

The Premodern World

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Introduction

Engagements with the premodern world within disciplinary IR have so far been limited, and focused on specific periods and spaces. Medieval Europe concentrates most of the attention - as in the standard narrative it is the "precursor to the Westphalian order that arose in Europe and was imposed from there onto the rest of the world" (Buzan and Albert 2010, 332). Beyond that, premodern East Asia and ancient Greece have also captured scholarly focus. Conversely, other places and times have largely been ignored: premodern Africa and America stand as chief examples, but also to a large extent the Islamic World and Central Asia (Watson 1992, and Ferguson and Mansbach 1996 being the most notable exceptions).

Rather than examining each locale separately, in this chapter I adopt a systematic approach. Indeed, speaking of 'the premodern world' immediately raises the problem of the boundaries and nature of a world that exists as the 'pre' of modernity. And yet, the temporal boundaries of the modern international, and particularly its starting point, are fiercely contested. The twelfth century Renaissance, the Italian *quattrocento*, the fall of Constantinople and invention of the printing press in 1453, the Columbus' 1492 voyage, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, the French Revolution or the long 19th century are but a few of the moments that have been put forwards as the dividing lines between the premodern and modernity. In these debates the premodern world is less the focus of substantive engagement than the residual category left for 'international relations before us' - at least for those of us who believe that modernity is not over yet. The name itself already de-voids the premodern from all independent standing and analytical power, turning it into a dependent concept for what happened before the modern. And yet, as Kathleen Davis remarks, "periodisation is never the simple drawing of a line through time, but a complex process of conceptualising categories, which posited as homogeneous and retroactively validated by the designation of a period divide" (Davis 2015, 73). In this view, the debates between different benchmark dates are less a matter of factual contestation and more dependent on substantively different ways of understanding premodernity and modernity.

In this chapter I draw on this insight to examine the common conceptual categories through which the premodern international world - and thus by extension its modern opposite - has been approached, and interrogate both what types of questions these different (pre)moderns

enable us to pose, but also what types of inquiry about history and our present they preclude. In particular I focus on four common ways of tackling the premodern world that respectively emphasize its religiosity, localism, complexity, and similarity to the present. As is evident from this brief enumeration, these conceptualisations are sometimes contradictory, and yet by no means mutually exclusive. In contrast, I consider what insights it could yield to have an alternative conceptualisation of premodern world, one which places plurality, diversity, and global interconnectedness centerstage. Approaching the premodern in this way, however, raises serious questions about concepts and methods and ultimately calls into question the use of the 'premodern' itself.

The Religious Premodern: pluralising the premodern.

A first narrative about the dividing line between premodern and modern concerns religion and secularism, and particularly the characterisation of the premodern world as dominated by religion - and of modernity as correspondingly secular. The centrality of this narrative is given by the preponderance of medieval Europe in disciplinary explorations of the premodern, but is also present in the treatment of other periods and spaces, such as the insistence on the 'Confucian order' in the case of premodern China.

The focus on religion in the case of medieval Europe starts with the naming itself: both classic and more recent takes refer to the period as the 'International Relations in Christendom' or 'Medieval Latin Christendom' (Brown, Nardin, and Rengger 2002, Latham 2011). In this reading, medieval Europe's distinctive feature was its religious (Christian) character. Institutionally, this meant the centrality of the Church in the organisation of society, in terms of religious rites, but most importantly as a governance structure that paralleled, competed with, and in some cases ruled over secular rulers. This centrality of religion extended also to ideas and identities. In political thought, Christian texts constituted the basis for thinking about the organization of society, and thus IR scholars frequently draw attention to the writings of theologians like Agustin and Aquinas. At the level of identities, Christianity constituted the basis for collective identification, which led to a number of structural antagonisms and conflict with other confessionalitys (Keene 2005, Alkopher 2005, Latham 2011, Costa Lopez 2016).

