



Deposited via The University of York.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/238940/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Fisher-Onar, Nora and ROY, INDRAJIT (2026) Multiplexity 2.0: Power and plurality in a post-liberal world. *International affairs*. pp. 319-335. ISSN: 0020-5850

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iag027>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Multiplexity 2.0: Power and Pluralism in the Post-Liberal Age

Nora Fisher-Onar

University of San Francisco

Indrajit Roy

University of York

Abstract

This article—and the edited collection it introduces—ask: *How to best read the post-liberal era of world politics?* The resurgence of hard power has led many to turn to realism, even as a liberal lens reveals key features of the world we inherited. Meanwhile, diverse state and non-state actors around the globe are (re)asserting their voices in international affairs. This article builds on Amitav Acharya's work to offer a vision of "multiplexity 2.0" that captures the interface of hard power, soft power, and global diversity. It does so by unpacking key components of Acharya's concept—"multiplicity" and "complexity". Doing so, we contend, captures: (i) the rapidly multiplying set of *actors, ideas, and structural forces* shaping our system's transformation, while (ii) reading the interactions between these parameters through the lens of complexity theory or a *complex systems*. A multiplicity + complexity = multiplexity 2.0 approach, we contend, captures non-linear, multi-directional patterns for an, ultimately, more "realistic" reading of world (dis)order.

Keywords: realism, liberalism, global justice, complexity, geopolitics, global South, multilateralism, space policy, Artificial Intelligence (AI), right-wing nationalism

Introduction: Making Sense of a Post-Liberal World *

Over the past decade, observers of global affairs from international relations (IR), world politics and development scholars to policy practitioners have debated the era's multifaceted transformation. Key features include the global diffusion of economic power, notably to China, India and Asia more broadly, but also to emerging regional centers of gravity on every continent. Layered onto this shift are major technological breakthroughs. From drones to artificial intelligence (AI), innovation offers opportunities for radical disruption by diverse actors, while also entrenching old cleavages between global haves and have-nots. Ideas and practices of global development are shifting profoundly as multilateral cooperation ceases to map onto conventional flows of aid and expertise from North to South and West to East. Geopolitically too, aggressive foreign policy from the usual suspects among greater Eurasia's "revisionist former empires" (e.g. Russia; Iran)[1], but also an unabashedly, neo-imperial United States, are radically reconfiguring the global calculus. This recalibration is taking place in differentiated ways across the systemic, regional, and national scales, with concomitant repositioning by non-state actors. The turbulent tableau demands a reassessment of our theories and practices, towards timely recalibration of how we think and do international affairs.

This article and the edited collection that it introduces are addressed to this challenge. In the present piece, we kick off the intervention via our own theoretical contribution, developed in four steps. First, we present a schematic map of major approaches, suggesting that while each foregrounds key components of our transforming system, there is a tendency to center one type of phenomenon at the expense of others. This siloed approach is evident in the emphasis on hard and great power in realism, capitalism and institutions in liberalism, and global plurality in critical approaches to world affairs. All crucial features, to be sure, our contention is that the connective tissue between such phenomena is too often overlooked; yet, the complex challenges of our era demand integrated inquiry.

This special issue emanates from the intuition that Amitav Acharya's notion of "multiplexity" can help to square the circle. In our second analytical move, we thus revisit the concept in its initial (2017) articulation which is perhaps best known for Acharya's metaphor of the "multiplex" cinema which captured how multiple scripts can co-exist under the same, globalized roof[2]. Suggesting that conditions have changed so dramatically that we can no longer assume the structural integrity of that roof—or our safety underneath—we proceed to reimagine the concept as "multiplexity 2.0". This innovation nonetheless onboards Acharya's fundamental insight: that we are confronted with "a decentralized and diversified world in which actors, state and non-state, established and new powers from the North and the South, interact in an interdependent manner to produce an order based on a plurality of ideas and approaches" (Acharya's Afterword for this collection).

In a third step, constituting our main contribution, we unpack this plurality by turning to the key components of Acharya's concept—"multiplicity" and "complexity". Doing so, we contend, captures: (i) the rapidly multiplying set of *actors*, *ideas*, and *structural forces* shaping our system's transformation, while (ii) reading the interactions between these parameters through the theoretical lens of complexity thinking or a *complex systems* lens. This pairing, as Fisher-Onar has proposed in sync with a growing body of work in IR deploying complexity logic[3], captures the dynamic interplay of agential, ideational, and structural forces—and the ways that their interaction results in systemic adaptation. This lens eschews the linear logics which tend to underpin realism (with its eschatological undertones) and liberalism (with its teleological undertones)—linearity which, in our present conjecture of great power rivalry and liberal retreat, produces a sense of impending doom. By way of contrast, our multiplicity + complexity = multiplexity 2.0 vision captures non-linear patterns of both continuity and change—emergent and dramatic alike—for a muddier but ultimately more "realistic" view of world (dis)order.

We further contend that by capturing more nuanced patterns in the evolution of our international system, a "multiplexity 2.0" lens helps to nuance the tendency in many critical approaches to privilege structure over agency. This can result, we contend, in an inadvertent and paradoxical reification of repressive power structures over the emancipatory agency of diverse actors. Yet, throughout history, marginalized people(s) have proved that it is possible to seize contingent opportunities for empowerment in a world stacked against them, not least at world historical junctures of power shift. In this regard, our "multiplicity + complexity" angle on multiplexity engages with diverse actors' advocacy for greater global justice as projects which are—for better

or for worse—enmeshed in, rather than siloed from realist power politics or the (neo-)liberal global economy and governance architecture.

In our fourth and final move, we show how the articles in this collection pair multiplicity and complexity to shed new light on outstanding challenges of power and plurality that characterize our multiplex age. Coverage includes new domains like AI policy, the space race, the challenge of (de)globalization, and the tension between diversification and co-optation in emergent, governance structures like the BRICS. At the same time, our contributors critically interrogate the weaponization of history today, unpacking neo-imperial nostalgia projects and resurgent, right-wing militancy across the globe.

