

The reactionary internationale: the rise of the new right and the reconstruction of international society

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Abstract

New Right actors are vocally seeking to change key international relations practices and institutions. We enquire how their philosophy of the international, which we call Reactionary Internationalism, is being socialised by a diverse group of international actors. Engaging with English School conceptualisations of international society and deploying discursive analysis of diplomatic positions, we examine the diplomacy of New Right actors and sympathisers on issues of rights and the limits of sovereign power. Through this empirical analysis it is demonstrated that opportunistic alliances between New Right politicians in democratic states, and authoritarian states such as China, are solidifying into an international compact that advocates radical normative change in international relations. This programme is centred on a new constitutive principle (birth-cultural sovereignty) and two new institutions (exclusive spheres of competence and transactionalism), that establish the terms of reference for a reactionary international society.

Keywords

English School, global politics, international society, New Right, Reactionary Internationalism

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Introduction

What do the new nationalists want from international relations? The political assemblage self-styled as the New Right has ambitions to rebuild the world on ‘new foundations’. Not unlike communists in the late 1870s, the contemporary New Right, exemplified in politicians like Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini in Italy, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Donald Trump in the US, Narendra Modi in India, Xi Jinping in China, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Vladimir Putin in Russia and Marine Le Pen in France, seeks ‘a radical renewal of modes of thought, decision and action’ through revolutionary changes to the rules of international relations.¹ Today, a mismatched grouping of populist politicians and authoritarian governments are singing in harmony about the need to end the Globalist world order and restructure international society. As Trump argued, ‘the future belongs to patriots, and not to globalists’.²

A reactionary international compact is emerging between New Right populists in democracies like the USA, UK, France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Italy, Holland, India, Brazil and Hungary, and authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia, Russia and China. These actors share a commonly-articulated desire to dismantle Liberal international norms, particularly rights and rules-based multilateralism, and replace them with a distinct vision of sovereignty, prioritisation of transactional deal-making and spheres of exclusive competence. ‘In what seems to be a truly transnational philosophy’ ‘a disdain for democratic pluralism, equality of people, immigration, participatory politics, and women’s rights are openly hailed as the right path forward’.³ Links between these actors centre on the need to correct the impacts of the ‘Globalist’ institutions that arose following of the end of the Cold War, a discourse clearly articulated in Xi and Putin’s public diplomacy concerning the war in Ukraine, but which long predates these events.

The actors involved are far from a coherent ‘club’ of non-liberal states. Instead, the New Right should be understood as a body of ideas, centred on ‘birth-culture’, that justifies a set of norms and practices that a diverse set of global actors can subscribe to, thus forming a loosely bounded global assemblage.⁴ In this regard, the New Right articulates the philosophical basis for a diffuse project of global reaction we term reactionary internationalism, which ties together conservative populist governments in otherwise putatively Liberal states, with explicit anti-Liberals, religious populists, monarchies, and autocrats.

Recent scholarship maintains that populism is leading to ‘a fluid and less intelligible international order, not a radical reconfiguration of world politics driven by populists’ “anti-globalism”.⁵ However, we find that a shared understanding of how ‘the international’ should be organised is developing between New Right actors and sympathisers. Their articulations of nationalism build upon the 19th-Century concept of national birth-culture pioneered by Maurice Barrès, which predicates sovereignty on an identity conditioned by birth.⁶ Strikingly, this formulation of nationalism can cohabit within diverse cultural, historical and societal conditions.⁷ This allows New Right ideas to provide a common ontological frame reflected in a shared discourse about international issues expressed by actors as diverse as Trump, Putin, Orbán, Xi, Modi, Johnson, Le Pen, Bolsonaro and Meloni. This discourse is matched by the emergence of converging international practices and advocacy for international institutional change.

This article draws on English School theory to explore the reconstruction of international society by the New Right's assemblage of sympathetic actors today. Current reactionary trends are only understandable if 'the international' is conceived as a social realm constituted around norms, standards of conduct and legitimacy, that can be changed. By engaging with this change we also contribute to existing English School debates, which typically frame change within international society as either progressive (solidarist) or conservative (pluralist).⁸ In treating international order as an international society, we take Buzan's 'basket' of institutions as our point of conceptual departure, as it incorporates the more limited list developed by other scholars working within the English School tradition.⁹ This Buzanian take on international society is supplemented by two additional moves. First, we adopt Kal Holsti's account of 'change' in international society, particularly the insight that primary institutions are the main markers of change in international politics.¹⁰ Second, we follow Tonny Knudsen in not including sovereignty as an institution among others; treating it, rather, as a constitutive principle that can incorporate different meanings that, in turn, shape institutional norms, practices and even 'the evolution of new fundamental or primary institutions'.¹¹

To empirically analyse the normative evolution of contemporary sovereignty, we deploy a poststructuralist genealogical approach that treats sovereignty as contestable, contested, and with capacity for deviation and aberration.¹² This divergence is important because we deploy two key methodological principles from poststructuralist IR: the analysis of discourse and practice, and the genealogy of ideas. These, we argue, can supplement the English School framework and help it more effectively analyse the empirical evidence of change in International Society.

In analytical practice, we treat *international normative consolidation* as a process through which alternative practices and normative principles assume legitimacy and validation through consistent promotion, adoption, endorsement and absence of sanctions. Our analysis locates and explores a consistent attempt to reconstruct international society around a reactionary vision of its constitutive principles. Though the normative consolidation we observe in this paper, an assemblage of New Right actors and sympathisers seeks to fold existing institutions into a structure based around a vision of sovereignty predicated on birth-cultural nationalism. This version of the sovereign constitutive principle of international society leads to two fundamental reconfigurations. Firstly, the acknowledgement of exclusive spheres of competence, wherein economic and military regional primacy is accepted as based on birth-culture and enabled by the power available to it. Secondly, transactional bilateralism, as opposed to diplomacy between equals, is promoted as the standard of interaction, again predicated on the primacy of birth-culture and the power available to it. The vision of international order that emerges is one in which contentious deal-making among unequal actors is viewed as the natural international political ontology. Despite striking regime differences, stabilised by the drive to destroy liberal norms, particularly universal rights, and replace them with sovereignty based on birth-culture, the New Right and its allies are united in eschewing multilateralism, equality among states, and rules-based commitments.

