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# Supposing the moral state: Japan and historical justice under liberal internationalism

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The two foreign ministers of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan, Kyung-wha Kang and Taro Kono, were standing apart from one another. They seemed so far apart that the United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged the two to stand a little closer together—but to no avail. The two foreign ministers staunchly refused to look each other in the eye, to appease their respective domestic audiences. The two US allies in east Asia have been in bitter dispute over how Japan is to come to terms with its imperial history. Central to the dispute is the use of forced labour and the Japanese state's involvement in running the 'comfort stations', a euphemism for the system of military sexual slavery in which the majority of victims came from the Korean peninsula, which was under Japanese colonial rule between 1910 and 1945.<sup>1</sup> The United States is therefore in alliances with both a former imperial power and its former colony. Pompeo had scheduled one-on-one meetings with the two ambassadors to put pressure on them to overcome their differences. The gesture was met with the unprecedented cancellation of the meetings by both. The scene described above, taking place in Bangkok in 2019 and captured in the *New York Times*, rendered obvious the simmering tension within the 'hub-and-spokes' system of the US-centred bilateral alliances in east Asia.<sup>2</sup> The system is based on an analogy to the ways in which a bicycle's wheel consists of 'spokes' connected to the central hub; the hub here is the United States, its allies the spokes.<sup>3</sup>

While it is tempting to interpret the scene as a case of nationalism run amok, as Tsuneo Watanabe is quoted that '[t]his is the typical trouble that is caused by nationalism and emotion against a potential enemy', in the report,<sup>4</sup> I offer a different reading. The persistence of the 'history problem' evinces the need to revisit taken-for-granted assumptions about moral possibility in global politics,

\* This article is part of the special section in the January 2023 issue of *International Affairs* on 'Injustice and the crisis of international order', guest-edited by Christian Reus-Smit and Ayşe Zarakol.

<sup>1</sup> Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's comfort women: sexual slavery and prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Nicola Henry, 'Silence as collective memory: sexual violence and the Tokyo trial', in Yuki Tanaka, Tim McCormack and Gerry Simpson, eds, *Beyond victor's justice? The Tokyo War Crimes trial revisited* (Leiden and Boston: Nijhoff, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Motoko Rich, Edward Wong and Choe Sang-Hun, 'As Japan and South Korea feud intensifies, US seems unwilling, or unable, to help', *New York Times*, 4 Aug. 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The US–Japan alliance was concluded in 1951, the US–South Korea alliance in 1953, and the US–Republic of China alliance in 1954. On the origins of the hub-and-spokes system, see Victor D. Cha, *Powerplay: the origins of the American alliance system in Asia* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Rich et al., 'As Japan and South Korea feud intensifies'.

where agency is presumed to exist on the part of the sovereign state. Attending to the Japanese case shows that there is a gap between the kind of state that liberal internationalism supposes and the kind of state Japan was allowed to become under the US-led liberal international order. This gap between the ideal and the real results in the impasse over what action is possible in post-1945 Japan, where the people are reluctant to see the revival of an agentic sovereign state.

The extent to which the ‘history problem’ haunts Japanese international relations *vis-à-vis* neighbouring Asian states has been well documented.<sup>5</sup> In the past it has resulted in cancelled meetings among the leaders of the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of Korea and Japan, anti-Japanese boycott movements in the Republic of Korea and the People’s Republic of China, and difficulty in coordinating the sharing of military intelligence between the Republic of Korea and Japan, to name just a few outcomes. Quoted in the report, Michael Green attributed the behaviour of Kang and Kono to the belated handling of the matter by US officials under the Trump presidency, noting that in the past the United States had sent signals to the two allies in order to ensure that historical animosities were contained.<sup>6</sup> Green’s commentary warrants mention because it indicates the priority of the hegemon: order comes before justice. Notwithstanding the unresolved issues over history, within the framework of the US-led liberal order, the two allies are required to band together against common security concerns such as those posed by North Korea and China. Still, as seen from the cancellation of the meeting, the simmering tensions over historical justice in east Asia between the two ‘spokes’ raises the question about how this order is being challenged by claims of justice.

Concerning the relation between order and justice, Hedley Bull’s framing of the question has been influential.<sup>7</sup> He asks whether justice comes after order is established, or if the injustice of an order undermines it from within.<sup>8</sup> Bull was concerned that countries in the Third World had no say in the making of the post-1945 order, and that these countries would have little stake in sustaining an order which had not been of their own making. The relation between order brought about by power politics and justice brought about by law is in tension, casting a shadow over the legitimacy of the status quo in various guises.<sup>9</sup> Although not to the same degree as the states in the global South, states in east Asia have also been largely left out of the process which John Ikenberry calls the ‘constitutive moment’ of US

<sup>5</sup> Political and Diplomatic Review, The Tokyo Foundation, et al., *Sengonihon no rekishi ninshiki* [History and politics in postwar Japan] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2017); Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful patriots: nationalist protest in China’s foreign relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jennifer Lind, *Sorry states: apologies in international politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). On east Asian international relations more broadly, see Thomas Berger, *War, guilt, and world politics after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Alexis Dudden, *Troubled apologies among Japan, Korea, and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Rich et al., ‘As Japan and South Korea feud intensifies’.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Reus-Smit and Ayşe Zarakol, ‘Polymorphic justice and the crisis of international order’, *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, 1–22 at p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society: a study of order in world politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 86–7.

<sup>9</sup> Bull, *The anarchical society*, p. 92.

