

SETTING THE WORLD STAGE:  
SOCIAL POSITIONING AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER CONTESTATION

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# **SETTING THE WORLD STAGE: SOCIAL POSITIONING AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER CONTESTATION**

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## *Abstract*

Why and how does the politics of identity lead to contestation in international orders? I argue that international actors engage in social positioning, which is to say that they are continually engaged in political moves that both enact and alter collective beliefs about social categories and the deeper understandings on which they are based. This background knowledge produces both hierarchies in international politics, and the institutions and practices that define international orders. By examining struggles over social positioning, which enables the competent performance of identities, I aim to shed light on how social positioning affects the reproduction and evolution of international orders. Political conflicts, from diplomatic quarrels to hegemonic wars, may thus be seen as struggles to assert relational position, and to enact particular practices as the proper “way things are done” in world politics. The generalizability of an identity performance approach is illustrated through case studies spanning different regions and issue areas of international relations. The cases include the change to practices of sovereignty and intervention that were enacted through the human security agenda. I examine the ideational challenge presented by the rise in ethnic conflicts in the 1990s and the efforts by the UN Secretariat and Canada to enact the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, which formalized a shift in which previously taboo intervention was now permissible in cases of mass atrocities. It then examines the post-Cold War rivalry between Russia and the US to enact their identities and extract recognition as a great power and hegemon, respectively, which has degraded the international security order. In international political economy, it studies how the Eurozone debt crisis in Greece was defined by

clashes between the “ordoliberalism” of creditor states and EU institutions, the International Monetary Fund’s attempts to assert its identity as the preeminent site of international economic expertise, and Greece’s identity-driven imperative to maintain social position inside the European core.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Colin Chia graduated from the University of British Columbia with a Bachelor of Arts (Political Science) and holds a Master of Arts (Political Science) from McGill University.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ECB	European Central Bank
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
G7	Group of Seven (major industrialized countries)
G77	Group of Seventy-Seven (developing countries)
ICISS	International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IO	International organization
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe
Pasok	Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement
PRC	People's Republic of China
RtoP	Responsibility to Protect
Syriza	Coalition of the Radical Left
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization

## Chapter 1

### IDENTITY PERFORMANCE AND INTERNATIONAL ORDERING

Why and how does the politics of identity lead to the contestation of international orders? In short, I argue that international actors try to change the world to suit who they want to be. Identities must be performed in a social setting and in interaction with others to be real. In the international context, the identities of nations and organizations depend on a sense of where that agent is placed in relation to specific others with whom they compare themselves, as well as in the broader social context of international politics. Being able to act in accordance with our identities (whether this is *woman*, *hockey player*, *American*, or *sovereign state*) is necessary to feel that we actually are who we think we are. Furthermore, interactions are both based on and reinforce collective and tacit background knowledge in the social order. These are not just about who belongs in an identity category, but what that identity means, and what kinds of privileges or discrimination are attached to it, which in turn is directly linked to the structures of political power in any social setting. In this study I posit that international actors engage in social positioning, which is to say that they are continually engaged in political moves that both enact and alter collective beliefs about social categories and the deeper understandings on which they are based. This background knowledge produces both hierarchies in international politics, and the institutions and practices that define international orders. By examining struggles over social positioning, which enables the competent performance of identities, I aim to shed light on how social positioning affects the reproduction and evolution of international orders.

Contestation of the international institutions and practices that structure world politics is one of the biggest issues facing international relations today. Russia's annexation of Crimea in

2014 and its rift with Western countries revived fears of inter-state conflict in Europe. But contestation is also coming from those who are typically expected to uphold the status quo, such as efforts to rewrite the rules of international economic relations by the United States. The Trump administration since 2017 has acted disruptively in international economic and security issues, something particularly evident at G7 and NATO summits. At the same time, international organizations that had been viewed as playing a crucial role in promoting cooperation have instead become targets for populist politics. While bureaucratic expertise was considered to help them foster legitimacy and international cooperation, this has come to symbolize an undemocratic technocracy imposing governance on behalf of transnational elites. This all suggests something deeper than the erosion of American unipolarity or hegemonic decline, it is a crisis of the ideational structures on which the institutions and practices of world politics are based.

International order contestation is thus primarily a result of efforts by international actors, which include states, international organizations, and other transnational actors, to enact background knowledge that allows them to perform their identities. My argument has two key implications for theories of international orders, hierarchy and hegemony. Firstly, since prevailing institutions and practices are crucial in how agents enact relations with each other, agents will tend to defend international orders that induce others to recognize their identity, and contest those that deny them their desired positions. In other words, agents tend to challenge international orders when the order's background knowledge forces them into social positions that cannot be reconciled with their desired identity. If they find themselves stigmatized or misplaced according to the prevailing ideational structure, and thus unable to maintain their sense of self within it, an international actor is more likely to contest international orders.

Although this argument aligns with recent work on international roles and recognition,<sup>1</sup> being recognized in a role or identity presupposes background knowledge in which that identity is meaningful, and a social context that allows it to be performed and experienced. The value added is to emphasize that there are tacit ideational structures behind roles and identities, and this background knowledge is central to the ideational structure of international orders. Furthermore, these structures are contested and changed through being performed. Adopting this performative approach lets us examine the process through which what actually happens in international politics might alter international orders, or serve to maintain and reproduce them. This aligns with the idea that agents will not necessarily challenge an order simply because it is based on a different culture, although this is a possibility if the background knowledge stigmatizes some forms of difference.<sup>2</sup> Rather than clashes *of* clearly bounded, coherent cultures or civilizations, contention thus features clashes *over* tacit beliefs about social categories, what defines them, and what they mean.

While it is not a new insight that ideas constitute international orders, ideas have usually been treated as exogenous or as intervening variables, and not themselves the subject of political contestation. In contrast, social positioning addresses why and how the substantive ideas that constitute international orders are challenged by agents throughout the international hierarchy. Conventionally, institutions and practices of international politics are seen as imposed by a state with dominant military and economic power. Thus, international orders are often described with terms like “US-led” or “Pax Britannica.” This claim that international orders are necessarily

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- 1 David M. McCourt, *Britain and World Power since 1945: Constructing a Nation's Role in International Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
  - 2 Christian Reus-Smit, ‘Cultural Diversity and International Order’, *International Organization* 71, no. 4 (2017): 851–85.

defined by who is at the top of the hierarchy is wrong. What really matters is the background knowledge that enables some actors to claim superiority and drives others to recognize it. Hegemons cannot simply impose themselves but have to secure the ongoing complicity of the subordinated.<sup>3</sup> It is with reference to tacit background knowledge that an agent claims the social position of hegemon, and is recognized by others through the practices they actually carry out. Hegemonic international orders are thus produced through social processes that reflect dominant and hegemonic ideas, rather than dominant hegemonic states.<sup>4</sup>

The second main contribution is to examine how the tacit nature of background knowledge both empowers ideational hegemony and makes it possible for actors to challenge it. Dominant ideas are tacit, deeply sedimented, and seem like “common sense.”<sup>5</sup> But their unspoken acceptance also allows slippages of meaning that allow them to be strategically reinterpreted and changed. This is how struggles to define and entrench dominant ideas are linked to the contestation of international orders. Hierarchies depend on naturalized beliefs about social categorization and stratification, which rely in turn on the background knowledge that is taken for granted as how the world works. Social positioning thus explicates the motives, means, and opportunities for agents to contest international orders. Explanations of why subordinate states comply with dominant orders without being overtly threatened or coerced tend to fixate on dom-

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3 Paul Musgrave and Daniel Nexon, ‘Defending Hierarchy from the Moon to the Indian Ocean: Symbolic Capital and Political Dominance in Early Modern China and the Cold War’, *International Organization* 72, no. 3 (2018): 12.

4 Robert W. Cox, ‘Gramsci, Hegemony, and International Relations: An Essay in Method’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (1983): 171–72; Daniel Nexon and Iver Neumann, ‘Hegemonic-Order Theory: A Field-Theoretic Account’, *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 673–76; Bentley B. Allan, Srdjan Vucetic, and Ted Hopf, ‘The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order: China’s Hegemonic Prospects’, *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (2018): 839–69.

5 See Ted Hopf, ‘Common-Sense Constructivism and Hegemony in World Politics’, *International Organization* 67, no. 2 (2013): 317–54.

inant actors having ideational resonance or cultural attraction.<sup>6</sup> I suggest instead that this results from constitutive effects of background knowledge, which privileges some actors by giving them greater power to interpret and define social meanings. This allows them to position themselves in privileged social positions, and make their superiority appear to be an immutable feature of the world.

Thus, by focusing on the soft power attraction or authority enjoyed by dominant actors, standard accounts actually understate the ideational power of hegemony. A dominant social order, and the hierarchy that goes with it, is not something that one can choose to engage with or not. It is an “inescapable social infrastructure” that we cannot avoid using and reifying if our actions are to have meaning and affect the outside world.<sup>7</sup> Hegemony’s power is that it imposes a definition of social reality, creates schemes of perception, and dismisses alternatives without conscious action or knowledge of either dominant or dominated agents. Hegemonic ideas are powerful precisely because of their common sense, taken-for-granted aspect, which means that they often pass unnoticed.<sup>8</sup> But this tacit dimension is also what makes it possible to challenge those ideas, through the reinterpretation and slippage of shared, explicit understandings.