Towards Multiplexity 2.0: Capturing Multiplicity and Complexity

To make sense of our era's dizzying changes, analysts have proposed a number of frames. The most prominent approach has been to revisit the realist IR canon. Scholars and policymakers in this vein increasingly invoke the return of "multipolarity," "spheres of influence," and "great power rivalry"[4], even as critics argue that the "new great game" is not a pre-relational fact, but a self-fulfilling prophecy.[5] Defenders of the liberal international order (LIO) also concede fragmentation with some, like Ikenberry, retreating from liberal universalism. Instead, he contends that the (presumptively Western-led) LIO will co-exist with global authoritarian and global South "worlds"[6] (a reading complicated by the authoritarian turn of United States under the second Trump administration). In a more constructivist idiom that bridges liberal and more pluralist approaches, Flockhart likewise envisages an emergent "multi-order order" as comprised of regional[7], but also functional/sectoral orders[8]. Meanwhile, critical scholars concerned with topics from political economy and (post-)development[9] to global ethics and postcolonialism[10] express overlapping concern that what Gramsci called the morbid "interregnum" between collapsing and coalescing orders is exacerbating familiar forms of inequality[11]. However, among some decolonial analysts, for instance, there may be hope that the eclipse of Western hegemony and/or liberal universalism will open "pluriversal" spaces for the expression of diverse lifeworlds.[12]

The starting point of our intervention is that while each of these approaches captures key aspects of the unfolding transformation, each also entails trade-offs given their respective privileging of hard power, of liberal capitalist institutions, and of global justice. For example, realist dismissal of small and non-state actors failed to anticipate, say, Ukraine's sustained resistance of Russian invasion, or the ability of insurgents to radically disrupt global public opinion, regional orders, and Transatlantic stability.

Similarly, single-minded emphasis on the LIO's virtues and order-generating capacity, led to neglect among the system's elite beneficiaries of (neo-)liberal capitalism's inability to deliver human dignity—not only to significant swathes of the global South, but also to a number of global North communities experiencing relative decline. This gap has contributed to the legitimacy crisis of liberal economics and governance among increasingly restive populations. Such sentiments,

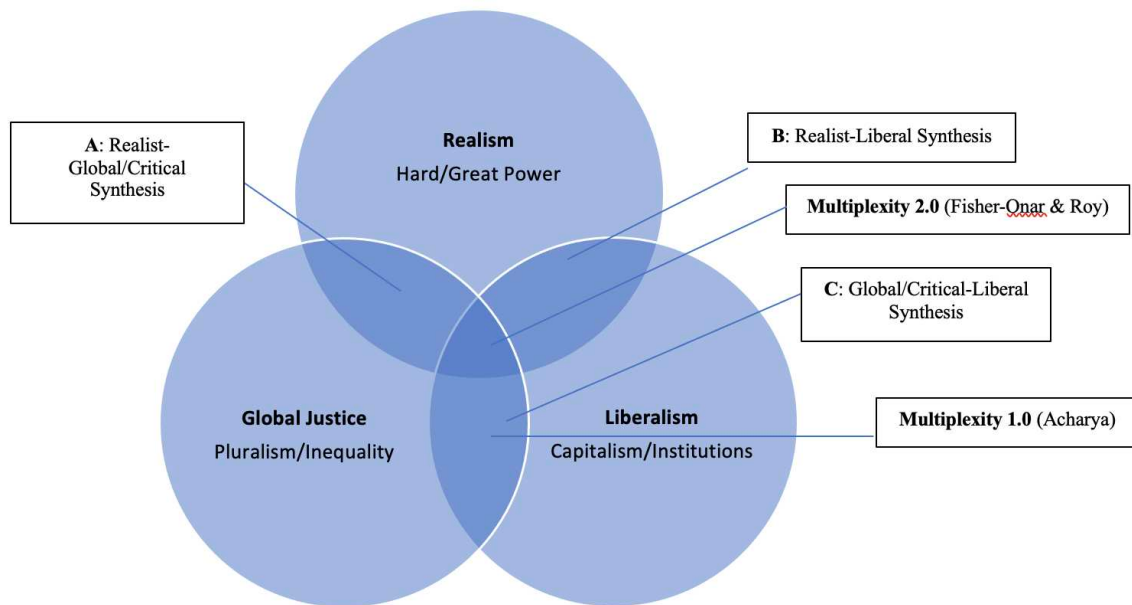
in turn, have been weaponized by populist leaders in the idiom of the left and especially the right, culminating in revisionist movements' full-blown challenge today to the LIO.

Finally, when it comes to the laudable, in our view, concern for global justice expressed in many critical approaches, it is necessary to also recognize sundry challenges. These include the tendency to privilege structure over agency. Doing so is problematic not because unjust power structures aren't resilient and reproductive (they are), but because centering structure may discount the agency of smaller actors and dynamics that, in fact, have transformative power. When combined with a parallel tendency to equate all such structures with "Western" modernity/coloniality, we confront a paradoxical discounting of "non-Western" agencies[13] (although theoretical resources like postcolonial notions of "hybridity"[14] and "co-constitution"[15], and queer notions of fluid, amalgamated[16] identities offer key correctives). A further upshot of this inadvertent recentering of Western hegemony can be to romanticize all expressions of anti-Westernism as anti-colonialism. This can manifest as tacit or overt support for authoritarian regimes and groups who—emancipatory rhetoric notwithstanding—may commit violence against their own and neighboring populations. The result, arguably, is to throw the human rights baby out with the anti-(Western-)colonial bathwater. Doing so entails, moreover, a tragic irony since that baby was fought for fiercely by global South actors and progressive social movements since at least formal decolonization.[17]

