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Political Invisibility: Structural Realism and The Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation

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Abstract: This research critically examined the intersection of structural realism, normativity, and political invisibility, with a particular focus on its implications for peripheral actors in international relations (IR), exemplified by the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation. Based on the assumption that structural realism governs Western foreign policy, the research investigated the possibility of political invisibility not as an indication of weakness but as a strategic method for political liberation. Through a theoretical analysis that contrasted the normative assumptions of structural realism with critical theory, a qualitative methodology, integrating a critical literature review and a case study analysis were employed in the research in order to dissect the dynamics of political invisibility and its potential as an emancipatory force.

The results indicated that political invisibility, when utilised effectively, can function as a subversive instrument enabling marginalised actors such as the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation to maneuver through and capitalise on the normative oversights of structural realism. This subversion challenges conventional IR perspectives by demonstrating how marginalised groups can assert agency and sovereignty despite systemic exclusion from central dialogues and decision-making processes.

The scientific novelty of this study lay in its focused critique of structural realism through the lens of political invisibility and the politics of refusal, offering a unique perspective on the agency of

peripheral actors in IR. Its practical significance emerges from the potential applications of these insights in fostering a more inclusive and equitable global political discourse, emphasising the strategic potential of invisibility for political mobilisation and emancipation.

By positioning political invisibility as a catalyst for emancipatory politics, this research contributed to a broader discourse on power dynamics within IR, challenging established norms and suggesting a paradigm shift towards recognising and leveraging the political agency of marginalised actors.

Keywords: Structural Realism, Political Invisibility, Liminality, Coxian Critical Theory.

Introduction

The argumentative structure of this document was predicated upon the following foundational premises: Firstly, (1) it suggested that contemporary western foreign policy was primarily dictated by *structural realism*¹ (Shimko, 1992) and that the west's positionality within the global hegemonic core had monopolised such structural realist tenants in the international arena (Portes & Walton, 2013). Secondly, (2) it posited that structural realism was intrinsically contingent upon normative assumptions with such exposé of normativity undergirding structural realism not only underscored by *Coxian critical theorists*² (CCT) (Cox, 1981) but also corroborated by prominent structural realists, including Kenneth Waltz (2010). Fourthly, (4) such *ontological*³ and *epistemological*⁴ normative assumptions undergirding structural realism precluded a systematic occlusion of certain political actors referred to by both this document as well as Selina Gallo-Cruz as: *political invisibility*⁵ (Gallo-Cruz, 2020). Fifthly, (5) this document suggested that this state of political invisibility, rather than rendering peripheral actors impotent, could potentially serve as a subversive tool. Certainly, when utilised effectively, such political invisibility could enable a form of emancipatory politics for these actors, enabling them to navigate and potentially exploit the blind spots inherent within structural realism's normative presumptions. Lastly, (6) in investigating the mobilisation of political invisibility into praxis, this paper shifted its focus to Audra Simpson's concept of the politics of refusal (Simpson, 2014), which involved marginalised communities consciously rejecting externally imposed political identities and sovereignties, and instead asserting their own governance, cultural practices, and identities on their own terms. This investigation aimed to explore how these ideas are relevant to the political emancipation of the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation, using it as a case study. Ultimately, such conclusion served to situate Simpson's 'politics of refusal' as a prospective way of commandeering

¹*Structural realism*, in IR, posits that the anarchic nature of the international system, characterised by the absence of a central authority, compels states to prioritise their own security and power, leading to a pattern of competitive interactions shaped primarily by the distribution of power among states.

²*Coxian critical theory*, rooted in the work of Robert W. Cox, posits that the structures of global order are historically contingent, emphasising the interplay between material capabilities, ideas, and institutions in shaping social forces and the world economy, with a focus on transformative potential and the critique of power relations.

³*Ontology* in critical theory refers to the study of the nature of being, existence, or reality within the context of social, cultural, and political constructs.

⁴*Epistemology* in critical theory examines the nature, origin, and limits of knowledge, focusing on how societal power dynamics influence our understanding of truth and reality.

⁵Here, *political invisibility* refers to actors that are ontologically/epistemologically excluded from dominant paradigms.

structural realism's normative blind spots and leveraging one's resulting political invisibility as an effective form of praxis.

Research Problem

The core issue under examination in this research was the paradoxical capacity of political invisibility, within the context of structural realism in IR, particularly as it pertained to peripheral actors like the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation. The structural realism, with its focus on the anarchic international system and the primacy of state actors, often overlooks or inherently marginalises non-state actors, relegating them to a status of political invisibility. This marginalisation is not merely a byproduct of the theoretical framework but a reflection of the *realpolitik* considerations that prioritise power dynamics among sovereign states over the agency and aspirations of indigenous nations and other non-state entities.

The Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation, as a case study, encapsulated the challenges and opportunities stemming from such political invisibility. Despite facing systemic exclusion and marginalisation from the central dialogues and decision-making processes that define international relations, peripheral actors like the Mohawk Nation continue to assert their sovereignty and pursue their emancipatory goals. This scenario raised critical questions about the efficacy and ethics of the structural realist framework in accommodating the complexities of modern international relations, where non-state actors play increasingly significant roles.

The research problem, therefore, lay in exploring how the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation, and by extension, other peripheral actors, maneuver within the constraints of structural realism to harness their political invisibility. This involved a critical examination of the strategies these actors employ to assert their agency and achieve their objectives, despite the theoretical and practical constraints imposed by a state-centric international system. Moreover, this problem challenges the adequacy of structural realism and similar IR theories in addressing the dynamics of international relations in a world where the lines between state and non-state actors, central and peripheral entities, are increasingly blurred.

Research Focus

This research was dedicated to exploring the potential strategies employed by peripheral actors in the international system, to leverage their political invisibility as a means to pursue emancipation. The focus was twofold: to critically examine the limitations of structural realism in accounting for the agency and influence of non-state actors in IR, and to illuminate the alternative pathways through which such actors assert their sovereignty and objectives.

Central to this examination was grasping political invisibility not merely as a consequence of systemic marginalisation within a state-centric international system, but as a prospective strategic advantage. The Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation's engagement with, and navigation of, their invisibility offered insightful perspectives on the broader dynamics of power, resistance, and sovereignty that challenge conventional IR theories.

The research specifically aimed to uncover:

(1) The theoretical underpinnings of political invisibility within structural realism and its implications for non-state actors.