One corollary implication is that the most effective challengers are the insiders to the international order, in effect those who have greatest symbolic power if not necessarily material power. In fact, their revisions may not appear to be change at all. In one example I examine in chapter 2, advancing the Responsibility to Protect was not seen as a revisionist move despite

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6 For example G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

7 Vincent Pouliot, ‘Against Authority: The Heavy Weight of International Hierarchy’, in *Hierarchies in World Politics*, ed. Ayşe Zarakol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 130.

8 Hopf, ‘Common-Sense Constructivism’.

altering fundamental concepts of sovereignty precisely because it was made to seem a competent interpretation of dominant ideas. In contrast, Russia's use of classical great power concepts to justify its political moves, examined in chapter 3, was construed as dangerous revisionism that both Western and non-Western states rejected. Likewise, chapter 4 outlines how tacit collective purposes of European regional order slipped from entrenching democracy to disciplining states' economic policies. Existing theories that do not distinguish between international orders and material capabilities thus do not anticipate that international orders can be revised and changed without shifts in the distribution of material resources.<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically, for the same reasons they also miss deep continuities (such as the centrality of the nation-state) that have endured through order reconstructions and the rise and fall of what they see as hegemonies.<sup>10</sup>

I begin this chapter by defining the concept of social positioning, and how it links the need to perform identities to the constitution and contestation of international orders. Social positioning is implicated in issues of group membership and relations to significant others. It can either reify or unsettle an agent's self-image, making securing social position a crucial motive for action. I then tackle the issue of how collective recognition of an agent's identity and social position depends on background knowledge. Background knowledge consists of beliefs about political ontology, collective purposes, and social categorization that are collectively taken for granted. Agents draw upon it so as to claim and place themselves within the social domain of international politics. I then discuss methodological issues and lay out an empirical strategy to

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9 Alexander Cooley, Daniel H. Nexon, and Steven M. Ward, 'Revising Order or Challenging the Balance of Military Power? An Alternative Typology of Revisionist and Status-Quo States', *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 4 (2019): 690–91.

10 See also Barry Buzan and George Lawson, 'Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 2 (2014): 437–62.

observe the processes of social positioning and order contestation at work, and contrast my argument to existing theories of hegemonic transition, institutionalism, and status-seeking.

### **Positioning, identities, and background knowledge**

Social positioning consists of performances aimed at establishing relations to others and a place in the wider social context. An agent's selfhood or identity exists only through its performance, whether through words or actions.<sup>11</sup> Agents engage in social positioning because their sense of self depends on the relations that are formed through interactions with others. Interaction is needed to have any sense of social existence at all, which requires taking on board the tacit background knowledge that structures interactions as the price of admission into the social game.<sup>12</sup> Since others have their own identities to perform, they will not always respond in ways that validate our self-image, and may also try to force us to conform with their definitions of our identity.<sup>13</sup> Thus, actor identities and the ideational structure itself can be at stake in seemingly trivial disputes over diplomatic protocol or the legal technicalities of an economic bailout package. This sets the scene for ongoing struggles because if who we are is how others relate to us, then being related to in undesired ways also threatens our sense of self.<sup>14</sup> In short, the power struggle for social positioning aims to define what relations should exist between the self and others, and the background knowledge on which those relations are based. In this section I dis-

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- 11 Judith Butler, 'Performative Agency', *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3, no. 2 (2010): 147–61; John R. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
  - 12 Erik Ringmar, 'The Recognition Game: Soviet Russia against the West', *Cooperation and Conflict* 37, no. 2 (2002): 119–20; Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 98–100.
  - 13 Cf. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 330–31.
  - 14 Simon Frankel Pratt, 'A Relational View of Ontological Security in International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2017): 78–85.

cuss how social positioning works at the level of performance and interactions, and is connected to enactments of international orders and background knowledge.

Social position is not just about relative rank, but can also be about being included in a specific group, or keeping a distance from particular others. Thus, it goes beyond status-seeking or concerns about vertical ranking. Status is usually seen as a kind of intangible good that agents have more or less of, which can resolve to a rank in an overall league table.<sup>15</sup> Social positioning sees this as an issue of performing and asserting relationships of superiority or equality with others. However, because social positioning is in pursuit of an identity, it is not only about being higher or lower. An agent might want to position itself as either part of or outside a certain group, even if this positioning also draws it into relations of inferiority with others.<sup>16</sup> It might be preferable to lead a subordinated group than to be a marginal member of a prestigious one, or vice versa. Hence, instead of gaining status per se, social positioning implies that agents aim to maintain and pursue social relations compatible with self-conceived notions about who they are and where they should stand in the social context. The specific positioning to be pursued is driven by narratives and interpretations of the world and the collective self's proper place in it. While I bracket these issues to focus on international contention, these may emerge from among staff of an international organization or within a state's domestic society.<sup>17</sup>

Social positioning and the relationships between agents must be continually performed.

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15 For a defining statement of this concept see Deborah Welch Larson, T.V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Status and World Order', in *Status in World Politics*, ed. T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3–32.

16 Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 46–56.

17 Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 613–14; Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity and Security Interests* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

Performances are meaningful actions that are based on a specific tacit understanding of the social context. When carried out competently, they are also part of larger patterns of action (that is, practices) that “embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world.”<sup>18</sup> Background knowledge consists of dominant narratives and tacit understandings that are taken for granted by social actors. These include criteria for social categories and stratification. Performances must draw on these socially shared meanings to be effective, and to elicit responses from other agents that cast them in the role they desire.<sup>19</sup> But other agents may also react with performances of their own to reject those claims in pursuit of their own social positioning. The actors on the stage thus work to establish theirs as the authentic interpretation of social reality, in which they hold the role that accords with their identities. Importantly, the stability of constructs like identities and orders is an illusion created by repeated practice.<sup>20</sup> Social structures change or disappear if agents change or stop carrying out actions premised on their existence. International politics is thus continually acted out by its performers, in staged events like summits or in relatively unscripted dialogues of words and actions during disputes and crises.

At the level of social interaction, social positioning enacts both relations between agents and the basic understandings of the social context in which those relations exist. In this way, performances make relationships and institutions real through actions and practices based upon them.<sup>21</sup> By acting based on their models of material reality, agents can alter the world to make it conform with those conceptions, both through their own practices and by inducing others to act

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18 Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, ‘International Practices’, *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (2011): 4.

19 Erik Ringmar, ‘Performing International Systems: Two East-Asian Alternatives to the Westphalian Order’, *International Organization* 66, no. 1 (2012): 2–3.

20 Adler and Pouliot, ‘International Practices’, 18.

21 Searle, *Making the Social World*.

based on them. Known as performativity, this concept implies that descriptions of the social world can alter it to more closely conform to them,<sup>22</sup> as people act and make decisions based on those descriptions and theories. This becomes more likely if those representations are made by agents with high symbolic power and thus authoritative social standing, like scientists or political leaders. Social positioning thus always produces broader structural effects above and beyond the immediate concern with performing one's identity and relations with other actors. The implication is that conflict is more likely when agents attempt to perform relations with others that clash with those others' self-conceptions. It is also likely to occur when the background knowledge implicitly enacted through social positioning performances clashes with the basic worldviews of others. Social positioning performances thus have to be studied as an interactive and dynamic phenomenon of contention over social relations and the social contexts in which they exist.

### *Performing background knowledge on the world stage*

Erving Goffman argued that "life itself is a dramatically enacted thing," and that we perform our selves on a social stage, before audiences made up of other members of society, in both unconscious and deliberately calculated ways.<sup>23</sup> We try to control both aspects of our performance, in order to induce others to see us as our ideal selves.<sup>24</sup> As with background knowledge, identities are "gleaned" from the performances of others in social interaction patterns.<sup>25</sup> Existing work examines the interactions of states in the form of face-to-face encounters between diplomats and

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22 Donald A. MacKenzie, *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Michel Callon, 'What Does It Mean to Say That Economics Is Performative?', in *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*, ed. Donald A. MacKenzie, Fabian Muniesa, and Lucia Siu (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 311–57.

23 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 74–75.

24 Goffman, 51–58.

25 Erving Goffman, 'The Interaction Order', *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (1983): 3.

representatives.<sup>26</sup> The experience of states for most people, however, is through means such as news media, through which we receive performances and representations of international actors and international politics in everyday life. States and other international actors are embodied by political leaders and represented as entities with desires and agency. This is how narratives and images are conveyed such as: Asian countries face challenges from the rising power of China, the UN is sending peacekeepers to a war-torn country, and activists have called for greater action to fight climate change. Popular culture and fictional depictions are also influential because they create “synthetic experiences” of world politics that can even influence state leaders who take them as images of reality.<sup>27</sup>

The performances that I examine here are thus not taking place in an abstract space detached from the mundane real world. The “little green men” in unmarked military uniforms taking control of the Crimean peninsula, bank machines in Athens that will not dispense more than €60, and the pageantry of summits and speeches must occur to become political performances. The capability and power to stage and enact those events is how military and economic capabilities matter, and it is also through public performances that symbolic power and intimidation can be exerted, whether by states, terrorists, social movements, or other political actors.<sup>28</sup> They may use power coercively to close off available justifications to others, both by acting to

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26 E.g. Iver B. Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats: Inside a European Foreign Ministry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Marcus Holmes, ‘The Force of Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Mirror Neurons and the Problem of Intentions’, *International Organization* 67, no. 4 (2013): 829–61; Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

27 J. Furman Daniel and Paul Musgrave, ‘Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations’, *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (2017): 503–16.