Conceptually, these blind spots may be visualized with reference to the Venn diagrams in Figure 1 which depicts, in a highly schematic fashion, the primary foci, forms of overlap, and omissions of the approaches discussed so far. Here, realism alla Mearsheimer in theory and Trump in practice privileges great powers and "great men", Western and non-Western alike, trivializing medium powers and—sometimes quite literally—erasing small and non-state actors. That being said, and as alluded to above, realists like Russia's Vladimir Putin also weaponize arguments at the intersection of realism and global justice (the "A" area in the diagram) by casting aggressive foreign policy as anti-(Western-)colonial struggle.[18]

Turning to liberalism alla Ikenberry, we register a wider array of state and non-state actors from international organizations and corporations to NGOs. There is attention moreover to individual and group rights and their advocates (though which individuals and groups actually receive protection varies considerably).[19] In practice, however, and as noted above, the LIO has long overlapped with great power privilege given its Western- and Northern-centric assumptions and assimilationist logics. This area of realist-liberal overlap is situated within the "B" section of the diagram. It is a space that some have characterized as "liberal imperialist"[20] or, in the EU context, as "normative empire Europe"[21]. Critics of the realist-liberal synthesis, for instance, often invoke the Western-dominated, international community's selective humanitarianism vis-à-vis sites of geostrategic importance, but neglect of other human rights debacles, especially when it comes to racialized populations in the global South.

Figure 1: Three Readings of International Order: Foci and Overlap



Meanwhile, critical champions of global justice come, fittingly, in many shapes and sizes from advocates of “global”, “post-Western” and “non-Western” IR and historical sociology, to critical political economy, (post-)development, environmental justice, global ethics, decentring, postcolonial, and decolonial approaches, among others.[22] Critical approaches also can—if by no means always—intersect with gendered interventions that unpack patriarchal and heteronormative power structures at the global scale.[23] They tend to critique Western hegemony and call for a more relational and multi-directional rather than binary and diffusionist reading and practice of world affairs. In this regard, the cross-cutting goal is arguably to render marginalized protagonists of international affairs more visible, and to advocate for reparative policies.

That being said, global pluralist arguments and practices also can converge with the agendas of (re)emerging powers in global South and East contexts. For example, emergent Chinese and Indian “schools” of IR, increasingly fuse normative critique of the Western/LIO hegemony with nationally interested *realpolitik* (the aforementioned area “A” of Figure 1) that is hardly friendly to domestic diversity. The appropriation of global pluralist arguments in more or less self-reflexive and cynical ways has ignited debates about the ethics of policy engagement. Here, more reformist approaches tend to counsel cautious engagement to achieve change from within the system,

while more revolutionary approaches emphasize resistance. The former, i.e., reformist or incrementalist advocacy for global justice can be read as situated, at least until recently, in area “C” section of Figure 1. Acharya’s agenda-setting contribution of “multiplexity”, to which we now turn, was arguably situated in this reformist space.

Multiplexity 1.0: A Global Pluralist-Liberal Synthesis

Acharya’s early vision, which we call “multiplexity 1.0”, emanated organically from the 2010s context of soft but accelerating power shift. During this period, the US and Europe were still reeling from the 2008/9 economic crises, but beginning to recover. Meanwhile, emerging powers had weathered the storm more smoothly, evidenced by the growing confidence of the G20 and BRICSs. Right-wing populist movements were gaining traction from India, Turkey and Hungary, to Britain and the United States, but had not yet captured national projects. And despite Russian maneuvers in Crimea, and Chinese launching of an ambitious grand strategy with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), geopolitical revisionism remained contained at the systemic scale. Thus, the turbulence of ongoing transformation was buffered by significant forms of geoeconomic continuity, through neo-liberal globalization and predictability in the development sector. Similarly, there was a semblance of geopolitical stability through the rules-based LIO and American enforcement thereof. In this context, moreover, geocultural pluralism remained embedded in liberal capitalist institutions (see also Parmar and Sundaram in this collection). The period, in short, was one when the LIO was beginning to wobble but hardly in crisis.

Given this context, Acharya’s approach with “multiplexity 1.0” was to demand more meaningful recognition of global diversity by calling out the dissonance between more inclusive aspects of the “liberal script”[24] and the hegemonic practices associated with liberal imperialism (area “B”)—a tried and true, reformist strategy in contexts of liberal hegemony.[25] His thesis effectively challenged the linear triumphalism of the liberal “end of history”. Arguing, analytically, for greater acknowledgement of “actually existing” diversity, it called, normatively, for greater inclusivity. Acharya communicated this global pluralist-liberal synthesis through the metaphor of the multiplex cinema. Here, plural scripts, protagonists and audiences are featured under the same global capitalist roof—a vision of emergent order where no one power or region, nor one set of norms, dominates the shared structure of global governance. Nonetheless, aspects of the post-WWII and post-Cold War era of American hegemony—including the globalized economy that had long underwritten cinematic multiplexes from North America to South Asia—were expected to persist. The pluralism that Acharya’s scholarship directed attention was not merely a pluralism of actors but also a pluralism of perspectives and practices, which compelled attention to ideas about global governance and world order being scripted beyond the established players in the global North.

Nevertheless, as Roy underscores in his contribution to this collection, this vision of multiplexity, “does not entail a rejection by the global South of the prevailing institutions of global governance but, rather, emphasises claims for a more equitable order in which constituent units are able to resist the domination of any single actor”. For example, “materially weaker powers can innovate ideas which are then universalised and adapted by materially stronger powers;” doing so enables global South actors to “not only resist efforts by Northern powers to preserve their privilege...[but

also] forge coalitions with each other and with the global North, on their own terms, to organise global governance and maintain global order”[26]. Acharya, Estevadeordal and Goodman went on to show that South-South, amongst other forms of multilateralism, are indeed mounting, and can be empirically captured by measuring “interaction capacities” across states and regions.[27]

Today, however, we face dramatic disruption. This is evident in increasingly uninhibited use of force by major military powers in tandem with apparent attempts—at the very heart of the erstwhile LIO—to forcibly reconfigure globalization and belittle global diversity from small states to vulnerable communities. Thus, alarming cracks in the globalized cinema ceiling are appearing above our heads, threatening to crush audiences within (and prevent those who couldn’t afford a ticket from ever having the experience, much less from building an alternative, more inclusive structure).