The focus on the religious Middle Ages also conditions how the passage to modernity is viewed, with the Reformation and the Peace of Westphalia being the main benchmarks. Indeed, the cultural unity of Latin Christendom was shattered at the turn of the sixteenth century with Luther's rejection of the role of the Latin Church. This was not only a matter of theology, but radically altered the traditional legitimating bases of authority upon which the late-medieval order rested (Phillips 2010). And even more, it also had a significant impact on and political networks and patterns of association and mobilisation. In this reading, the proliferation of confessions fundamentally altered the dynamics between rulers and ruled in composite polities, leading to a system-wide crisis and subsequent transformation (Nexon 2009). While it is still possible to speak of 'Christian international society' well into the seventeenth century (Bull 2012, 26ff.), the Reformation and the Wars of Religion are conventionally seen as a moment of crisis. The resolving moment of this convulse period was the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. The Treaties of Münster and Osnabrück instituted the

principle of *cuius regio eius religio* - whose realm, their religion. Although normally read as a territorialising move (De Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson 2011, Osiander 2001b), the emphasis on the religious Middle Ages turns Westphalia also into a secularizing one by which religion was removed from being a principle for managing international affairs and confined to the internal domain.

This conventional story about the religious Middle Ages and their demise has been challenged in a number of ways. Recent works in the tradition of political theology emphasize that this 'whig' narrative of progressive secularisation (Davis 2012) hides the fundamental role of medieval theology in the constitution of modern ideas, and thus the fundamental continuities and similarities between medieval and modern internationalisms (Gillespie 2008, Bain 2017). For example, they convincingly show how the purportedly secular IR imaginary of sovereignty and anarchy rests on fundamentally theological notions (Bain 2014). And yet, it is worth noting that in IR these efforts have been mostly directed at challenging the secular understanding of modernity but have left the religious nature of the medieval unproblematised, particularly when it comes to finding bases for identity and legitimations of political authority. This stands in contrast with a burgeoning historical literature which opens up a variety of alternative avenues of inquiry. On the one hand, there are good reasons to challenge the unimodal understanding of religious constructions that underpin traditional approaches to medieval religiosity (Costa Lopez 2016, Catlos 2014) or even point out to the specific historical construction of the concept of religion itself in a way that challenges the universality with which it is used (Boyarin 2004). Beyond this, however, there is a wide historiographical basis that opens up avenues for the examination of alternative (secular) bases of identification and political action. Starting with Susan Reynolds' seminal work *Kingdoms and Communities*, a large literature examines a variety of lay modes of identification, solidarity, and political organization that explicitly draw us away from totalising understandings of premodern religiosity.

Interestingly, this relative dearth of IR scholarship critical with the religious nature of medieval Europe and its effects stands in contrast to the growth in literature challenging the religious-philosophical view of premodern Asia. The conventional wisdom of a Confucian Sinocentric order is well established. Confucianism, straddling the division between 'religion' and 'philosophy', is an ancient philosophy understood to have placed emphasis on natural harmony and, politically, on pacifism. As the official ideology of the millennia-long Imperial era (221 BCE - 1911 CE), this inherent pacifism is credited for having produced long periods of stability in the context of a hierarchical system (Kelly 2011). The so-called tributary system was a specific international order that placed China in a superior position relative to other Asian polities, which were incorporated into the order through paying tribute and acknowledging the superiority of the Imperial polity (Lee 2016). This gave the Imperial China specific governing rights over them, even if they conducted most of their affairs autonomously. According to both IR scholarship and historiography, this system was maintained thanks to a Confucian cultural substrate. And it was this substrate that, in contrast to modern notions of sovereign equality, allowed for a hierarchy that maintained a long *pax sinica* (Kang 2010, Zhang and Buzan 2012). Conversely -mirroring in this sense the argument about the externally hostile medieval Christendom - those polities that were not accepted

within the Confucian system were constructed as 'barbarians' and subjected to much harsher and violent treatment (Phillips 2018).

However, some recent works which rely on different bodies of sources have sought to challenge this Confucian narrative. First, they have pointed out that Confucianism - much like any other tradition of thought - is extremely diverse. As such, reducing its implications for international politics to religious pacifism constitutes an instance of "selection bias" (Hui 2018, 149), that, we may add, makes it fit into a particular modern/premodern binary. Most importantly, they have pointed out that this is a fundamentally Sino-centric view, which takes for granted Chinese representations of the relations but fails to examine the perspective of subordinate polities and in doing so exaggerates the religious-based peacefulness (Tin-bor Hui Forthcoming). Doing so, they argue, reveals that the Confucian Peace was actually underpinned by coercive mechanisms that ensured compliance of even those subordinate polities that had been traditionally seen as fully integrated into the Sino-Centric order (Wang 2011).