28 James Der Derian, ‘Imaging Terror: Logos, Pathos and Ethos’, *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2008): 23–37; Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Performance and Power* (Polity Press, 2011).

create “facts on the ground” or through rhetorical arm-twisting.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, in social life and in international politics there is no fourth wall between the audience and the stage. The audience does not passively watch; their interests are implicated in the performances they see, and they also respond with their own performances.<sup>30</sup>

Since performances may clash and make contentious claims on others,<sup>31</sup> the question is then which performances will have more power to shape social reality. Having one’s performances pass as legitimate definitions of the world is the expression of symbolic power, which describes the relative ability of a social actor to impose its meanings and interpretations of the social world onto others.<sup>32</sup> Symbolic capital is whatever is socially recognized as representing and signifying “power,” in the most loose and tacit sense. This might be battleships, holy relics, technological achievements, human rights protection, or hosting the Olympics.<sup>33</sup> What is recognized also tells us something about what is valued in a given social order: how are organizational capacity, military strength, or cultural achievement each regarded? All this is part of the background knowledge about how politics works, what it is for, and how to classify different political actors.

Social positioning performances always take place within a wider social context, and affect the social setting itself and the interactions that take place within it. Intentionally or not,

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29 Rainer Forst, *Normativity and Power: Analyzing Social Orders of Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 49; Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick T. Jackson, ‘Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric’, *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2007): 35–66.

30 Erik Ringmar, ‘How the World Stage Makes Its Subjects: An Embodied Critique of Constructivist IR Theory’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 19, no. 1 (2016): 101–25.

31 See Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

32 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); This is akin to ‘denotic’ power in Searle, *Making the Social World* and ‘noumenal’ power in; Forst, *Normativity and Power*.

33 Ann Hironaka, *Tokens of Power: Rethinking War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nexon and Neumann, ‘Hegemonic-Order Theory’.

social positioning performances thus assert the understandings of social hierarchy and stratification on which they are based. By playing out their actions as part of commonly accepted practice, agents can attempt to translate and invent background knowledge.<sup>34</sup> This enables them to place themselves in the social position that best serves their self-defined interests, and steer each other's actions in desired ways.<sup>35</sup> Social positioning is thus linked to order contestation because the issue of what makes someone admired or ostracized in a social setting is directly connected to its tacitly known purposes and principles. Claims of superiority and equality relative to other agents necessarily involve making claims about the rightful basis of social rank in the wider social context. These claims are justified and made possible by more tacit levels of background knowledge that are accepted in the social context.

Since practices are patterns of action recognized as competent performances, what makes contestation more or less successful is also a question of what actions are perceived as normal and competent. An agent's relational position and symbolic capital can make a big difference in how its actions are interpreted. While departures from standard practice by most actors will be seen as deviance and failure, a masterful improvisation by a well-positioned agent might set a new standard for others to follow.<sup>36</sup> Performances can alter background knowledge through interpretations that shift standard practice by inducing others to adopt the revised patterns of action, whether by force or persuasion. Recall that stability actually requires active disciplining and reproduction of existing practices, and social structures change or disappear if they stop

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34 Butler, 'Performative Agency', 154–55.

35 Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, *Symbolic Power in the World Trade Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 34–35.

36 Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders*, 57–58.

being performed. Hence, the background knowledge that structures relations and the social order can be modified through the practices that embody it.

Social settings are structured by background knowledge, the beliefs and assumptions that are taken for granted within a social context. Some aspects of background knowledge are more tacit and foundational, and more surface-level understandings and interpretations are based on them. At the deepest, most tacit level is political ontology, beliefs about what exists in the social world, how it works and the nature of power and politics.<sup>37</sup> Beliefs about what the “state of nature” is like fall into this layer. Forming the next layer are beliefs about justice and fundamental notions of the good in social life, which shape the fundamental values and purposes of society.<sup>38</sup> This forms the basis for social categorization, knowledge about how agents are grouped and stratified. Identity groups are often defined to include some and exclude others. Linked to this drawing of boundaries, stratification depends on morally-loaded assessments of the worth and character of different actors.<sup>39</sup> Social categorization leads some agents to be recognized as having specific identities and to enjoy relations of superiority to others. On this basis, some are classified as “rogue” or barbaric while others are considered normal or even admired.

Social positioning performances directly invoke the most explicit layer of background knowledge (social categorization), but the more tacit layers are necessarily embedded in the performance as well. Differences in the scripting, staging, and performance of international prac-

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37 Bentley B. Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 33–34.

38 See Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

39 Ann E. Towns, *Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 45–46.

tices reflect differences in the background knowledge that is enacted through them.<sup>40</sup> Importantly, because of the tacit nature of background knowledge, each layer has the potential for multiple interpretations and slippage.<sup>41</sup> Both agency and the potential for contestation exist in these gaps between tacit understandings and performed practice. Agents may claim a shared commitment to one layer while contending over how it should be properly interpreted and enacted in practice. For instance, during the Crimea crisis there was conflict over whether the principles of the UN Charter should be interpreted to prioritize territorial integrity of Ukraine or the self-determination of Crimea. The reverse is also true: events and actions are contentiously interpreted as proper or improper performances of accepted practice, in ways that aim to define background knowledge. This might be done by creating a *fait accompli* on the ground and claiming that it reflects the legitimate background knowledge. This is what the annexation of Crimea helped Russia to do, whereas rejecting such claims required Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) advocates to denounce the use of RtoP-like justifications for the 2003 Iraq War.

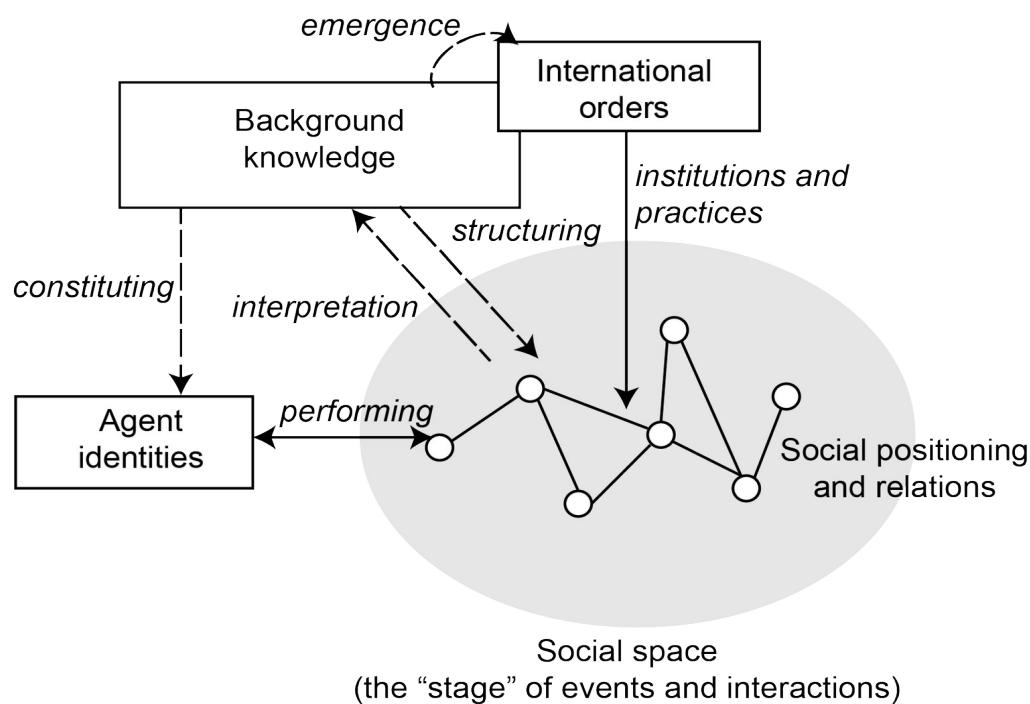
Social positioning performances, as manifestations and representations of tacit background knowledge, can both reproduce and contest social orders. The background knowledge that structures the social setting is put into practice through everyday politics, as well as notions of legitimate action and collective purposes. An agent's social assets and attributes may help or hinder their performances from eliciting recognition. Most agents simply lack the symbolic power to induce others to recognize them as great powers, even when they actually inflict military defeats on the most powerful states.<sup>42</sup> In this way, background knowledge produces a topo-

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40 Ringmar, 'Performing International Systems'.

41 Cf. Christian Reus-Smit, *On Cultural Diversity: International Theory in a World of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 208.