## Supposing the moral state

led-liberal internationalism.<sup>10</sup> As the product of the advent of Cold War in Asia, the hub-and-spokes system is part and parcel of the post-1945 international order, institutionalized at the conclusion of the San Francisco peace treaty in 1951, although ‘except for Japan ... none of the major states involved in the conflicts participated in the treaty’.<sup>11</sup> And even with regard to Japan, the brain behind the treaty, John Foster Dulles, ‘once confided to British officials that the 1951 treaty amounted to a voluntary continuation of the military occupation, but in the guise of a normal political relationship between two nation-states’.<sup>12</sup> Asia after 1945 witnessed the entanglement of decolonization, de-imperialization, efforts by the British, Dutch and French to reassert control over their former colonies, the national liberation movement against these European reassertions, and the American attempt to forge a stable framework of alliances against communist states.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the ‘who had a say in making the order’ question that Bull posed is extendable to the east Asian region. The relationship between the hub-and-spokes system and Japan’s ‘history problem’ is an awkward one: because of the strong antagonism against Japan among the newly liberated states in Asia in the aftermath of the Asia–Pacific war, it was difficult for the United States to integrate Japan in a multilateral framework as it did for Germany within NATO, and because the bilateral alliance with the United States isolated Japan from its Asian (especially communist) neighbours, it also made historical reconciliation difficult.<sup>14</sup>

As Reus-Smit and Zarakol observe, the post-1945 order is currently in crisis, challenged by multiple claims of justice posed no longer solely by state actors, but also by non-state actors.<sup>15</sup> As evinced in the US House of Representatives’ passage of House Resolution 121 in 2007, which made explicit the US disapproval of the ways in which the Japanese state was dealing with the history problem, the issue of ‘comfort women’ today has become tethered to the affirmation of human rights discourse. Here and elsewhere, the United States has reconfigured its liberal internationalism as a universalist anti-colonial and anti-racist alternative to Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere during the Asia–Pacific war.<sup>16</sup> Once the Korean American diaspora succeeded in reframing the issue of military sexual slavery as a matter of human rights and women’s rights, connected to the ethos of anti-colonialism and anti-racism, instead of a bilateral matter between Japan and its former colonies, it became untenable for members of the US Congress to oppose the movement for historical redress among Korean Americans.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *A world safe for democracy: liberal internationalism and the crises of global order* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2020). But also see John Swenson-Wright, *Unequal allies? United States security and alliance policy toward Japan, 1945–1960* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Kimie Hara, ‘Introduction’, in Kimie Hara, ed., *The San Francisco system and its legacies: continuation, transformation, and historical reconciliation in the Asia–Pacific* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Cha, *Powerplay*, p. 143.

<sup>13</sup> Kerstin von Lingen, ed., *War crimes trials in the wake of decolonization and Cold War in Asia, 1945–1956: justice in time of turmoil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) pp. 239–60.

<sup>14</sup> Cha, *Powerplay*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Reus-Smit and Zarakol, ‘Polymorphic justice’, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Christine Hong, *A violent peace: race, US militarism, and cultures of democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Kinue Tokudome, ‘Passage of H.Res. 121 on “comfort women”, the US Congress and historical memory in Japan’, *Japan Focus* 5: 8, 2007, pp. 1–11; on Asian American diaspora activism, see also Daniel Schumacher,

This situation illustrates how a question of interstate justice between a former colonizer and colonized came to tug creatively at the US claim to the legitimacy of its post-1945 liberal international order. Once couched in such a manner, the Japanese state's avoidance of taking responsibility becomes hard for the United States to defend. Not only that, being the power responsible for hastily rehabilitating Japan as a member of the international community and an ally at the expense of the victim population, as it did in the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal and the San Francisco peace treaty, opens up the United States to accusations of hypocrisy from right-wing pundits and historians in Japan. While the goals of right-wing pundits and historians differ, historians are also asking why the United States is counselling Japan on history as if the US had nothing to do with the making of the present predicament.<sup>18</sup> The persistent tension between Japan and the Republic of Korea is an example of what Reus-Smit and Zarakol characterize as the 'tangled yet fundamental relationship between (in)justice and (dis)order'.<sup>19</sup> The terminology of 'entanglement' here is used intentionally by Reus-Smit and Zarakol to challenge Bull's dyadic framing of the relation between order and justice.

Reus-Smit and Zarakol claim that while Bull's framework is useful, it is nonetheless insufficient in considering how multiple types of claims of justice intersect and compound. For example, sovereignty is both a spatial and a social allocation of authority, and it also pertains to questions of who may have standing in international law.<sup>20</sup> My contribution to this special section is to add that the question of 'who' matters, and so does the sense of being a sovereign in addressing moral questions. The post-1945 international order was constituted at the moment of a 'shift from a world of empires to a world of sovereign states',<sup>21</sup> and, in the case of the two US allies, one when the Korean peninsula became liberated from Japanese colonial rule and Japan, under US occupation, underwent a thorough denial of state sovereignty and subsequent nominal recovery as a signatory of the San Francisco peace treaty.<sup>22</sup> This, too, creates a fissure in respect of how sovereignty, autonomy and agency are understood. When it comes to addressing memories of empire and historical justice in east Asia, issues of US liberal hegemony are intertwined in a way that is peculiar to the history of the region, in contrast to that of Europe. I argue that the post-1945 international order constituted a Japanese state that is there and not there, sovereign and semi-sovereign—a palimpsest state—thereby implicating the question of 'who' is active in the discourse on history.

How does the state being a palimpsest matter? While historians such as Kimie Hara and John Dower have documented the impact of the alliance system on postwar Japan, activists pursuing historical justice have tended to treat the Japanese state in a selectively ahistorical manner. For example, the founder of the website

'Asia's global memory wars and solidarity across borders: diaspora activism on the "comfort women" issue in the United States', *Asia-Pacific Journal* 19: 5, 2021, pp. 1–19.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War ruins: transpacific critique of American justice and Japanese war crimes* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Reus-Smit and Zarakol, 'Polymorphic justice', p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Reus-Smit and Zarakol, 'Polymorphic justice', p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Reus-Smit and Zarakol, 'Polymorphic justice', p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Hara, ed., *The San Francisco system and its legacies*.

‘US–Japan dialogue on POWs’, Kinue Tokudome, concludes her report on the Japanese embassy’s insufficient response to House Resolution 121 as follows:

What the international community is asking Japan to do is not very difficult. Unlike other seemingly insurmountable issues that affect so many other parts of the world, it would be resolved overnight if the Japanese political leadership decides to accept responsibility.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding the history of how the post-1945 order came about, the matter is here reduced to a question of whether or not a nation’s leadership accepts responsibility for its predecessors’ decisions. Likewise, for philosopher-activist Tetsuya Takahashi, the Japanese state is a monolithic entity to be deconstructed, and its historical relationship with the United States is rendered ahistorical.<sup>24</sup> This is not because of historical forgetfulness. Rather, it is because, in Kantian formulation, moral action supposes a sovereign subject. Moral possibility hinges on the assumption of autonomy, which is why the perceived degree of sovereignty matters. This means that those who seek accountability project an image of the state that is sovereign and autonomous. The image of the state in postwar Japanese discourse on history oscillates between a state which is heavily circumscribed under US liberal hegemony on the one hand, and a state which is sovereign, autonomous, agentic and independent, as the activists assume, on the other.