(2) The actors on the periphery, despite their current state of invisibility, should resist engaging in Nancy Fraser's advocated *struggle for recognition*⁶ (Fraser, 2009). Engaging in such struggles could inadvertently dissolve their invisibility, thereby exposing them to the biopolitical apparatus of power inherent in structural realism. Rather than being passive victims of marginalisation, these peripheralised actors should harness their invisibility as a strategic asset to accomplish emancipatory goals. This approach suggested a nuanced understanding of power dynamics and the potential of invisibility as a form of resistance against dominant biopolitical structures.

(3) The potential lessons and implications these strategies hold for rethinking the role of peripheral actors in the international arena and for the theoretical frameworks that seek to understand these dynamics.

Through this focus, the study contributed to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of international relations, advocating for a theoretical expansion that accommodated the complexities and contributions of all actors involved in shaping the global landscape.

Research Aim and Questions

Building on the previously outlined research focus, this document posed the following research question: In the context of structural realism, how could peripheral actors employ political invisibility as a means to pursue emancipation? This question challenged the approach of critical theories, particularly those advocated by Fraser (2014), which emphasise the importance of recognising marginalised actors. It suggested an exploration of an alternative strategy where invisibility, rather than recognition, served as the means towards achieving emancipatory ends.

Literature Review

In the existing scholarly discourse on the nuanced mobilisation of political invisibility, this study acknowledged its intellectual debt to seminal works, notably those of Cynthia Enloe and Selina Gallo-Cruz. However, it was imperative to delineate the unique trajectory of this analysis in relation to these foundational texts. Indeed, while Gallo-Cruz embarked on an exploration of political invisibility across various "social and political spheres" (Gallo-Cruz, 2020, p. 14), and Enloe's analysis was ensconced within the parameters of orthodox IR (Enloe, 1996), encompassing (both *structural and classical*⁷) realism and *liberal internationalism*⁸ (Walt, 1998), This current investigation carved out a distinct niche by concentrating its theoretical inquiry on structural realism exclusively.

This focus was predicated on two primary justifications: the first (1) arose from the argument outlined in the initial premise of the current study's argumentative framework asserting the dominance of structural realism in shaping contemporary western foreign policy (Shimko, 1992).

⁶Nancy Fraser's politics of recognition, drawing from Hegel's philosophy, emphasises the moral imperative of recognizing and valuing peripheral identities and experiences as essential for achieving social justice and personal development.

⁷*Structural realism* focuses on the anarchic nature of the international system and its impact on state behaviour, whereas classical realism emphasises the inherent selfish tendencies and power-seeking attributes of human nature as the primary drivers of international politics.

⁸*Liberal internationalism*, within IR, advocates for a rules-based international order characterised by open markets, international institutions, and the promotion of democratic governance and human rights to achieve peace and cooperation among states.

This influence is significant given such states' pivotal roles within the *imperial core*⁹ (Portes & Walton, 2013), subsequently steering the hegemonic currents of contemporary IR. The second (2) justification addresses a tendency observed among CCT scholars. Indeed, there appears to be an inclination to perceive the unearthing of structural realism's foundational normative assumptions by CCT scholars as an epistemic coup de grâce that could ostensibly undermine the theoretical paradigm in its entirety (Legro & Moravcsik, 2014). This perspective persisted notwithstanding Kenneth Waltz's own candid acknowledgment and defence of the normative underpinnings intrinsic to his structural realist theory as a means of not adopting an overly *methodologically reductionist*¹⁰ approach (Waltz, 2010).

In light of this, this document endeavoured a targeted interrogation of the theoretical normativity that Waltz himself conceded, employing these normative assumptions as leverage points to conceptualise political invisibility as a potentially emancipatory mechanism within the realm of structural realism specifically. In this sense, this methodological approach sought to borrow from intelligence studies' insistence on "studying the enemy in order to determine the relative weak points in [structural realism's] defensive deployment" (Hecht, 2012, p. 24).

Research Methodology

General Background

This study employed critical theory to scrutinise the epistemological and ontological assumptions of conventional IR theories, aiming to expose how these theories favoured certain epistemologies aligned with power, while marginalising Indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives. Moreover, it examined the static view of central-peripheral dynamics assumed by orthodox IR, highlighting the political invisibility this created for peripheral actors. The motivation behind this methodology was to challenge and broaden the existing theoretical framework of IR by incorporating the often-overlooked perspectives and agency of peripheral actors as capable of leveraging their political invisibility.

Instrument and Procedures

Given the nature of this research, which was theoretical and critical rather than empirical, traditional participants or samples were not applicable. The study instead focused on a comprehensive review of literature and theoretical analysis within the field of IR, specifically examining the works and critiques by scholars such as Cynthia Enloe and Zeynep Gulsah Capan, among others.

The primary instrument of this research was a critical literature review, complemented by a case study analysis of the EZLN uprising. The procedures involved:

(1) The literature Review: Systematically analysing existing literature within both orthodox and critical IR theories to identify discussions around the epistemological and ontological assumptions being critiqued.

⁹The *imperial core* refers to the dominant—usually Western—countries that economically and politically exploit less developed nations, forming the centre of a global system of imperial domination and resource extraction.

¹⁰Waltz describes *methodological reductionism* as wrongly explaining IR phenomena by breaking them down to their simplest units, such as states and their internal characteristics, to understand their behaviour and interactions in the global system.

(2) The case Study Analysis: Employing the EZLN uprising as a case study to illustrate the practical implications of these theoretical assumptions and their limitations in accounting for the political agency and visibility of peripheral actors.

(3) Theoretical Critique: Applying the principles of critical theory to dissect the foundational assumptions of orthodox IR, focusing on their implications for understanding movements like the EZLN and the broader field of IR.

Data Analysis

Since this research was grounded in theoretical analysis and critique rather than empirical investigation, conventional data analysis methods were not suitable. Instead, the study utilised critical discourse analysis to assess the language and narratives present in orthodox IR scholarship. This involved the identification and critique of the normative biases that underlay the discipline's focus on state-centric dynamics and its marginalisation of peripheral actors and knowledge systems. Through this theoretical critique, the research aimed to contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of international relations, emphasising the agency and perspectives of traditionally marginalised actors.