42 Hironaka, *Tokens of Power*, 43, highlights the examples of Afghanistan and North Vietnam defeating the Cold War superpowers.



**Figure 1.** Simplified depiction of performances, background knowledge, and the social space.

graphy of social space that gives advantages to some agents over others.<sup>43</sup> Crucially, it does so in ways that are perceived as legitimate and self-evident, not needing further justification.<sup>44</sup> Social positioning performances thus invoke and assert understandings of the legitimate basis for social stratification, group membership, and relations between agents.

Figure 1 provides a simplified illustration. Solid lines represent patterns of action which are embodied and enacted by agents, while dashed lines represent abstract constitutive relationships. Background knowledge is enacted by agents through their performances, which are interpreted by others within the social space. In this way, background knowledge can be seen as

43 Charlotte Epstein, 'Norms: Bourdieu's Nomos, or the Structural Power of Norms', in *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking Key Concepts in IR*, ed. Rebecca Adler-Nissen (New York: Routledge, 2013), 170.

44 Eagleton-Pierce, *Symbolic Power in the WTO*, 59–61.

structuring the social space in which those performances are enacted, the relations between agents, and their predispositions to regard some performances as more competent and some interpretations as more correct. International orders are emergent from background knowledge and are manifested in institutions and practices taking place in the social space. Events in the world and interactions taking place on the “stage” feed back into background knowledge as agents interpret their meanings. Agents formulate and perform their identities in context of background knowledge and the performative feedback they receive from the social space, such as how others interact with them and their sense of where they are socially positioned. Their performances, in turn, may seek to affect how others interact with them by altering social positioning and the space of relations. In this way, identities, background knowledge, and international orders are produced and potentially altered.

The ability to influence, manipulate, and interpret background knowledge is crucial because it defines what will be perceived as correct, competent, and legitimate in the international order. Furthermore, the logics of social categorization are not just about prestige or status, they are the basis for some agents to be considered more competent and superior to others. Those with privileged positions will consequently have a greater ability to have their performances perceived as the authentic definition of the tacit background knowledge, and ultimately a greater ability to maintain and enhance their social position. They can reshape background knowledge through their actions if other agents who observe those performances accept them as valid and socially correct. The prestigious position of some performers leads other agents to infer, from those actions, the tacit understandings that are conveyed by them, and to adopt and emulate them in their own performances and beliefs about the world.

### *Social positioning and contentious performances*

Identity performances may have social positioning effects of claiming and placing, whether as unintended side effects or part of a conscious strategy. These, in turn, can both reproduce or contest the background knowledge shaping the social space. *Claiming* is when agents seek to perform their identities by engaging in practices associated with that identity. Agents cast themselves in their desired role by behaving as if they already hold that social position.<sup>45</sup> To perform an identity is to simultaneously claim, experience and reproduce it, by carrying out the patterns of action that are constitutive of that identity. It should be emphasized that this does not mean that an external, more “objective” reality exists beyond social interaction that is more real than the performance. The performance *is* social reality, and performances are ripe subjects for conflict and contestation precisely because they themselves create social reality and agents have different ideas about what that should look like.

Claiming might entail fitting oneself to an existing social category. Background knowledge about social categorization may attach certain characteristics, rights, obligations, and privileges to different social labels. Thus, agents who identify with that label acquire an interest in performing the practices that are associated with it. In this sense, “it is what we do that determines who we are.”<sup>46</sup> For example, for an entity to identify as a state in the current international order is to take on expectations that it will enforce a monopoly on violence, advance the welfare of its population, and abide by treaties it signs, among other things.<sup>47</sup> Competence as a state also means refraining from and preventing certain acts that infringe on internal affairs of other states,

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45 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 329–30.

46 Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

47 Cf. Cynthia Weber, ‘Performative States’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27, no. 1 (1998): 77–95.

such as transnational terrorism. Emulation and imitation of those recognized as having one's desired social position are ways to claim it for yourself. The performances required to experience and be recognized as having an identity are determined by social expectations of other international actors.

Performances can also have *placing* effects. Whereas claiming focuses on performing a self-conceived identity, placing is focused outward. It includes moves to assert equality, superiority, or some other type of relationship with others. Placing draws upon and affects, deliberately or not, underlying logics of how agents are placed and the practices of social stratification that make those understandings real. At an explicit and direct level, placing may take the form of overt declarations about the relations between agents. State leaders might proclaim that their countries enjoy a special relationship, brotherly ties, or regional solidarity. They might criticize "failed" or "rouge" states considered to be deviating from standards of proper behavior, such as engaging in human rights abuses.

Placing can also be performed in a more generalized fashion. Forming groups and categories of agents both fosters relations between them and creates categories of perception. Various international organizations have the effect of categorizing states by geographic location, language, or culture, reifying constructions like "Southeast Asia" or "la Francophonie." Country rankings are an example where ranking countries on various criteria overtly places them in a hierarchy. This simultaneously asserts those criteria (gender equality, liveability, competitiveness, democracy, etc.) as an objective and legitimate basis for judgment and discrimination.<sup>48</sup> Performances may also put forward redefined or entirely new foundations for social competence

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48 Ann E. Towns, 'Norms and Social Hierarchies: Understanding International Policy Diffusion "From Below"', *International Organization* 66, no. 2 (2012): 179–209.

and preeminence. This can reproduce or contest standard practices and normative structures of international orders, because the basis for social stratification is derived from deeper beliefs about basic values and conceptions of justice.

Claiming and placing can also work in combination. Part of claiming one's social position also involves placing others through relations that go along with embodying that position. Behind these seemingly straightforward performances are also implicit claims about the background knowledge that generates the social space in which those positions exist in the first place. Social positioning serves to produce and reproduce understandings about the ideational foundations of international orders. When international actors define certain behaviors as deviant, they also define in negative terms what normal and accepted practices are.<sup>49</sup> For instance, using human rights as a basis of social stratification enacts background knowledge not just that permissible state action is tied to respect for individual liberty, but also deeper modernist ontological commitments as the basic structure of international orders.<sup>50</sup> Claims based on the possession of material capabilities follow the same logic. Even blunt assertions of superiority based on power or size are implicit claims that these are legitimate bases of stratification. In 2010, the Chinese foreign minister declared during an ASEAN summit that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."<sup>51</sup> Certain military assets are seen as a source of prestige for states, and serve as "tokens of power" even when they prove ineffective at securing outcomes against much weaker foes.<sup>52</sup> But they can also lead agents to be ostracized

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49 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society', *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (2014): 143–76.

50 Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*, 122.

51 Quoted in John Pomfret, 'U.S. Takes a Tougher Tone With China', *The Washington Post*, 30 July 2010.

52 Hironaka, *Tokens of Power*; See also Michelle Murray, 'Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition before the First World War', *Security Studies* 19, no. 4 (2010): 656–88.

and actually compromise their social positions. The impact of a nuclear arsenal on a state's position depends greatly on social context. Nuclear weapons are a symbol of achievement and power for some states, but others are stigmatized as threats to international society because they possess or pursue them.

Social positioning thus necessarily involves making claims about the rightful basis of social rank in the wider social context. But whether criteria like military capability, a democratic regime, or cultural preeminence are better grounds for legitimacy and social standing is an issue continually contested through political performances. Performances can alter those understandings through interpretations that shift standard practices and induce others to adopt them. This, in practical terms, is what constitutes change in international orders.

### **What are international orders?**

I define an international order as a complex of institutions and practices that prevail in a given area of world politics. Orders are structured by principles, institutions, and practices derived from background knowledge, and these tacit and explicit rules of the game are taken for granted as how things are done in international politics. It should thus be clear that I do not conceive of international order as meaning the absence of conflict or discord, or in other words I distinguish this from definitions based on the existence of order as a state of affairs. Hence, international orders are not necessarily cooperative, but they do channel competition and conflict so they take place according to stable, shared expectations that render them at least minimally predictable.<sup>53</sup>

While different international orders may be more rigid and monist or flexible and pluralist, they

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53 Janice Bially Mattern, *Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis and Representational Force* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 22–23.

are capable of tolerating diversity. What matters for the definition is that they engender ongoing purposive patterns of behavior, however thin and fragile they might be.<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, world politics is composed of multiple overlapping orders which generally span issue areas or geographic areas. For instance, we can conceive of an international security order or a European monetary order, which will have their own epistemic and practical variations.<sup>55</sup> While this implies that there is also an encompassing global political order, this does not mean that it is more important or even more influential in a specific situation. Neither does any top-down or supervenience logic necessarily apply; wider and larger orders are just as likely to be influenced by narrower and smaller ones as the other way around. Moreover, the ideational content of the global political order is likely to be broader and thus have less relevance than the local and more specific one. Which orders will be in play in a given interaction ultimately depends on the strategies and actions of the agents involved in it.

The concept of international orders I use here also moves from thinking of social objects and structures as substantial entities, and instead as contingent assemblages that appear substantial because of repeated practice. They must be continually reproduced through the actions of agents. It would thus be better to think not of international orders, but international *ordering*,<sup>56</sup> a continual process that influences and is emergent from what actually happens in world politics. International order contestation is thus any attempt to change the institutions and practices that are commonly accepted, and this alters how world politics functions as a realm of social activity.

