Statehood and recognition in world politics: Towards a critical research agenda

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Abstract
This article offers a critical outlook on existing debates on state recognition and proposes future research directions. It argues that existing knowledge on state recognition and the dominant discourses, norms and practices needs to be problematized and freed from power-driven, conservative, positivist and legal interpretations and reoriented in new directions in order to generate more critical, contextual and emancipatory knowledge. The article proposes two major areas for future research on state recognition, which should: (a) expose the politics of knowledge, and positionality, and seek epistemic justice and decolonization of state recognition studies; and (b) study more thoroughly recognitionality techniques encompassing diplomatic discourses, performances and entangled agencies. Accordingly, this article seeks to promote a long overdue debate on the need for re-visioning state recognition in world politics.

Keywords
Critical theory, decolonization, recognitionality, state recognition, statehood

Introduction
The creation of states and their subsequent recognition remain among the most problematic, yet important, aspects of international politics. Despite the fact that many ethnic groups, movements and regions have sought to create their own sovereign state, only a very small fraction of ethnic groups seeking independence have managed to become internationally recognized states (Griffiths, 2016: 5). In addition to 193 UN Member States, we have over 10 de facto and partially recognized states, and over 40 partially independent and non-self-governing territories (Caspersen, 2014). While there is no exact definition of state recognition, in a broad sense recognition entails ‘the practice of states conferring recognition upon newcomers, which is considered to be an important
element of independent statehood and a crucial blessing for admission to the international community of sovereign states' (Visoka et al., 2020: 2). International recognition plays a vital role in the political, security, legal, economic and socio-cultural development of states (Rezvani, 2015: 1). It enables states protection under international law, access to multilateral bodies and the possibility to develop diplomatic and trade relations with other states. While international recognition might not guarantee successful statehood, its absence certainly poses many challenges for surviving an inhospitable international environment (Craven and Parfitt, 2018). States which lack full international recognition are more likely to become subject to foreign military occupation and hybrid wars (Fabry, 2010). Limited diplomatic relations – an inherent condition of unrecognized states – undermines the capacity of these entities to enhance their political, security and trade relations with other recognized states, leading to economic stagnation, poverty and social isolation (Geldenhuys, 2009). More broadly, the recognition of states plays a central role in shaping world politics. It can be a cause of state death, birth, or resurrection. It can be a source of conflict and peace, a source of justice but also of discrimination and subordination. It can be a safeguard to state expansion and international order, but also can be a source of collective self-determination and liberation. It can reproduce the existing state system but also open up space for normative change and emancipation.

Although the subject of state recognition is widely studied in law, comparative politics and area studies, there is still no consolidated research programme which critically interrogates the recognition of states in theory and practice. So far, the subject of state recognition has remained a sub-category of other research programmes, such as those examining international norms, sovereignty, secession, self-determination, international intervention, great power politics, preventive diplomacy, violent conflicts, ethnicity, identity politics and conflict resolution. The resulting fragmented body of knowledge on state recognition has prevented the development of more comprehensive and reality-adequate accounts that take into account the politics, law, history, sociology and economics of state recognition in theory and practice. Most importantly, existing literature lacks a critical outlook of state recognition as a uncodified norm and scattered practice in world politics.

This article offers a critical look at the existing debates on state recognition and proposes future research directions. It argues that the existing knowledge on state recognition and its dominant discourses, norms and practices need to be problematized and freed from power-driven, conservative, positivist and legal interpretations, and be reoriented in new directions in order to generate more critical, contextual and emancipatory knowledge. The overarching stance proposed in this article is that the dominance of conservative perspectives on state recognition has resulted in producing apathetic knowledge about the people and states left outside the society of recognized states. This epistemic injustice not only has repercussions for producing conceptual and theoretical knowledge, which is far from the lived reality of these state-like entities, but also contributes to the reproduction of existing power relations, global normative and political orthodoxies, and exclusionary practices towards peoples and groups who seek to realize their collective right to self-determination. Therefore, a critical research agenda on state recognition is long overdue to generate more empathetic and emancipatory knowledge towards peoples who struggle for recognition in their quest to become a sovereign state.
In order to generate critical, emancipatory, yet problem-addressing knowledge, future research should focus first on unpacking and deconstructing existing discourse and practices to reveal their anomalies, flaws and inconsistencies, and second it should offer new perspectives that contribute to emancipatory outcomes and better alternatives to existing knowledge and practices. To pluralize knowledge on state recognition, future research should problematize and rethink the foundational claims underpinning modern statehood, the function of state recognition, as well as entire hierarchical and discriminatory semantics and positionalities on different varieties of statehood emanating in both the Western and non-Western world. To denaturalize and decolonize knowledge, the future research should rescale and revision the colonial-area imposed cartography of states and promote a grounded normativity and emancipatory visions of justice, rights and forms of peaceful co-existence of states. It needs to deconstruct the power-driven, conservative, positivist and legal interpretations of state recognition and reorient the debates along new knowledge frontiers that promote local perspectives from aspirant states to ensure epistemic justice and fair voice on matters affecting their ontological security and unalienable rights.