The local, simple Premodern: globalising the premodern.

A second approach to the premodern world is to emphasize its local, simple, and isolated character. When referring to the period from 3500 BC to 1500 AD, Buzan and Little, for example, claim that "there is a certain static quality about this whole gigantic era" (Buzan and Little 2000, 165). This is not an isolated instance: the claim that premodern – and especially medieval – politics took place at a small, local scale is almost a commonplace (Osiander 2001a). This characterization ultimately draws from a long tradition in social theory that sees human evolution as a progressively complexifying process. In its Durkheimian iterations, it puts forward a developmental narrative of societies whereby they evolve from simple segmentary differentiation via premodern stratificatory differentiation into modern, functional differentiation (Buzan and Albert 2010). Functional differentiation is in this view the hallmark of modern society, where progressive specialization creates a variety of separate spheres that require different modes of social integration. Conversely, the premodern appears as either segmentary or stratificatorily differentiated: a realm of the local or regionally specific, of traditional politics, and static orders - as it is only in modernity that a larger scale of politics becomes possible. Indeed, when taken from an international perspective, this is a (teleological) story about progressive globalization, whereby societies evolve from localized modes of existence to have increasingly more interaction, culminating in a globalized world (Holmes and Standen 2018).

Interestingly enough, there are differing accounts of what constitutes this global modernity. For some, the Columbian exchange in 1492 marks the breaking point (Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017). On the one hand, for the first time it marks the existence of a global-scale international system through the opening of sea lanes and the development of a global political economy (Buzan and Lawson 2014, 438), but also through the development of new, specific global imaginaries (Lobo-Guerrero 2019). On the other hand, this also means the inception of modern colonialism and thus the creation of a series of power structures that persist until now (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004). For other scholars, however, this move into modernity only took place in the long nineteenth century. In this account, transformations such as

industrialization, along with the emergence of new ideologies, meant a fundamental shift in the mode of power that altered the way in which international politics could be conducted, and thus its very nature (Buzan and Lawson 2015).

What all these different periodizations have in common is their reliance on a local, static, or restricted notion of the premodern. Against this, a burgeoning literature in history – and to a lesser extent in IR – points to the existence of multiple premodern connections, mobilities, and globalities. Featuring, for example, calls for a Global Middle Ages, the wager behind these approaches is that the features that have commonly been seen as the hallmark of modern dynamism and globalities are not exclusive to the modern period (Holmes and Standen 2018). On the contrary, long-distance trade, migrations, multi-ethnic polities, and cultural interconnections were all features of premodern international relations, as much as of modern ones (Bentley 1993). Viewed from this perspective, the claims about the local and simple premodern world are but conceptual straightjackets that prevent us from seeing a variety of phenomena and dynamics. For example, large amounts of literature have been devoted to the Silk Roads. Entirely crossing Eurasia by land, the first traces of established contacts and pathways date back to at least the 2nd century BC. Over the span of almost two millennia, the Silk Roads provided a platform not only for long-distance trading of goods, but also for intense cultural interactions, diffusion, and innovation among various peoples. (Hansen 2012, Beckwith 2011).

The point about global premodernity goes beyond developing analytics that make the existence of connections visible. Rather, a global and connected view of premodernity would force us to understand that seemingly local developments cannot be accounted for without paying attention to these larger connections and interactions. International historical sociologists, for example, have repeatedly made the case for the fundamental role of the East in the development of the West. In this reading, the non-Western premodern civilizations were interlinked into a form of oriental globalization whereby fundamental innovations were first developed in the premodern East and only then came to be appropriated by the West (Hobson 2004). These ranged from technical inventions, such as the printing press, to fundamental conceptual developments, such as the recovery of Aristotelian philosophy through the work of Jewish and Muslim writers. In this sense, the formulation in terms of ‘East’ and ‘West’, while useful for the purpose of challenging the Eurocentrism of some traditional accounts of medieval history, need not obscure the complex webs of relations between polities that facilitated exchange, transmission and modification: beyond the fundamental role of Muslim polities in the transmission of classical thought, the nomadic Mongol empire, for example, was crucial not only for the circulation of navigational techniques and gunpowder, but also for the transmission of the Black Death in the fourteenth century, which had profound repercussions in political and social organization (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015).