While the persistence of the history problem is often portrayed as unique to Japan, I suggest that the Japanese case shows a gap in the discourse of historical justice *in and under* liberal internationalism. This is the gap between the kind of state which liberal internationalism envisions as an enactor of historical justice, a state that is sovereign and agentic, and the kind of state postwar Japan was allowed to become under US occupation and US liberal hegemony: a state which is post-national and without patriots.<sup>25</sup> What I seek to show in the following is (1) that there is a certain kind of state agency assumed in progressively minded liberal International Relations (IR) theory—namely, a sovereign agentic state that can pursue moral questions; and (2) that post-imperial Japan, which is a semi-sovereign state under the Pax Americana, cannot act as the kind of coherent agentic state that liberal internationalism needs, and that its people do not wish to see the return of a strong state. In the first part I show how, setting aside realists who argue that morality has no role in world politics, liberal and constructivist theorists of international relations are invested in an image of the state with high agentic capacity, a state that can actively shape the international order instead of being dictated to by the structure of anarchy. In the second part, I examine how the question of justice was hastily and prematurely settled under the US occupation of Japan between 1945 and 1952, and how the ambiguous terms of the San Francisco peace treaty and the signing of the security alliance left post-1945 Japan as a palimpsest. There is a split in the interpretation of the impact of the ‘constitutive moment’ of the US-led international order among those commenting on

<sup>23</sup> Tokudome, ‘Passage of H.Res. 121’, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Tetsuya Takahashi, *Yasukuni mondai* [The Yasukuni problem] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shinsho, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Masaru Tamamoto, ‘A land without patriots: the Yasukuni controversy and Japanese nationalism’, *World Policy Journal* 18: 3, 2001, pp. 33–40.

historical justice, between those who consider the history problem with nominal sovereignty in mind on the one hand, and those who problematize this subordination for Japan's difficulty in responding to the victim states, on the other. At the implicit centre of the 'history problem' lies the ambivalence towards state sovereignty which characterizes the condition of post-imperial Japan's international relations. At stake in historicizing the image of the state in the post-1945 international order is the question of the implications for the discourse on historical justice. By examining the specific case of Japan, I explore the broader implications for the relationship between moral possibility in world politics and the paradox of being a semi-sovereign entity under US-led liberal internationalism.

## The moral state in liberal internationalism

In 2007, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution 'expressing the sense ... that the Government of Japan should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility'.<sup>26</sup> In explaining his support for the resolution, US member of Congress Tom Lantos emphasized that 'our two countries share wide-ranging strategic interests, but most importantly we *share* common values of democracy, economic opportunity, and human rights'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, facing the past was not only a matter of strategy, but had become a matter of values. What until the passage of House Resolution 121 had been mainly understood as a bilateral issue between Japan and the Republic of Korea now became a concern for US-led liberal internationalism, as a matter of affirming shared moral values. This also assumes moral possibility in world politics.

As the House resolution implies, the persistence of Japan's 'history problem' is often attributed to the Japanese state's unwillingness to face its imperial record. In the past there have been military tribunals, state apologies, reparations, and the 1965 Basic Treaty between the Republic of Korea and Japan. In 2015, there was an agreement to 'finally and irreversibly' settle the dispute over history between the two, which was later overturned by then President Moon. In the past, various Japanese prime ministers, such as Ryutaro Hashimoto and Tomiichi Murayama, have issued statements on history; and yet Japan's position on history comes under scrutiny every time a politically appointed minister contradicts the position of the prime minister by claiming that the 'rape of Nanjing is a hoax', thus contravening the third component of the House resolution that calls for public refuting of such claims.<sup>28</sup> The history problem has been politicized by various actors both inside and outside Japan, sometimes in order to dodge domestic scandals, at other times with an eye to appealing to the large voting bloc of the War Bereaved Families Associations.<sup>29</sup> While numerous statements of apology have been issued on various

<sup>26</sup> US Congress, H. Res. 121, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-resolution/121>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 20 Nov. 2022.)

<sup>27</sup> Tokudome, 'Passage of H.Res. 121', p. 9 (emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> Norihiro Kato, *Haisengoron* [After defeat] (Tokyo: Chikuma Bunko, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Franziska Seraphim, *War memory and social politics in Japan, 1945–2005* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2006).

### *Supposing the moral state*

occasions by Japanese leaders and the emperor, what inevitably becomes contested is the matter of sincerity.

While individual leaders and their respective stances on history are certainly significant, I argue that the focus on these individuals occludes the gap that lies at the very heart of a progressively minded demand for Japan to face the past: the assumption of Japanese state agency. By the gap I mean that moral action, following Kant's formulation, must assume freedom to choose. While Kant was writing on the individual, in IR, Alexander Wendt's idea that 'states are like people' is often reinforced in everyday discourse such as the newspaper headlines that liken the state to an individual.<sup>30</sup> This raises a question: if moral action presupposes freedom, and when such an assumption is projected onto the state, how does this chime with the reality of state sovereignty in the age of globalization, let alone the reality of a state such as Japan, which is a mere 'spoke' in the US-led liberal international order and whose terms of settlement after 1945 were largely defined by the United States as the occupying power, as Japan literally did not have sovereignty?

As noted, House Resolution 121 is formulated using the word 'should' for what the Japanese state is to do. Yet what can a state *do*? What seems to be an absurdly simple question unveils a difference in position between neo-realists, on the one hand, and neo-liberals and constructivists, on the other, in IR theory in respect of questions of morality. What I show in this first section is that House Resolution 121 is based on a liberal conception of international relations, and that this liberal internationalism is anchored on a particular understanding of state agency in world politics. Here I offer a schematic contrast between liberal and realist IR in terms of how state agency is theorized.