Results

Structural Realism's Dominance: One World, One Theory

It is noted by many CCT scholars that structural realism, or neorealism, constitutes the dominant theory within contemporary IR (D'Aoust & Raoul-Dandurand, 2014). However, although many scholars in IR argue that structural realism dominated the IR field from the aftermath of the Second World War, others contend that neoliberalism, often referred to as liberal institutionalism, has supplanted structural realism as the prevailing theory since the 1970s (Whyte, 2012). Notwithstanding, this study challenges that proposition. It acknowledges, however, that both structural realism and neoliberalism incontrovertibly maintain prominence as the two leading conceptual frameworks in contemporary IR discourse (Walt, 1998). Indeed, while neoliberalism's prominence found compelling arguments in the latter half of the 20th century characterised by global austerity measures, internationally imposed structural adjustment policies (SAPs) and the Washington Consensus' forced global imposition via the Bretton Woods institutions (BWIs) (Harvey, 2005), in the 21st century, Western foreign policy appears to have repositioned itself within a neorealist framework. Indeed, even the neoliberal austerity measures previously discussed suggest an embodiment of neorealist American exceptionalism. This perspective appears marginally concerned with establishing good global economic governance and fostering economic cooperation within the Global South to help peripheral states adapt to the "strenuous conditions of the modern world" (Rajagopal, 2003). Instead, it prioritises consolidating American hegemony, particularly in forming an anti-Soviet hegemonic bloc (Rivero, 2012). This emphasis highlights a strategic inclination toward geopolitical dominance, aligning more closely with the principles of structural realism rather than genuine global economic collaboration characteristic of neoliberalism.

The pervasive influence of structural realism in the West, as per IR's "narrow range of world political events fixed from a U.S. perspective" (Smith, 2002, p. 67) is markedly evident in the period between 1970 and 1995, a time often thought of as being characterised by the ascendancy of neoliberal thought. Certainly, an analysis of scholarly publications during this period unveils a notable geographical imbalance in contributory influence and theoretical inclinations, emphasising the dominant cultural and intellectual influence of Western academia (Smith, 2000). In an in-depth

meta-analysis of IR academic journals emerging from the U.S. during this period, a striking 80% of contributing authors were identified as having affiliations with American institutions (Smith, 2000).

Beyond mere representation, within the corpus of U.S.-based scholarly literature, there is a prominent preference for structural realism; approximately 70% of the articles from this geo-intellectual locale adopted theoretical frameworks rooted in structural realist assumptions (Smith, 2000). This predilection is less pronounced, yet still notable in European journals, wherein around 30% of contributions are engaged with structural realist paradigms (Smith, 2000).

Indeed the hegemonic dominance of structural realism spearheaded by Western intelligentsia is perhaps even more notable in the advent of the present century's contemporary *collective action crises*¹¹. Notably, in this context, a collective action crisis refers to the manifestation of a *collective action problem*¹² (Ostrom, 2010) at a critical, transnational magnitude. This dilemma emerges when multiple actors, such as nation-states in this scenario, would collectively gain from a particular course of action. However, the inherent costs associated with undertaking such action deter individual participants, culminating in suboptimal or inefficient results for the collective entity (Ostrom, 2010).

To be sure, the 21st century thus far has been riddled with collective action crises that U.S. foreign policy has failed to address by falling back on structural realist proclivities. Of note, structural realism, which primarily regards nation-states as the central actors within the international arena and assumes their behaviour to be *rational*¹³ (Hollis, 1991), found its limitations exposed during the 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers, carried out by terrorists, or actors, that do not conform to the model of rational, state-centric behaviour (Hough, 2015). Therefore, the subsequent state-centric response by the U.S., involving the imposition of collective punishment (McMahan, 2008) on the nation-state of Afghanistan via "heavy-handed military tactics with the implicit assumption that every [civilian] is a threat" (Fierke, 2005, p. 55) underscored the various ways in which U.S. foreign policy remains axiomatically tied to structural realism (Campbell, 1998).

Further, the prevailing challenges of collective action crises distinct from 'terror', evident in current global concerns such as the climate crisis, mirror the structural realist, state-centric strategies universally adopted by nations within the imperial core. This reflection underscores the persistent reliance on power structures and national self-interest in the formulation of responses to transnational emergencies. In this context, manifestations of structural realism are prominently observable within the actions of hegemonic powers which prioritise their economic expansion and energy requisites, maintaining a substantial reliance on fossil fuels. Including how during negotiations pertaining to emission reduction targets and financial commitments, these states primarily employ strategies focused on safeguarding and advancing their national interests, frequently at the detriment of global ecological security (Rosen, 2015).

As such, the structural realist tenets shaping the responses of global powers towards contemporary collective action crises suggest a pivotal reassessment of IR theory. These developments present two potential historical narratives: one (1) where structural realism is experiencing a resurgence and repositioning itself as the preeminent paradigm in international

¹¹*Collective action problems* arise when individuals' self-interested behaviour leads to outcomes that are suboptimal for the group as a whole, often resulting in the failure to produce a public good or solve a common issue. *Collective action crises*—this document contends, refer to these problems at an international level with the 'individuals' in question being 'individual' nation-states.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Note *rational choice theory* as a theoretical predecessor to structural realism.

discourse, and another (2) where it has sustained its dominance since World War II, subtly steering global strategies under the ostensible pretence of neoliberalism. Nonetheless, both narratives suggest a situation whereby structural realism remains contemporarily dominant thus justifying a stand alone investigation distinct from Enloe and Gallo-Cruz's more holistic analyses.

Indeed, even amid contentions by historians of IR that foreign policy in the early 21st century has been characterised by a theoretical equipoise between structural realism and neoliberalism (Hough, 2015), such a claim maintains structural realism's profound influence. This recognition validates the analysis presented in this document, which elucidates the strategies that peripheral actors could utilise to counteract the normative deficiencies inherent in structural realism. Thus, such contentions by IR historians do not negate this document's tenets, rather advocate for future inquiry regarding the mobilisation of political invisibility within neoliberalism as a parallel form of analysis.

Structural Realism And Normativity - Coxian Critical Theory

As per Coxian Critical Theory's (CCT) discourse of International Relations (IR), Robert Cox's seminal work: *Social Forces, States and world Order* (1981), distinctly demarcates 'problem-solving theories' such as the structural realism from 'critical theories', with the first referring to theories that prescribe political remedies around what their respective theorists believe to be objective political tenants, while the latter pertains to a meta-theoretical, deconstructivist approach aimed at revealing such principles as conditioned by normative ontological and epistemological assumptions (Cox, 1981).