The first section of this paper discusses the possibility of normative change in core institutions from an English School perspective, providing an analytical frame to determine what the New Right revolution in international normativity means for international

institutions and their norms. The second section explores the history and architecture of reactionary internationalist ideas, identifying core concepts, approaches and assumptions. Thirdly, using discourse analytical methods we analyse whether Reactionary Internationalist actors practice diplomacy with similar approaches, norms, and goals, determining that they are socialising a distinctive set of reactionary norms into international society. In conclusion, we discuss the conceptual and international implications of the rise of a reactionary international society predicated on birth-culture, exclusive competence spheres, and transactionalism as the only legitimate tool of international interaction. Further, returning to the methodological discussion, we affirm the central claim of the English School that practices and norms are constituted by historical interaction.

Birth-culture is, ultimately, the core ontology underpinning the New Right vision for a robustly pluralist international society. We refer to this vision as reactionary because the New Right's attitude to international modernity is captured both technically and normatively by the term. In naming the kind of international order we see rising today as reactionary, we acknowledge the substantive nature of its answers to our times, its radical conservative intellectual roots, and that its global reach among diverse actors derives from their common concern with defending birth-cultural tradition in world politics. As Trump proclaimed at the UN:

each of us here today is the emissary of a distinct culture, a rich history, and a people bound together by ties of memory, tradition, and the values that make our homelands like nowhere else on Earth. That is why America will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control, and domination. I honor the right of every nation in this room to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions. The United States will not tell you how to live or work or worship. We only ask that you honor our sovereignty in return.¹³

What does this mean in practice?

The evolution of international societies and the rise of a reactionary alternative

Liberal International Relations theory provides no means to conceptualise the contingency of its own ordering rules. It assumes that the extension of rights to humanity, the globalisation of democracy, free-trade and multilateral international institutions, reflect a trend towards progress, rather than historical events. The fragility of these normative principles, including their subjection to criticism in the domestic politics of states previously at the forefront of promoting the 'Liberal International Order', can be parsed only as a potential breakdown.¹⁴ Because Liberalism often assumes that internationalisms are necessarily Liberal rather than contingently so, it provides few analytical or conceptual insights into the potential for alternative ways of ordering the international.¹⁵

A vision in which the nation-state might be transcended has long been the object of Realist critique. The philosophy of the New Right, Reactionary Internationalism, sits within a shared communitarian tradition in international studies. As Williams and Drolet point out, Realist émigrés like Hans Morgenthau drew on conservative traditions that emphasised the preservation of 'eternal' national cultures.¹⁶ However, while Classical

Realists drew on that conservative tradition to develop rationalist approaches which assumed natural laws governing international relations, these were explicitly counterposed to the early 20th Century ethno-nationalisms today being re-developed by the New Right.¹⁷ Classical Realists considered the role of international institutions like diplomacy in facilitating regularity in the conduct of international politics,¹⁸ whereas for latter-day Realists, socially-constructed institutions have limited significance in determining the conduct and evolution of international relations, which they see as a function of pre-existing and exogenous power relations.¹⁹

The English School has long argued, by contrast, that international norms are contingent and emerge from historical interactions among states, leading to the formation of relatively institutionalised, but historically contingent, international social practices. A turn to practices has characterised more sociologically-informed approaches to international politics propelled need to interrogate how agents put norms into effect within social institutions.²⁰ This returns to the signature English School claim that the rules of international society are constructed through interaction, taking shape in the form of institutions structured by and constitutive of the meaning of deep-seated international practices like war, diplomacy, the balance of power or international law.²¹ This allowed for debates about the singularity or diversity of international societies,²² whether there are progressive or reactionary historical trajectories,²³ and how international norms might shift.²⁴ Returning to these debates in the context of the New Right reopens the question of the English School's 'failure to account for practice' in international relations,²⁵ as it raises the need to identify whether 'reactionary international actors' may be not just 'order-breakers' and 'antipreneurs' as some Constructivist literatures have suggested,²⁶ but rather norm entrepreneurs with a distinct worldview and socialising a distinct set of international rules.

Authoritarian states like Russia and China are well known for their proclamations against key institutions of international society, which they view as manifestations of 'Globalism', and their claim that these are anti-pluralist institutionalisations of Liberal ideology. Across the democratic states of the West, Liberal assumptions about international order are similarly questioned by New Right movements and politicians, and there appear to be significant areas of agreement among these actors. Recent English School scholarship has made the case for considering authoritarianism as a new, emerging institution of international society although for now this remains at the sub-systemic level.²⁷

Seeing how New Right leaders such as Trump, Salvini, Bolsonaro, Orbán and hard Brexiters actively seek to construct or deepen alliances with explicitly non-liberal actors like Russia and Saudi Arabia suggests something more fundamental than illiberal connivance: a move towards pluralism that allows for partitioning and simplifying international norms and institutions. As Trump proclaimed at the UN, a move towards 'the right of every nation to pursue its own beliefs', rather than 'domination' by existing norms.²⁸ While it has been argued that the density of norms operating across international society renders it resilient to change or collapse,²⁹ an alternative thesis is that pluralist international societies become more fragile with intrusive, if not coercive, normative proliferation. The emergence of a reactionary solidarist discourse centred on reaffirming pluralist values,³⁰ as distinct from historical Fascist solidarism,³¹ makes sense as the first step in

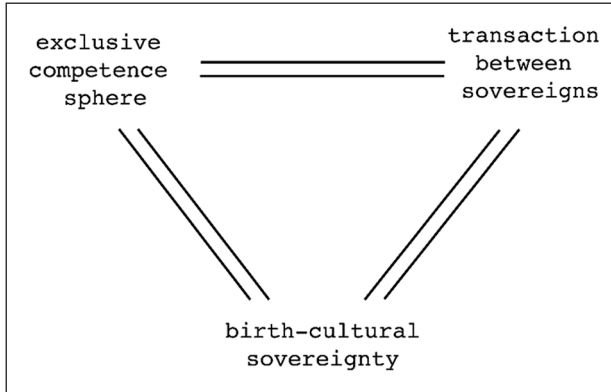


Figure 1. Institutions of Reactionary International Society.

the convergence around Reactionary Internationalist norms to reconstruct international society.