Multiplexity 2.0

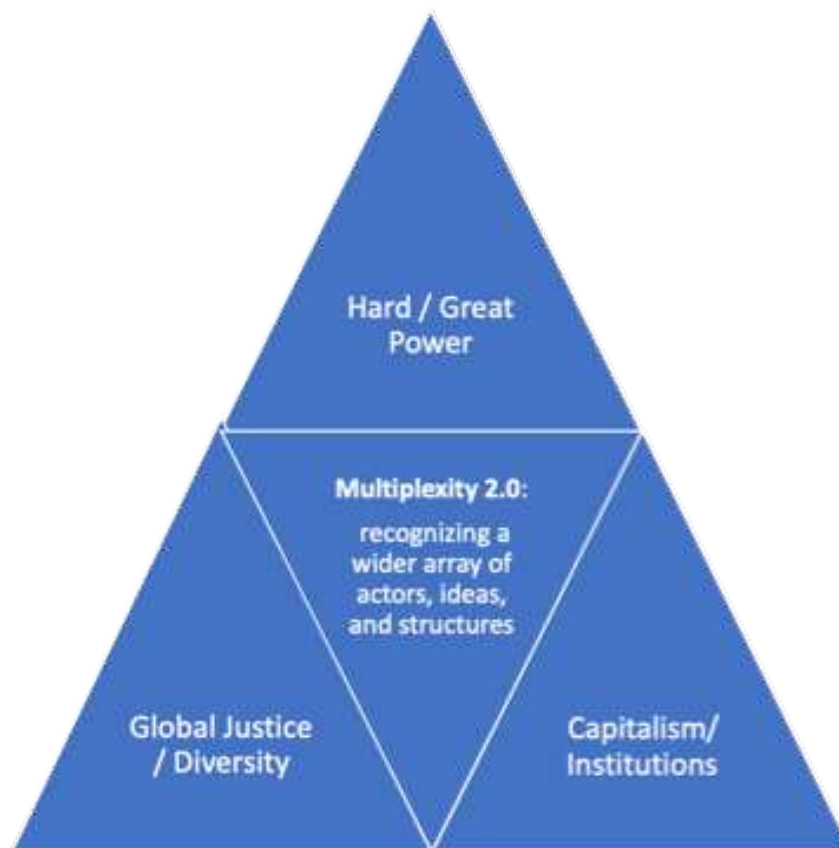
This challenge begs reimagination of multiplexity in ways which recognize the growing salience of power politics as per realism. In effect, if multiplexity 1.0 resonated with the era’s attempt to co-opt challengers, multiplexity 2.0 confronts a world historic moment when the hegemon is seeking to crush challengers. Yet, we must also register the ways in which LIO will persist in manifold, path dependent and innovative ways. The same is true for the pursuit of global justice which will not disappear, despite the best efforts of exclusionary movements.[28] The moment, in short, is ripe to reimagine multiplexity for our *zeitgeist*. As Rosenberg has argued, “social” and by extension international “existence is not and has never been unitary: it has always comprised a multiplicity of social entities evolving in different ways, and yet interacting with each other in real time.[29]

Our approach begins with recognizing that while the multiplex cinema’s LIO foundations are in peril, Acharya’s concept nonetheless includes two features that are more constitutive of our emergent (dis)order than ever: “multiplicity” and “complexity”. Today, after all, we are confronted with the quantitative pluralization of actors, ideas and structural conditions—but also openings—that the original concept anticipated. Qualitatively, moreover, this pluralization is taking previously hard-to-imagine forms. When it comes to actors, for example, not only are longstanding revisionists like Russia emboldened, but status quo powers like the United States under Trump are torpedoing the LIO. This is evident in the use of raw force to dismantle sovereign if authoritarian governments like Maduro’s Venezuela, while saber-rattling at the Danish territory of Greenland whose unilateral usurpation by the US would spell the end of NATO.

Another source of change at the nexus of agency and structure is technological transformation. Today, after all, billions possess a multiplex cinema in the palm of their hands via their cellphones, with digital technologies offering unprecedented opportunities to long marginalized peoples and places[30]. At the same time, qualitatively, the AI revolution is producing entirely new types of agents and agency, with the robotic revolution closely on its heels. Technological innovation, as such, is rapidly augmenting human capacity whilst simultaneously threatening to make humanity redundant.

This tango between the multiplication yet erasure of agency is accompanied by the opening of a Pandora's box of ideas that were, by and large, inconceivable or taboo at the heyday of the LIO. As President of the European Commission Ursula van der Leyen has put it, we are confronted with the “end of the West as we know it”[31], i.e., of the liberal democratic Transatlantic alliance. But another West—notably, the fascist West—is resurgent. In tandem with this ideational/normative shift, the global human rights regime (or at least its LIO iteration) is under siege. This retreat is occurring, moreover, just in time for systemic change at the planetary scale, as climate tipping points loom with adverse implications for large swathes of humanity[32]. Given these fraught features, it is imperative that we read global dynamics in a way which takes seriously the multiplying agents, ideas and structural changes driving change at the interstices of hard power, the legacies—for better *and* for worse—of the LIO, and the aspirations of diverse actors across the globe (intersections depicted in Figure 2).

Figure 2: The “Multiplicity” in Multiplexity 2.0: Pluralization of Actors, Ideas Structures



Fortunately, we already have an approach in the natural and organizational sciences with which to make sense of such complexity, although it is relatively new to IR: namely, complex systems thinking with its intrinsically relational logic.[33] The building blocks of complexity, moreover, are highly congruent with the tools of institutional analysis (insofar as institutions are also complex systems). This toolkit enables us to read the international system as a complex system like any other (e.g., an immune system, a weather system; a banking system; a political system).