To achieve this, future research needs to move from perceiving recognition as a singular act associated with power, privileges and gatekeeping features of dominant states to an assemblage of discourses, performances and entanglements that capture the pluriverse nature of recognition and diplomatic agency of aspirant states. The article proposes the concept of ‘recognitionality’ to capture the reality-adequate nature of recognition practices in world politics. The concept of recognitionality can be useful as a heuristic to look at state recognition as a process not entirely shaped by power, legal norms, institutions and material condition, but also constituted through diplomatic discourses, performances and entanglements. As Ryan D Griffiths (2019: 112) argues, there is an international regime which ‘determines when an applicant has the right to withdraw from an existing state and join the club of sovereign states’. Yet, making sense of diplomatic recognition requires looking at the micro-moves and everyday practices, spaces, emotions and personal diplomacy. It is not sufficient to only look at the legal and institutional rules. It requires acknowledging the multidimensional nature of recognition and opening up to different scale, forms and varieties of recognition, as well as capturing the contextual and temporal nature of such practices. By unravelling the techniques and politics of recognitionality, the future research is able to generate new knowledge which should challenge existing orthodoxies on statehood and re-vision the politics of recognition that are fit for the contemporary world. Accordingly, this article is an invitation to rethink state recognition studies and generate critical research which seeks to both expand the knowledge frontiers as well as make an impact in the real world.

This article is organized as follows. In order to identify the existing assumptions and anomalies underpinning the existing theories of state recognition, it first explores why there is no critical theory of state recognition. The second and main part offers an outlook for two major areas of future research on state recognition. It concludes with a nuanced discussion of the viability of and potential obstacles to such research on state recognition, and proposes several approaches to overcoming them.
Why is there no critical theory of state recognition?

Critical research agendas have emerged across political geography, international law (Singh and Mayer, 2014), international relations (Devetak, 2018), and peace, conflict and security studies (Richmond and Mac Ginty, 2015). These critical turns seek to denaturalize and decentralize existing paradigms and theories by unravelling their limits and implications and offer new alternative pathways for reconstructing knowledge. Notably, state recognition has been widely studied from the international law perspective, which usually offers a narrow and dogmatic understanding of statehood and recognition and is deeply influenced by state policies and legal and institutional practices (Chen, 1951; Crawford, 2007; Lauterpacht, 1947; Rač, 2002; Talmon, 1998). Critical international law perspectives have offered important insights on the evolution and transformation of the politics of state recognition, including the contribution of non-Western states and perspectives, but often with primary focus on broader themes such as sovereignty and self-determination and not primary focus on state recognition per se (see for example, Getachew, 2019; Lorca, 2014). In international relations (IR) and diplomatic studies, state recognition research mainly seeks to reproduce existing, state-centric orthodoxies regarding power politics, stability, order and rules governing state recognition, whilst demonstrating a preference for understanding the status quo rather than opening up spaces for normative and political change in the international arena (see Caspersen and Stansfield, 2011; Daase et al., 2015). Peace and conflict studies tend to approach the subject of state recognition from the perspective of how to prevent and manage secessionist conflicts (Weller, 2009; Wolff and Yakinthou, 2011). While such ‘critical turns’ exist in a wide range of subjects, what explains the lack of a critical turn in state recognition studies?

First and foremost, the dominance of positivist and problem-solving orientations has prevented the consolidation of a critical research programme on state recognition. Robert W Cox (1981: 128) maintains that the problem-solving approaches takes ‘the world as it finds, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action’. To resolve problems, for positivist traditions to consider knowledge to be valid and objective it needs to be generalized, categorized, quantified and simplified (see Smith et al., 1996). For example, international lawyers take a dogmatic view and follow only legal narratives and norms, omitting broader socio-political dynamics and practices that underpin state recognition in world politics (see Singh and Mayer, 2014). Legal debates are still embedded in fruitless discussions of the criteria of statehood; the competing constitutive and declarative character of recognition; global norms of sovereignty statehood; denial of the duty of states to recognize new states and the obsession with the obligation of states with non-recognition of states emerging in breach of fundamental norms of international law; the congruence of scholars’ policy and legal opinions with their government’s foreign policy objectives; and the dominance of Western perspectives on state recognition (see Visoka et al., 2020). The limited legal toolkits and conceptual frameworks for studying the recognition of states have significantly undermined the ability of legal scholars to study the broad and diverse diplomatic practices and dynamics of state recognition.
Moreover, political scientists’ take on state recognition often fails to recognize the fluidity of the concept of state, micro-politics of diplomatic practices, complex entanglements and multidirectional causality (Visoka, 2018). They tend to prioritize quantifiable and decontextualized knowledge over context-specific and detailed knowledge, which is in line with broader positivist research approaches. Comparative and normative studies tend to create categorization which misrepresents the unique historical trajectories of each recognition-seeking state. Problem-solving thinking blinds the possibilities for critical thinking. Fiona McConnell (2009: 344) rightly criticizes Western scholars for their ‘binary conceptualisation of geopolitical entities as either nation-states or anomalies deviating from this model’ with the anomalies’ ‘existence under-theorized and their achievements under-reported’. The quantification and qualification of state recognition has been present in all studies on state recognition and the vocabulary of theories and findings has been deeply Eurocentric and oriented towards reproducing the existing order (Coggins, 2014; Griffiths, 2016). Which big powers and how many countries have recognized a claimant state have to a large extent determined the political worth of these states and shaped the research on their merits for statehood. Recognition scholars who use quantitative methods and deploy positivist and ‘scientific’ methods seek to simplify knowledge, generate universal categories and group countries accordingly at the expense of more detailed, contextual and reality-adequate knowledge. They might not be aware that such knowledge exists, might not find it convenient to explore it, or might be unable to reach it (see Florea, 2017). They also often serve as epistemic gatekeepers of academic knowledge-production outlets where they exercise their positions to discourage and sideline critical and alternative views. This oversimplification, categorization and homogenization of knowledge undermines the possibility for broadening the study of politics and practices of state recognition in the real world.