A triangular normative frame characterises this emerging Reactionary International Society (Figure 1, below). New Right actors and sympathisers share a commitment to understanding sovereignty as birth-culture, which acts as the constitutive principle of this specific international society. In birth-culture, sovereignty is conferred by reference to the cultural memories, traditions and values to which birth gives privileged access, its normative imperative to assure the continuity of the birth-culture in contestation with other national birth-cultures. International power should only be limited by the competence of a birth-culture (spheres of competence), and not be moderated by anything other than transactions with other birth-cultural sovereigns (transactionalism). The new constitutive principle and the two new institutions deriving from it are related to and draw on each other. Their interactions inform and condition the forms of engagement and behaviour of this type of society, informing what may be described as the moral purpose of a reactionary international society.

This is the core institutional architecture of Reactionary International Society we see emerging today. Even though birth-culture is analytically conceptualised as a constitutive principle of this would-be international, the double lines in the diagram indicate that these relations are mutually productive. Desired outcomes are functions of the balance between the three in any given context. That is: the establishment of an exclusive competence sphere is a function of the relationship between birth-culture and its transactions, just as transactionalism is a determined by how a birth culture might wish to establish an exclusive sphere and, finally, the power of a birth culture is defined by the extent it was able to transactionally achieve such an exclusive sphere. This explains why no transaction is binding, as its need is defined not by presumptive multilateralist norms, but by the birth-cultures that transacted it. The change of sovereignty into 'birth culture' and the two institutions that this produces represent a drastic simplification of the wider 'basket' of institutions of international society. In particular: birth-culture now subsumes human rights, nationalism, and equality of people; transactionalism now subsumes international

law; diplomacy; multilateralism; the market and environmentalism. Spheres of exclusive competence now subsume great power management, balance of power and war.

In this new international society, birth-culture becomes the core subject of politics. It replaces the human as a legal and political category, and with it assumptions of a shared nature, rights and equal treatment, which are reframed as a betrayal of one's birth-culture. To accept equality is to harm one's own. Transactionalism substitutes international law and rights, replaced by the needs of the negotiating birth-cultures, making *pacta sunt servanda* lose its normative content because what matters is the need and advancement of the birth culture. This translates into a preference for bilateral negotiations because they reward greater power, and a rejection of multilateralism because the latter assumes equality among states and is pursued only when necessary. Transactionalism also overtakes diplomatic protocol as leaders can negotiate freely on a personal level, as well as multilateralism, which is pursued only when necessary.

From an economic perspective, transactionalism also aligns the normative compact of the New Right with developmentalism and state-centric capitalism,³² thus reaffirming the importance of the primacy of birth-culture in the sphere of economic activities, too, with the state assuming increasingly managerial, technocratic and paternalistic roles in providing the birth-culture with the resources necessary to prosper under its supervision, when not surveillance.³³ In the broader economic sphere, the principle is that of the 'visible hand' in the market, and that any political conditionality (such as money in exchange for democratic domestic reforms) should be written off apart from mutual support in international forums. Linked to this, environmentalism changes from a multilateral global concern to being subsumed into transactions where the principle concern is to save one's own birth-culture from the damage, particularly mass migration. It is not by chance that, following Polanyi, 'savage', or 'hyper' developmentalism has been described in recent research as centred on 'expansionism, order, and anti-democracy'.³⁴ Transactionalism is the operational tool in a normative compact that embraces hierarchy and inequality as constitutive principles.

Finally, spheres of exclusive competence legitimise localised hegemonies on the grounds of cultural autochthony, and partition areas of responsibility, thus supplanting the idea of great power management, unless great power management is seen as the array practices of a single great power in a specific, hierarchical regional international society. In addition, they restructure the logic of balance of power in the sense that 'exclusivity' does not allow unwelcome encroachment and, when this happens, it legitimises war. Spheres of competence need not necessitate forms of neo-imperial expansionism, as identified with Russia's invasion of Ukraine or China's threat to invade Taiwan. They do establish, however, a principle for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate international interests as conditioned by birth-cultural affinity.³⁵

The norms and institutions are summarised in Table 1. The reader, however, must be careful to take into account that the three new institutions depend on one another, shape one another, and are mutually reinforcing and constitutive. Crucially, all of them come together to reconstitute what the New Right means by sovereignty.

What we are theorising here is an attempt to simplify, or 'minimise',³⁶ the normative skeleton of international society through a fundamental reinterpretation of its constitutive principle – sovereignty.³⁷ But how to trace this change?

Table 1. Summary of reactionary institutions.

