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# Review of ‘Liminal sovereignty practices’

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cac**Sergei Prozorov****Keywords**

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I recommend that the article should be revised and resubmitted. This is a very well-written and clearly argued piece that offers a systematic and analytical treatment of the concept of liminality that the authors suggest as an alternative to the binary inside/outside thinking that characterizes both the traditional international relations (IR) theory and its post-structuralist critique that remains fixated on the dividing line between the inside and the outside, even as it affirms its contingency, fluidity, haziness, and so on. While the authors’ argument, particularly their typology of liminal practices, is very interesting and suggestive, I am not certain that it succeeds in solving the problems the authors claim it does, at least on the level they claim it does. Below I address three problems with the argument.

The authors argue that liminal practices challenge ‘the very ontology of modern international relations, unsettling the inside/outside dichotomy on which the modern concept of state sovereignty rests’. Yet the examples provided in the article suggest otherwise: while important in their own ways, contested or non-recognized states, indigenous groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and terrorist organizations have coexisted for a long time with sovereign states without undermining them or ‘unsettling’ the overall inside/outside logic. By definition, liminal spaces do not (easily) fit in with that logic but this does not entail that they succeed in overcoming or transcending it. On the contrary, they may either be subsumed by it (e.g. unrecognized states gaining recognition, indigenous groups acquiring autonomous status within states) or coexist with it with varying degrees of antagonism (Amnesty International, which challenges particular state practices but not statehood as such, or ISIS, which destroys existing states in the

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name of its own state to be created). It is difficult to see how the challenge posed by these liminal agents could unsettle the inside/outside dichotomy. The sheer fact of liminality – that is, of the existence of threshold space as opposed to the abstract ‘line’ between inside and outside – is clearly not sufficient to overcome the ‘ontology of modern international relations’. It seems that the authors have constructed a straw figure of the image of sovereignty as a ‘pure line’ and go on to argue the fairly self-evident point that no such line exists and there are always threshold spaces. While this is true, it is not terribly original or profound and the implications of this self-evident fact appear to be overstated by the authors.

Secondly, it is not even clear how the liminal agents discussed in the article could properly ‘unsettle’ whatever is meant by the ‘ontology of modern international relations’. If any of these or other liminal agents were able to undermine the principle of sovereign statehood, they would presumably cease to be liminal, since there would be nothing that they would be liminal in relation to. This would still be an interesting – if only hypothetical – possibility, but the authors do not address it as such, since they seem to be more concerned with transformations in thought rather than practices. The examples of liminality are supposed to produce a change in our way of thinking about the international – specifically, abandoning the image of the line in favour of a more ‘fuzzy’ idea of liminal spaces. Yet, if the impact of liminal agents consists, according to the authors, in ‘sharpening, smearing, expanding and erasing this line’, then the image of the line remains central, with the sole exception of erasure, which, if its paradigm is provided by agents like ISIS, does not really seem to succeed in erasing anything.

This brings me to the final problem, which is more logical in nature: a liminal entity may be defined as occupying a threshold space on both sides of the boundary. This space cannot be unlimited, otherwise the entity in question would become global. Hence, the liminal space must itself be limited and thus bounded by the very ‘line’ the authors seem to dislike so much. This is why we can easily identify border regions of any two or more countries and differentiate them from mainland or hinterlands. Yet, by doing so, the inside/outside logic that we were presumably leaving behind comes back with full force: we only know the liminal by virtue of its contrast with the non-liminal, just as the inside was obtained by distinction from the outside. The framing or ‘parergonal’ function that Jens Bartelson associated with sovereignty appears unavoidable, since we cannot identify the liminal without it.

These problems do not invalidate the argument of the article in its entirety, since there is still a good case to be made for differentiating the practices on/around the line/threshold in the way the authors do. It is only the more ambitious claims about unsettling the ontology of international relations that appear problematic and should either be fortified with more evidence or somewhat tempered.