Complex systems are constituted by parameters which are interactive rather than atomistic. The international system, in our conceptualization, is constituted by agential, ideational and structural parameters. Agents alone, ideas alone, and structures alone have no independent force. Rather, it is their *interplay* which “does” things like maintain or change the system. Continuity and change, as such, are not linear but driven by dynamic, interactive processes as actors respond to evolving conditions by invoking ideas in pursuit of desired outcomes. At one level, these processes involve considerable continuity. For example, an actor who was able to claim a disproportionate share of the system’s resources at a given time (T^1), is unlikely to be knocked out of their orbit by a single shock or even by a black swan event. In the language of complexity, this path dependence is a function of the system’s “sensitivity to initial conditions.”

At the same time, the ongoing interaction of system parameters exerts feedback which loops endemically back into parameter interaction, engendering change. This means that even a small event in systemic terms can have a disproportionate effect, much like the famed “butterfly effect” in a weather system. Here, an insect fluttering at the equator activates weather system parameters that produce a hurricane thousands of kilometers away. Similarly, minor events from an international system perspective can produce outsized impacts. Consider the 1914 assassination of an Archduke Ferdinand, or Stalin’s maneuverings to keep Trotsky away from Moscow at the time of Lenin’s death—events which spiraled into World War I and the Stalinist Soviet Union. More often than not, however, change is emergent, meaning it cumulates gradually over time through processes like “layering”, “drift” or conversion[34]. More dramatic change, is also possible, either because cumulative change builds up to tipping points, or via sudden shocks which produce critical junctures that radically reconfigure the international system’s trajectory.

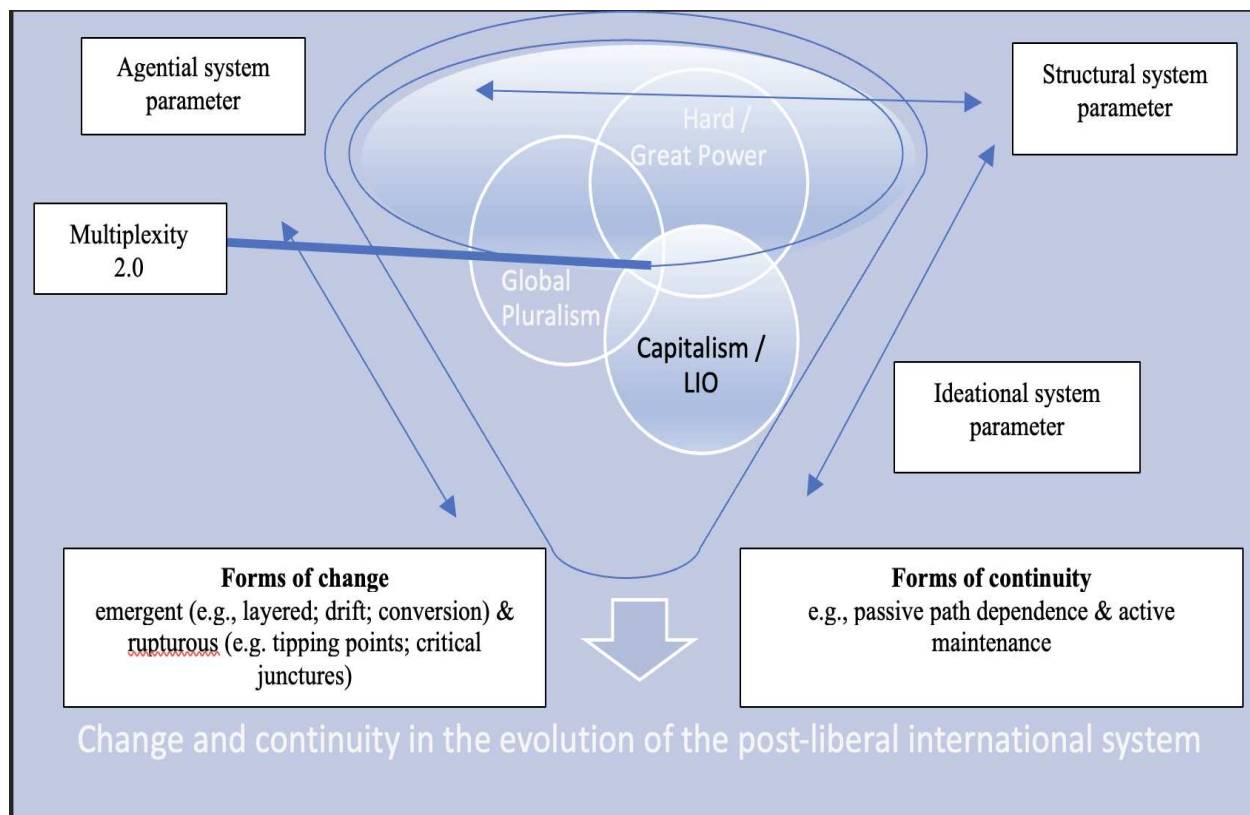
By way of example, consider the decision of President Trump to raid and remove the leader of Venezuela in early 2026. The move may have been undertaken for discreet reasons that were intelligible to the White House at the time (e.g. to serve the US fossil fuel industry; to distract from growing resistance to the government’s heavy hand at home). It will nonetheless have major, no doubt partially intended, but also unintended consequences. This is because, ideationally, the action put paid to the LIO norm of non-intervention without multilateral or even domestic/Congressional ratification. This invites like forays by other great and middle powers in their would-be spheres of influence, with highly destabilizing, potential impacts on regional and system-wide dynamics (not to mention the choices of small and non-state actors).