Abandoning the focus on the static, local premodern is also crucial if we are to develop a better awareness of historical processes of spatialisation and territorialisation. A consequence of the local assumption that underpins the study of the premodern world is not only that studies tend to stay limited to one geographical area, but also that the notion of what constitutes a relevant geographical locale is not derived from a historicist understanding, but rather from modern conceptualisations that are retrospectively imposed. Consider the notion

of the study of medieval 'Europe' or 'Asia': these are neither neutral terms nor historically informed self-descriptions, but rather loaded modern spatial imaginaries. As such, they substantially limit what is made visible by creating transhistorical geographical spaces that do not capture the existing patterns of interaction. Against this, an understanding of the premodern that does not do away with its globalities yields a variety of alternative spatial configurations that were politically relevant and should thus receive analytical attention. Within a Marxist tradition, Janet Abu-Lughod's now classic *Before European Hegemony* already made the case for the existence of at least eight circuits of sustained interaction that escape modern spatial divisions (Abu-Lughod 1989, in IR see Phillips 2017). More broadly, the focus maritime basins in both IR and historiography also points in the direction of changing spatial understandings (Bentley 1999). Although specifically in IR most attention has been devoted to these spaces since 1500 in the context of examinations of colonial encounters (Phillips and Sharman 2015), there have been a proliferating number of historiographical studies on premodern seas and oceans. Studies of the premodern Mediterranean, for example, have shown how such a focus yields novel insights on trade, interaction, conflict and coexistence that transform the way in which we think about premodern international relations (Horden and Purcell 2000, Catlos and Kinoshita 2017). Not only this, but they have also shown how a focus on as specific locale as a sea can help challenge the imagination of the premodern as local and highlight the many global connections and dynamics (Abulafia 2011).

The complex Premodern: making the premodern intelligible.

Interestingly, the classical narrative in IR about the emergence of the modern state - encapsulated in the Westphalian myth (Oslander 2001b) - presents a diametrically opposed view to those who see the premodern in terms of simplicity. The story is well-known: the European Middle Ages were characterized by a heteronomous organizing principle: that is, not conforming to the norms of sovereignty and statehood, they were organized around a variety of 'overlapping authorities and multiple loyalties' (Bull 2012, 245, similarly, Ruggie 1998). The resulting variety of actors that populated medieval Europe - from lords to kings, churches to merchants and monks - interacted with one another on the basis of fundamentally different understandings of social organization: lacking a distinction between public and private, and between political authority and property, they operated by making specific claims under the universalist ideologies of the Holy Roman Empire and the Latin Church. It was not until the reformation broke the monopoly of this universalisms, and the Renaissance recovered ancient concepts of politics, that this medieval heteronomy was overcome and the modern international emerged (Philpott 2001). This involved a fundamental transformation of the political imagination: political communities were delimited through a territorialised inside/outside scheme, and all political authority was seen as emanating from a single sovereign point (Walker 1993).

Much like in the previous case, this understanding of the premodern, in this case the medieval, presents an evolutionary narrative about the emergence of modernity. And yet, this narrative is very much opposed to the standard complexifying one in social theory, for it sees the transition to modernity as a simplifying move. The change towards an organizing principle

of sovereign equality meant the concentration not only of political authority into sovereign hands, but also the establishment of a segmentary mode of differentiation by which all states fulfilled the same functions and were thus regarded as equal to one another and fundamentally distinct from all other actors. Although the ill-fitting dynamics of imperialism and colonialism would at first sight seem to challenge this, they can nevertheless be reconciled by pointing to their progressive incorporation into the simplified, segmentary order of states (Bull 1985).

Interestingly, a number of recent works have challenged some elements of this periodization and relocated the fundamental break to the 12th century Renaissance (Benson, Constable, and Lanham 1987). Politically, the so-called Investiture controversy confronted the Church and secular rulers, creating space for the development of alternative political imaginaries (Hall 1997). As a result, from this perspective the era of sovereignty and the state would have begun much earlier than the Reformation, with both the appearance of particularist discourses and the development of bureaucracies (Latham 2012). Doing so opens up the door for thinking beyond the pre/modern divide, and, for example, think historically about different forms of statehood and nested sovereignty (Canning 2011). At the same time, however, the overarching narrative about politics before the (now relocated) state remains fundamentally the same.