New institutions	Definition	Institutions subsumed	Examples
Birth-culture	The link between state and people is defined on the basis that identity is cultural, and determined by birth	Human rights, nationalism and equality of people, legitimate territoriality	Opposition to migration, denial of Human Rights guarantees, negation of gender equality
Exclusive spheres of competence	States have the right to exert power in the space delimited by their birth-culture.	Great power management; balance of power, and war	Russia's claim to Ukraine; China's nine-dash line; India's claim to Hindus.
Transactionalism	Unconstrained opportunistic deal-making with other birth-cultures	Diplomacy; international law; developmentalism; markets; environmentalism; multilateralism	Brexit, NAFTA renegotiation, rejection of binding multilateral agreements

Accounting for the role of practices in driving normative change has been an abiding problem for the English School, which has classically deployed a speculative historical approach to theorisation. This paper resolves this by deploying a poststructuralist framework for empirical analysis that retrieves from diplomatic discourse, be it discourse about diplomacy or actual diplomatic knowledge production, the exact representations, norms, subjects and their normative contexts.³⁸ Firstly, its data selection rationale selects official-level enunciations inductively limited by New Right actors' time in office and thematically circumscribed by actors' own claims, which for this research gathered over 280 statements. Secondly, the method establishes the subjectivity, normative assumptions, and structure of enunciations, by retrieving how they constitute subjects and their contexts in spatial, temporal and normative frames of inscription. This method inductively identifies the normative architecture at work and determines how subjects are located within it. Analysis focuses on three issues central to New Right claims: the rights afforded to foreigners, obligations to international institutions and obligations to other states, as well as mutual legitimisation events that give an idea of the 'socialisation' of this new internationalism.

To determine if the acts and policies in question reflect and contribute to the enactment and consolidation of Reactionary International norms, the following section clarifies what we mean by the New Right, expounding its core ideas and their role in this global project of reaction. The subsequent, third section of this paper deploys the above-described analytical approach to analyse the discourses and, where enacted, the policies of these actors, their correlations, international agreements and alignments.

Reactionary Internationalism as a global programme of ideas

Political movements in the global north and south represent a tradition of ideas within international thought which is best described as 'reactionary' because it sits within the

quarrelsome body of conservative thought emerging out of responses to the French Revolution, predicated upon taking a critical attitude to historical change as such.³⁹ Reactionaries identify a ‘lost prior order that is constitutive of the good life or conditions for human flourishing’, and posit the need to restore the past, or at least the conditions of possibility for that order.⁴⁰ Today a complex assemblage of nationalists, autocrats, theocrats and populists across the world oppose Liberal Internationalism, or ‘Globalism’ as they name it, but they do not seek to destroy internationalism. Rather, they seek to create a new reactionary international society in their own image, orientated by suspicion of universalist and progressive philosophies that sought to jettison birth-cultural tradition via the discourse of modernisation.

The French Nouvelle Droite, the Alt-Right and Paleo-Conservatism in the US, or the ‘conservative revolution’ of postwar Germany, share a relatively coherent intellectual agenda centred on critiques of liberal internationalism. A growing body of literature explores these ideas and identifies them using the term New Right.⁴¹ New Right groups communicate with and reference one another, and have a constructive project ‘to take control of globalisation to build an alternative order’ organised around ‘natural’ national birth-cultures engaged in competition.⁴² The New Right includes nationalists in the United States attached to Trump’s Republican party, Le Pen’s Rally (formerly Front) National in France, Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary, Salvini’s Lega and Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia in Italy, Bolsonaro’s movement in Brazil, as well as violent extremist and more mainstream movements in Germany, Spain, Poland, Finland, Sweden, Russia and Britain.

At the heart of these mostly European and American New Right movements lies an understanding of identity rooted in the late 19th-Century idea, originating in the work of Barrès (who popularised the term ‘nationalism’), of an immutable ‘birth-culture’.⁴³ Not all nationalists have been advocates of birth-cultural identity. Some nationalists construct identity as a choice of belonging, like Mazzini, who emphasised the affirmation of identity through patriotism as far more important. Others, like German National Socialists, emphasised fixed racial criteria for belonging to a community over any pathway for affirmative membership. The New Right largely avoids overt racial discourse. Their claim about identity is that one’s biological birth acts as a *condition for* and *constraint on* belonging: being born of members of a culture gives individuals access to that specific culture and acts as a core condition for cultural belonging. This allows this strand of ethno-nationalism to avoid overt mention of race, colour or other phenotypes, while retaining the assumption that individuals behave as defined by their identity and that identities struggle among one another for survival.

New Right thought preserves the immutable functions of nations whilst, conveniently for 21st Century politics, referring to them as ‘culture’. An individual can be born in a geographical location but still not ‘belong’ to its culture because birth is the key condition underwriting access. A host of normative consequences cascade from birth-culture for the New Right, impacting issues such as social, gender and cultural norms and historical interpretation. Where accepted, loyalty to a birth-culture, its history and immutable values, is a particularly important condition for successful migrant integration.⁴⁴ A striking feature is the ambivalent position between nativism and national constructivism, which does not fully resolve the tension on one side or the other, leaving space for both. As a core operative concept birth-culture allows the New Right to retain a certain

strategic flexibility, which assists in mainstreaming their discourse and explains why common attempts to reduce them to their White Nationalist elements often fall flat.

Culture, conditioned by birth, cannot be open to everyone equally. To the New Right human rights involve ideological overreach and imposition. This philosophical position implies the rejection of a universal political subject assigned unconditional rights. Multilateralist institutions are viewed as forums for the promotion of Liberal ideology that degrades national-cultural autonomy to distribute rights. New Right ideas concerning the role of women are also the result of the same mechanism, whereby birth conditions one's place within a culture. International and UN 'gender mainstreaming' ('gender ideology', as they view it) is seen as uniquely imperialist, as an attack on the autonomy of birth-cultures to define gender roles and guarantee their survival.