How are different theoretical positions related to questions of morality? Richard Price, writing on moral possibility in world politics, provides an overview of how different approaches to the study of international relations are tied to different stances on questions of moral possibility. For Price, realism 'den[ies] the very existence of developments we could call ethically progressive change in world politics in the first place', whereas the 'talk of progress has long been the purview of liberal and critical theories of International Relations (IR), whose champions in different ways have laid claim to the moral high ground in pointing the ways to positive moral change'.<sup>31</sup> For Price, constructivists who focus on the role of norms in IR also adopt liberal conceptions in so far as the aim of such work is to demonstrate that things need not be the way they have been in the past.<sup>32</sup>

Why does realism offer no space for moral concerns? What differentiates the realist position on morality from others is on the degree to which the state can act independently from the shaping and homogenizing effect of international structure. The theoretical role of international structure and its impact on state

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Wendt, 'The state as person in international theory', *Review of International Studies* 30: 2, 2004, pp. 289–316.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Price, 'Moral limit and possibility in world politics', in Richard M. Price, *Moral limit and possibility in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 1–52.

<sup>32</sup> Price, 'Moral limit and possibility in world politics', p. 5.

agency is most explicit in the structural neo-realism of Kenneth Waltz. In his *Theory of international politics*, originally published in 1979, Waltz separated the levels of analysis and identified the homogenizing role of the international structure in respect of the state.<sup>33</sup> Basing his argument on two assumptions—that in the absence of world government the international structure is anarchic, and that survival is what all state actors pursue—and drawing also on Rousseau's stag-hunt story where actors striving to survive fail to collectively catch a stag and opt for the hare, he derived a theory that all states become alike in their behaviour. Here the necessity of survival offers no space for moral progress.

Whereas a structural realist or neo-realist would build their theory on the assumption that the international structure shapes the unit, a neo-liberal approach would attribute the opposite logic, whereby the state *can* shape the international structure. Instead of assuming that Rousseau's stag-hunt analogy is a one-time game, neo-liberals such as Keohane and Nye would open up space for cooperation among state actors by claiming that this is a multiple game where the actors must take into consideration not just the short-term consequences but also the long-term implications of their actions. This shift in calculation is based not only on the extension of the temporal horizon, but also on the building of institutions through which communications and credible commitments can be made. The constructivists' position would be similar to that of neo-liberals in so far as their intention is to show how things could be otherwise, indicating that the state can choose and act rather than being dictated to by necessity.<sup>34</sup>

Questioning the relationship between agent and structure seems hardly relevant to the case of Japan. Yet as the historian Yutaka Yoshida explains, those who are opposed to atoning for the past have often insisted on the role of necessity and survival, claiming that there was no other choice but to fight.<sup>35</sup> Where there is no choice, questioning responsibility is a non-starter. To claim that Japan was surrounded by hostile powers, and therefore had no other option but to fight, is implicitly to embrace the structural realist position that the state's action is determined by the international structure and the necessity of survival. In this way, in Japanese textbooks, even Japan's invasion of China comes to be explained as a matter of need to fill a power vacuum created by the European powers' partial retreat back to Europe after the First World War. Civilian government was taken over by the militarists, and the militarists in turn were dictated to by the international structure. When the situation is framed in such a way, choice disappears, and with it responsibility.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the state, and war: a theoretical analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland, 2010, first publ. 1979).

<sup>34</sup> On the import of the 'second state debate', see John Hobson, 'What's at stake in the "second state debate"? Concepts and issues', in John Hobson, *The state and international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1–14.

<sup>35</sup> Yutaka Yoshida, *Nihonjin no sensokan: sengooshi no nakano henyo* [The Japanese view of the war: changes in post-war history] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2022).

<sup>36</sup> Hitomi Koyama, *On the persistence of the Japanese 'history problem': historicism and the international politics of history* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

### *Supposing the moral state*

While the claim that the state acted out of necessity and the survival imperative was not used as a theory of international politics in early twentieth-century Japan, the assumption about anarchy and the overriding need for survival was imbued in the discourse of social Darwinism, which was internalized in the discourse on international politics. In the realist narrative, for survival a strong centralized state becomes crucial; yet how the state is to act is determined by the international structure. In historian Eri Hotta's analysis, while there were many strands to the discourse on pan-Asianism which anchored Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, what united these strands was the observation that Asia was weak, and something had to be done about it.<sup>37</sup> Subsequently, the view that Japan was surrounded by Anglo-American allies culminated in the justification of war on grounds of necessity. Such a view of international politics, that characterized Japan's war as a holy war against a white menace, was wholly eradicated once the empire was dismantled. Yet it is worth noting how survival and necessity are linked to questions of whether it is possible to act morally in the postwar Japanese discourse on war.

If the realist view denies the possibility of moral action, the liberal view envisions a state that can actively shape the international structure. As John Ikenberry elaborates, liberal internationalism is itself an amalgam of various strands of liberal traditions, ranging from the Enlightenment progressive view of history to Woodrow Wilson's idea of self-determination. As Ikenberry points out, 'liberal internationalists, by contrast, tend to see order as a constructed outcome that is shaped by organizational structures and agreements'.<sup>38</sup> Liberal internationalism finds its roots in the Enlightenment notion of modernity that assumes progressive history, a 'grand narrative of the world' that incorporates the notion of the agentic state that can act to shape the world.<sup>39</sup>

Those who are critical of the Japanese state are also implicitly subscribing to the progressive view of history. Kinue Tokudome castigates the Japanese state for not dealing with the history problem when she considers the issue as something which could be 'resolved overnight if the Japanese political leadership decides to accept responsibility'.<sup>40</sup> What one can see here is a projection of the state as the sovereign subject. In writing about the discourse on injury, Wendy Brown identifies a reifying effect in this move:

Developing a righteous critique of power from the perspective of the injured, it delimits a specific site of blame for suffering by constituting sovereign subjects and events as responsible for the 'injury' of social subordination ... This effort also casts the law in particular and the state more generally as neutral arbiters of injury rather than as themselves invested with the power to injure.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's war 1931–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *A world safe for democracy: liberal internationalism and the crises of global order* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Ikenberry, *A world safe for democracy*, p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Tokudome, 'Passage of H.Res. 121', p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of injury: power and freedom in late modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 27.