Indeed, while both narratives have a distinctive understanding of what constitutes modernity - an international society of states - it sheds little light on the premodern, as it does not provide much substantive characterization of it beyond its complexity. Highlighting the extent to which periodization is an act of conceptualisation that attributes features to the periods on both sides of the line, most characterizations of the medieval in this tradition limit themselves to portraying the mirror opposite of the modern system: where the modern has public authority, the medieval has private; where the modern has territoriality, the medieval has fuzzy borders; where the modern has a system of multiple sovereign polities, the medieval has universalist claims of Church and empire (Hall and Kratochwil 1993, Costa Lopez 2020). This stark opposition, and the superficial engagement with the premodern that ensues, reach sometimes the extreme of completely depriving the medieval from any independent character, by just portraying it as (literally) non-modern: "insofar as medieval politics can be summed up, it was simply a system that lacked sovereignty" (Philpott 2000, 78). It would seem that, as Buzan and Little claim, "existing [IR] concepts simply cannot begin to capture the complexity of medieval political organization" (Buzan and Little 2000, 244).

This contrasts with a wealth of literature in not only history but also a number of other disciplines that, far from understanding the premodern as irreducibly complex, use it to develop an original conceptual vocabulary that aids with modern and premodern alike. Research on nomadic societies from an international relations perspective provides a case in point that can help pluralise the sites of study. Central Eurasian steppe nomads, for example, were agrarian societies which migrated in order to ensure grazing grounds for their flocks and herds. This also meant that they regularly came into contact with a variety of other groups - nomadic or sedentary- leading not only the development of specific raiding capabilities but also a variety of institutionalised ways of managing this plurality of polities. While the gregarious existence itself already challenges one of the more common IR assumptions about sedentarism and, ultimately, territoriality (Agnew 1994), their potential for novel theorisation goes well beyond it. The plurality of groups that came into contact

meant that rather than basing order and institutionalisation in ethnic or linguistic commonality, as is generally the starting point for most IR theorizing (Reus-Smit 2017), specific forms of authority and leadership became central in articulating the coexistence of the groups and their belonging to a common polity (Neumann and Wigen 2018). The ensuing polity form – comprising not only nomadic but also sedentary groups – was distinctly hierarchical, adaptable and diverse providing interesting points of connection with current interest in diversity regimes and hybridization (Phillips and Reus-Smit 2020, Kwan 2015).

Finally, nomadic societies challenge our existing frameworks in a different way: we noted in the previous section how a common take on the premodern derives from social theory's grand narrative of progressive complexity. This is of course a historically embedded narrative that temporalizes differences between human societies and situates nomadism as a primitive "condition from which they [nomads] were rescued by the establishment of the state" (Ringmar 2020, 46). The binary between nomads and the state is also an analytical one that has been productive of the idea of the state itself and with it of a particular understanding of modernity – even when the modern coexistence and entanglement of states, sedentary polities, and nomads is a well-documented fact. An unpacking of (pre)modern nomadic societies is thus something which can help transcend and historicise these binaries, illustrating that an alternative to the complex premodern is not necessarily an exercise in importing historiography but also, advancing some of the reflections in the conclusion, about realising that the fundamental division between premodern and modern not only hinders our understanding of the former, but also blinds us about the features of the latter.

The Premodern is us.

A final way of engaging with the premodern world has been taking to heart Wight's characterization of the international "as realm of recurrence and repetition" (Wight 1966, 26). As opposed to the previous takes, which were predicated on the notion of a fundamental rupture between premodern and modern, these authors (more or less explicitly) challenge this by emphasizing continuities or, at the very least, the possibility of thinking about the both within one same conceptual scheme. This argument has been put in reference to a variety of locales, from the Middle Ages to the Chinese Warring States (Fischer 1992, Zhang 2003, Hui 2004, Tin-bor Hui 2005).