Notwithstanding the above, the paradigmatic divide and dominance of conservative views on statehood is not the only reason why there isn’t a critical theory on state recognition. Most of the critical perspectives in international studies, broadly defined, tend to adopt an anti-state and anti-establishment ontological and epistemological commitment (see Edkins, 2019). They mostly focus on challenging the normative and operational features of modern statehood. In particular, advocating for re-visioning state recognition for critical theorists could be seen as reproducing a Eurocentric conception of statehood where recognition has been historically used as a colonial instrument to safeguard the expansion of international society without damaging the dominance of Western states. Whether through imperialist and violent methods, or through rule-based international order, the same states remain in control of who enters and who remains outside the society of states. Exercising organized and structural violence is a core function of the state, intrinsically associating it with power, order, authority, control and violence. Seen from this perspective, the state is widely viewed as an ontological enemy of human freedom and emancipation. Consequently, critical knowledge in IR is often applied to examine alternative national, transnational and cosmopolitan possibilities for reorganizing political communities along post-national constellations (see Linklater, 2007).

Moreover, the absence of a critical theory of state recognition is also related to the deeply embedded coloniality and conservatism among dominant scholars. Jens Bartelson (2013: 110) points out that ‘theories of recognition have been instrumental in justifying
different forms of exclusion in world politics, thus bringing about a hierarchical relationship between those entities that merit recognition and those who do not’. While the main protagonists of international studies are sovereign states, other aspirant states that struggle to enter the international society are discriminated against not only politically by the conservative global order, but also epistemologically by the existing Western-centric scholarship. Although historically the doctrine of recognition was meant to replace the standards of civilization (see Lorca, 2014), over the years it has become another regime of inequality among existing and new aspirant states. The field of state recognition studies is dominated by an epistemic alarmism, which takes the shape of paranoia and fear that the emergence of new states exacerbates more chaos and disorder, ignoring the primacy of freedom, equality and development as epitomizing aspirations for independent statehood. There is a fear that creation of new states and their subsequent recognition would result in changing the cartography of states and thus reshuffling geopolitical constellation of interests, powers, resources and relations (see Caspersen and Stansfield, 2011). This is evident in many studies that associate state recognition with conflict, insecurity and international chaos, while downplaying the emancipatory potential of self-determination and state expansion (see Kolstø, 2006). Evidently, secessionist conflicts tend to trigger stronger international reactions and the politics of recognition can become a source of conflict, but containment of these self-determination conflicts through existing legal and policy instruments has proven fruitless (see Weller, 2009).

While peripheral interventions by non-Western states and legal experts have historically shaped the particularistic universalism of state recognition (Lorca, 2014: 36–37), Western states and scholars (especially legal experts) have been at the forefront of shaping contemporary knowledge on state recognition and non-recognition. The doctrine of statehood and recognition are very rigidly legalistic in nature and tend to produce and reproduce rules that suit the interests of dominant states (often hidden under the label of rule-based international order). Especially, the scholars that have taken a paternalist view of this subject tend to produce knowledge and shape policy-making in such a direction that suits the current powers and their global dominance. What prevails in the existing state recognition studies is a lack of willingness to rethink the foundational categories underpinning statehood, secession and most importantly recognition of states. Instead, scholarly work on recognition-seeking states tends to (re)produce ideologies, discourses, positionalities and interests of either former host states or the other dominant states (see Ker-Lindsay, 2012). They often advocate on behalf of powerful states and act as fanatical defenders of the existing international legal order, which discriminates against recognition-seeking states (see Paquin, 2010). International legal scholars, such as Charles H Alexandrowicz (2017 [1952]: 381), have long advocated preserving the role of great powers as agents of international order and serve the ‘quasi-judicial function’ of applying the rule of international law with regard to state recognition.

