins, *Debt as power*, pp. 53–5.
[63] Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, 'The drain of wealth: colonialism before the First World War', *Monthly Review* blog, 1 Feb. 2021, https://monthlyreview.org/2021/02/01/the-drain-of-wealth/.
[64] Koram, *Uncommon wealth*.
[65] Getachew, *Worldmaking after empire*, ch. 5.
[66] Thomas McCarthy, *Race, empire, and the idea of human development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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The third point is that control over the terms of debt allows for the erasure, denial or repression of countervailing historical justice claims, in so far as such claims are not deemed legitimate, authoritative, appropriate or timely. We can see this, for example, in the statements of the then British Prime Minister David Cameron during visits to India in 2013 and Jamaica in 2015 urging them to 'move on' from talking about legacies of imperial violence or exploitation, while seeking to cultivate and maintain specific trading and political relations.[67] The ignoring or suppression of historic justice claims is, for example, central to EU policy on climate change, such as the European Green Deal announced in 2019,[68] and to the downplaying of indigenous claims to sovereignty over land guaranteed by treaties in settler colonies such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand. While such denials or omissions are hardly surprising, they still need to be analysed as a relevant political feature of the international landscape, especially as the claims for justice occasioned by them continue into the present.

This pattern of international governance over time as experienced by the global South thus cannot adequately be captured by a notion such as 'complex interdependence'—a constitutive element of the liberal thinking discussed in the previous section—since this emphasizes the reciprocal and shifting nature of economic and other exchanges between countries, as well as the circumstances under which they come together to establish mutually advantageous and consensual cooperative arrangements with common terms of inclusion.[69] In this line of thinking, resource endowments such as arable land or particular crops are treated as 'natural' rather than, as often in the case of settler societies, the result of terra-forming practices that produce new landscapes and trade possibilities. Matters such as the terms of financial debts and payments between countries in the global North and South are treated as essentially technocratic issues, determined by impersonal markets, and matters such as the historic injustices of empire and settler colonialism are matters for either domestic reconciliation initiatives or forms of personal regret during diplomatic visits.

As an alternative framework, 'complex indebtedness' understands the terms through which such political and economic relations are set as being shaped by histories of empire, racialized differentiation and unequal institutions. These relations and networks are thus hierarchical and asymmetric, mediated via various metropolitan centres, institutions, currencies, discourses and interests, but incorporating actors from all over the world. What complex indebtedness identifies is a configuration of moral and material obligations and entitlements (i.e. a configuration of indebtedness) which tends to redistribute power and wealth towards

[67] The same prime minister was revealed to have had family connections to the slave trade, including a family member who had received the equivalent of £3m at the time of the British government payout to slave-owners in the nineteenth century: see Caroline Davies, 'How do we know David Cameron has slave owners in family background?', *Guardian*, 29 Sept. 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/29/how-do-we-know-david-cameron-has-slave-owning-ancestor.

[68] Abby LaBreck, 'The European Green Deal: addressing the intersection of climate and racial justice', *Harvard International Review* blog, 2 July 2021, https://hir.harvard.edu/the-european-green-deal-addressing-the-intersection-of-climate-and-racial-justice/.

[69] Keohane and Nye, 'Power and interdependence'.

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those best able to defend or take for granted their own creditworthiness, and away from those whose political and economic entitlements are more questionable. It highlights the point that politics is about the power to create and enforce some kinds of debts/obligations, while denying or suppressing others.

When we think about politics through the prism of indebtedness—i.e. who owes what to whom and why—we see that there is no obvious dividing line between coercion and consent in terms of how these relations work. Debts are almost always nominally 'voluntary' in terms of their contractual origins, but in a concrete sense less wealthy debtors often perceive no choice but to borrow, and very little control over the terms of their borrowing, in a system where compound interest means that simply servicing interest rather than repaying capital becomes its own effort, and where there is often a more or less 'violent' outcome for failing to pay.[70] In this sense relations of debt are a form of hegemonic ordering; they are constituted by power, and this power can be understood as having at least the four dimensions noted by Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall—compulsory, institutional, structural and productive.[71] In turn, efforts to reposition the former colonizer as *themselves* indebted to the colonized are also made possible by these relations and arguably represent a form of counter-hegemonic practice. In a world characterized by profound and complex relations of indebtedness, the conditions of sovereignty and democracy are never absolute conditions, but very much relative to and conditioned by one's position within interlocking imperial debt formations, at the level of both states and peoples.