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54 Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2–4.

55 Emanuel Adler, *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 139–40.

56 Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unravelling of the American Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 32.

This has several implications for conventional conceptions of international orders which I argue are misleading and flawed. Firstly, what defines international orders is not who the hegemon is, but the background knowledge on which its position of social supremacy is based. International orders are held together by hegemonic ideas and are contested through struggles of symbolic power to define the legitimate vision of the world. This contrasts with standard theories of hegemony, which argue that institutions and practices of international politics are created and upheld by a state with dominant military and economic power.<sup>57</sup> In line with this, international orders are often identified with the hegemon that purportedly leads them. Constant references to the “US-led order” or “American hegemony” as staples of international affairs analysis illustrate how influential this heuristic is. “Liberal international order” has its own problems but is at least a more accurate term because it highlights that the ideological content of the background knowledge is what matters. This is in line with Ruggie’s argument against hegemonic stability theory which emphasized congruence of social purpose, not the presence of a dominant state, as the defining feature of hegemonic orders.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, it is those ideational structures that generate recognition of any agent as the leader or hegemon.

A hegemon’s dominance thus depends on socially positioning itself as a superior actor. To do this, it needs to competently perform the social position of hegemon according to basic narratives, codes, and discursive configurations that resonate with existing background know-

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57 G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 41; see also Michael Mastanduno, ‘Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending US Hegemony after the Cold War’, *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 479–504; Christopher Layne, ‘This Time It’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana’, *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 203–13.

58 John G. Ruggie, ‘International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order’, *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 381; 384.

ledge.<sup>59</sup> There is no blank slate on which a hegemon inscribes new rules of the game, as implied by standard theories of hegemonic orders and the use of benchmark dates to mark era-defining moments.<sup>60</sup> The hegemon's advantage in symbolic capital tends to make its performances more likely to succeed at changing background knowledge. But other agents with investments in the existing background knowledge will tend to resist changes that threaten the value of their social assets and thus their social positioning. Incompetent performance of a superior social position can seriously damage an agent's symbolic power, and provoke resistance. The hegemon thus cannot alter the order at will, since its performances of relational superiority succeed or fail to resonate with the audience based on whether they accord with intersubjective background knowledge.

A second key implication is that hegemony and hierarchy do not fit simply into a "continuum... between imperial and liberal forms."<sup>61</sup> This debate between liberal institutionalism and neo-realism on whether the present international order is formed through consent or domination rests on a misconception of power and coercion as only the fear or threat of force. For liberals, the absence of overt coercion is evidence of the legitimacy and the lack of "imperial characteristics" in the international order.<sup>62</sup> This claim hides the ideational domination and subordinate complicity that are inherent to hegemony. I take a different approach that focuses on dominant understandings of legitimacy and social stratification that are defined by background knowledge. Thus, international hegemony is the outcome of social processes that reflect dominant

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59 Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy', *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 4 (2004): 550.

60 Buzan and Lawson, 'Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations'.

61 Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 38.

62 Ikenberry, 107.

ideas, rather than a dominant state.<sup>63</sup> Social positioning, by placing the focus on background knowledge, helps to explain how US leaders could view the international order that it purportedly controls as an obstacle and even a threat to its security and welfare. This approach provides a better explanation of order contestation by directly addressing political struggles over the content of international orders, not only the hierarchies that emerge from them.

### *Social categorization and international orders*

What different social positions mean and who gets to hold them is based on the background knowledge that shapes agents, their identities, and hence their “social power to project a credible performance on the world stage.”<sup>64</sup> Categories of states are widely used in international relations theory and foreign policy analysis. They are particularly crucial in structuralist theories that assume a state’s behavior can be predicted from its place in the international system.<sup>65</sup> According to this reasoning, “structural constraints” drive states to take on roles like hegemon or great power when they fulfill the characteristics of those categories, and they are “predictably punished” if they ignore these imperatives.<sup>66</sup>

Scholars have tried to define which states fall into different social categories, and what behavior (or optimal foreign policy) is attached to them. But the categories have proven very hard to nail down. Attempts to create objective definitions through quantitative measures tend to find important inconsistencies where behavior does not match the structural position. “Status

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63 Cox, ‘Gramsci, Hegemony, and International Relations’, 171–72; Nexon and Neumann, ‘Hegemonic-Order Theory’, 673–76; Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf, ‘The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order’.

64 Emanuel Adler, ‘Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don’t: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing’, *Security Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 200–201.

65 Jacek Kugler and A.F.K. Organski, ‘The Power Transition: A Retrospective and Prospective Evaluation’, in *Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 171–94.

66 Christopher Layne, ‘The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise’, *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993): 9–10.

inconsistency” instead becomes part of an explanation for conflict.<sup>67</sup> Methodologically, since the measures themselves are selected according to existing theories of what a great power, middle power, or hegemon is, there is a problematic tautology. Are states acting contrary to predictions because of pathologically “wrong” foreign policy, or because the theory and concept itself is wrong?<sup>68</sup> There is also a deeper problem that arises because the social world is not independent of theories about it. Foreign policy practitioners know about the concepts, and may decide to actively pursue great power, middle power, or hegemon status.

An approach based on performances cuts through this problem. If these categories are social constructs that social actors perform into reality, then they exist through, and only through, efforts to enact identities that cite these concepts as assertions about a given state’s rightful social position in world politics. This gets past the notion that there is something more “real” about the great power, middle power, and other categorizing concepts that the practices of states might not measure up to.<sup>69</sup> How they are performed is the reality, and those performances are based on the tacit background knowledge that is held by agents such as state leaders and international organizations. Hegemons, great powers, and middle powers do not have to objectively exist for the belief in them to be real in its effects. It also means that the definition of such social categories is not fixed, and indeed there are reasons to politically manipulate them by advancing new definitions or claiming that your performances really do exemplify your mem-

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67 Thomas J. Volgy et al., ‘Major Power Status in International Politics’, in *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics: Global and Regional Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–26.

68 Monica S. Jeong, ‘Critical Realism: A Better Way to Think about Middle Powers’, *International Journal* 74, no. 2 (2019): 240–57.

69 On this point I differ specifically with Jeong, 252.

bership in that group. A practice-oriented approach thus anticipates the tautology that entraps conventional theories as itself being part of political dynamics.

Social categorization connects to international order contestation because deeper layers of background knowledge are carried along in it. To perform the identity they desire, agents must refer to and draw upon collective understandings not just about what a member of that category is like, but the deeper logic beneath those understandings. Performing a great power identity entails making claims about what the collective good is and what actions promote it. It is an implicit claim that a peace and stability are moral purposes to be pursued, and that a balance of power (and not, for instance, free trade or democracy promotion) will achieve this. The assertion by Australia and Canada during negotiations on post-World War II institutions that their military contributions merited institutional privileges as “middle powers” illustrates how social categories can be created through this process. Recognition might be induced by successfully playing upon others’ background knowledge commitments to assert that one’s social positioning logically follows from accepted political ontology and collective values. This can be seen as akin to rhetorical coercion.<sup>70</sup>

Social positioning also anticipates that international actors will try to create roles and carve out space for themselves, in order to place themselves in the social space and in relation to other international actors. International actors will latch on to existing concepts that are part of the background knowledge about international politics (such as the concept of great powers). But social positioning also entails creative, innovative actions that reinterpret and innovate on background knowledge. Examples of creative moves by agents to carve out their own space and

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70 Krebs and Jackson, ‘Twisting Tongues’.

roles include the proliferation of forums like the G20 and the BRICS summit. This study also focuses on international organizations, whose identity performances are even more clearly about conceptualizing and carving out social positions for themselves. Thus, agents do not just play roles, their performances serve to define what those roles are. While certain commonly understood tropes and devices endure, scripts are not fixed, they are rewritten through performances of them. The theater of world politics is not the static recitation of old classics but continual improvisation and innovation.

### **Observing contestation and crisis**

This study develops an analytical model through explicating the observable performances of international actors which produce social positioning, and how this affects the reproduction and evolution of international orders. It deals with the question of how and why international actors, which here includes primarily international organizations and states, contend over the international orders in which they interact. In this mode of analysis, theoretical development is achieved through the explication of mechanisms and identifying causal complexes. In each case study I thus develop an analytical narrative that shows the workings of analytically generalizable mechanisms,<sup>71</sup> that is, specifying how identity performances potentially generate international order contestation. The ways that international orders are reproduced, and may be altered and contested through this process, may thus be conceived as the outcome of interest or object of analysis. This terminology does not imply definite outcomes, keeping in mind that contestation is an interactive, social process.

The goal is ultimately making sense of the mess of events and practices that take place in

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71 Patrick T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 168–69.

the social world; theories are thus neither true nor false but more or less useful. A useful theory will be able to “capture the generative links between various social processes” and place the particular observations of practices and relations “as part of larger classes of social processes.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, the choice of methodology should follow from the basic assumptions one makes about the world. The prevailing “general linear reality” approach assumes that the social world consists of “fixed entities with variable attributes”,<sup>73</sup> or in effect that the social world is a closed system of linear regularities to be uncovered by scientific investigation. Here, I make a different foundational claim, that the social world is an open system where political action entails innovation and improvisation that seeks to deal with fundamental uncertainty.<sup>74</sup> If this is what social reality is like, then it needs to be studied with methods compatible with these basic assumptions.