Thus, as a result of this conservative and negative bias towards state creation and recognition, existing research on this subject suffers from uncritical examination of the discourses, policies and practices of recognition. More so, the knowledge-power nexus at the heart of this debate has real world implications whereby the wording of rules and norms of statehood and recognition results in their ‘worlding’; namely, making recognition-seeking
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states targets of external intervention, exclusion, discrimination and subordination both in scholarly knowledge and in international policy and legal practices.

Towards a critical research agenda on state recognition

Critical perspectives across different social science disciplines usually consist of two vital components: (a) deconstruction of existing discourse and practices to reveal their anomalies, flaws and inconsistencies, and (b) reconstruction of alternative possibilities which would contribute to emancipatory outcomes (see Kurki, 2013; Ní Mhurchú and Shindo 2016; Smith et al., 1996). To address some of the anomalies and loopholes evident in the existing research on state recognition, the remainder of this article proposes two critical departures that new research on state recognition should explore. First, future research should expose the politics of knowledge and positionality of scholars in state recognition studies, as well as seek epistemic justice and decolonization of knowledge on the subject. Second, future research should study more thoroughly the ‘recognitionality’ regimes so as to explore the complex factors, multiple actors and entangled politics that underpin the knowledge and practices of state recognition. These two areas for future research are not necessarily the only ones worthy of attention, but they do offer sufficient grounds for initiating a constructive, yet critical debate on the foundational, normative and epistemological aspects of state recognition in world politics. Crucially, there is relevant and critical research on state recognition, but it tends to be scattered across different disciplinary stands and not consolidated enough into a cohesive research programme.

Epistemic justice and decolonization of state recognition studies

Practices of recognition in world politics are at best institutionalized patterns of exclusion that affect the ability of aspirant states to participate as an equal member of the international community. It is widely known that recognition as a diplomatic practice has its historical roots in the colonial era, where non-European states were required to adhere to a ‘civilisation process’ before becoming partial or full members of the international society governed by laws of nations (Tourme-Jouannet, 2013: 668). Historically, recognition is affiliated with the discriminatory and racist practices of European states selectively determining who are civilized and uncivilized (see: Anghie, 2004; Ringmar, 2014: 450). Knowledge on state recognition has followed this trend as well. Often the epistemic community (especially legal, positivist and comparatist researchers) arbitrarily defend the exclusionary norms and practices of the international society and seek, through pseudo-intelligent arguments, to retain the boundaries of the status and entitlements of existing dominant states in global politics. A number of diagnostic studies highlighting the achievements and failures of scholarly debates on aspirant states have failed to consider the dominant presence of geo-epistemological Western scholars and the implications this has for the theory and practice of state recognition (see Pegg, 2017). State recognition scholarship mainly accounts for the legal and state practices of dominant Western states such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America. For instance, the influential work of Lauterpacht (1947), Kelsen (1941), Chen (1951), Talmon (1998) and Crawford (2007) all
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theorize on the legal dimension of state recognition by using examples from diplomatic and legal practices of dominant Western states. The growing research which exposes the role of non-Western states in shaping the transformation of state sovereignty, self-determination, international law and the practices of state recognition provide valuable historical accounts (see Getachew, 2019; Lorca, 2014), but with little insights on how to overcome the contemporary conservative and imitative practices of state recognition in the global scale. The knowledge produced by a narrower epistemic community mostly located in the West is subsequently reproduced and imitated by the rest of the world to a large extent. This nexus between Western-centred knowledge and state practices is normalized and globalized to set the main epistemic contours on state recognition.

First, future research should problematize the politics of state recognition knowledge, showing their political roots and tracing how they have become normalized in theory and practice. Sovereignty, territorial integrity and legitimate authority should be unpacked critically and denormalized to re-centre existing knowledge about statehood, sovereignty and recognition in contemporary world politics (see Bartelson, 2016). The decolonization process has not entirely resolved the problem of self-determination and state recognition in the world. On the contrary, it has ended up becoming a feature of institutional closure in the international system (see Viola, 2020). The current international norms on self-determination of peoples entrapped by the consent of the host state and constraining logic of the uti possidetis principle has forced many groups seeking independent statehood to choose violent methods and become vassals to great power politics to achieve their aspiration at any cost (Walter et al., 2014). Consensual secession as a precondition for international recognition has become the unspoken and double standard of civilization. Despite their warmongering and peace-breaking practices, former base states are quickly normalized and readmitted into international society, and the burden of seeking international affirmation and survival in a disenfranchising international order falls on the recognition-seeking entity. Although it is important to highlight the problematic nature of the state – including its aggressive and affective character – for many ethnic groups, creating their own state represents an existential solution and an aspiration for emancipation of their rights, status and group identity (see Buchanan, 2004; Craven and Parfitt, 2018). Despite calls for global justice beyond the modern state, the state is unlikely to vanish as the core framework for organizing political, social and economic life (Jessop, 2016). State recognition is a socio-diplomatic and historically contingent practice, which has emerged only in the modern times and as such it should be prone to change and transformation (see Fabry, 2010). Thus, future research should adopt a more receptive approach towards state creation and endorse the possibility of overcoming the existing status quo with regard to the regulation of recognition in law and practice as well as promote alternative knowledge on how to redefine the colonial-area imposed cartography of states which balances justice and rights with order and prosperity for all concerned groups (see Buchanan, 2004). Certainly, future research should retain an ontological suspicion of the state, while simultaneously exploring alternative arrangements for more emancipatory forms of statehood that enable individual and collective freedoms as well as promote global justice.