Another way in which the framing of complex indebtedness helps us reframe the relational structure of the international is that it takes us from a surface-level understanding of inclusion or exclusion within orders to a clearer focus on the *terms* of inclusion.[72] 'Marginality' in this sense is not a useful term to describe disempowered peoples or states, since it implies distance or exclusion from such a system. Rather, through an indebtedness lens, those who are considered 'marginal' are as entangled as anyone else, but simply incorporated on the least favourable terms of inclusion that produce disempowering forms of indebtedness. Whereas for proponents of the liberal order and the framework of complex interdependence the solution to poverty is further *integration* with the global system, for our conception of complex indebtedness such moves can render peoples and states even more vulnerable.

To recap, we argued in the first section that the liberal order and its defenders misrecognized key constitutive features of the relational structure of the international through notions such as 'interdependence', downplaying its hierarchical and extractive character both past and present. In this section, we have articulated an alternative reading of the relational structure of the international through the framework of 'complex indebtedness', arguing that it better accounts for the continuation of international relations of hierarchy and extraction, which

[70] Dienst, *The bonds of debt*.

[71] Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, 'Power in international politics', *International Organization* 59: 1, 2005, pp. 39–75.

[72] This resonates with Getachew's argument regarding 'burdened membership' in the international system for newly independent states in *Worldmaking after empire*.

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are contested in contemporary claims for justice. In the next section, we revisit symptoms of crisis within the contemporary LIO through the lens of complex indebtedness, arguing that it sheds significant light on some of the fundamental political questions around order and justice thrown up by these struggles.

Complex indebtedness and the symptoms of crisis

Supporters of the LIO have been well aware of rising challenges to it, particularly since the global financial crisis of 2008, and to some extent this has dented confidence within a wider system perceived to have been delivering both order and justice over the previous half-century. In their *Foreign Affairs* article 'The liberal order is rigged: fix it now or watch it wither', for example, Jeff Colgan and Robert Keohane make the somewhat surprising claim that globalization—which they would equate with increased interdependence—has been 'overtaken' by capitalism, that it has produced falling real wages within the West except among elites, and that this plus the collapse of the Soviet Union has left the door open for nationalist and leftist populism to take over.[73] They counsel forms of sufficient economic redistribution within the West, some military restraint and the political othering of illiberal and authoritarian states in order to shore up a national narrative. That is to say, they diagnose the problems of the liberal order as the accidental distributive or historical by-products of a system which has veered slightly off course, rather than as the result of its constitutive structure, institutions or ideas. Moreover, such a diagnosis completely ignores the crises as experienced among states and peoples in the global South over decades, focusing instead on how to reincorporate the middle classes of the global North.

From the standpoint we have elaborated, it is not very surprising that supporters of the liberal order, given the weaknesses we have identified in their understanding of how it works, would have a relatively limited assessment of its fragilities as a means of delivering justice. In this section, we examine some contemporary challenges/symptoms of crisis for the order through our alternative framework of complex indebtedness, which in contrast helps us zero in on the relations of indebtedness, entitlement and obligation which are being asserted and contested. These are: (1) global movements for racial justice; (2) white nationalism; and (3) forms of South–South cooperation. The former two have been viewed as symptoms of the 'end of consensus' in liberal societies, whereas the latter has been interpreted as a geopolitical expression of the end of western dominance.[74] For reasons of space we can only suggest the outlines of such an analysis here.

The movements for racial justice comprise a set of wide-ranging demands from the epistemic to the material—from acknowledging racism as structural in society

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[73] Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, 'The liberal order is rigged: fix it now or watch it wither', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 3, 2017, pp. 36–44.