This is a key benefit of adopting an practice-oriented approach to process tracing. If we assume that we are seeing a social terrain of latent, potential forces, causality cannot be restricted to the constant conjunctions of Humean causality that the default neopositivist and Newtonian methodology in political science assumes.<sup>75</sup> This classical approach, oriented around causal analysis and inference, prescribes a scientific program of hypothesis-testing in search of law-like generalizations. But doing this takes on meta-theoretical commitments that largely ignore the constitutive, structuring effects crucial to understanding social positioning and international order contestation. Because of this, a causal inference methodology would simply fail to capture the phenomenon and will not provide insight into the processes by which it takes place. The

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72 Vincent Pouliot, ‘Practice Tracing’, in *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*, ed. Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 239.

73 Andrew Abbott, ‘Transcending General Linear Reality’, *Sociological Theory* 6 (1988): 181.

74 Peter J. Katzenstein and Lucia A. Seybert, ‘Protean Power and Uncertainty: Exploring the Unexpected in World Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2018): 80–93.

75 Milja Kurki, ‘Causes of a Divided Discipline: Rethinking the Concept of Cause in International Relations Theory’, *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 1 (2006): 189–216.

effects that a practice approach looks for are local to the social context and generalizable to other cases, but not universal.<sup>76</sup> It emphasizes sufficient but unnecessary conditions in which posited causal powers may be manifested. This reflects a view of causality as contingent, potential, and exerted through the medium in which units interact rather than solely by the units themselves.

*Performances, staging, contestation, and crisis*

My empirical approach combines the methods of process-tracing and discourse analysis. I propose that from existing positions in the social space, agents attempt to alter that social space through the ideational structures that constitute it as well as the identities of agents within it. Furthermore, agents do this in order to affect the ways that ideational structures constitute their identities by structuring the practices of both selves and others. The overarching research question of why and how identities affect international order contestation can thus be broken down into more discrete questions to be addressed. Firstly, what are the impacts and consequences of efforts to perform identities on international orders? Secondly, through what processes might this lead to changes in the interpretations, ideas, and the ordering of international politics? How does contention to redefine background knowledge play out?

Empirically, I address these questions through analytic narratives of international order contestation in the post-Cold War period. Doing this also helps inform current debates by putting them into the context of their recent history and by helping to uncover some of the ideological content that is being contested, but is taken for granted – including by decision-makers themselves. The method involves recovering subjective meanings, objectifying them by putting them into their social context, and observing how they evolve and affect the world over time and

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<sup>76</sup> Pouliot, 'Practice Tracing', 258.

through social interaction.<sup>77</sup> Within each case, I begin by asking: what meanings do key actors attribute to the social world they encounter, and how do these interact with the interpretations of other actors? I then place these in historical and political context and examine how both the influence of the ideas, and attempts to influence them, affected the course of political contention.

I focus on crisis events because as interruptions of normality, they force agents to articulate reasons and justifications for their actions. This process opens up tacit ideational structures both to observation and to change. As they engage in contention over international orders, political actors use public performances to make claims on and about other actors and the international order's institutions and practices.<sup>78</sup> Contestation thus involves patterns of action, rationalization, and justification, which can be assumed to be intended to advance the interests of the agent making them. My argument proposes that these interests pursued by international actors are to secure social positioning that enables the performance of their identity conceptions. Part of the empirical inquiry is thus to examine what that identity is and what social positioning is needed to support it.

The sources used reflect the empirical task of identifying the identity conception agents hold, how they represent that identity to others, and the claims that they make on specific and generalized others that perform and attempt to solidify that identity. I use this evidence to trace how facts are represented and coupled with representations of what legitimate practices are, thereby making assertions about the "correct" relations between various actors and the social order on which those relations are based. In this way, international actors are engaged not just in

77 Vincent Pouliot, "'Subjectivism': Towards a Constructivist Methodology", *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (2007): 359–84.

78 This definition draws on Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 7–8.

producing and reproducing their own identities, but the social context in which they exist.<sup>79</sup> In general, the empirical material to examine is public speeches, media interviews, and debates in international forums, where state and institutional officials are engaged in explaining and justifying their actions to each other and to the global audience. Official records of statements in the UN Security Council and General Assembly, interviews of decision-makers with journalists, and memoirs of policymakers were thus the principal sources of data.

Theoretically, the corpus would include any representation of state and national identity active at the time of contention. However, attempting to gather every such representation would be an impractical and potentially unbounded task. Furthermore, not all of the corpus is equally important in international order contention. Set-piece speeches by state leaders and in forums like the UN Security Council have the greatest impact on social and political reality. It is simply the case that some agents and some settings are more empowered to perform collective identity than others (which is another way of saying they have more symbolic power). I thus aim to sample the most prominent performances that take place in front of the most significant international audiences. Where available, I also utilized the memoirs and reflections of key policymakers, which can take us inside the meeting rooms and tell us about the interactions between the key representatives. Equally of interest is how they justified their own thought processes and actions taken. Secondary sources, such as media reports and accounts contained in academic works, can also shed light on the proximate factors in play that contributed to determining the shape of events and outcomes.

Performances need an audience and must be public to affect social reality. Thus, I do not

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<sup>79</sup> Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 27–29.

make any assumptions about whether the claims being made are true or sincere. For instance, it does not matter for my argument whether or not Russian leaders really believed the annexation of Crimea was in compliance with international law, as they claimed.<sup>80</sup> Likewise, whether German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble genuinely wanted to force Greece out of the eurozone or pretended to hold this position as a bargaining tactic, interlocutors were forced to act as if this was his true belief. We cannot read agents' minds, they may engage in self-deception, and there are incentives to misrepresent even in private diaries and conversations. More importantly, the organization and structuring of the public social space can only be affected by what is said and done as public performance. We thus need to (and can only) observe what takes place "in the intersubjective space *between* individuals."<sup>81</sup> We can assume that discourses are strategic whether or not we think the agents are being sincere. What matters empirically is to reconstruct the discursive space rather than private motives,<sup>82</sup> which in any case can only be achieved through performances others can observe.

A related issue touches on current worries about truth and misinformation in the context of politics. The stance that I take in this analysis is not to attempt to adjudicate the truth of contending claims and worldviews that are used in political action, but to ask why they are made and with what purpose. The reason that fears about misinformation and "alternative facts" are relevant in the first place is precisely because some political actors have asymmetric power to make their claims and representations authoritative despite their doubtful or contentious status.

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80 It is analytically useful however to assume sincerity and question why they would think in that way, e.g. Ted Hopf, 'Identity, Legitimacy, and the Use of Military Force: Russia's Great Power Identities and Military Intervention in Abkhazia', *Review of International Studies* 31, no. S1 (2005): 225–243.

81 Patrick T. Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 32. Emphasis in original.

82 McCourt, *Britain and World Power*, 17.

The implication of this basic assumption about the constructed nature of social reality is not that someone can simply imagine any reality they want, but reveals how this is fundamentally constrained by the need for *collective* imagining and by power struggles over social facts. It cautions us to keep in mind that what we take for granted in social life is often valid only because, like the value of money, it is collectively accepted as true and it is both a result of political power and vulnerable to the use of it. This goes further: it implies the notion that social reality can be treated or studied in the same way as the genuinely mind-independent world is naïve.

#### *Case studies of post-Cold War order contestation*

The case selection is motivated by the goal of explicating how social positioning plays out and how it may affect international orders. The aim is to make analytically general claims, rather than to identify covariation and isolate a causal variable that is argued to account for a dependent variable. We thus want cases that vary in the types of agents and issues involved, showing the usefulness of the theory to make sense of substantively important, yet particular empirical instances.<sup>83</sup> If the analytical framework holds when applied to different issue areas and different types of actors, we gain confidence in its generalizability across those conditions. Each case is a crisis event that varies in terms of the issue at stake, and social processes within those cases feature interaction between a variety of actor types.

The cases studied each focus on different crises which featured contention over practices central to international orders: sovereignty, international security and economic governance. The question of generalizability depends on how the cases relate to existing theory. They are more or less likely relative to what prevailing alternative explanations for the making and breaking of international orders lead us to expect. This is both in terms of where contestation comes from

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<sup>83</sup> Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*, 166–69.

and how it plays out. Chapter 2 focuses on the UN Secretariat and Canada, which are not expected to engage in order contestation. Conventionally, attempting to revise practices of sovereignty and international security is something only the most militarily powerful states engage in. Moreover, since RtoP can be seen as an aspect of the human rights order, the rational institutionalist framework focusing on credible commitments would claim to have already explained the process and politics that led to its formalization. This is hence an unlikely case where social positioning would not be expected to influence international ordering. Furthermore, the UN Secretariat, led by secretary general Kofi Annan, played an indispensable role in reconceptualizing sovereignty as the responsibility to protect. Since sovereignty costs are the most important barrier to cooperation in institutionalist theories, the idea of an international organization redefining sovereignty itself is far outside conventional expectations.