To identify and delimit a specific site of blame is to reify and project the state as the responsible actor. This move rigidly fixes the image of the state as powerful and sovereign while occluding 'all possibilities of indeterminacy, ambiguity, and struggle for resignification or repositioning'.<sup>42</sup> Here I draw on Brown because history of postwar Japan is the history of a resignification of sovereignty. Reading Brown against Tokudome, what becomes evident is the gap between those who rigidly reify the state as sovereign and the historical ambiguity of Japan's status as a sovereign state under the Pax Americana.

Those critical of the state, in other words, assume state authority and agency much more than the neo-realists, who consider the state as responding to the international structure. In his study of the state in IR theory, John Hobson identifies this as

a paradox: that it is neo-realist state-centrism that denies the importance of the state in IR, while the various approaches listed above [postmodernism, critical theory, constructivism, feminism and Marxism] (along with liberalism), I argue, all take the state more seriously.<sup>43</sup>

This is a paradox because neo-liberal IR theory would question the relevance of the state by observing that interdependence and globalization has diminished its role. Yet when it comes to the possibility of the state to make a change, it must assume that the state *can* do that. Why does liberalism take the state seriously? The concept Hobson introduces in his work is 'international agential state power' which 'refers to the *ability of the state to mitigate the logic of inter-state competition and thereby create a cooperative or peaceful world*', a condition where the logic of anarchy does not dictate how the state is to act.<sup>44</sup> His identification of this paradox is crucial, because it illuminates how those who are critical of the role of the state in world politics, and demand that the state act otherwise, nurture an attachment to an agential sovereign state. The assumption of moral action always assumes the capacity to act. This is to say that while those who do not subscribe to the realist vision of world politics are critical of the state, they also reinforce the role of the state as the actor and arbiter of justice.

To be sure, this is not to say that the international structure prevents the Japanese state from acting morally. Rather, what this discussion shows is that whether one takes the realist view or a liberal view affects what kind of state is being imagined and supposed. For those who oppose the liberal and critical calls for atonement, necessity becomes an alibi and justification for remaining unrepentant. For realists, to call for peace and international cooperation, and to claim that Japan could have chosen another path, is to be idealistic and naive in the face of the reality of the hostile international environment at that time. Thus what appears unrelated, between IR theory and the history problem, are in fact interconnected. The discourse on the Japanese view of war, to be sure, has varied over the decades since the end of the war. Nonetheless, what constantly recurs is the ideological battle between, on the one hand, those who insist on taking a realist view of the

<sup>42</sup> Brown, *States of injury*, p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> Hobson, *The state and international relations*, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Hobson, *The state and international relations*, p. 7 (emphasis in original).

### *Supposing the moral state*

international environment at the time and do not believe in counterfactuals, and on the other, those who believe that human rights and an anti-colonial ethos are transcendental values that must be applicable at all times.

Taken together, the theoretical positions that embody a commitment to progressive change are implicitly wedded to the notion of a state with ‘international agential state power’—that is, the image of a state that can actively shape the structure, not the other way around. The realist view that takes a structurally determinist position attributes no agency to the state and therefore also no responsibility. The possibility of moral progress is tethered to a particular theory of the state: a state that can actively shape the international structure. With agentic power comes responsibility; to seek responsibility is to assume agency. While these categories are schematic, what increasingly comes into focus is the ways in which moral action supposes a particular image of the state—a state that is modelled on and rooted in the Anglo-American historical experience of building international order—and an image of a sovereign state that can exercise agency.<sup>45</sup>

### **Japan under liberal internationalism**

In 1945, Japan lost both the war and its sovereignty. What General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) envisioned when he was newly appointed to rule over Japan instead of the Philippines was a completely demilitarized, decentralized and democratized Japan. The military was disbanded and the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal tried 1,344 individuals, while 200,000 of those complicit in the wartime regime were dismissed from their positions.<sup>46</sup>

Selective attribution of responsibility and strategies of subjugating enemy subjects went hand in hand for US strategists, even before the end of the war. Before the occupation of Japan, the US military’s strategic unit planned on governing the population by instilling a victim consciousness and putting the responsibility for war on the military clique, thereby separating the Japanese people and the emperor from the military.<sup>47</sup> The psychological unit in the US military reasoned that distinguishing the people from the military in this way would encourage the people to cooperate with the US forces. These tactics of differentiation and separation rendered the ordinary Japanese people as hapless victims. The ‘re-education programmes’ of the US occupation force’s Civil Information and Education Section also reinforced the narrative that ‘the Japanese were pitiable war-victims like their humane Emperor, who were deceived by military leaders represented by General Tojo Hideki’.<sup>48</sup> While other Allied powers, such as Australia and Great Britain, demanded that Emperor Hirohito also be put on

<sup>45</sup> G. John Ikenberry, ‘Liberal internationalism and cultural diversity’, in Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit, eds, *Culture and order in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 139.

<sup>46</sup> Cha, *Powerplay*, p. 124. On the history of Japan after defeat, see John Dower, *Embracing defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: Norton/The New Press, 1999).

<sup>47</sup> James J. Orr, *The victim as hero: ideologies of peace and national identity in postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> Yuki Tanaka, ‘Editor’s preface’, in Tanaka et al., eds, *Beyond victor’s justice?*, p. xxix.

trial, the United States insisted on his being exempt from standing trial.<sup>49</sup> While this move ensured the emperor's cooperation with the occupation force, it implied that both the emperor and the ordinary Japanese people were passive victims of the military, free of responsibility.