[74] Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition* (London: Profile, 2019); Douglas Murray, *The madness of crowds: gender, race and identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020); Fareed Zakaria, 'The future of American power: how America can survive the rise of the rest', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 3, 2008, pp. 18–43.

and all its institutions, to decolonizing the curriculum, repatriating items from the global South from museums in the North, demanding reparations and restitutions for slavery and colonialism, demanding an end to state violence against people of colour, such as by police or immigration officials (Black Lives Matter), criticizing racist immigration and citizenship policies, demanding the abolition of racist institutions, and demanding recognition for the military service and economic contributions of empire to (post-)imperial states. In settler colonial societies, Indigenous movements demand territorial restitution, the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, the upholding of treaty-based rights, the recognition of Indigenous languages, and justice for violence from institutions of the state. The heightened visibility of these movements in the global North in the wake of George Floyd's murder in the United States has arguably begun to produce a reckoning across institutions in society with questions of race and empire, from universities and colleges investigating the relationship of their endowments to the slave trade to movements of sportspeople speaking out about racism in society.

Our argument is that these movements are not just about experiences of discrimination and violence, but that at a more profound level they seek acknowledgement of the unrecognized moral, political and financial debts that metropolitan societies and institutions owe to the subjects of empire and settler colonialism and their descendants. These claims of indebtedness are of course most easily seen in the demands for reparations, such as those being calculated and claimed by Caribbean governments and movements for slavery—translating historical experiences of oppression, violence, dehumanization and exploitation into a 'payable' debt which is not only financial but also political/symbolic. They can also be seen, for example, in efforts to get equal recognition for African and Asian soldiers as part of the Commonwealth war dead in the First and Second World Wars—acknowledging that the debts owed to the war dead extend to these men too, previously excluded for reasons of racism.[75] Complex indebtedness as a framework helps us pinpoint more precisely the nature of justice claims in this context—emphasizing that these do not simply emerge as a result of 'connectedness' or 'interdependence'. Rather, these justice claims are about the politics of who owes what to whom, and in this case about actors trying to remake the political and discursive environment in which such claims could be previously ignored or suppressed.

Nonetheless, as is clear, this movement in the North Atlantic region especially is met by a backlash or 'whitelash' which is centred on the strong reassertion of racialized national community and expressions of resentment ('Make America Great Again'), a positive view of empire's effects, where they are acknowledged at all, such as crediting Britain with ending the slave trade, a hostile and violent response to non-white migrants and asylum-seekers as undeserving claimants on the public, a complaint about the lack of gratitude on behalf of those pressing for racial justice, and a fear about the general collapse of self-confidence in (western) civilization.[76] Where this movement has gained power within legislative and

[75] David Olusoga, *The world's war: forgotten soldiers of empire* (London: Head of Zeus, 2015).
[76] Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: the West and the rest* (London: Penguin, 2018).

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state institutions, we have seen political clampdowns on, for example, critical race theory, an insistence that schools teach the 'benefits' of empire as well as its downside,[77] a further criminalization of migration and the conditionalization of the citizenship of non-white groups.

We understand these movements as also making sense through the lens of complex indebtedness—specifically in defending the extant imperial debt formations constituting international order, which, as noted in the previous section, are forms of organizing differentiated and hierarchical entitlements. At the outbreak of the First World War, Du Bois understood intensified imperialism and racism as a means of navigating the challenges of democracy for elites in the early twentieth century—that is to say that the class-based antagonisms of white societies could be mediated and alleviated through the material and psychic/epistemic rewards provided by empire and global racial domination.[78] This insight helps us to contemplate the nature of the backlash today; what it articulates is a sense of lost imperial and racialized entitlement to material comfort, unquestioned political dominance and global hegemony, in a context where most households around the world but especially in the global North have experienced the chronic suppression of wages, austerity and a surge in levels of household debt.[79] Thus the crisis of post-imperial entitlement and of whiteness is embedded and resurgent within a wider and related crisis of indebtedness, threatening entitlements that had been previously taken for granted and which had disproportionately benefited particular groups now (fearful of) losing status.[80] The framing of complex indebtedness helps us understand the political traction of these movements not as populism and nationalism 'outside' a liberal framework, as is often asserted by liberal thinkers, but as 'inside' and defending the particular constellation of indebtedness which underpinned empire from external challenges.