The New Right's understanding of the state as the political instantiation of a birth-culture allows for an inclusive conception of potential global allies. Given there have been various formal or overt associations between these groups, this potential is clearly worth recognising and investigating. The evidence of such collaboration, analysed in the following section, reveals an advancing movement that signifies more than the erosion of international society as the literature on norm entrepreneurship would suggest. The 2016 Brexit referendum attracted international collaborators, including financial actors like the Mercer family, who underwrote the data analytic firm Cambridge Analytica, as well as media actors like Breitbart, a key player in the 2016 US Presidential election. Steve Bannon promoted a European league of such movements, Putin's United Russia Party financially supported the Austrian, Italian and French New right parties of Strache, Salvini and Le Pen,⁴⁵ while New Right actors in the European Parliament collaborate through the anti-migrant Identity and Democracy group of MEPs. In July 2021, far-right parties from 16 EU countries united to argue that 'the EU is increasingly becoming a tool of radical forces that want to effect a civilisational transformation and build a Europe without nations'.⁴⁶

This emerging alternative to 'Liberal' internationalism is far from uniform. Diversity has been a notable strength, allowing the New Right to maintain alliances across ideological and national divides, and facilitating openness to sympathetic movements and regimes across the Global South, including monarchies and autocracies. It is this openness that justifies widening the scope of the term New Right to acknowledge an assemblage of global reaction that shares key elements of its vision and international ambitions, alongside maintaining striking differences in ideology and regime type.

There are notable areas of disagreement within the New Right, particularly regarding the state's role in economic life and the relationship between religion and culture. The 'libertarian' wing advocates for tariff-free trade and the withering away of the state, in tension with a significant 'protectionist' wing, and a smaller strand animated by environmental anxiety and local self-government. A large New Right contingent conceptualises the West as a civilisational unit defined by Christian heritage and is anxious about a 'cultural replacement' associated with Islamic migration.⁴⁷ This body of paleo-conservative-influenced thought sits alongside a modernist technophile wing that views Christianity as past, but which can also view lay Christianity as an essential component of European birth-cultural identity, meaning that an influx of non-native religious culture is viewed as hindering the birth-culture's survival.

These divisions expose conditions for international assemblage and alliance with otherwise distinct actors. For example, New Right divisions on state-led economic management means some New Right actors are enthusiastic about authoritarian state-led economic strategies like China or Singapore's, while others advocate for deregulation into privatised corporatist governance. Similarly, New Right actors in the global north have developed warm relations with religious governments in the global south, including democratic India and autocratic Saudi Arabia, on the grounds of respectful birth-cultural difference, and acknowledging respective spheres of competence. While the European and American New Right contains apologists for empire, an anti-colonial discourse also runs through core New Right theories, centred on a rejection of Western imperial universalism and modernisation.⁴⁸ This provides a key point of contact with anti-Liberal traditionalists and theocrats in the Global South, for whom the international ordering process of decolonisation is foundational to national birth-cultural identities. Alliances between New Right groups in the West and non-Western parochialist actors like Modi, Putin, Erdogan, Bolsonaro and Xi are facilitated by existing intra-New Right disagreements, but clearly rely on a common concern for defining *sovereignty by reference to birth-culture*.^{49,50}

The New Right coalesces in a reactionary global assemblage, despite many significant internal differences, around viewing birth-culture as the basis of national identity, and the resulting need for national independence from international institutions, oversight, norms and constraints. This is not to suggest that all actors within this assemblage are products of one lineage of nationalist thought: a complex family tree underwrites the global presence of birth-cultural nationalisms, running through decolonisation as a historical process that was not unilinear.⁵¹ This tangled genealogy lies behind the strikingly similar accounts of sovereignty articulated by illiberal democratic Fidesz in Hungary, authoritarian-Communist China and theocratic-populist India, and underwrites common international practices to constitute a new international normative ecosystem.

In sum, the New Right is not a coherent club of non-liberal states. Rather, New Right ideas provide a legitimating framework for comprehending the norms and practices that diverse global actors increasingly subscribe to, bridging nationalisms from the global north and south, linking Orban and Putin to Xi and Modi in pursuit of an international order consolidated around birth-cultural sovereignty. The next section now traces this project of global reaction in diplomatic practice.

The Reactionary International assemblage in action

Anti-Globalism is not the same as seeking an end to international order. This section examines how New Right ideas observed above are being put into practice internationally, and how they relate to core international institutions outlined by the English School. We demonstrate that the diplomatic practices of the New Right and its allies constitutes a pattern of rejection of international norms predicated on human rights and multilateralism which logically reflects the normative implications of centring international order on birth-culture. This section examines how New Right actors have since 2016 implemented claims in diplomatic practice that institutionalise transactionalism and exclusive spheres of competence. Our objective here is to show that the socialisation we hypothesised above is observable and taking place in the open today.

Birth-culture

The most visible New Right policy concerns the right to movement of foreigners. In 2019 Italian deputy Prime Minister Salvini ordered the Italian navy to break the oldest international law, the Law of the Sea, which mandates vessels rescue persons in danger. Salvini was clear as to why: migrants at sea had no rights, the Italian state owed its duty to 'Italians first'.⁵² This event exemplifies the freedom claimed by reactionary internationalist actors: limiting states' obligations to their birth-culture, and seeking freedom from multilateralist restrictions on sovereign power within its area of exclusive competence. More revealing of the concepts underwriting these policies, 2021 British legislation makes it a 'criminal offence to knowingly arrive in the UK without permission', removing any right to migration or asylum, making it instead a discretionary gift of the Home Secretary.⁵³ The Bill criminalises onshore asylum seeking, mandating immediate deportation on the assumption that migrants pose immediate danger.⁵⁴ Further, it 'streamlines' legal pathways to appeal considered 'betrayals' of 'Family. Community. Country' by 'traffickers, the do gooders, the leftie lawyers'.⁵⁵ The bill put into legal practice the New Right idea that the core obligation of the state is the defence of birth-culture from those of different birth-cultures.