Matters of colonialism was treated lightly in the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. This was because the scope of those who were part of the 'international community' at the time were limited to states that were independent, and in most cases imperialist, powers. This resulted in the occlusion of violence against the colonized. As Yuki Tanaka notes,

the UK, France and Holland, as well as the US, were the colonial rulers of large areas of Asia, in which national independence movements were underway including in the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, Singapore, Burma, the Philippines and Indochina. Therefore, it is not surprising that Japanese responsibility toward Asian people was framed by the Tribunal in ways that focused on war atrocities and elided issues of colonialism.<sup>50</sup>

The occlusion of the colonial issue was an issue not only for the Allied powers, but for the communist powers, too, as evinced in the exemption of the Japanese biological warfare Unit 731 not only by the United States, but also by the Soviet Union.<sup>51</sup>

Given this, Japanese atrocities in Korea were not brought to the War Crimes Tribunal, and so the majority of victims of the 'comfort women' system had no redress. This omission was all the more glaring given the existence of the photographs of 'comfort women' posing next to Allied soldiers: a record that these women were seen, yet neglected, as subjects in history in their own right.<sup>52</sup> Immediate punishment for the setting up of institutionalized military sexual slavery took place only in the cases where the victims were Dutch colonial settler women captured in Dutch-controlled Indonesia, and, in one rare instance, on behalf of a Chinese victim by Australia.<sup>53</sup> The majority of Asian victims were noted in the Tokyo Tribunal as supporting evidence to demonstrate the viciousness of the Japanese military, yet these victims had no standing in the trial on their own account.<sup>54</sup> The post-1945 order therefore began with a partial addressing of Japanese wartime deeds, in part because the deeds dealt with entailed violence committed against Allied powers, for the most part, and because what happened to those in the colonies was not deemed as important by the Allied powers, many of which were still colonizers themselves. From the vantage-point of the colonized, the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal was lacking in many ways; despite

<sup>49</sup> Yuki Tanaka, 'Editor's preface', in Tanaka et al., eds, *Beyond victor's justice?*, p. xxix.

<sup>50</sup> Yuki Tanaka, 'Editor's preface', in Tanaka et al., eds, *Beyond victor's justice?*, p. xxvii.

<sup>51</sup> On the Soviet Union's stance on Unit 731, see Valentyna Polunina, 'From Tokyo to Khabarovsk: Soviet war crimes trials in Asia as Cold War battlefields', in von Lingen, ed., *War crimes trials in the wake of decolonization*, pp. 239–60.

<sup>52</sup> Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's comfort women: sexual slavery and prostitution during World War II and the US occupation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 41.

<sup>53</sup> Helen Durham and Narrelle Morris, 'Women's bodies and international criminal law: from Tokyo to Rabaul', in Tanaka et al., eds, *Beyond victor's justice?*, pp. 283–90.

<sup>54</sup> Durham and Morris, 'Women's bodies and international criminal law', p. 283.

the United States ostensibly standing for an alternative anti-colonial universalist vision of global order, the actual practice of American justice proved otherwise.

And even this politicized Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal was cut short by the 'reverse course' in American strategic thinking with the advent of the Cold War. The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 marked a fundamental reconfiguration in US strategy. As Cha documents, there were two diametrically opposed plans that were initially envisioned in American strategy: first, the neutralization approach, which consisted of demilitarization and extension of occupation; and second, the rehabilitation of Japan with the aim of balancing communist powers in Asia.<sup>55</sup> The first approach was pursued under MacArthur; yet for figures such as George Kennan, this risked Japan falling into the Soviet orbit. Still, the second plan of rehabilitating Japan did not go down well with states such as New Zealand and Australia and most of the Asian states. The dilemma, according to Cha, was 'not [to] leave Japan too weak such that it could be overrun by the Soviets, but not [to] leave it too strong such that it would be threatening to its neighbors'.<sup>56</sup> The solution to the riddle offered by John Foster Dulles was a generous offer to Japan that shielded economic recovery from compensation demands from victim states that viewed Japan as under US control. Dulles' assumption was that Japan's resurgence as a great power was only a matter of time. Continuation of occupation was not tenable, and a multilateral framework was unthinkable, given neighbouring states' animosity towards Japan. In these conditions, the option that gave the United States the most amount of effective control over the future of Japan was the formation of a bilateral security alliance with Tokyo.

After signing the peace treaty with 48 nations (excluding South Korea, North Korea, the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China) in San Francisco in 1951 and regaining sovereignty, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida headed to the Enlisted Service Club (today the Golden Gate Club) located in the headquarters of the Sixth US Army in Presidio to sign a security treaty that would allow US land, sea and air forces to have bases in Japanese territory. While Yoshida considered the alliance tentative, Dulles thought otherwise: 'Dulles once confided to British officials that the 1951 treaty amounted to a voluntary continuation of the military occupation, but in the guise of a normal political relationship between two nation-states'.<sup>57</sup> Japan became nominally independent by becoming substantively dependent on the United States economically and militarily, which effectively served the American power-play objective. And it was the United States that persuaded Japan's former victims to normalize relations on generous terms, pushed Japan to penetrate the South Asian market to steer it away from fostering close trade relations with the People's Republic of China, and linked foreign aid to the rehabilitation of Japan.<sup>58</sup>

What this history highlights is the gap between the recovery of nominal sovereignty by Japan and the accumulated sense of lacking sovereignty in the country

<sup>55</sup> Cha, *Powerplay*, pp. 122–3.

<sup>56</sup> Cha, *Powerplay*, p. 133.

<sup>57</sup> Cha, *Powerplay*, p. 143.

<sup>58</sup> Cha, *Powerplay*, pp. 151–6.

after 1945. Legally, Japan regained its sovereignty when it signed the peace treaty in San Francisco in 1951. Yet given Japan's reliance on the United States for protection and the renunciation of war as a sovereign right, the state in postwar Japan has often been labelled as 'abnormal' or 'semi-sovereign'.<sup>59</sup> These formulations have emerged because for some, sovereignty means having the right to wage war and having a monopoly on violence, whereas for others autonomy in relation to other states, especially the United States, looms larger in thinking about sovereignty. What is abnormal always assumes that which is normal, and the model for postwar Japan has always been the United States, which has meant that the discourse on state agency has been about the discourse on imperfect sovereignty.

The sense of abnormal is also reflected in popular culture, where the state is described as both present and dead. To be sure, if one were to use the Weberian definition of the state, the Japanese state is formidably present. Yet the postwar Japanese narrative of the state is mired in the language of simultaneous presence and absence. How can the state be simultaneously there and not there? A comic book popular among young people by Harutoshi Fukui entitled *Bokoku no Aegis* [The Aegis Ship of the Ghostly State] was turned into a film of the same title in 2005; the central question for the protagonists was what exactly the aegis ship is protecting when the country's sovereignty is felt as being compromised by the alliance with the United States.