In this sense, CCT, constitutes a paradigm within IR that challenges the supposedly 'positivist' ontology and normative assumptions of mainstream theories by foregrounding the interplay between material capabilities, ideas, and institutions in shaping world order. This approach, emblematic of critical theory's broader engagement with power structures and emancipatory potential, interrogates how these elements collectively reproduce or transform the socio-political and economic hierarchies governing global relations. Thus, Coxian analysis distinguishes between problem-solving theories, which take the world as it is and seek to manage existing structures, and critical theories that question the foundational premises of those structures with the aim of facilitating transformative change. By emphasising the historical and social constructs of state and non-state actors' interests, Coxian Critical Theory provides a nuanced understanding of global power dynamics and the possibilities for achieving a more equitable world system. Moreover, critical theories propose that the preference for certain normative assumptions over others by problem-solving theories is not merely accidental. Instead, it reflects a deliberate ontological and epistemological strategy employed by problem-solving theories, continually generated and perpetuated to "serve someone or some purpose" with competing strains of critical theories debating what constitutes "someone or some purpose" (Cox, 1981, p. 126).

To illustrate such competition, *historical-materialism*¹⁴, as a critical theory, might critique structural realism's assumed state-centrism as materially contextual, serving the interests of capital accumulation by woefully neglecting the role of finance capital in dictating the behaviour of nation-states inside the international arena (Goodell Ugalde, 2023). Diverging from historical materialism, feminist IR – also situated within critical theory – could argue that the same foundational state-centric assumption of structural realism instead serves to produce and reproduce international patriarchy,

¹⁴*Historical materialism* is a critical theory, primarily developed by Karl Marx, that posits societal development and changes in human history are fundamentally driven by material economic forces and class struggles, rather than ideals or ideologies.

suggesting that, structural realism's unitary centring of the *Westphalian nation state*¹⁵ as its focal point of analysis internationally engenders an excessively militarised, masculinist ethos which actively contributes to the reinforcement of international patriarchal norms (Enloe, 2007).

Notwithstanding competing strains of critical theory's sectarianism as to who benefits from international hegemonic assumptions, it is also an observable trend that once critical theories venture into the realm of policy prescription, they inevitably engage with certain normative assumptions, potentially compromising their analytical objectivity and are thus rendered 'problem-solving theories' themselves (Corradetti, 2012). For example, the teleological framework of historical materialism, which is rooted in a belief in the inevitability of social and economic progression towards a specific end state (Sayers, 2019), embodies normative positions as much as structural realism does with its assumptions about state behaviour and the anarchic nature of the international system (Hough, 2020). Likewise, the dedication to economic determinism in historical materialism mirrors the state-centric approach of structural realism, as both adhere to a grand narrative that simplifies international phenomena into single causal factors (Cole, 2015). Indeed, even human security, as a critical framework, espoused by self proclaimed CCT theorist Kenneth Booth (2005) which centres human emancipation as its focal point of analysis too "has tended to be problem-solving" (Newman, 2010, p. 89) in execution.

Nonetheless, this document did not seek to criticise critical theories' prospective prescriptive contradictions nor investigate resolutions for the sectarianism arising from competing strains, rather it seeks to commandeer CCT's descriptive capabilities. That is, it is not concerned with the purpose or agenda served by the normative assumptions of structural realism. Instead, it leverages critical theories' elucidation of such assumptions as an exploitable emancipatory blind spot for peripheral actors. Indeed, by unravelling these foundational elements, critical theories, as per CCT's framework, reveal the inherently normative complexion of ostensibly objective foreign policy prescriptions embedded within structural realism, including revealing who is excluded, or invisible, from such prescriptions (Peters & Besley, 2015). Regardless of whether structural realism's normatively assumed state-centrism serves to produce and reproduce structures of capital accumulation, as per historical-materialism or structures of international patriarchy, as per feminist IR – although I would suggest, alongside Cynthia Enloe that it does both (Enloe, 1996) – what is important is noting that such normative assumption, as well as the many others espoused by structural realists, obfuscates the role of peripheral non-state actors possibly precluding undetected emancipatory praxis by these actors.

Structural Realism And Normativity – Structural Realist Corroboration

Given the accusations of normative assuming leveraged against structural realists from both CCT and critical IR scholars generally, it is worth noting that Kenneth Waltz, the pioneer of structural realism (Hollander, 2000), did not negate, rather corroborated such accusations, a stance curiously often overlooked by proponents of critical constructivist theory. To contextualise, Waltz begun his justification for structural realism with three premises: (1) laws unitarily describe political phenomena, (2) theories unitarily explain political phenomena, and (3) a comprehensive political analysis necessitated both a description and an explanation of political phenomena to be effective (Waltz, 1999). Thus, for Waltz, laws and theories, when considered in isolation, only provided the

¹⁵The *Westphalian nation-state*, refers to the contemporary nation-state model in IR, established by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and characterised by sovereign states with defined territorial borders, possessing ultimate authority within their territories, free from external interference.

necessary criterion for comprehensive political analysis and as such, must be amalgamated to establish the sufficient criteria for an effective theoretical paradigm.

Given this, Waltz, perhaps borrowing from David Hume (Hume, 2018), contended that positivism, which unitarily engaged in describing the causality of political phenomena, did not explain why such causality exists. For Waltz, observing the sun rise daily and drawing an inductive conclusion that 'the sun rises every day' did not constitute a theory. Instead, it unitarily provided a description of observed causal patterns and to believe it to be a theory conforms to what Waltz called the *inductivist fallacy*¹⁶ (Waltz, 1999, p. 3). Indeed, a genuine theory, in the Waltzian sense, is required to explain why the sun rises each day, rather than just describing its occurrence. As such, he posits that induction absent of theory holds no explanatory power, rather only descriptive power, and although theories are riddled with normative assumptions (Cox, 1981), such assumptions are axiomatically necessary for any comprehensive political analysis, that seeks to explain, not unitarily describe, political phenomena.

In juxtaposition to positivism, Waltz contended that certain theories risked overextension, thereby obscuring their core causative analyses. To recycle the prior analogy concerning the sun's rise, an overextended prospective argument might suggest that my very existence – and by extension, the gravitational pull of my mass – influences the Earth's rotation rate and, subsequently, the manner of the sun's rise. However, Waltz contended that such a peripheral hypothesis was not particularly instructive in describing the daily sunrise suggesting that instead, it risked becoming mired in minutiae, diminishing its descriptive potency regarding the central phenomenon at hand. Certainly, while a lack of a theoretical framework can indicate a positivist approach, the excessive use of theory, as demonstrated in the latter reconfigured analogy, tends more towards methodological reductionism, characterised by the effort to explain phenomena by breaking them down into increasingly smaller units (Overgaard, 2023).