Similarly, as interior minister 2018–2019, Salvini, unsuccessful in attempts to 'deport the majority of migrants',⁵⁶ ordered Italy's navy to prevent rescue operations.⁵⁷ His October 2018 security decree removed 'humanitarian reasons' – and thus the 'human' category – from Italy's 1998 Human Rights law.⁵⁸ Linking 'sovereignty' to 'migration', he joined the Visegrad Group and Trump's US in rejecting the 2016 UN Global Compact for Migration,⁵⁹ claiming that lawyers and organisations assisting refugees and migrants were traitors.⁶⁰ Likewise, Trump's first migration decree, establishing that refugees, migrants and illegals 'harm Americans', limited asylum, expanded detention and enhanced defensive measures;⁶¹ the second defunded institutions that did not deport illegals,⁶² while the third banned people from some Muslim countries.⁶³

In a correlate version, the Indian 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act links citizenship to the identity of the subject and their ancestry – legalising illegal entrants and their progeny if Hindu-born, making faith by birth into a condition for citizenship.⁶⁴ The law assumes that Hindus would be killed in Muslim-majority countries and that India's sovereignty extends to them, demonstrating the reframing of Indian sovereignty around confessionally-labelled birth-culture. The retroactively applies to all subjects of the 'Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920', making all Hindus in the former British Indian empire Indians.⁶⁵ This works on the same basis as Putin's claims about Russian speakers in Ukraine, Transnistria and elsewhere.⁶⁶

China likewise considers claims to Hongkonger or Uyghur distinctiveness unacceptable because they are linked to disloyalty to China and thus the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and hindering 'harmony'. Dangers to harmony are subject to 're-education', rebranded 'vocational training', designed to make them 'helpful' subjects that will respect CCP's 'harmony'.⁶⁷ Besides dismissing human rights violations as Western fabrications, the regime argues that China has the right to manage its peoples. A 2021 State Council policy paper on Human Rights establishes that China must 'diversify' the concept of human rights, its core tenet updated to 'upholding [CCP] leadership and the

socialist system' because 'the happiness of all the people' depends on the 'harmony' CCP provides.⁶⁸ Xi's concept of 'harmony', based on 1950s Neo-Confucian ideas of political culture,⁶⁹ conceptualises loyalty around collectivised interests.⁷⁰ This is combined with Xi's vision of China's 'time to rise', a version of ancient Wude Zhongshi Shuo cyclicity framed in Neo-Confucianism as vital political conditions for national power,⁷¹ of which 'harmony' is the most important.⁷² Harmony means, therefore, seeking 'long-term stable rule, which means ensuring the central role of the party',⁷³ deeming opposition as 'anti-Chinese'.⁷⁴ In this discourse, human rights too are determined by the diversity of birth-culture and not humanity.

This is the global policy expression of the core New Right norm to freely govern within the sphere of one's own birth-culture. It connects diverse regime types, enacting an effective variety of international pluralism. As analysed, birth-culture acts as the subject and object of national sovereignty, determining both the means and purpose of legitimate national state policy as the promotion and persistence of a culture and those born into it.⁷⁵ The principle of birth-cultural sovereignty logically results in a presupposition that multilateral rules lack competency and legitimacy.

Transactionalism

The New Right commonly proposes abandoning established rules to 'rebalance trade' to national advantage,⁷⁶ as with Brexiter claims of post-Brexit trading bonanzas that can leverage 'British strengths' to strike more advantageous bilateral deals,⁷⁷ or Trump's NAFTA renegotiation, negotiated separately with Mexico, then Canada.⁷⁸ Trump explicitly denounced multilateral rules and organisations that 'give up all of our economic leverage', consistently arguing for bilateral deals where, 'if they don't agree to a renegotiation', they could leverage withdrawal.⁷⁹ Trump's trade war with Europe's Airbus similarly articulated the view that a state should, if able, create exclusive spheres of competence, in this case commercial aircraft.⁸⁰ These practices enact the demand to gain unrestricted expansion in any area possible by rejecting common rules and commitments.⁸¹

This desire to renegotiate international rules on the grounds of national interest is based on the notion that birth-culture defines competence and thus legitimacy of action. It is in these terms that Putin's Russia claims control of its 'near abroad' as vital to its survival.⁸² This control consists of three overlapping spheres. Firstly, spatial control: as with classical ethno-geopolitics, controlling the 'near abroad' provides strategic advantages.⁸³ Secondly, claims to exclusive competence cite 'natural', 'centuries-long ties', which the West plots to sever.⁸⁴ 'Russia is the country on which the Russian world is based' and 'the main guarantor of the safety of the Russian world'. This covers areas of Czarist and Soviet-era colonisation such as the 18th Century settling of Eastern Moldova (Transnistria) and South-eastern Ukraine (Novorossiia),⁸⁵ as well as Central Asia.⁸⁶ This is why 'true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia'.⁸⁷ Exclusive control assures 'consolidation of society around moral values of Russia's peoples' and 'defense'.⁸⁸ The third overlapping sphere concerns achieving regime contiguity and 'integration' with examples cited being Kazakhstan,⁸⁹ or Belarus.⁹⁰ As Lavrov explained, relationships can be fruitful when transacting with respect for exclusive

spheres and sovereignty: 'our really strategic partners [. . .] actively and consistently strengthen their political, economic and technological sovereignty, their cultural and civilizational identity'.⁹¹

China has supported Russia's right to conduct itself free from constraint within its sphere and has criticised NATO for impinging upon that sphere and thereby causing the war in Ukraine.⁹² Xi has notably withheld criticism of the invasion of Ukraine to its economic consequences, and continued to maintain a public diplomatic narrative on an alliance 'without limits' with Russia. China has particularly vociferously condemned sanctions inflicted on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine as expressions of Western imperial lawlessness.⁹³ China claims three exclusive spheres of competence. The first includes Taiwan, Mongolia, Hong Kong and the South China Sea,⁹⁴ treating ethnic Chinese with foreign citizenship as subject to Chinese sovereignty.⁹⁵ Secondly, China claims exclusivity in Southeast and Central Asia, explicitly rejecting a 'rule-based international order',⁹⁶ because it 'worked hard to assume' this influence.⁹⁷ 'Cooperation' involves bilateral deals based on the ASEAN-China partnership, which promotes economic integration with China and rejection of 'China-bashing'.⁹⁸ Transactionally, 'China could provide its neighbours with rich experiences' if they join Belt and Road, 'overcome' the 'setback' of the 'Maritime dispute' (International Maritime Tribunal ruling denying China's claim on the Nine-Dash Line), and negotiate a 'South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC)' that forbids 'non-party' incursions (freedom of navigation operations).⁹⁹