The debates on the recognition of states are spread across different, often overlapping disciplinary fields, such as those that look at aspirant states, and those debates that study
more broadly secessionist and intra-state conflicts. Such research on state recognition tends to be comparatist. It involves the intermeshing of different case studies that either seek or have declared independent statehood but struggle for international recognition. John O’Loughlin et al. (2014: 3) argue that ‘the will to homogenize these de facto states is pervasive and is evident in debate and reporting’. These diverse and parallel debates often study the same recognition-seeking states, yet end up overlooking their distinct features as well as their similarities with recognized states. Aspirant states are inaccurately portrayed in policy and scholarly debates because they are seen as ‘transient phenomena expected to disappear’ (Geldenhuys, 2009: 45). The Western and European states are associated with democratic, liberal, progressive and stable states, whereas recognition-seeking states are labelled and thus misrecognized as ‘contested states’, ‘de-facto states’, ‘pariah entities’, ‘disputed lands’, ‘unrecognized states’, ‘unrecognized statelets’, and ‘invisible countries’ (see Florea, 2017). Such epistemic misrecognition has serious ramifications for the socio-economic and political existence of communities living in these discriminated against and overshadowed societies (see Epstein et al., 2018).

To serve justice to and normalize the existence of recognition-seeking states, future research should not only focus on the dimension of conflict and (non)recognition when approaching these societies. As Georgio Comai (2018: 146) argues, ‘exclusive focus on conflict and recognition issues risks being a distraction from prevalent dynamics on the ground’. More so, in aspirant societies seeking international recognition, ‘the lives of ordinary citizens are generally ignored in the geopolitical discussions that involve the parent and patron states, as well as major powers beyond the region’ (O’Loughlin et al., 2014: 29).

In order to reshuffle the foundational knowledge on state recognition, future research should remain open to all types and forms of knowledges, including knowledge produced by scholars coming from states and societies seeking international recognition. The desire to maintain status quo and colonial mindsets among state recognition scholars has resulted in the promotion of epistemic negativity towards the creation of new states and their international recognition. In particular, international law is attuned to generating prohibitory rather than emancipatory knowledge on state recognition (see Kohen, 2006). Rather than siding with dominant conservative and realist conceptions of recognition, critical scholars should promote empathetic, reflexive, and emancipatory knowledge on statehood and recognition. In denaturalizing knowledge, future research should question and problematize different disciplinary takes on recognition and expand the lexicon of different modes and definitions of recognition. In particular, future research should pay attention to previously neglected subjects, areas, actors and processes in state recognition, and expand the scope of knowledge beyond narrow traditional debates. As the dominant knowledge does not represent the pluriversal views, historical experiences and geo-cultural nuances of many other practices of state-becoming and recognition, future research needs to tackle this epistemic injustice and generate more representative, legitimate and reality-adequate knowledge. The discipline cannot be considered decolonized only with knowledge produced by scholars with origin or focus on existing decolonized nations that have full international recognition now. The new silenced and suppressed voices are those coming from existing aspirant states seeking international recognition. Local voices in aspirant states are often silenced and their perspectives
channelled through intermediaries who are often foreign researchers. Exploring local narratives in aspirant states is crucial to uncover experiences of contested and isolated statehood and its socio-economic, gendered and everyday impacts. Narrating local perspectives on state recognition helps also to debunk myths and overcome persisting negative images of these isolated states and societies. Lived experiences, micro-politics, social and political forces, and the entanglement with external instances in claimant states should be the epistemological points of departure for critical analysis (see Kuus, 2013; O’Loughlin et al., 2014). So, decolonized knowledge on state recognition should reverse the order of things – placing the local before the regional and international in the epistemological scale for understanding recognition-seeking states and societies.

To decolonize knowledge on state recognition requires ‘to engage, examine, retrieve and cultivate other ways of thinking about and being in the world that can form alternative points of departure to the hegemonic knowledges of empire’ (Sabaratnam, 2017: 7). In such a context, the question would not be about isolating unrecognized and contested states and their citizens, but to tackle structural and ideational factors that reproduce the existing discriminatory and exclusionary order. As Samantha Balaton-Chrimes and Victoria Stead (2017: 2) point out, it is important to ‘challenge the normative value of the dominant, hierarchical ways in which recognition is conceived and performed, particularly those that privilege the state as a recognising agent’. In recent years, there is growing research which signposts the importance of developing new toponomies of statehood, which needs to be expanded and mainstreamed further (see Bryant and Hatay, 2020; Jeffrey, 2013; McConnell, 2016; Navaro-Yashin, 2012; Nicholson, 2019; Wilson, 2016). Thus, future research needs to take account of how the politics of recognition are embedded in hegemonic and colonial logics of power, control and domination over certain societies. Citizens of aspirant states are entrapped under four layers of suppression and misfortune: undemocratic rule by national leaders able to prolong their rule, partially as a result of non-recognition; the interference and hardship caused by the former host state; pressure coming from the patron state and its major competitors who exploit the country for their economic and geopolitical interests; and ignorance on the part of international organizations and global human rights groups.