In contrast, the contestation of international orders by Russia is an area where theories like hegemonic transition and status-seeking already claim to offer the best account of why rising powers contest the status quo and in what ways. In this sense, this case provides a way to highlight the value added of a social positioning theory and what it explains that congruent theories do not. I argue in chapter 3 that they underplay the importance and significance of the background knowledge and ideational structure that channels these struggles for status or prestige. They hence misread the process taking place as a result of a faulty conflation between social hierarchy and the international order itself. It is the order's structuring background knowledge that produces the social inequality being contested in the first place. From another perspective however, this might actually be an unlikely case for identity performance to explain events and political processes. Many realists would claim that rivalry between military powers over secur-

ity and geopolitical issues is the normal state of international affairs, and security and geopolitical imperatives tell us all we need to know. Showing the relevance of identity performance in explaining this instance of international order contestation thus strengthens this theory's validity at the expense of realist arguments in a case which should be most favorable to the rival theory.

Economic crises are a situation where we would expect material factors, quite simply euros and cents, to be the central issues. Showing that identity performance is a necessary part of explicating the euro crisis in Greece thus increases confidence in the analytical framework by showing its applicability to an unlikely case. International organizations are expected to be indifferent to social positioning, since in theory their goals are technocratic and limited to promoting states' collective interests. I thus argue that the IMF's performances in the eurozone crisis gives strong affirmation of the generalized relevance of social positioning, by showing that it affected international orders in a way not anticipated by alternative approaches. I argue that the IMF sought to enact a social position as the dominant institution of international economic governance in a situation where it faced marginalization. Its efforts to advance solutions to the eurozone crisis based on debt sustainability had to contend with pro-austerity worldviews of the EU institutions and their desire to stigmatize debtor states.

While this justifies the case selection in terms of comparing my theory against rival explanations, the methodology also posits its own standards to be met independently of what existing theories claim. Taking the social world as an open, indeterminate system, it makes little sense to pursue causal inference or covering laws as this would not produce firm knowledge. Rather, the key issue for case selection is whether the empirical study produces generalizable insights that can be applied outside of the specific cases being studied. The claim is not of gen-

eral applicability to all cases, as neopositivist epistemology implicitly demands, only that the insights of the analytical model *may* be applicable in cases other than the ones I consider in this study.

The case selection in this study thus aims for variation in issue areas (examining security, human rights, and economic orders), types of actors (states in different regions, with different material capabilities, and international organizations with different missions). The cases being studied are also clearly significant in their own right. It can be debated whether these are in fact the *most* important episodes of international order contestation in the post-Cold War period; this is not my claim and neither would it make them better cases to study. What matters is that the reconceptualization of sovereignty embodied by RtoP, the crisis in the European monetary order, and the contention over hegemon and great power identities between Russia and the US are all salient international political events that have decisively shaped international orders or contention over them. This rationale of case selection follows what Patrick T. Jackson calls an analytical approach. Strictly speaking analytical frameworks “*must* terminate in a case-specific narrative” and case selection thus has “no particular value... as a strategy of inquiry.”<sup>84</sup> The task in moving between theory and empirics is thus to show the model’s potential applicability to a wide range of situations, although this will always be provisional and contingent and it goes too far to claim that any analytical model can be predictive. The priority here is to make sense of contention over ideas and identities in world politics.

This study thus uses variation between cases, while arguing for the cross-case applicability of identity performance as an analytical thinking tool, in order to illustrate the generalizability of

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84 Jackson, 166. Emphasis in original.

the processual model that the study develops. I aim to show how identity performances can explicate interactions between diverse types of actors over different issues in world politics, and how this affects international orders. A successful account is one that produces “analytically general insights” through demonstrating local causality, understood as relationships between various social processes within the specific context of the case.<sup>85</sup> This is in line with philosophical realist definitions of causes as “all those things that bring about, produce, direct, or contribute to states of affairs or changes in the world” rather than the narrow, deterministic Humean understanding used in positivist approaches.<sup>86</sup>

The case selection can also be considered a type of comparative moments study, in which politically salient events are examined. This can be considered a study of “multiple events related by issue” where the issue at hand is post-Cold War international orders and a variety of identities or “selves” are in play.<sup>87</sup> As my focus is not primarily identities but rather how their performance is influenced by and influences the social structure, my comparison holds constant the social context of post-Cold War international orders to examine those orders’ interactions with the changeable identities of different entities, in the context of different politically salient events.

This is different from the rationales for case selection that assume a neopositivist methodology aiming for causal inference by isolating and controlling for different variables across cases. Such research designs seek to emulate the ideal of a controlled, randomized experiment in order to establish causal inference.<sup>88</sup> But this takes on board a metaphysical assumption that the

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85 Pouliot, ‘Practice Tracing’, 239–40.

86 Kurki, ‘Causes of a Divided Discipline’, 202.

87 Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 78–82.

88 Stephen L. Morgan and Christopher Winship, *Counterfactuals and Causal Inference: Methods and Principles for Social Research*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

social world is predictable, mind-independent, and operates according to universal laws that can be discovered. There is a basic inconsistency with adopting such assumptions to test a theory that assumes the social world features unexpected events, is influenced by how people perceive and interpret it, and is too complex and inchoate for covering laws to be useful, even if they could be found. The logic of case selection should thus depend on the methodologically specified goals of the study. To select cases for the estimation of the causal effect of a variable when the goal is to illustrate the general applicability of a processual model would create a faulty research design. It would be irrelevant to the research objectives, or worse might hamper the validity of the research as the evidence produced would fail to address the concerns and standards of the methodology in use.

This also means that methodological standards apply here which would be irrelevant to a neopositivist study. Since the focus is placed on political performances and contention over ideas through discursive practices, a study is weaker if it overlooks important identities or significations, and if it misinterprets, exaggerates, or downplays the links between ideational constructions and political practices.<sup>89</sup> For instance, one might argue against the validity of my account of the eurozone crisis in Greece on several fronts. One could present evidence that shows the IMF was taking orders from the Obama administration and that the Fund's participation in the bailouts and its policy differences with the EU institutions were primarily because it felt bound to act as an agent of US economic hegemony, and not, as I claim, because it aimed to perform an identity as the primary site of international macroeconomic expertise. Another possibility would be to show that my account of the background knowledge of the European monetary order was faulty, for instance by showing that during the 2010s it was actually operating

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<sup>89</sup> This draws on Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 45.

based on a Keynesian economic ontology rather than ordoliberal and monetarist premises. My argument would be weakened if it were shown that during the crisis, maintenance of full employment rather than fiscal probity was regarded as a normative priority, and consequently that countries were stigmatized for high unemployment rates but debt levels were considered less important.

*Observable implications of identity performance*

I now address the issue of when identity performance will be more likely to lead to contestation of international orders and what we should observe if the processes I posit are taking place. Identity performances operate as part of a causal complex and while it could in principle be read into any action, it is not always the most useful or important avenue for analysis. It will be more salient when one or more of the following three conditions exist: an event has unsettled the relations and positions that agents are used to performing, an agent's interactions with others repeatedly deny it a social position consistent with its identity conception, or an apparent shift in political ontologies threatens other aspects of background knowledge. This makes it more likely that we will see international order contestation in the form of a struggle between different actors who aim at "imposing the definition of the social world that is best suited to their interests."<sup>90</sup>

First, when an event unsettles existing relations and places in the social setting, agents are generally forced to reevaluate their identity conceptions and to change their social positioning accordingly. The end of the Cold War was one such unsettling event. While this process was obviously more wrenching for Russia and the former Soviet bloc, the US and members of the Western alliance were also faced with the need to rethink their selves with the sudden disappear-

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90 Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 167.

ance of the “other” against which identities had been defined.<sup>91</sup> This unsettling might be an antecedent, or it might take place as part of processes that make up a larger event during which identities and positions are unsettled. In the case studies, I take events like the Rwandan genocide and the increased incidence of mass atrocities in the 1990s, as well as the eurozone crisis from 2011-2015, as events that unsettle existing social relations and identity conceptions.

A second condition is when an agent faces a continual pattern of interactions with others who have the symbolic power to deprive it of social position consistent with its identity conception. Social positioning comes to the fore and is likely to result in contention in such a situation as the agent tries to resist this. Often, this leads to patterns of stigmatization and counter-stigmatization.<sup>92</sup> In chapter 3 I discuss how Russia was faced with just such a situation in which it was unable to gain social positioning that would allow it to perform an identity as a great power. It was caught by the “symbolic domination” of the US and Western Europe,<sup>93</sup> and international ordering practices enacted the widely-held tacit understandings of collective purposes and social categorization which excluded a place for great powers and their prerogatives.

Thirdly, shifts in political ontology that threaten existing collective values and social categorizations may increase the salience of social positioning. This shift may be due to events whose main causes are outside the social space of interaction and thus have the appearance of an exogenous shock. These may lead to a widespread questioning of orthodoxies that had previ-

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91 David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 30–33; Michael C. Williams, *Culture and Security: Symbolic Power and the Politics of International Security* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 59–62; more generally see Stefano Guzzini, ‘The Framework of Analysis: Geopolitics Meets Foreign Policy Identity Crises’, in *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe? Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises*, ed. Stefano Guzzini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45–74.