However, it has been most commonly accepted in relation to Ancient Greece during the so-called Classical era from about 500 to 100 BC. The region at the time was populated by a number of small city-states, which, although having very different forms of political organization, regularly interacted with one another: they traded, waged wars, or engaged in diplomacy. On the one hand, scholars have focused on the conflict dynamics, both through histories of war but also through an overwhelming attention to Thucydides' infamous Melian dialogue (Keene 2015). Through this, they have sought to prove how conflict dynamics in Classical Greece paralleled current international politics (Gilpin 1981). On the other hand, these city-states also exhibited a variety of cooperative interaction patterns, from mediation to third-party arbitration, that have led some to see this as a first instance of an international society (Watson 1992, Wight 1977). In both these literatures, Ancient Greece "stands as one of the great analogues of the modern state system, a familiar world of independent states in

which the eternal verities of international politics are thought to have appeared in their most rudimentary and essential form” (Reus-Smit 1999, 40).

The Italian Renaissance is afforded a similar status. Straddling the conventional periodization for the medieval-to-modern transition, the existence of a plurality of polities in northern Italy in the long fifteenth century is taken to have been constituted a distinctive international system. Although constitutionally they differed - from republican Florence, to absolutist Milan and the Papal states – these polities shared a common culture and had similar understandings of authority and politics (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996). Over the fifteenth century many of them saw the concentration of political power in the hands of individual families, from the Medici in Florence to the Visconti in Milan. In a context of revival of classical literature and increased wealth, this led a number of political thinkers – Machiavelli and Guicciardini being the most commonly cited ones- to reflect on the power of the ruler and develop a political vocabulary to capture this situation. Moreover, these Italian city-states also maintained regular interactions through a historically-specific diplomatic system that saw the first resident ambassadors. Overall, although the revival of the Habsburg empire at the beginning of the sixteenth century saw the end of the relative independence these polities enjoyed, the distinctive patterns of interaction have allowed IR scholars to speak of a genuine international system (Watson 1992).

These two cases exemplify how the claim of the fundamental similarity between modern and premodern international relations rests, surprisingly, on the same international imaginary that we saw in the previous section: that of a number of coexisting states, be it as units under anarchy or as an international society (Waltz 1979, Butcher and Griffiths 2017). This assumption that there is something in common between spaces and times where a number of more-or-less independent political communities interact with one another has received severe criticism (for a recent example see Nexon 2017). The debate is not exclusive to IR, but rather echoes broader discussions in a number of socially-oriented fields (Davies 2003, Wimmer and Schiller 2003). Ultimately, it boils down to the thorny question of how far our modern concepts can travel. Particularly relevant here is the charge of ahistoricism, that is, that this claim rests on a projection of modern ideas and conceptual schemes unto past times to an extent that it fundamentally distorts their nature. In the case of the concept of the state and sovereignty, linchpins of the imaginary of the international, the argument highlights how these concepts cannot be reduced to the appearance of independence or the presence of more-or-less supreme authority, but rather they rest on a number of historically specific distinctions such as public and private, or indeed between state and society. As a result, making concepts like the state or sovereignty travel in time beyond their circumscribed historical contexts constitutes an anachronistic exercise (Costa Lopez et al. 2018), insofar as the distinctions upon which they rest were unthinkable.

And yet, for all the critiques of ahistoricism, radical historicism that would maintain the uniqueness of the premodern seems equally untenable. We have already seen that in most of the narratives the distinctiveness of the premodern was not necessarily a matter of historical investigation, but rather an exercise in ex-ante conceptualisation on the basis of a specific assumed narrative about the emergence of modernity. In this sense, they constitute but a variation of a historicism which would start from the premise that each specific premodern time and place "exists as such, out there, in the splendid isolation of a past whose essence has

nothing to do with our present" (Fasolt 2014, 86). In other words, the assumption of a fundamental division between premodern and modern, as we have seen, is not a historical given but rather constitutes as much of an assumption as the timelessness of the international.

Conclusion.

The previous sections have examined a number of ways in which the premodern is commonly portrayed through the lens of periodization, that is, by unpacking the conceptualisations that are ascribed to specific periods. Doing so has revealed not only common understandings of the premodern as religious, local, complex and also similar to us, but also some of the alternatives to doing so. However, the point of highlighting these different understandings, and their restrictions, is not to arrive at a 'true' characterization of the premodern, nor is it to find the correct periodization. On the contrary, the matter of periodization is such that any attempts at settling it risk drawing one into an "interminable rabbit warren of nominalist anxieties" (Strathern 2018, 317). Where do we go from here? In this concluding section I consider some potential challenges in light of the broad theme of granularity in this volume. To begin with, we may observe that the majority of studies of the premodern in IR operate at a high level of generality. This 'generality', however, operates in at least two ways: at the level of research practice, by relying on secondary literature, and at the level of the type of questions, by inquiring mostly into system-level features in broad sways of time and space rather than about specific events or interactions.