The reason why I call attention to this ambivalent sense of the state in post-1945 Japan is because if, as I sought to show in the first section, morality assumes state agency, as in the arguments of constructivists and liberals, then the discourse on addressing historical responsibility to Japan's victims also circles back to the question of how one thinks about the state. Could it be the case that the various positions on history and state responsibility talk past one another because they each have a different sense of state agency? To consider this is to track the constellations of these various visions without reducing them to a single definition, and to consider the possibility that the state is both there and not there, rather than to think of the matter of the state as all or nothing. This calls for a rethinking of the Japanese *sense of having* state agency as refracted through US liberal internationalism.<sup>60</sup>

The interconnection between 'international agentic state power' and the history problem is quite telling, as it was when Japan came so close to catching up with the United States economically in the 1980s that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) began discussing the need to deal with history in relation to Asia. In his study on postwar Japanese views on war, Yutaka Yoshida locates the origin of the shift in the LDP stance on history in its emergent ambition for Japan to take a greater political role in Asia, not only an economic one. The first cabinet that admitted that the war was a war of invasion was that of Prime Minister Yasuhiro

<sup>59</sup> In many ways, the labelling of Japan as 'abnormal' tells us more about the state of the discipline and how the Eurocentric vision of the sovereign state has been internalized. On this, see Linus Hagström, 'The "abnormal" state: identity, norm/exception and Japan', *European Journal of International Relations* 21: 1, 2015, pp. 122–45.

<sup>60</sup> Gordon Avery, *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 6.

### *Supposing the moral state*

Nakasone, who came to power in 1982, the same year the history textbook became an international issue.<sup>61</sup> While Japan was still dependent on the United States, there was a sense in the 1980s that the state should actively involve itself in and seek to shape the international relations of Asia, to go beyond being solely an economic power; and the impediment to this aspiration was the history issue. Yoshida quotes Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu's speech in Singapore in 1991: 'For our state to actively politically involve [itself in Asia], what must be thought of is the issue of history.'<sup>62</sup> Yoshida's observation is important because it shows that it is when Japan wishes to exert 'international agential state power' that the issue of history becomes, in the view of LDP leaders, a matter to be dealt with. It also inversely indicates the sense of lacking agency while under the aegis of US hegemony: the LDP wants to bolster the state's agency because it perceives the current state to be *lacking* in this respect. To put it another way, the subtle shift in the 1980s signals the governing party's view that the Japanese state was hardly playing an agentic role in shaping Asian international relations.

The aspiration to play a greater role in the region is linked here with assuaging the concerns of neighbouring states to make Japan's remilitarization more palatable. The move to make Japan 'normal' in the 1990s by aiming to model itself on the United States relates to the country's search for a more agentic and assertive role. The assuaging part has failed, yet what is notable is how the LDP's vision of exercising not only economic but also political power in Asia as a great power marks the intensification of the state's attempt at controlling the narrative about the war and shifting its stance on security. Inherent in this move is the question of the role of the state in international politics. While liberals such as Tokudome assume the state is agentic, the LDP imagines state agency and sovereignty as compromised and consequently in need of bolstering. The same applies for Japanese nationalism. As Masaru Tamamoto observes, the LDP is attempting to institutionalize a positive view of history and nationalism precisely because there are no patriots in postwar Japan.<sup>63</sup>

And it is not only those in the LDP that consider the ambivalence of state sovereignty an issue. Literary critic Norihiro Kato also pointed to this as the source of Japan's inability to face the other in postwar years in his essay 'After defeat'.<sup>64</sup> Kato was responding to the public appearance of survivors of military sexual slavery in the 1990s, which led him to theorize that the cause of Japan's difficulty in facing the other has to do with how Japan has kept on running away from becoming a subject. What he problematized was the way in which the constitution was written and imposed by the United States instead of letting the Japanese people write their own laws with their own hands. The original denial of Japanese agency at this constitutive moment of post-1945 liberal order for him resulted in a twisted idea of the state. As a way to address this original twist, he called for a national referendum in which the Japanese people were actively to choose their own constitution. This

<sup>61</sup> Yoshida, *Nihonjin no sensokan*, pp. 9–10, 186–92.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Yoshida, *Nihonjin no sensokan*, p. 11 (present author's translation).

<sup>63</sup> Masaru Tamamoto, 'Japan's politics of cultural shame', *Global Asia* 2: 1, 2007, pp. 14–20.

<sup>64</sup> Kato, *Haisengoron*, p. 109.

act is a gesture to fix the postwar twist by creating a moment where the citizens can *choose* to live under the constitution, even if they choose the exact same constitution. Such a gesture is intended to reinstate the sense of the state, and the sense of connection between the self and the state. For Kato, in order for the people of Japan to respond to the demands of former victims, there needs to be a ‘self’ that can respond to the ‘other.’ Why does Kato see the ‘self’ as a precondition to being responsible? As Hannah Arendt wrote on collective responsibility, in order to be held responsible, two conditions must hold: first, I am being held responsible for a deed which is not of my own doing; and second, my responsibility arises from my membership in a community which is unlike a business partnership in that I cannot easily join or leave it.<sup>65</sup> In the post-1945 international order, where under US occupation Japanese nationalism was explicitly demilitarized and denied, and especially with globalization where identity becomes fluid, this notion of the collective has become diffuse. For Japan to respond to the other, the diffuse sense of belonging to the state must be replaced with an active acceptance of acting as a Japanese. For Kato, meaningful relation to the past arises where the future generation *decides* to respond because this is the price of belonging to the human community—and in this case, to the collective called Japan.<sup>66</sup>

For Kato, the issue was the forgetting of the original twist. If the issue is one of forgetting, then the antidote is to unforget. However, such a move resembles the move by the LDP to reassert the state in an attempt to rekindle nationalism. The LDP’s shift of stance on history in the 1980s, so as to take a greater political role in the region, was followed by its move to instil a greater sense of nationalism in the people in the 1990s, for example by passing a law on the national anthem and the raising of the national flag at the end of the decade. This method of instilling nationalism and Kato’s discussion about restoring the sense of the state came too close for critics such as Takahashi, who considers the state as something which must be deconstructed. Takahashi called Kato a ‘neo-nationalist’ for identifying a need to connect the people to the nation, and the postwar debate on the subject of history resulted in an impasse.