Recognitionality and the re-visioning of state recognition

The existing knowledge on state recognition focusing mostly on the globalized Western legal and political theory is unable to capture the broader politics and practices of state recognition (see Fabry, 2010: 5–6). At its core, scholarly debates on state recognition tend to focus mostly on debating whether international recognition is constitutive or not of independent statehood. Some argue that recognition is acknowledgement of independent statehood and does not impact the existence of a state (see Visoka et al., 2020). Others vest a great deal of importance in recognition, considering it constitutive of statehood (Visoka et al., 2020). The International Law Association’s (ILA, 2018) Committee on Recognition and Non-Recognition in International Law concluded in 2018 that ‘the Constitutive/Declaratory dichotomy is of limited usefulness in analysing the role of recognition’. On balance, neither the declaratory theory defended by international lawyers nor the constitutive theory defended by IR scholars and political scientists provides a
solid basis for capturing the role, politics and dynamics of international recognition in the state-becoming process (see Warbrick, 2003: 237). Another major preoccupation among state recognition scholars is the impact of aspirant states on international order, institutions and great power rivalry. Literature in general considers systemic factors that reflect preferences of great powers as well as broader international norms as key determinants of recognized statehood in contemporary times (Coggins, 2014). Similarly, literature on state recognition tends to view recognition as a formal act bestowed upon a claimant entity that marks their formal entry into the club of sovereign states (see Visoka et al., 2020). Such monolithic views not only fail to account for the nuanced and the multi-staged process of state recognition, but also omit a broad range of modes by which emerging states engage with the international community prior to or without obtaining diplomatic recognition. Often the impression is created that the existing thinking on state recognition tries to make the world fit into existing doctrinal and legal frameworks, failing to recognize that the prevalent epistemological and methodological contours are incapable of accounting for the complexities surrounding state recognition in contemporary world politics. Accordingly, future research should overcome the limits of legal theories and macro-accounts and focus on capturing the discursive, performative and entangled aspects of state recognition.

Although there is no regulatory mechanism which governs state recognition in law and practice, there is a ‘recognitionality’ regime, which represents an assemblage of widely accepted and debated discourses, rules, norms and practices which capture the contemporary features of recognizability of new states in international affairs. The concept of recognitionality, which mirrors Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1991), would be a suitable concept to account for a broad range of discourses, tactics, strategies, guidelines, and techniques employed by different external actors for granting, withholding or withdrawing the recognition of states as well as those employed by internal actors for becoming recognizable entities. Whereas the notion of governmentality captures techniques of power and governance in modern societies, the notion of recognitionality could be a useful derivative concept to describe the diplomatic techniques underpinning the recognition of states. In other words, to make sense of the politics and technologies governing state recognition as a diplomatic practice in international affairs, future research needs to engage more thoroughly with the micro-politics, discourses, performances and entanglements with other states – key ingredients for obtaining diplomatic recognition and admission to the international community. At present, constitutive features of what is proposed here as recognitionality, namely discourse, performances and entanglements, are present but often studied separately or in isolation. Thus, the added value of the concept of recognitionality is to critically examine all features that govern state recognition in practice.

Undoubtedly, recognition is a necessary condition of contemporary sovereign statehood but not constitutive of statehood in itself. The ability of new aspirant states to act like a state and secure diplomatic recognition and membership of international organizations requires more than just satisfaction of most of the objective criteria of statehood. State recognition is a textually constructed social fact that is articulated through everyday acts of writing, talking and performing recognition of others and the self (see Visoka, 2018). Diplomatic performances are what make new states recognizable entities in world
politics. In this context, exploring cultures of recognition is crucial to making sense of the entangled nature of recognition, especially how meaning is constructed, how practices are improvised and how recognition takes a political and material effect (see Björkdahl, 2018; Pouliot and Cornut, 2015). Moving beyond existing mainstream research orthodoxies will make it possible to reveal the indeterminacy of norms and politics of state recognition and show that it is the continued performance and reproduction of those norms that creates the perception of stability and continuity of existing regimes of recognition. At the end of the day, it is the ritualized, habitualized, repeated, and performed diplomatic discourses and practices of states that contribute to the constitution and reproduction of existing regimes of state recognition (see Grzybowski, 2017).