Spheres of competence

Not limited to territory and extendable to any area, exclusive competence spheres are the reward of power but also the legitimate reach of sovereignty understood as derived from birth culture. This does not imply absence of conflict or competition, but neither does it necessitate imperial expansion. It does however, set birth-cultural conditions for legitimate international relations. Within European New Right discourse, the idea of a Europe of Nations characterised by a common European birth-culture has become a central part of the evolved strategic discourse of Le Pen and Meloni, both of whom previously held more overtly Eurosceptic positions. The idea of competent foreign policy as structured by recognition of spheres of exclusive cultural affinity is based on the acknowledgement of birth-culture as the ontological basis of politics.

The European New Right has evolved its strategic narrative, and in so doing made itself more electable and more closely aligned with international allies beyond the West.

Analysing how New Right actors reconcile differences reveals overarching common norms and practices. Though removing universal human rights and accepting the principle of exclusive competence spheres is a unifying policy across the New Right, this is not the case with gender. In Italy, India, Russia, Poland and Hungary, New Right discourses on gender see it as governed by biology and innate birth-religion. This, in practice, means requiring a traditional role for women, presuming the superseding right of the family, tied to nature and nation.¹⁰⁰ Russia, Poland, Hungary and others deploy the self-same discourse on sexual orientation, banning 'gay propaganda', denouncing homosexuality as an attack on national nature and religion,¹⁰¹ and decrying attempts to 'interfere' by international institutions such as the European Court of Human rights,¹⁰² the EU, and

even UEFA.¹⁰³ As explained by a Russian minister, accepting LGBT rights would allow a foreign import to sabotage Russia, its survival and its particularity.¹⁰⁴ The UK, conversely, criticises the Visegrad Group's homophobia,¹⁰⁵ but did not contest their right to take such action.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, the UK has not supported India's birth-cultural cleansing and Modi opposes the UK's anti-immigrant drive,¹⁰⁷ but have not condemned each other's entitlement to do so. Johnson, like Putin,¹⁰⁸ agreed that Kashmir is a bilateral, not multilateral or universal issue,¹⁰⁹ just as Modi acknowledged that India must pay if it wants Indians to migrate to Britain.¹¹⁰

Here we see how key differences are resolved by the New Right's commitment to sovereignty as the expression of birth-culture. As leading New Right politicians from the UK's Gove to Brazil's Araujo argue, 'without sovereign nations, there is no freedom', multilateralism is totalitarian,¹¹¹ accepting only 'nation states as vessels for our values',¹¹² a view also explicitly echoed by Brazil's Bolsonaro when meeting Modi,¹¹³ and even Trump and Xi.¹¹⁴

The reactionary assemblage

Birth-cultural sovereignty must only be tempered by transactionalism. In relations with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, China has conditioned economic and infrastructural investment on assurance that governments will not harbour Uyghur refugees.¹¹⁵ The practical consequence of conceptualising sovereignty as birth-culture is that any agreement is transactional, not normative, as Bolsonaro and Modi expressed in 2020.¹¹⁶ As with Poland and Hungary's rejection of EU commitments on judicial independence, or British refusals to treat post-Brexit agreements on Northern Ireland as binding, these actors are aligned in viewing diplomacy as a purely transactional process defined by birth-culture and the power available to it. This is a consolidation, simplifying diplomatic norms into a post-Liberal formulation institutionalised through practice, with transactionalism, as shown above, replacing rights with contingents agreements. The logical implication of a transactional approach to diplomacy and the establishment of exclusive competence spheres is the disestablishment of multilateral obligations on any issue.

Though Trump's climate change denialism might apparently make futile a study of New Right engagement with this supposedly multilateral issue, Republicans are outliers defending a discourse inherited from the party the American New Right took over. Even in denial, transactionalism provides the dominant diplomatic frame, whence Trump's claims that it is a scheme to impoverish America. When accepted, the issue must be dealt with transactionally.¹¹⁷ Leading theorists of the New Right agree that climate change must be dealt with defensively with national environmental protection and refusal to assist others.¹¹⁸ Global disaster can even become an opportunity to increase power through greater adaptability, or, for the accelerationist New Right, by returning to first principles after catastrophe.¹¹⁹

Internationally, New Right actors present a remarkably united front in rejecting any binding climate commitments. Recently, the UK announced the 'world's most ambitious climate change target', which notably excludes any binding international commitments and mechanisms.¹²⁰ The National Rally in France proposes to protect the French environment while breaking international climate commitments, to promote 'economic

patriotism', localising trade, closing free-trade deals, and ending migration.¹²¹ China too rejects multilateral commitments other than as a function of bilateral China-US deals.¹²²

Explicitly relying on birth-culture, Modi claimed that 'India's civilizational values teach us that' '[t]o adapt to climate change, our lifestyles must also adapt to this ideal'.¹²³ The Paris accord, based on 1990 figures, means that Russia's 1990s economic collapse already 'lowered' its emissions by 25%, requiring no change. The regime has refused to cut hydrocarbon extraction and will only negotiate 'bilaterally' with the US.¹²⁴ Bolsonaro's government likewise argues it has the right to exploit resources,¹²⁵ denouncing 'a leftist conspiracy against the United States and Brazil, whose sovereignty is under attack', labelling multilateral commitments as 'foreign interference'.¹²⁶ In a show of transactionalism, in late 2020 Bolsonaro announced willingness to negotiate Amazonian protection if paid.¹²⁷

As distinct from pragmatism or realism, which assume interests are mutable but may evolve through interaction, if the purpose of all negotiation is set by relation to birth-culture, no agreement is binding beyond its direct utility. The negotiations at the 2022 UN Conference on Nuclear Disarmament resulted in no agreed text, with Russia wielding its veto on the grounds that safety on Ukrainian sites was not a subject for the conference. Disestablishing multilateral obligations reflects a repeated pattern of behaviour by New Right actors globally. Considering the war in Ukraine, it is tempting to interpret Putin's transactional actions, around energy supplies for example, as exceptional. To the contrary: an established trend towards transactionalism underwrites these actions as behavioural norms.