While the standoff between Kato and Takahashi attracted little attention among those who study Japanese international relations, I argue that it links up with the paradox noted by Hobson. A state that can pursue a moral end is a state with ‘international agentic state power’. What Hobson identifies as the paradox, that neo-liberals and constructivists are the ones who take the state more seriously, in the case of post-imperial Japan under the Pax Americana manifests as the simultaneous disavowal of and implicit desire for the state. The history problem persists because there is a contradiction among discourses disavowing the state that militates against any effort at constructing a coherent national identity, given the lessons of total war on the one hand, and, on the other, the discourses desiring the state (whether out of nostalgia for greatness or the need to respond to Japan’s

<sup>65</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘Collective responsibility’, in Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment* (New York: Schocken, 2003).

<sup>66</sup> Norihiro Kato, *Sengow sengoigo kangaeru* [Thinking about the postwar in post-postwar] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1998).

### *Supposing the moral state*

other), both of which ignore the evolution of the role of the state in global politics and, more specifically, the subordinate and dependent status of Japan under the Pax Americana.

If the kind of state which can act towards a morally progressive end is a state with 'international agential state power', then how does Japan *under* US-led liberal internationalism fare? After defeat, Japan was under US occupation between 1945 and 1952, with no ability to make foreign policy of its own. Even as Japan regained sovereignty by signing the partial peace treaty in San Francisco in 1951, this came on the condition that Japan agree to enter into a bilateral security alliance under the aegis of the United States. As a state that is part of the US hub-and-spokes system, Japan is a state subjected under liberal internationalism, or what Kato calls the 'American shadow'. While the fact that the United States holds a strong influence over Japanese international relations is well known, the ways in which this lack of *sense of having agency* affects discourse on historical justice is seldom acknowledged when considering the relation between liberal internationalism and historical justice.<sup>67</sup>

After 1945, the Japanese state became a palimpsest, both there and not there. Those who assume that the state has the agency to shape international structure talk past those who see state agency as being compromised. This gives rise to an impasse where those who think of morality as having to do with agency and autonomy, such as Kato, see the compromised arrangement cemented under the hub-and-spokes system as an obstacle to be reconsidered, whereas those who focus on Japan's relation with Asia occlude the role of the United States and take Japan's 'international agential state power' as a given. Why does the sense of sovereignty matter? It matters because moral action supposes a sovereign subject, and this supposition makes the semi-sovereign state of history a problem, and ineluctably triggers a move to assert sovereignty, albeit towards different ends in the cases of Kato and the LDP. The postwar palimpsest state gave rise to diametrically opposed approaches to the solution of the history problem. While Kato's intent in rethinking the relation between the people and the Japanese state envisaged constituting a subject of history that could be held accountable to Japan's other, this ironically echoed the moves by the conservative government to bolster nationalism, both finding Japanese sovereignty and sense of collective identity to be lacking. Therefore, in Tetsuya Takahashi's eyes, Kato appeared as a dangerous neo-nationalist. The supposed moral state exists for some, but not for others, and this is where history matters.

### **Conclusion: the palimpsest state, after history**

This article began with the simmering tension in the hub-and-spokes system in east Asia which brings to light challenges to the post-1945 order on multiple levels. Not only state actors but non-state actors have increasingly come to exercise influ-

<sup>67</sup> I insist on the term 'sense of having agency' as opposed to 'having agency' as this phrasing enables one to take into account how perception matters.

ence in challenging how the state is to face its past. The US House Resolution 121 calls for the state to take action. Yet this raises a question: what kind of state is supposed when one calls for a state to act morally? Attending to literary critic Norihiro Kato's critique that Japan cannot face the other because 'it has kept on running away from becoming a subject', I have examined here how an aspiration to act morally inadvertently recentres the state, because moral possibility supposes a state that can act autonomously. Despite serving different ends, the move by the conservative LDP to instil nationalism and love for the nation, and Kato's call for the people to rechoose the constitution to kindle the connection to the state so as to be able to respond to the other, were both labelled as neo-nationalist and dangerous, thereby resulting in an impasse over how to face the past. The state in Japan is ambivalent, and so is the people's sense of the state. What I have sought to show here is the gap between the kind of state which liberal internationalism envisions as a doer and arbiter of historical justice, and the kind of state postwar Japan was allowed to become under US hegemony. Kato was one of the few figures who drew a connection between the two. Therefore, for policy-makers, seeing the 'history problem' not as a matter of Japan's alone, but as entangled and polymorphic, as well as seeing the US building of international order since 1945 as part of the story, would offer a better comprehension of why the history problem persists to this day.

Liberal internationalism, originating in the Enlightenment notion of progressive history, is underwritten by an idea of the state that can exercise agentic state power. The discourse which pursues moral possibility in world politics implicitly take the state seriously. Nonetheless, the idea of progressive history and the agentic state has come under scrutiny in a globalized age where the state is said to be withering. This is to say that the moral actor in global politics, despite its recent focus on human rights, nonetheless remains wedded to an image of the agentic sovereign nation-state that has become outdated. Therefore, beyond Japan, in other regions of the world, revisiting the question of *who* the responsible subject of history *is* in the post-national era can identify the gap between the sovereignty assumed in international law and the sovereignty assumed as a social construct and identity in global politics.

The post-1945 international order marks the shift from the world of empires to that of sovereign nation-states. Yet for Japan, the state has been both there and not there. Thinking about Japan's history problem enables us to ask what it might mean to think about moral possibility when one is not a sovereign in the sense that liberal internationalism assumes, but a semi-sovereign. The discussion of Japan under US-led liberal internationalism presented here is not intended to excuse Japan and blame the United States, but rather to show how positing the 'history problem' as Japan's problem alone occludes the broader theoretical lacuna about the relation between moral possibility in world politics and the paradox of the disavowal of and desire for the sovereign in moralizing discourse. Considering the relation between state agency and liberal internationalism in responding to questions of justice by attending to the case of post-imperial Japan can contribute

### *Supposing the moral state*

to the existing literature on historical justice in global politics more broadly, as it demonstrates the need to rethink the state of history in international politics in a late modern era when we have become conscious of exclusionary mechanism of master narratives.<sup>68</sup> We must ask, what does it mean to deal with questions of justice as a semi-sovereign, when the ability to act as an agentic sovereign is implied in reconciliation? Can we think of justice as a non-sovereign if we are to deal with the paradox that those who seek moral space simultaneously desire and disavow the state?

<sup>68</sup> Brown, *States of injury*, p. 30.