But while the move marked a critical juncture that henceforth privileges realist hard power, forms of LIO continuity also will persist. These include the integrationist forcefield exerted by (neo-

)liberal capitalism as attested to by the restraining role that jittery financial markets appear to have on Trump's aggressive diplomacy. Furthermore, liberal institutions like courts and elections will continue to be leveraged, in tandem with pressures produced by protest movements and alliances.[35]

This complex interplay of actors, ideas and structural dynamics, in turn, will produce ample opportunities for alliance-building and norm-entrepreneurship across heretofore unaligned segments of global society across the national, regional, and/or transnational scales. At the national level, for instance, it is plausible that a number of European or Southeast Asian states who do not feel directly threatened by Beijing may pivot to China as a prospective bulwark of globalization and geopolitical balancer vis-à-vis an increasingly unpredictable Russia and Washington. Here, moreover, China may innovate some governance norms in keeping with its authoritarian capitalist model, but also may help to preserve aspects of the inherited world trade regime that serve its and global South interests.[36] Similarly, at the sub or transnational scale, a number of global cities are engaging in “paradiplomacy” between non-state actors[37], pledging to cooperate towards, for example, climate targets despite the reneging on such commitments by some such cities’ national governments.

Figure 3: The “Complexity” in Multiplexity 2.0: Dynamic, Non-linear Interplay of Agents, Ideas and Structures



Multiplexity 2.0: Overview of the Special Issue

How might the reconceptualization of multiplexity as “multiplicity” + “complexity” help to shed light on the outstanding challenges of our times? This lens eschews the linear logics which tend to underpin realism (with its eschatological undertones) and liberalism (with its teleological undertones)—linearity which, in our present conjecture of great power rivalry and liberal retreat, produces a sense of impending doom. By way of contrast, our multiplicity + complexity = multiplexity 2.0 vision captures non-linear patterns of both continuity and change—emergent and dramatic alike—for a muddier but ultimately more “realistic” view of world (dis)order.

This lens eschews the linear logics which tend to underpin realism (with its eschatological undertones) and liberalism (with its teleological undertones)—linearity which, in our present conjecture of great power rivalry and liberal retreat, produces a sense of impending doom. By way of contrast, our multiplicity + complexity = multiplexity 2.0 vision captures non-linear patterns of both continuity and change—emergent and dramatic alike—for a muddier but ultimately more “realistic” view of world (dis)order.

The articles in this collection lead the way by tackling messy, multi-directional patterns in the international system’s trajectory, uncovering fresh empirics and insights which complicate dominant narratives. Some of these findings assuage anxieties produced by liberal and realism’s linear assumptions that at the end of the West, we face only regression, conflict, and potential systemic-level meltdown. At the same time, our contributors do not romanticize revisionist and/or global South challenges to these linear logics, capturing instead complex patterns of layered change and conversion in tandem with path dependence and active, system maintenance by status quo powers in—but also beyond—the West from Canada to South Korea.

Roy kicks us off with an argument about global South actors’ advancement of a hybrid moral economy characterized by what he calls “moralpolitik”. Ideationally, this fusion of ethical and instrumental reasoning builds on notions of “subaltern realism”[38] and is situated, at the interstices of realism and global pluralism (Area “A” of Figure 1 above). Here, post-colonial agents forge spaces for autonomous—and interdependent—agency via narratives and practices of multi-directional multilateralism (e.g., South-South and South-North, as well as North-South). Thus, multilateralism under multiplexity entails novel forms of cooperation as well as rivalry, inviting cautious optimism in the face of great power bluster and liberal declinism.

This acknowledgment of multiplicity and complexity at the interstices of hard power, liberal capitalist governance, and global diversity is complimented by the contribution of de Graaf and Linsi. Asking whether today’s narratives of deglobalization are alarmist, they discover differentiated patterns across the global economic system. Noting what could be called “sectoral multiplexity”, they find that in fields like production and finance, Western-dominated globalization is actually advancing apace. In domains like trade and technology, however, there is some evidence for deglobalization driven mostly by US-China rivalry. But even apparently disruptive practices—like Trumpian trade policy—appear to aim at preserving the United States’ systemic advantage, not at actually dismantling the system. Meanwhile, despite Washington’s efforts to contain Beijing, in early 2026, China posted its largest trade surplus ever[39]: a 20 percent increase to 1.2 trillion dollars despite aggressive tariffs imposed by the US in the preceding year.

This outcome further corroborates de Graaf and Linsi, as well as Roy's claims above: namely, that major powers and smaller actors alike respond to turbulence in dynamic ways, seeking both to rebalance *within* the extent architecture, and to steer the system in new directions.

Stroikos similarly reads the space sector through the lens of what he calls "functionally differentiated multiplexity". This is evident in the *de facto* regionalization of space policy, such that each region is operating according to its own logic. For example, in the—on balance—dominant US sector, new actors are emerging through the commercialization of the space industries (a very different dynamic than in state-driven China). These differentiated dynamics, Stroikos shows, are yielding underacknowledged forms of both intra- and inter-regional cooperation despite ongoing rivalry. As a result, Stroikos concludes, we must be wary of totalizing narratives about militarized, systemic-level competition. Rather, a combination of hierarchical and pluralistic practices are at play.

Singh and his colleagues further show that when it comes to AI policy, we are confronted neither with a war of all against all, nor of purportedly correct Western and allegedly incorrect non-Western ways of doing things. Rather, the emergence of distinctive clusters becomes salient, which in turn develop a "menu of choices" that can be accessed by others in a dynamic and highly networked process. Nations who do not have the capacity to produce AI technology or norms can select from the menu in a highly entangled process thereby demonstrating their agency.