Existing research on state recognition tends to fall into a binary trap between recognized and unrecognized state(hood). Central to understanding contemporary recognitionality regimes is disentangling different forms of recognition both at the conceptual and practical level. At the conceptual level, it is important to unpack further irritations of state recognition as acceptance of difference and equal status as stipulated in the work of Honneth (1995) and Taylor (1994). It is also important to account for more pessimistic and critical views of state recognition in line with the view of Sartre and Fanon (see Coulthard, 2014). At the practical level, it requires exploring plural modes of recognition, diplomatic agency and interaction between different subjects in international affairs. It is important to recognize that there are variations of recognition ranging from formal recognition to de facto and implicit recognition to various forms of pragmatic, situational and temporal acceptance and engagement, suggesting there are no simple binary practices and dualisms when it comes to state recognition (see Ker-Lindsay, 2015). It is also important to examine the pivotal role of regional organizations, national and supranational parliaments, and transnational movements in decentring and pluralizing the meaning and agency of state recognition (see Visoka et al., 2020). Moreover, alternative forms of recognition and deisolation beyond the central state could open up the possibility to end prevailing abuse of discretionary right by states. Supranational and sub-state forms of recognition need to be taken into account as well. Bottom-up forms of moral and political recognition of societies deprived of freedom can also be an effective way of decentring state-centric forms of recognition.

Seeking state recognition as diplomatic performance challenges the solid and reified accounts of recognition as an intentional act and opens up the possibility for exploring different agencies, stages and tactics involved in the practice of state recognition. As Alex Jeffrey (2013: 2) argues, ‘performances of the state are often more explicit where changes are desired in the existing inter-state system, where a particular political authority is seeking to assert or solidify a specific claim to the state’. When tracing practices of state recognition we are able to identify and overcome blind spots imposed by narrow analytical categories and existing ways of knowing recognition in theory and practice. Unlearning existing ways of studying state recognition might open up the space for generating and learning afresh a new knowledge that corresponds better with the real world. It is worth noting that existing debates on state recognition have to a large extent ignored the everyday dimension of sovereignty, especially how local subjects experience it, and how political elites have constructed it through various forms of local agency (see Björkdahl et al., 2019). They have failed to point out how micro-history of state
recognition contributes to the understanding of how particular examples and cases shed light on and trace their wider impact (Solomon and Steele, 2017). Diplomatic performances and entanglements in their everyday articulation provide insights on how norms, institutions and practices of sovereign statehood operate transversally at local, national and international levels (see McConnell, 2018). In particular, studying the everyday struggles for international legitimization is important as it confronts the existing sovereignty entrapments in world politics and opens up the space for new forms of political subjectivity materialized through alternative integration in the international society (see Bouris and Fernández-Molina, 2018). Such an approach could also reveal important insights on the everyday life of sovereignty in aspirant states and the desirability for liminal existence in world politics (see Bryant and Reeves, 2021). Thus, future research should cast greater attention to the variety of diplomatic performances as well as multiple forms of state recognition, including the role of domestic politics and personal and networked diplomacies in shaping the decisions of states for granting, withholding or withdrawing recognition of other states.

In particular, practices of diplomatic recognition by non-Western states remain overshadowed by extensive attention paid in scholarly debates to the legal and political practices of dominant powers, especially former colonial powers. Future research should explore non-Western rituals, practices, and cultures of state recognition to expand and differentiate knowledge on this evolving subject as well as to chart the road ahead for developing normative, legal and policy mechanisms that would regulate state recognition globally. Geographies of state recognition are widely spread within and beyond the frontiers of exiting diplomatic institutions. Work by political geographers, such as Fiona McConnell (2016), has shed light on some of the most ignored diplomatic practices of recognition-seeking states. However, it has not yet been considered by other traditional perspectives on state recognition. A scalar perspective on state recognition is particularly needed to map out places, sites and scales that affect and are affected by state recognition or non-recognition. In this regard, future research needs to pay closer attention to and capture diplomatic practices of recognition unnoticed to date, to account for liminal stages and temporal encounters that underline the situated agency and micro-politics of state recognition.

Another important feature of recognitionality practices is the interdependency between recognized and aspirant states. In other words, recognition is important not only for the aspirant state, but also for other recognized states as recognizing others is the very act that constitutes the international society; namely the collective features that unite and differentiate sovereign states. Erik Ringmar (2014: 447) argues ‘it was through practices of recognition, affirming sameness, and through practices of non-recognition, affirming difference, that international society came to constitute itself as such’. Without mutual and reciprocal recognition between states and societies there are no international relations (see Wolf, 2011). Power, status and state identity exist only in being acknowledged by others. Recognition is a segment of power and as such it is a deeply relational phenomenon. Those states that recognize newcomers essentially perform an act of self-recognition. States need recognition by other states in order to enact state subjectivity in international relations. Recognition underscores the intersubjective constitution of international norms, order and practices (see Lindemann and Ringmar, 2014). Therefore, it is
crucial to analyse how other states reinforce their own state sovereignty and self-recognition by the very act of recognizing new states. Existing sovereign states become self-determining states by the practice of granting, withholding or rescinding recognition of aspirant states. On the other hand, it is crucial to examine critically how recognition as a practice in itself creates states with different statuses. Demand for recognition creates the conditions for servitude. It establishes colonial-like relations between the master and the slave. For Jean-Paul Sartre, recognition constitutes a form of enslavement, of being ‘fixed’ by ‘the look’ of another (Coulthard, 2014: 134). Recognizing states stimulate their own sovereignty by intervening in the internal affairs of other states by bestowing or withholding the recognition of other states (Weber, 1995).