There are some very good reasons for relying on historiography: for one, sources for the examination of premodern processes are – in broad terms – scarcer than for contemporary ones. Not only the evolution of record-keeping and archiving practices mean that it is comparatively easier to access modern records for a variety of topics, but it is hard to overestimate the impact of the passage of time, disaster, and willful destruction for the loss and damaging of older sources. Thus, more and more frequently, historiographical approaches to a number of premodern topics make use of sources, methods, and approaches with which IR scholars are generally unfamiliar: from archaeology to environmental science, the premodern frequently requires interdisciplinary collaboration. Moreover, the number of languages and contexts that it would be necessary to master if we were to follow the suggestions of this chapter and unpack premodern global connections and entanglement is almost insurmountable not only for IR scholars but also for historians. Similarly, there is a priori no reason to eliminate certain types of questions about the premodern nor to discard periodization as a mode of historical knowledge: periodization is always a creation that constrains our knowledge about the past – and yet, at the same time we cannot know the past without conceptualising it. And conceptualisation, while not being reducible to it, necessarily involves a temporal dimension that creates divisions in time, that is, periodizes.

However, taken together the works examined in this chapter reveal an approach operating at a level of abstraction and generality that mostly serve to confirm – and conform to- specific grand evolutionary narratives about the emergence of modernity. Indeed, more than enable specific knowledge, the category of the 'premodern' appears to work to preclude any surprises and confirm preconceptions. By creating a division between a previous time and us, it inscribes this binary as foundational to the inquiry – or alternatively elides all differences.

While it is impossible to conduct research on any topic without specific conceptualisations, when this is added to the first dimension of generality – the reliance on secondary literature – this sets up a mode of research that leads to subsuming the premodern under the pre-established categories and narratives, rather than allow for a dialogical process between historical data and concepts (Herborth 2017).

How could such a dialogical process operate? As a brief illustration, let us confront a quintessentially 'modern' dynamic - colonialism - against some specific 14th and 15th century events, operating a different level of granularity. IR has remained focused on the singularity of 1492 as the moment that "changed the nature of IR" (Buzan and Lawson 2014, 453). However, starting in the mid-fourteenth century, expeditions by Mediterranean sailors ventured progressively south along the African Atlantic coast, encountering a number of societies previously unknown to them (Abulafia 2008). Understanding these through the pre/modern divide poses immediate challenges. The expeditions drew on Mediterranean and Iberian practices, and can thus be inscribed in longstanding medieval traditions (Fernández-Armesto 1987). At the same time, however, many of the practices of Early Modern colonialism in America and beyond, including the Portuguese Factory system, black slave circuits, and large-scale plantations were pioneered in these encounters. Examining some detailed contemporary accounts would not only reinforce these interpretative problems of the pre/modern heuristic, but also raise interesting possibilities. Venetian sailor Alvise Cà da Mosto, for example, could at once describe different peoples he encountered in his 1455 trip as 'white moors', 'very black' or 'brownish... wearing hair... in German fashion' (Cà da Mosto 1507, 21r, 30v, 10r, my translation). Given current academic interest in politics of race (Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2015), what could this tell us about notions of collectivities? In what way may it help us develop a different historical account of the emergence of racial structures?

The point is thus not to relocate benchmark dates of modernity, nor to adjudicate which dynamics are modern and which ones medieval, not even to bypass the category of the 'premodern' altogether. Rather, it is that approaching the premodern with periodization-derived preconceptions about its significance prevents us from doing anything but confirming our own prejudices - whatever those may be. And with that, what we lose is the possibility of being surprised, and thus challenged, in our knowledge about past and present alike. For, as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, what is at stake in the premodern is not only our historical knowledge but also our knowledge about the present. As Skinner (2002, 6) noted, it is only by being openly confronted with the past that can help us attain a "broader sense of possibility."

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