The War in Ukraine has to some extent exposed the limited global coherence of the New Right. Putin has been a principal backer of European far right parties in Hungary, Sweden and Italy, but key actors' such as Meloni in Italy, in many respects a purer expression of the New Right than Salvini, have been at pains to distance themselves from Putin. Likewise, whereas Xi's commitment to an alliance without limits with Russia appears undiminished, along with Modi and Erdogan he has expressed disquiet at the economic fall-out. This is because, though their alliance agrees on removing Liberal norms like rights or multilateral obligations, they remain very explicitly competing birth-cultures with obligations to one another that remain purely transactional.

New Right international negotiations are clearly different from a classical realist ethics that pursues systemic balance.¹²⁸ In Reactionary Internationalism the primacy of birth-culture is freed from international obligations, unless transactions can be found to satisfy its needs, as opposed to humanity's.¹²⁹ The only approach to interaction between states is transactionalism, made ever-mobile by the lack of institutions to make them reliably permanent, and circumscribed by responsibility to a birth culture and the self-determined reach of its competence. Irrespective of the fate that may befall Putin, the principles that underpin his invasion, transactionalism and the presumption of birth-cultural sphere of competence, are reshaping world order.

Conclusion: the reactionary song of sovereignty

This concluding section firstly conceptualises the practices promoted by the New Right and the norms that underpin them as the institutions of an emerging Reactionary

International Society, and secondly how this might be looked at as a theory of change to add to English School analytics. Going back to the conceptual triangle discussed in the second section of the paper (Figure 1), and the summary of the new Reactionary institutions (Table 1), we argued that birth-cultural practices are leading to its reconfiguration as a constitutional principle of international society. This is happening by simplifying the current compact of primary institutions, subsuming them under two new, fundamental macro-institutions: exclusive spheres of competence and transactionalism. Spheres of competence indicate the reach the national state as defined by birth cultural sovereignty, while transnationalism makes the temporal extension of national decision making subject to birth cultural sovereignty. This explains why multilateral obligations are systematically eroded by New Right diplomatic practices, but also how a functional pluralist international society may be in the offing.

The resulting configuration of international society, revealed in the practices and discourses of the leaders we have focussed on here, is that of a minimal pluralism, coexistence is guaranteed by the respect of each other's spheres of competence, the possibility of transactions and partnerships, and an understanding that cosmopolitanism and solidarism would erode this normative arrangement. This minimal pluralism would be rooted in the awareness of other birth cultures' strengths and transactional opportunism, as opposed to an abstract right to life and independence. This is not a 'war of all against all', but rather an attempt to make an international society tamed by only minimal norms and institutions. In English School terms this is akin to a coexistential pluralism based on acknowledgment that birth cultures are, by definition, not universal.¹³⁰ This makes it possible to cooperate in secondary institutions such as the UN or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as well as the mutual support highlighted in the analytical section above.

The internal coherence of the triangle of institutions not only acts as a logic of practice, but as shown above, could provide a robust framework for a renewed pluralist international society. This restructuring of international relations along polycentric and hierarchical lines frames any outcome of this triangle of institutions as natural, to be expected of all birth-cultures. Violence is reframed as a natural form of transaction, a tool to transact spheres of exclusive competence as clearly articulated by Putin concerning Ukraine. Inequality among identities is the natural outcome of the different competences and strengths of birth-cultures. Universal norms and rights must be removed because they prevent birth-cultures from realising the freedom to thrive or fail. The theory of change we are pointing to in our analysis suggests a normative shift from within as the result of practical collaboration by New Right nationalists and sympathisers. As our empirical analysis of New Right diplomacy 2016–2021 suggests, the institutions of international relations are already changing. The Reactionary Internationale's ambition is to simplify international politics by returning to a consolidated, more robust, order that is fairer because it provides for birth-cultural achievements and differences to be rewarded.

The empirical analysis approach in this paper demonstrates how the English School can provide an account of such significant changes by engaging in practice-based analytics of diplomacy through deployment of a poststructural methodological toolkit. This shows that collaboration among these theoretical approaches can produce empirical insights to inform theorisation of international society and how it might change.

Reactionary international society is the result of the socialisation and legitimisation of New Right norms through practice.

There is no doubt that various actors within the New Right assemblage are observing with great interest Putin's overt rejection of 'globalist' rules and norms. The very overt-ness of his exposition of reactionary internationalism as an alternative order may have greater historic impact than the high economic costs or territorial implications of the war itself. This is not Realism; it is significantly closer to the ethno-geopolitical realpolitik of the late 19th-Century, inheriting from this era the depoliticization of whatever is necessary as 'interests'. If liberals saw humanity as one nature and advanced human rights and universality, in its own international revolution the New Right is advancing an identitarian birth-cultural understanding of human nature as plural and different. In this vision, sometimes framed in decolonial terms as with Xi and Modi, each birth-culture is an ontological species of its own, and ethics only allow each to secure its own flourishing. In diplomatic practice these ideas are providing the basis for a thriving socialisation and reconfiguration of international institutions and global politics.

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