Seeking recognition from other states externalizes the freedom of states and undermines self-worth and self-affirmation. By default, in an environment that gives so much credit to diplomatic recognition, those entities that lack full recognition tend to suffer from ontological insecurity and decreased self-worth, which impacts the political and economic development of the country. In this regard, future research on state recognition needs to highlight how the very act of recognition, which is intended to enhance the claimant state’s sovereignty and self-rule, creates complex forms of dependency towards external states who often patronize and benefit from the contested statehood.

Last but not least, important, studying techniques of recognitionality requires criticizing and problematizing techniques and practices of state recognition in order to debunk the entangled politics and interests which enable the preservation of existing interventionary and exclusionary order. The political economy of state recognition needs proper examination. Power politics and systemic features underlying the existing recognitionality techniques are by-products of micro-politics and bottom-up processes. Global interconnectedness produces many effects which are indirect, mediated and delayed. The global arena is an open space where multiple actors, agencies, events, norms, entanglements and estrangements take place. In such an environment, prospects for diplomatic recognition and admission into international society are not entirely determined by discursive and performative efforts, but also by situational entanglements and the suitability of assemblages of transnational relations (see Fernández-Molina, 2019; Pacher, 2019). A number of aspirant states, mostly concentrated in the former Soviet space, that are solely dependent on Russia as a ‘patron state’ are not entirely committed to full and recognizable statehood as their purpose of existence is between reunification with another external state and retaining liminal status for geopolitical reasons (see Ó Beacháin, 2020). Therefore, making sense of how states secure recognition requires exploring both exogenous and remote and unrelated agencies, events, relations and dynamics that entangle to form temporary assemblages which simultaneously can facilitate or inhibit an emerging state’s recognition and access in the international system. Finally, future research needs to go beyond existing postcolonial approaches to international empire and decolonization. It needs to highlight the complicit role of postcolonial states in reproducing the existing Eurocentric international political and legal order by using or withholding recognition as a foreign policy instrument for self-interest rather than for liberation and emancipation of recognition-seeking societies (Visoka, forthcoming). Economic interests are a major influencing factor behind state recognition, non-recognition and derecognition. Seeing recognition as a material interest casts light on the limits of norms, rules and global institutions in shaping who gets diplomatic acceptance and who remains excluded. The state
capture and authoritarian character of many postcolonial states has impacted the promotion of predatory foreign policy contrary to the normative justification of their foundation (see Englebert, 2009).

**Conclusion**

This article highlighted some of the key anomalies in existing state recognition literature and proposed two future directions for research. In the first part, it pointed out that state recognition studies are dominated by particular and narrow epistemological frameworks for thinking and acting on world politics that directly impact on how the recognition of states is (re)produced both in theory and practice. The mainstream knowledge on state recognition seeks to preserve the interests of existing powers at the expense of the rights and freedoms of subjugated peoples who see creation of a new state as a sanctuary for collective emancipation and escape from human rights abuses by the base state. By seeking to reproduce the existing state system and international order, present knowledge on state recognition is predominantly unable to question the ontology and epistemology of state recognition and the political, economic, social and normative multiplicities surrounding it. In the second part, the article proposed that future research needs to produce emancipatory knowledge which shifts attention from Western-centric frameworks of thinking towards more epistemic justice and decolonized knowledge. The article also proposed to move from monolithic, legalistic and narrow understandings of recognition in theory and practice towards exploring the recognitionality techniques and the multiplicity of discourses, performances, and entanglements of state recognition.

Understandably, existing theories and approaches are deeply committed to preserving existing international order and are sceptical to change the existing recognitionality practices. This makes it difficult perhaps to even take into account or debate, let alone implement, many of the proposed ideas in this article. Such scepticism should, if anything, motivate critical scholars to uncover the structures and actors as well as types of knowledge which prevent changes to the existing recognition regime and direct future research towards producing more emancipatory knowledge that contributes to global justice and better representation of subjugated states, peoples and communities in world politics. Despite being critical of existing practice and hegemonic hierarchies of states, norms and institutions, however, future research should neither promote violent politics as a means or end for achieving independent statehood nor promote questionable methods for securing recognition. It should show empathy to cases of remedial self-determination and uncover the structures of injustice, but not encourage manufacturing remedial conditions with detrimental human and material consequences for the subjugated people in the first instance and also for the neighbouring regions and beyond (see Cassese, 2005). Most importantly, future research should rethink the foundational knowledge on state recognition and include other alternative ways of knowing, acting and seeing state recognition in world politics. Such a change requires expanding the analytical tools as well as engaging in interdisciplinary and grounded research which rescales whose voices, interests, needs and rights matter the most. It also requires taking a bottom-up approach to understanding state recognition that is not captured by existing legal, doctrinal and normative knowledge on the subject. This is a huge task, but not impossible and very much worth pursuing.
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