Given this, in Waltz's view, while structural realism indeed contains numerous normative assumptions, a trait he concedes is inherent in all theories—as opposed to laws, which can, by contrast, be derived purely from induction—he maintains that as an international paradigm necessitates both normative theory and inductive law, structural realism, remains the most compelling framework for explaining and describing international phenomena within the context of the Westphalian nation-state system (Waltz, 1999). Indeed, the imperative integration of normative theory as an explanatory mode of engaging with empirical analysis is a common thread that appears to unite prominent scholars in the fields of both classical and structural realism, regardless of any potential divergences. Notably, Hans Morgenthau—the progenitor of classical realism—equally posits that the inductivist fallacy suggests that in crafting an IR paradigm “we can only play by ear and must be satisfied with a series of [normative] hunches which may or may not turn out to be correct” (Morgenthau, 1962).

Crucially, this text did not seek to either corroborate nor negate Waltz' and Morgenthau's necessitation of both theory and fact in crafting a holistic IR paradigm. Instead, it reiterated an alternative angle for those analysing Waltz's structural realist theory, that is: specifically, as long as both CCT theorists and structural realists agree that the structural realist paradigm is predicated on normative assumptions that ontologically conceal the agency of peripheral political actors, these

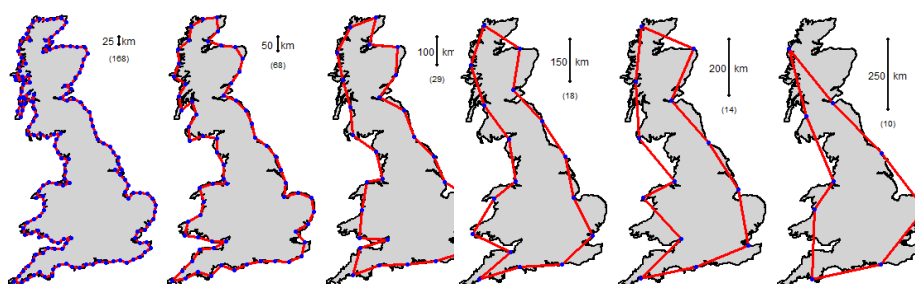
¹⁶The *inductivist fallacy* is the erroneous belief that scientific theories can be conclusively proven true through the accumulation of empirical observations alone, without considering the underlying theoretical frameworks or potential for falsification.

actors, if mobilised correctly, can paradoxically leverage their political invisibility as an unlikely tool for emancipation.

To further illustrate how peripheral or invisible actors can exploit structural realism's skepticism towards methodological reductionism and its resulting normative blind spots, we can draw an analogy with the coastline paradox. This paradox highlights the puzzling observation that a coastline's measured length can vary dramatically based on the scale of measurement employed. As one adopts a more granular measuring tool, or ruler, capturing the coastline's minute undulations, the perceived length increases (Fig. 1). In theory, as the scale of measurement is continuously reduced to infinitesimal dimensions, the length of the coastline approaches infinity (Weisstein, 2008). For Waltz and Morgenthau, such a measurement, though capturing every conceivable detail, becomes functionally redundant in providing a practical understanding of the coastline's length. Indeed, in this context, the theoretical referent point of analysis employed functions analogously to the length of the ruler and for Waltz and structural realists alike, this referent point of analysis is the Westphalian nation-state (Waltz, 1999) leaving open a glaring exploitable blind spot for any peripheral, non-state actor that operates outside of this purview hidden away in the often perceived illimitable tidal swash.

Figure 1

"The Coastline of Britain, Measured with Rulers of Different Lengths. The Number of Segments is in Parenthesis" (R Spatial, n.d.). Notably, There is a Correlation Between an Increase in Ruler Length and a Decrease in Coastline Length



Locating Structural Realism's Theoretical Liminal Spaces

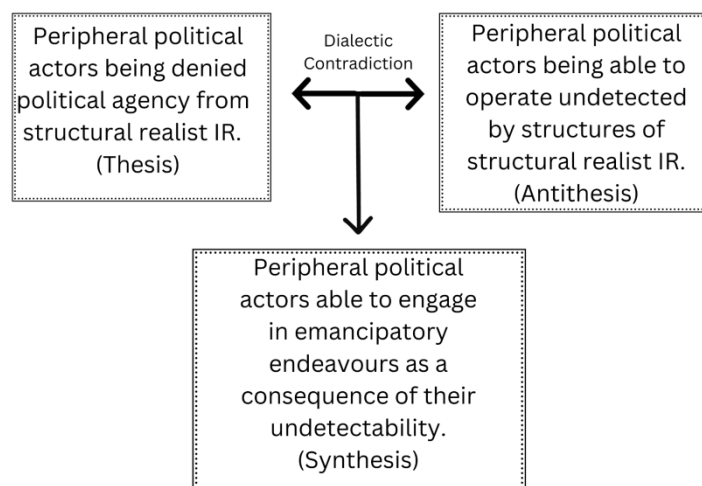
Upon affirming that structural realism constitutes the dominant, or at least one of the two dominant, theories in shaping the behaviour of actors within the international arena as well as affirming that both CCT scholars and structural realists uniformly acknowledge the foundational premises of structural realism's unitary reliance on "specific political and normative commitments" (D'Aoust & Raoul-Dandurand, 2004, p. 14) it may be most instructive to comprehend the manner in which these presuppositions engender *theoretical liminal spaces*, and paradoxically, this concept can be turned on its head, leveraging the Hegelian dialectic. That is, understanding change through the triadic process involving a thesis generating its negating antithesis, resolving as a synthesis (Maybee, 2016). Notably in this sense: *theoretical liminal spaces*, refer to the spaces which occupy a problem solving theory's normative blind spots, and thus, can be navigated freely by peripheral actors without fear of reprisal.

Indeed, under this model, the Hegelian thesis may be thought of as the existence of such normativity within the structural realism. Contrasting, the antithesis reflects the political invisibility granted to peripheral actors as a consequence of their normative exclusion from such conceptual

liminal spaces. Lastly, the dialectic synthesis, that is the resolution to the antagonism, is the ability for peripheral actors to commandeer such paradox to advance their own emancipatory ends (Fig. 2).