From a more pronounced global justice perspective, Parmar and Sundaram challenge the analytical and normative subsuming of pluralistic ethics into the existing, universalist architecture of global governance, a pattern we described above as "multiplexity 1.0." They make the case via the empirical examples of the BRICS and G20s—and a neo-Grainscan argument about elite co-optation. It's gist: that global South elites' progressive inclusion in the LIO is a status quo, not a reformist, much less a revolutionary enterprise. A more "critical" vision of multiplexity" or genuine change, they contend, is realizable only through meaningful, popular mobilization via which alternative governance structures can be imagined and instantiated. This position is somewhat further south, as it were, of Roy (in Figure 2)—with Parmar and Sundaram situated squarely in concern for greater global justice. Both articles, nonetheless account for rather than ignore hard power and Northern-dominated institutions, arguing that alternative agencies can complicate both great power and liberal institutions.

An appreciation of multiplexity compels an attention to time. After all, as Chagas-Bastos and Kristensen remind us, spatial arrangements of power are not only erected and contested in space but also in time. Recognising the temporal dimension compels us to accept that orders are transient, with specific origins and ends. Of course, they continue to be invoked in multi-temporal ways by state actors such promising the restoration of "greatness"- for example by American, Chinese, Russia, Turkish and Indian elites. Temporalities are also invoked by non-state actors, as Wai Yeap Chan convincingly demonstrates in his contribution: radical groups such as Islamist militants and White supremacists seek legitimacy by appropriating symbols from the past which, they hope, will take them and everyone else "back" in time.

Conclusion: Power and Pluralism in a Post-Liberal Order

These contributions remind us that, in our turbulent times, we cannot afford to maintain the tunnel vision produced by centering realist hard power, liberal soft power, and global diversity to the analytical exclusion of one another. Each, in reality, exerts forcefields shaping each other—and our evolving system. As pluralism becomes ever more ingrained in global governance and world politics, power is not merely about domination, agenda-setting, consent-creation and subject-formation. Beyond these dominant paradigms of thinking about power, these contributions compel us to appreciate power as the ability to navigate a plurality of perspectives and practices. This takes us beyond coercive and manipulative understandings of power to shine a light on the interaction capacity of diverse agents.

Towards capturing this, build on Acharya's conception of "multiplexity" which advocated for global pluralism within a transforming LIO. We showed that two components of multiplexity—multiplicity and complexity—captures the adaptative interplay of actors, ideas and systemic forces, shedding fresh light on outstanding challenges in international affairs. We close with the hope that our approach can be deployed vis-à-vis a wider range of concerns. The goal: to make better sense of the promise and perils of multiplexity 2.0 in the face of dramatic—and interconnected—geoeconomic, geopolitical, and geocultural transformation.

*** This collection is dedicated to Peter Marcus Kristensen, a fellow traveler, who thought deeply about time, but was granted far too little.**

[1] Nora Fisher-Onar, "The Capitulations Syndrome: Why revisionist powers leverage post-colonial sensibilities toward post-imperial projects." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no.4 (2022): 1-12 (ksac077).

[2] The concept's inspiration further includes early modern mathematics and telecommunication infrastructure. See Acharya's afterword in this collection, in addition to Amitav Acharya, "After liberal hegemony: The advent of a multiplex world order." *Ethics & international affairs* 31, no.3 (2017): 271-285; Amitav Acharya, Antoni Estevadeordal, and Louis W. Goodman. "Multipolar or multiplex? Interaction capacity, global cooperation and world order." *International Affairs* 99, no.6 (2023): 2339-2365.

[3] For the theoretical framework from which this treatment of our international system as a complex system emanates see, chapter two and the conclusion of Nora Fisher-Onar, *Contesting Pluralism(s): Islamism, Liberalism and Nationalism in Turkey and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2025). See also, Kavalski, Emilian. "The fifth debate and the emergence of complex international relations theory: notes on the application of complexity theory to the study of international life." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 20, no3 (2007): 435-454. Elena Korosteleva, *Complexity and Community in International Relations: Nurturing Resilience in Central Eurasia*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2025).

- [4] See, for example, Walter Russell Mead, "The return of geopolitics: The revenge of the revisionist powers." *Foreign Aff.* 93 (2014): 69, and Matthew Specter, "Realism after Ukraine: A critique of geopolitical reason from Monroe to Mearsheimer." *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no.2 (2022): 243-267.
- [5] Nora Fisher-Onar and Emilian Kavalski. "From trans-Atlantic order to Afro-Eur-Asian worlds? Reimagining international relations as interlocking regional worlds." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no.4 (2022): 1-11 (ksac080).
- [6] John Ikenberry, 'Three Worlds: the West, East, South and the competition to shape global order', *International Affairs* 100, no.1, 2024, 121-138.
- [7] Trine Flockhart, "The coming multi-order world." *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no.1 (2016): 3-30;
- [8] Discussion from roundtable on "Narratives of Orders in the Multi-Order World" convened by Flockhart at the European International Studies Association (EISA) annual pan-European conference in Bologna, Italy on 29 August 2025.
- [9] Aram Ziai (2025) offers prescient insights into the trajectories of postdevelopment in "Theorizing Postdevelopment." *The European Journal of Development Research* (2025): 1-24; Singh and Woolcock (2022) reflect on the possibilities and pitfalls of global development in the new era of multilateral cooperation:
<https://online.ucpress.edu/gp/article/3/1/57594/195047/The-Future-of-Multilateralism-and-Global>; Indrajit Roy (2024) blends insights from development studies and global international relations to reflect on changing practices of development:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/217456/1/GDI_WP_2024-76_2_.pdf
- [10] Devika Dutt and her colleagues (Dutt et al, 2025) have extended discussions on decolonisation and postcolonialism to development economics:
https://www.politybooks.com/bookdetail?book_slug=decolonizing-economics-an-introduction--9781509545476
- [11] Jack Taggart (2020) reflects on the governance of global development in the interregnum:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09692290.2020.1852948>
- [12] Querejazu, Amaya. "Encountering the pluriverse: Looking for alternatives in other worlds." *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 59, no. 2 (2016): e007. Hartmut Behr and Giorgio Shani. "Rethinking emancipation in a critical IR: Normativity, cosmology, and pluriversal dialogue." *Millennium* 49, no.2 (2021): 368-391.
- [13] John Hobson and Shizhi Zhang. "The return of the Chinese tribute system? Re-viewing the belt and road initiative." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2022): ksac074.
- [14] Homi Bhabha, *Debating cultural hybridity: Multicultural identities and the politics of anti-racism*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.
- [15] Mine Nur Küçük, "Postcolonial Approaches in International Relations." *Critical Approaches to International Relations: Philosophical Foundations and Current Debates*. Leiden: Brill (2022): 157-174.
- [16] J.K. Puar, *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. (Durham: Duke UP 2018).
- [17] Dimitris Bouris, Nora Fisher-Onar, and Daniela Verena Huber. "Towards Allyship in Diversity? Critical Perspectives on the European Union's Global Role." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* (2025), 1391-1418.