This understanding is linked to the last illustrative symptom of crisis—that of the broad phenomenon known as 'South–South' cooperation. We understand this as the emergence of collaborations—particularly financial ones—that are initiated, capitalized and organized by states outside the G7/global North. While historically connected to projects such as the Non-Aligned Movement or the 1978 Buenos Aires Plan of Action in the UN, such collaborations now also include the BRICS[81] bank and the Belt and Road Initiative, projects funded from oil-capitalized sovereign wealth funds in the Middle East and Caribbean, and various social and cultural exchanges. Their major significance over the past three decades has been that they represent the emergence of alternative and substantive credit lines for governments in the South looking to develop infrastructure without the conditionalities embedded in Bretton Woods multilateral lending over public spending

[77] Cf. Priya Satia, 'One tool of "critical thinking" that's done more harm than good: you can't write up pros and cons for imperial rule', *Slate*, 30 March 2022, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/03/pros-cons-british-empire-balance-sheet-history-imperialism.html.
[78] Du Bois, 'The African roots of war'.
[79] See e.g. Jason Hickel, *The divide: a brief guide to global inequality and its solutions* (London: Windmill, 2018).
[80] Similar dynamics may characterize other former imperial powers such as Russia, but we cannot explore this here for reasons of space.
[81] Brazil, India, China and South Africa.

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and borrowing. These collaborations are not without controversy, as pathways for economic development, with civil society actors in debtor countries pointing out significant environmental and political costs, and various figures in the North Atlantic accusing countries such as China of 'debt-trap diplomacy' leading to repayment in equity, land or commodities when cash is unavailable.

We argue that thinking in terms of evolving imperial debt formations helps us understand the changing international political environment much better than an account principally focused on power and geopolitics, a notion of reciprocal interdependence, or Southern states' willingness (or not) to uphold the LIO through its institutions. Understood through complex indebtedness, the significance of South–South cooperation is its gradual if non-linear erosion of the monopoly on credit and obligations held by the historic financial institutions of the North, and the requirement that development priorities and cooperation be channelled through multilateral institutions that it controls for substantial access to funding—i.e. the weakening of a historic imperial debt formation. It is unsurprising that the political justification for these forms of cooperation makes explicit reference to such countries as being 'underserved' by existing financial institutions, and that a shared Third World history of solidarity is regularly invoked.[82] Yet these relations of indebtedness are complex in so far as they are not a like-for-like replacement of Northern debt with Chinese or other forms of Southern debt; rather, we can see these shifting debt formations as materially overlapping and entwined with each other, still ultimately underpinned by the imperial dynamics of dollar hegemony and the hydrocarbon-based economy.[83] Nonetheless, if we are looking for a substantive account of South–South cooperation and the shifting political environment out of which it emerged and that it entails, the challenge to imperial debt formations presents a more compelling and specific focus than thinking more generically in terms of interdependence: it directly identifies the key stakes for Southern actors as being in the conditions of chronic indebtedness, and the governance and policy challenges resulting from these conditions.

The three brief examples presented in this section suggest the value of adopting a framework of complex indebtedness to rethink the struggles for justice now besetting the LIO. They show how underlying structures of indebtedness (what we call imperial debt formations) are central organizing features of international political order, and also how changes in these structures are initiated and contested by different political actors at both state and non-state levels. These examples draw attention to the need for far greater attentiveness to the question of how political power is exerted through frameworks of debt and obligation, both financial and moral; the need to ask harder questions about how conditions of debt and credit—of indebtedness in all its forms—create the conditions for human suffering and enrichment; and the need to understand how the imperial underpinnings of the LIO continue to generate political and economic crises.

[82] Xi Jinping, 'Full text of Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at opening ceremony of 2018 FOCAC Beijing summit', Xinhua, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/03/c_129946189.htm.
[83] Norrlof et al., 'Global monetary order'.

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Conclusion

A prominent feature of the alleged crisis of the LIO is a range of diverse calls for justice, including epistemic and historic justice. For a long time, that order understood itself in liberal terms and as capable of delivering justice accordingly. Asking a second-order question, about how questions of justice are framed in the international order, led us to the conclusion that the LIO's relational account of the international is at best partial, if not deeply flawed. Building on long-established and more recent traditions of scholarship aligned with the majority world, we have proposed a different relational account of the international and its core dynamics: complex indebtedness. Such an account not only enables a better appreciation of the justice claims currently being made in and against the LIO; it also more plausibly explains their origins, interconnections, and multiscalar and polymorphic character. Justice, as both a normative principle and a set of institutional arrangements, is inseparable from the historic and social relations—the order, in other words—in which it is embedded. By facing squarely the political parameters of indebtedness, we can make better sense of how to approach claims for justice in the present and future.

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