Figure 2

The Hegelian Dialectic As Applied To Structural Realism's Theoretical Liminal Spaces



Political Invisibility: From Theory To Praxis

In the seminal publication, "Justice Interruptus," political philosopher Nancy Fraser ambitiously sought to elaborate on the concept of justice through an innovative amalgamation of Hegelian *dialectical idealism*¹⁷ and Marxian *dialectical materialism*,¹⁸ advancing what she called a "struggle for recognition" (Fraser, 2009, p. 11). Fraser's integration built on the foundation of Hegelian dialectics, which emphasised the resolution of conflicts between opposing ideas—thesis and antithesis—into a unified synthesis, and Marxian dialectical materialism, which illuminated the historical evolution propelled by material conflicts, particularly the class struggle, towards a more just 'synthesis' of society (Dialego, 1975). Through this theoretical fusion, Fraser argued that true justice or emancipation for marginalised groups necessitated concerted efforts on both the socio-cultural (*superstructural*¹⁹) and economic (*base*²⁰) dimensions, drawing upon the principles of Hegel and Marx respectively. The author asserted that a holistic theory of justice might tackle both socio-economic dispossession and the amelioration of cultural and identity-based misrecognition. Consequently, Fraser posited that the realisation of a just and equitable society, demands a commitment from the hegemonic class to engage in economic *redistribution* (via strategies such as resource reallocation and reparations) and to acknowledge and honour the cultural and identity

¹⁷Hegel's *dialectical idealism* posits that the development of ideas and the unfolding of history progress through a dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, ultimately leading to the realisation of absolute spirit or absolute idea.

¹⁸Marx's *dialectical materialism* applies the Hegelian dialectic to the material conditions of society, arguing that historical and social change is driven by the conflict between opposing economic classes, leading to the evolution of societal structures through stages of economic development.

¹⁹The superstructure refers to the cultural, ideological, and institutional aspects of society, such as laws, politics, religion, and education, which are shaped by and serve to maintain the economic base. The base refers to the economic foundation of society, including the means of production and relations of production.

²⁰Ibid.

nuances of marginalised groups, via a plea for the peripheralised subjects' *recognition* by the *hegemonic core*.²¹

Reiterated, Fraser amalgamates both Hegel's principle that emancipation was attained not merely through the self-assertion but via being recognised, acknowledged, and validated by others as autonomous and rational entities (Hegel, 2018), as well as Marx's 'materialisation' of this perspective in positing that said validation is expressed through human labour, as per his concept of humans' 'species-being'—the human capacity to creatively interact with the world, producing objects that reflect this creativity, which should then be recognised by others (Marx, 2016). Thus, for Marx, Hegel and as subsequently adopted by Fraser, emancipation was fundamentally contingent upon *recognition*. Thus, Fraser's synthesis of Marx and Hegel's theories posited that *recognition* among antagonistic entities presupposed their engagement in struggle, aiming to dialectically *synthesise* a more equitable—in this case postcolonial, future. This dynamic is viewed as "a testament to the virtue of [peripheralised peoples'] consciousness," (Baskatawang, 2023) which is pivotal to establish a framework whereby "their inherent right to self-determination is eventually recognised" (Baskatawang, 2023).

Following Hegel, Marx and Fraser, 'Invisibility'—that was, the dialectical negation of 'recognition'—was, even within critical approaches, colloquially thought of as an indigent and undesirable state. Indeed, the concept of invisibility signifies a state experienced by a marginalised cohort, compelled to acquiesce to the dominant group's cultural and normative structures, whilst concurrently being alienated from their own practices. This pertains to those members of society whose sense of self is effaced by prevailing societal forces, and whose circumstances are relegated to the periphery of societal concern. As such, emancipatory movements are almost always exclusively concerned with shifting the hegemonic paradigms' referent point of analysis²² towards one more favourable to their group's visibility via awareness campaigns (Smith et al., 2018) perhaps best exemplified by the aphorisms for queer liberation, "we're here, we're queer," (Smith et al., 2018, p. 58) or the pre-civil war abolitionist slogan "we will be heard" (Gold, 2015, p. 35) both asserting the necessity for visibility and recognition.

Nonetheless, it can be acknowledged that there exist both epistemological and ontological outliers to the general emancipatory pursuit of political visibility. Enloe posits that the relative triumph of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) can be partially ascribed to the prevailing epistemological presuppositions within orthodox IR. These assumptions have historically marginalised Mesoamerican knowledge(s) that are central to the EZLN, thereby trivialising them as ancillary and, by extension, not posing a substantive challenge to the hegemonic epistemological constructs underpinning the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—the very framework contested by the EZLN (Enloe, 1996). This relegation of Mesoamerican epistemologies to the realm of 'folklore' instead of recognising their empirical validity exemplifies a bias toward Western modes of knowledge production (Capan, 2017), often exclusively associated with 'empiricism' and

²¹ In a subsequent publication: "Scales of Justice," (2009) Fraser differentiates between social or epistemological recognition (valuing diverse identities/knowledges) and infrastructural recognition (inclusion via dominant power structures, or 'representation'). However, this text amalgamates both under 'recognition,' as initially presented in "Justice Interruptus."

²² In international relations theory, the *referent point of analysis* refers to the primary unit or entity (such as the state, individual, or organisation) from which perspectives, interests, and behaviours are analysed and understood within the global system.

international legitimacy which had provided a theoretical liminal space successfully commandeered by the EZLN (Smith et al., 2018).

Similarly, Gallo-Cruz contends that the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo—an Argentine collective that emerged as a response to the Videla regime's National Reorganisation Process (NRP) and the resultant disappearance of political detainees—garnered effectiveness partly due to their perceived political inconspicuousness within the dominant political paradigm. In this instance, the ontological stance of the Videla administration held that women, particularly in their roles as mothers, were unlikely to pose a serious challenge to state sovereignty or to merit centrality in security discourse, ultimately presupposing the success of the mother (Gallo-Cruz, 2020).

In advocating for Enloe and Gallo-Cruz's acknowledged exceptions which adopt and subsequently weaponize political invisibility, it is essential to state explicitly that this inquiry does not endorse structural realist *accelerationism*,²³ referring to a theoretical approach that advocates for the intensification or acceleration of technological and socio-economic structural realist processes to provoke radical societal change, often to the point of a systemic collapse or transformation (Gardiner, 2017). Indeed, it is legitimate for peripheral actors to assert their right to engage with the dominant ontological and epistemological narratives of IR as advocated by Fraser, particularly structural realism given its prior mentioned monopolised presence within IR. Certainly, delving into a politics of invisibility involves navigating through "a perilous unknown" (Gallo-Cruz, 2020, p. 54) given that the parameters of a given liminal space are not fixed, rather shift alongside the constantly renegotiated faultlines of what the hegemonic paradigm considers to be a legitimate threat. Consider for example, the parallels between the prior mentioned aphorism: "we're here, we're queer" (Smith et al., 2018, p. 58) and the Nazi use of the pink triangle (Plant, 2011); both aimed to highlight queer visibility but served vastly different ends given each dominant paradigms' distinctly demarcated fault lines.