- [18] Morozov, Viatcheslav, *Russia's postcolonial identity: A subaltern empire in a Eurocentric world*. Springer, 2015.
- [19] Huber, Daniela Verena. "Organized Hypocrisy and the Logic of Coloniality. Explaining the EU's Divergent Response to Grave Violations of International Law in Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Palestine." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* (2025)
- [20] Inderjeet Parmar, "The US-led liberal order: imperialism by another name?" *International Affairs* 94, no.1 (2018): 151-172.
- [21] Del Sarto, Raffaella A. "Normative empire Europe: The European Union, its borderlands, and the 'Arab spring'." *JCMS: journal of common market studies* 54, no.2 (2016): 215-232.
- [22] For key voices in this debate, and overlap and divergence across approaches see Bouris et al. *Towards Allyship in Diversity?*... (2025) and the contributions to the special issue of the *Journal of Common Market Studies* that the article introduces.
- [23] Rao, Rahul. *Out of time: The queer politics of postcoloniality*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- [24] Tanja Börzel and Michael Zürn, "Contestations of the liberal international order: From liberal multilateralism to postnational liberalism." *International organization* 75, no.2 (2021): 282-305.
- [25] The civil rights movement in the United States, and liberal feminism and LGBTQ activism are other cases in point where activists demand that liberal institutions better reflect the pluralistic values upon which they purport to be founded.
- [26] Roy, Indrajit. "Southern multilateralism: Complementary competition vis-à-vis the Liberal International Order." *Global Perspectives* 3, no.1 (2022): 39589. See also, Indrajit Roy (2024) The connected politics of global development. Working Paper 2024-076. Global Development Institute Working Paper Series. Manchester: University of Manchester
- [27] Acharya, Amitav, Antoni Estevadeordal, and Louis W. Goodman. "Multipolar or multiplex? Interaction capacity, global cooperation and world order." *International Affairs* 99, no.6 (2023): 2339-2365.
- [28] Indeed, ideologically, we are witnessing the curious crystallization of a transnational alliance of secular and religious nationalists, racists, Islamophobes, anti-Semites, misogynists, homophobes, and aporophobes (haters of poor people), which, in turn, may be (re)galvanizing progressive-liberal-moderate conservative coalitions. Such a coalition, in 2020, carried Joseph Biden to the White House, and in 2025 elected a "democratic socialist" as mayor of New York city, and a progressive prime minister in Ireland.
- [29] Justin Rosenberg, "International Relations in the Prison of Political Science," *International Relations* 30, no.2, pp.127-153.
- [30] Such partnerships are enhanced, moreover, by leverage engendered by competition for influence by great powers . Soulé, Folashadé. "Navigating the Multiplexity of Africa's Digital Partnerships amidst Global Rivalry." *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2025): ksaf114.
- [31] "The West as we knew it no longer exists," von der Leyen says amid Trump tensions," *Euronews*, 16 April 2025, Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/04/16/the-west-as-we-knew-it-no-longer-exists-von-der-leyen-says-amid-trump-tensions>
- [32] Manners, Ian. "Normative power in the planetary organic crisis." *Cooperation and Conflict* 60, no. 3 (2025): 422-439.

- [33] See, for example, John Urry, J., 2005. The complexity turn. *Theory, culture & society*, 22(5), pp.1-14 and Milja Kurki, 2022. "Relational revolution and relationality in IR: New conversations," *Review of International Studies* 48, no.5, pp.821-836
- [34] "Layering" refers to the grafting of new elements onto extant institutions or practices—oftentimes a gradualist strategy for actors who lack the resources for more radical change; conversion refers to the repurposing of extant features of a system for new ends; drift refers to shifts in an institution or practice due not to conscious design a lack of will or capacity to recorrect. See, for example, James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, eds. *Advances in comparative-historical analysis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015).
- [35] For example, the liberal/progressive/non-MAGA-conservative alliance that brought Biden to power but collapsed over divergent views on Gaza, *de facto* boosting Trump's electoral triumph. For more on when, how, and why such coalitions coalesce and collapse, see Fisher-Onar, *Contesting Pluralism(s)...* (2025)
- [36] Weinhardt, Clara, and Deborah Barros Leal Farias. "Developing countries in global trade governance: comparing norms on inequality in the WTO and GSP schemes." *Review of International Political Economy* (2025), pp.1239-1265.
- [37] Gzik, Michał, Tomasz Kamiński, and Natalia Matiaszczyk. "Fragile ties: exploring city diplomacy in times of crises." *Contemporary Politics* (2025), pp.1-24.
- [38] Ayoob, Mohammed. "Inequality and theorizing in international relations: The case for subaltern realism." *International Studies Review* 4, no.3 (2002): 27-48.
- [39] Chan Ho-Him, "China's Trade Surplus surges 20% to a record \$1.2 trillion, even with Trump's tariffs," APNews, 14 January 2026. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/china-economy-trade-surplus-record-59f6fcc80ee3afc204a024f57766d319>