Nonetheless, should exclusion persist to the degree that it effectively erases peripheral actors from the discourse, or, conversely, should these marginalised actors argue that Fraser's pursuit of recognition is merely an "othered plea for inclusion" (Habermas, 2018, p. 13) – thereby normatively reinforcing the validity of the prevailing structures as Coulthard (2014) implies – then employing this normative estrangement – that is, capitalising on their political invisibility, as a strategic countermeasure can emerge as a potent tactic. Indeed, this transition from theoretical speculation to tangible praxis, particularly as it pertains to structural realism, is perhaps most effectively conceptualised through Audra Simpson's politics of refusal, as exemplified by her investigation of the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation's refusal and misrecognition of the centrality of the Canadian and U.S. nation-states (Simpson, 2014).

A Politics Of Refusal And The Kahnawà:ke

Audra Simpson's investigation into the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation's *politics of refusal* is most aptly articulated as an ideological repudiation of Canadian and U.S. state sovereignty (Simpson, 2014) and thus, can be conceptualised as a repudiation of structural realism's state-centrism. This conceptual stance involves a categorical rejection of the legitimacy and operative procedures of the Canadian and U.S. state apparatuses by the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation, who exclusively endorse political processes originating from Iroquoian tradition (Simpson, 2014). When placed in dialogue with Cynthia Enloe's critique concerning the dominant epistemological paradigms that informed

²³*Accelerationism* is the theory that technological and social progress should be vastly accelerated to bring about radical economic, political, or social change, often envisioning the transcendence of current limitations and systems.

'North American Free Trade Agreement' (NAFTA), specifically concerning the prior mentioned assertion that structural realist paradigms have overlooked Indigenous Mesoamerican knowledge systems. It becomes clear that on the infrequent occasions that Indigenous knowledge(s) are acknowledged by hegemonic paradigms, they are not validated within their own ontological and epistemological frameworks but rather are assessed based on their deviancy, or lack thereof, from such hegemonic paradigm (Alcoff, 2013).

Simpson suggests that the Kahnawà:ke preference for a *politics of refusal*²⁴ over Fraser's *politics of recognition* is informed by a similar logic. Indeed, the very act of seeking recognition for Kahnawà:ke's societal customs within the purview of Canadian and American nation-states, inadvertently, consign them to a peripheral (Marotti de Mello et al., 2022) or deviant (Erikson, 1961) status, separate from the core ideological infrastructures of these nation-states (Simpson, 2014). As such, the Kahnawà:ke endeavour to articulate their existence and knowledge(s) not by their congruity or variance from settler-colonial norms but on the integrity of their distinct ontological and epistemological foundations necessitates *epistemic disobedience*²⁵ (Mignolo, 2001) as a refusal to acknowledge the centrality of the nation-state as the dominant referent object of analysis, and thus, refusing to concede that Kahnawà:ke existence is congruent on nation-state acknowledgement (Fig. 3). This refusal was often executed via refusing to adopt Canadian citizenship documents and denying the legitimacy of state-imposed settler land tenure (Fellner, 2017).

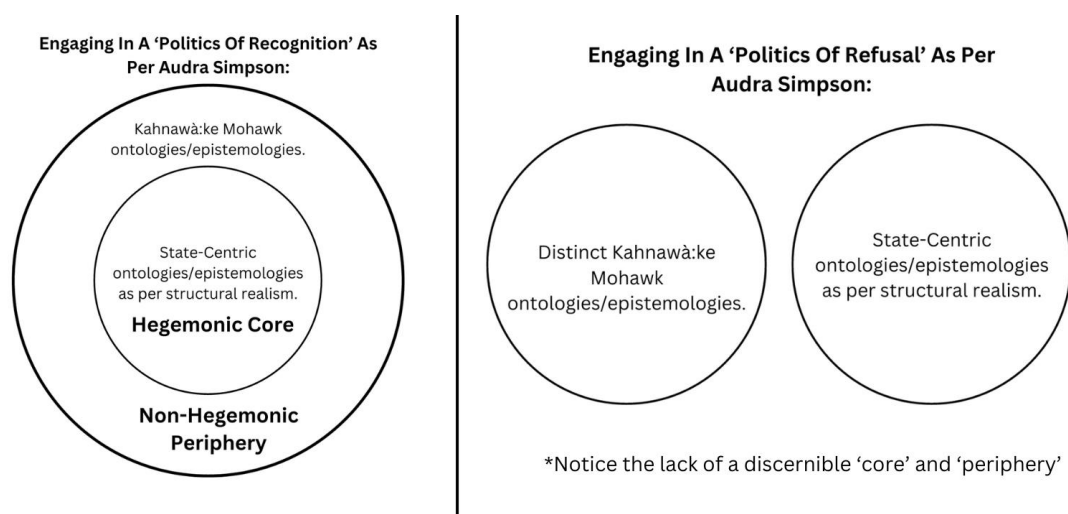
Alternatively, contemplate the approach adopted by Fredrick Douglass and other pre-Civil War abolitionists, intentionally choosing not to engage in debates with anti-abolitionists, fearing it might imply the negotiability of the freedom and humanity of Black individuals (Douglass, 1855). In this sense, discursive refusal reflects not simply an indignant and illiberal unwillingness to discuss one's humanity within a democratic marketplace of ideas, rather it reflects rejecting the preconceived epistemic assumptions present in dominant discourse(s) that presuppose such marketplace of ideas and normatively posit such concept as an objective means of deriving "an exalted sense of truth" (Mill, 1998, p. 8). Again, in this example, refusal refers specifically to the negation of "the nature and forms of [a given actor(s)] domination" (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 8).

²⁴The *politics of refusal* is a stance or strategy that involves rejecting and resisting established norms, systems, or policies as a form of political and social dissent, emphasising autonomy and the right to dissent.

²⁵*Epistemic disobedience*, refers to the rejection and decolonization of dominant Western narratives and knowledge systems in favour of validating and revitalising non-Western perspectives and epistemologies.

Figure 3

Demarcates Between Audra Simpson's 'Politics of Recognition' and 'Politics of Refusal'



Nonetheless, whereas Simpson's politics of refusal, is most often understood in this decolonial sense, that is, as a peripheral actor's unwillingness to centre their ontological/epistemological customs not on their own terms, rather from their deviancy, or lack thereof the hegemonic paradigm. Such strategy, particularly as it pertains to the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation, may equally be regarded as one of the most potent illustrations of utilising political invisibility to challenge the fundamental assumptions of structural realism. Certainly, upholding a stance of refusing to engage with the hegemonic paradigm not only helps maintain an ontological distance from such a paradigm, presupposing ontological independence, as noted by Simpson (2014), but in doing so also maintains the existence of one's political invisibility, thus maintaining the ability to freely engage in emancipatory praxis hidden within the purview of the dominant paradigm's theoretical liminal spaces.

Consider, for instance, the hypothetical scenario where the Kahnawà:ke chose to embrace recognition and citizenship within the Canadian and U.S. nation-states. As Simpson (2014) articulates, this acknowledgment would invariably subsume Kahnawà:ke identity under the dominant state-centric, structural realist paradigm. Interestingly, opting to accept recognition also bestows a degree of political legitimacy upon Kahnawà:ke as political entities, albeit within the limited scope of a structural realist framework. Consequently, this would reduce the Kahnawà:ke's political invisibility, thereby facilitating the ability of structural realism to more effectively govern and discipline their political conduct. In this sense, such politics of refusal via "refusing to play the [structural realist] game" (Simpson, 2014, p. 5) reflects a tangible mobilisation of one's political invisibility into praxis. Indeed, disengaging from structural-realism's normatively assumed nation-state determinism, allowed the Kahnawà:ke to further negate the *biopolitical apparatuses*²⁶ (Moro, 2018) that may be imposed on them if they sought to relinquish their political invisibility. Thus, in maintaining such separation via a politics of refusal, that is refusing Canadian and U.S. citizenship while negating the legitimacy of settler-imposed land tenure, the Kahnawà:ke peoples have neglected to willfully reduce the scope of structural realism's normative theoretical liminal spaces to retain a level of and ungovernability that if conceptualised via our previously posited coastline analogy, situates the Kahnawà:ke within structural realism's illimitable tidal crevices.

²⁶*Biopolitical apparatuses* refer to the institutional and regulatory mechanisms through which power operates to control and manage populations, bodies, and life processes in modern societies.

Discussion

The examination of the complex interplay between structural realism, its normative foundations, and political invisibility revealed that the influence of structural realism on contemporary western foreign policy was a tangible reality impacting the politics of various actors, particularly those marginalised from the state-centric hegemonic core. In dissecting structural realism's normative assumptions, this manuscript identified them not only as critical to the theory's construction but also as potential sites of emancipation. It posited political invisibility not merely as a marker of impotence but as a possible strategic asset. This study found that peripheral actors could exert agency and effect change by exploiting what Coxian Critical Theory scholars might identify as vulnerabilities in the theory's epistemic and ontological bases.

The political manoeuvres of the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation, informed by Audra Simpson's politics of refusal, offered a tangible illustration of how strategic utilisation of political invisibility can translate into effective political action that challenges dominant paradigms. This case study supported the theoretical proposition of this document and highlighted pathways for political actors, often sidelined in dominant discourses, to assert their sovereignty and agency by exploiting the blind spots within structural realism.

This study's focused approach on structural realism responded to its prevailing dominance in Western foreign policy. By re-framing the normative aspects of structural realism not as flaws but as opportunities for constructive engagement, this research transforms what critical IR scholars traditionally view as structural realism's 'Achilles' heel' into a platform for political innovation and transformation.

The exploration into the nexus of structural realism, normativity, and political invisibility, particularly through the lens of the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation, injected a nuanced perspective into IR debates. This research was predicated on the innovative hypothesis that political invisibility, far from being a mere byproduct of systematic marginalisation, could be a strategic asset for political emancipation. It aligns with the insights of scholars like Cynthia Enloe and Audra Simpson, who have noted the capacity of marginalised actors to navigate hegemonic structures. However, it diverges in emphasising the strategic use of invisibility as a counter-hegemonic tactic, a novel juxtaposition to structural realism's normative blind spots that existing literature may not fully recognise.

This discussion led to a comparative analysis with existing research. While these findings echo the transformative potential of non-recognition explored by Simpson, they suggested broader implications of political invisibility across various non-state actors and IR theories, challenging foundational assumptions in the field. This comparison underlined the unique contribution of this study to IR discourse and its potential to re-frame understanding of political invisibility as a critical and strategic tool in global politics.

In conclusion, this study bridged a crucial gap in IR literature, challenging the narrative that political invisibility is synonymous with powerlessness and advocating for its recognition as a strategic asset. This transition prompts a reassessment of the significance of invisibility in international relations, encouraging additional investigation into its potential applications across diverse contexts and theoretical frameworks. By highlighting significant findings, such as the strategic potential of invisibility and its application beyond traditional recognition-focused approaches, this research enriches academic conversations and opens new avenues for future inquiry.

Conclusions and Implications

Strategic Utilisation of Political Invisibility

The Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation has effectively leveraged its political invisibility to navigate the international system and pursue emancipatory goals. This strategic utilisation takes on various forms, such as the creation of informal diplomatic channels, engagement in international indigenous networks, and the tactical utilization of legal and normative arenas to affirm rights and sovereignty. These actions demonstrate a sophisticated understanding and engagement with the international system, contradicting structural realism's assumption of non-state actors' marginality and lack of agency.

Challenging Structural Realism

The Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation's strategies challenge the core assumptions of structural realism, particularly its state-centric bias and deterministic view of power dynamics. By actively participating in international dialogues and leveraging legal and normative frameworks to their advantage, the Mohawk Nation illustrates the potential of non-state actors to influence international relations. This challenges the dominant narrative within structural realism and prompts a reevaluation of how international systems accommodate and engage with peripheral actors.

Alternative Pathways to Emancipation

Contrary to critical theories that emphasise the necessity of recognition for marginalised groups, the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Nation's approach suggests that political invisibility can also serve as a tool for emancipation. This finding provides an alternative perspective on strategies for achieving political and social objectives, highlighting the diverse ways in which peripheral actors can assert their agency and sovereignty. It suggests that the pursuit of recognition, while important, is not the sole path to empowerment and emancipation for marginalised groups.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study holds significant reference value for enhancing regional cultural competitiveness, promoting the development of cultural and museum undertakings, and improving the level of public cultural services. However, limited by the data availability, it does not discuss the influencing factors of museum development in multiple periods. In addition, whether the influencing factors of the spatial evolution pattern of different types of museums at different scales are different will be the direction of future research. Based on the results of this study, it should be further focused on the types and levels of museums, a classification and classification discussions should be conducted, and the spatio-temporal rules and formation reasons of museum undertakings from multiple perspectives should be deeply explored. Other effective and quantitative methods to study the distribution characteristics and influencing factors of museums should also be explored. In addition, it is also necessary to consider how the evolution of museum pattern in Jiangxi Province differs from that in other provinces.

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