92 Adler-Nissen, ‘Stigma Management in International Relations’.

93 Pouliot, *International Security in Practice*.

ously been taken for granted. As detailed in chapter 2, the genocide in Rwanda was an event that contradicted and undermined the validity of the dominant liberal peace ontology, and was interpreted to demonstrate serious problems with existing practices of international ordering, sovereignty, and international security. It consequently threatened to undermine the social positioning of agents like Canada and the UN who were strongly invested in the existing background knowledge. Similarly, contention may emerge because of the perception that another agent is trying to change the background knowledge in a dangerous or threatening direction. Chapter 3 traces how the US project of hegemonic ordering, especially when performed through events like the Iraq War and claims of a right to engage in unilateralism, was interpreted by Russian leaders as a threat to international stability. The historical context created a space where the enactment of a countervailing classical power-balancing ontology could become influential in Russian identity and foreign policy, against the perceived liberal hegemonism of the US and the West.

In these conditions, I argue that efforts by various international actors to assert their own social positioning and to place others will play a more important role in driving actions and events. Accordingly, although social positioning may in theory be found as part of a causal complex in any political situation, it is in these situations that focusing on social positioning is more analytically useful in explicating world politics. I expect to observe performances that aim to assert and “teach” others tacit knowledge and its proper interpretation, that identity performance becomes a major consideration that is debated among decision-makers or in domestic politics, and that defining and fixing the background knowledge of the social order becomes a highly salient issue even amid crisis and pressing material issues.

Agents may enact social positioning through an attempt to “teach” others background

knowledge and its proper interpretation through their own performances. The performance itself asserts the actor's subjectivity, identity and the ideational structure that gives it meaning and reality.<sup>94</sup> The annexation of Crimea itself and the discourses of Russian state representatives who interpreted it for various audiences asserted the international order was governed by great powers and positioned Russia as one of those great powers. The action itself created facts on the ground that provided material support for those performances. Advocates of the human security agenda and RtoP carried out performative acts like speeches, conferences, and publications that sought to reinterpret existing tacit knowledge to fix a new meaning of sovereignty. Two of the leading advocates, the UN Secretariat and the Canadian state, enacted identities as the central arbiter on international security issues and as a "middle power", respectively, through the pursuit of the agenda itself. This met with resistance from counter-performances by the US to insist on its hegemonic prerogatives and from post-colonial states who feared this would erode national self-determination.

A second observable implication is that the need to perform the correct identity will be a major consideration in decision-making. Choices about actions to be taken and words to be used will be based on what performance would be enacted by them. Evidence of this would be that plausible or even potentially more effective alternatives were *not* pursued because they were considered less effective as performances of the desired identity. We might also observe that possibilities that would endanger the identity conception and its performance, if they are floated, will be met with responses that aim to rule them out as "obviously" untenable. This kind of evidence is likely to be found in internal debates or how representatives portray their actions to

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94 Iver B. Neumann and Ole Jacob Sending, 'Performing Statehood through Crises: Citizens, Strangers, Territory', *Journal of Global Security Studies* forthcoming (2020): 3–5, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz073>.

audiences. Counterfactual analysis about what viable alternatives existed, or were possible but unthinkable, can also identify the background knowledge that tacitly rules out strategies that fundamentally contradict an agent's self-image. Often, this is the unspoken premise behind beliefs about what the agent needs to do or must avoid, such as the notion that the IMF had to be involved in the eurozone crisis or that the US should not treat Russia as an equal partner. What is unsaid and thus a matter of tacit consensus can be even more important than what is said and subject to internal disagreement. For instance, while UN Secretariat staff were split on how Kofi Annan should respond to the 1999 Kosovo intervention, what was not up for debate was that the Secretary-General's performance should aim to reproduce and reinforce the organization's pre-eminence and centrality in international ordering processes. This split was more about whether to emphasize the aspect of the UN's identity as upholder of international law, or its humanitarian mission.

Third, we should observe that social categorization, collective purposes, and political ontology will be highly salient amid crisis or pressing material issues. Performances should thus be enacted that explicitly or implicitly assert specific sets of background knowledge at times of uncertainty and instability. Indeed, crises might themselves have been precipitated by such moves. More than acting based on understandings of social relations and positions *despite* the context of crisis, the situation might be taken as an *opportunity* to press desired changes in social positioning and the background knowledge that structures social contexts. For instance, Canada, the UN, and other advocates of human security engaged in social positioning moves in response to an apparent crisis of international security practices that undermined the political ontology of the liberal peace in the 1990s. Going further, the IMF actively sought involvement

in the eurozone crisis because its leadership feared that the Fund might otherwise lose relevance and its social standing as a preeminent actor in the international economic order. In doing so, they engaged in contention with the other members of the Troika over collective purposes of their activity – crisis-fighting or European integration – as well as underlying macroeconomic ontologies around the meaning of fiscal balances and sovereign debt. As I will argue in chapter 4, Greece’s leaders also regarded its categorization as “European” important enough to accept harsh austerity conditions, and this included the Syriza government that had promised voters to tear them up.

Social positioning and identity performances can be distinguished from the similar concept of status-seeking as it implies that agents are concerned more with who they are, rather than how they rank. The empirical difficulty is that high status, or rather social positioning in a vertical dimension, can also be important to the performance of identity. While there is hence an overlap with status-seeking, social positioning is also about placement relative to others in a multidimensional social space. It can therefore capture positioning in terms of being part of or outside specific categories, or in terms of centrality or brokerage positions. This can be distinguished from status-seeking if we observe actions to place the actor in the social context that involve implicitly accepting subordinate or inferior status. For instance, “mutually recognized subordination” can come out of social positioning as a useful and trustworthy partner for more powerful states.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, for the countries which bore the brunt of the European banking crisis, maintaining social position in the European regional order implied ongoing stigmatizing interactions that express their inferiority as debtors who are poor performers in the social con-

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95 Niels Nagelhus Schia and Ole Jacob Sending, ‘Status and Sovereign Equality: Small States in Multilateral Settings’, in *Small State Status Seeking: Norway’s Quest for International Standing*, ed. Benjamin de Carvalho and Ole Jacob Sending (London: Routledge, 2015), 83.

text. Yet both these examples entail pursuing a social position that best supports the performance of identity, rather than simply maximizing how high up in terms of hierarchy and relative rank the agent can go.

### **Alternative explanations for contestation**

In the methodological framework I adopt here, theoretical validity is evaluated by the criteria of explanatory adequacy and judgmental rationality.<sup>96</sup> Thus, contending explanations are not falsified, but rather they are shown to be less adequate explanations if they do not account for important aspects of the outcome of interest, or the how the phenomenon occurs. Thus, rather than excluding or controlling different variables to isolate causes as in neopositivist methodology, an explanation posits a causal complex which is assessed as a whole against other explanations. A theorized mechanism is valid if it is shown to be necessary to explanations of social phenomena. It should thus be clear that at issue is not the relative significance or magnitude of ideational or material factors, or between structure and agency. Rather, the social world is made up of “powers, propensities, and forces” that are emergent from the way its elements are structured and related to each other.<sup>97</sup> Given this assumption, the social scientific project is seen as primarily about specifying connections and relations, and building conceptual toolkits to make sense of an indeterminate and dynamic reality.

By understanding hegemony in ideational terms, we get a better grasp on the influence of shared beliefs about state purpose and international orders. Those dominant ideas empower and privilege some actors over others, forcing contestation to take place according to systems of meaning that privilege the incumbents. Claiming and contestation have to be done in terms that

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96 Jonathan Joseph, *Hegemony: A Realist Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2002), 13.

97 Jonathan Joseph and Colin Wight, ‘Scientific Realism and International Relations’, in *Scientific Realism and International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 14.

are legible to others, and thus by reference to the ideational structures of the existing order. This means that in order to have any chance of improving social positioning, agents first have to enact practices that reinforce the legitimacy of the existing pecking order.<sup>98</sup>

### *Hegemonic orders and power transition theories*

Theories of hegemony view revisionist states dissatisfied with existing institutions as the source of international order contestation. In power transition theories, the hegemon, as the most powerful state, is presumed to have designed the rules of the order to suit its interests. Consequently, a rising power is liable to become dissatisfied with an institutional setup that denies it the prestige befitting its material strength. Gilpin thus predicts a cycle of hegemonic wars where “the fundamental issue at stake is the nature and governance of the system.”<sup>99</sup> Gilpin is less concerned with the substance of those rules and assumes they favor the hegemon’s interests and work against others,<sup>100</sup> while institutionalist theories argue that rules and mechanisms can be rationally designed to improve coordination and cooperation. Yet institutionalist theories also adopt the view that international orders are acts of hegemonic creation,<sup>101</sup> a rational bargain where the hegemon gains a “stable and congenial environment in which to pursue its interests” by credibly constraining itself not to exploit weaker states.<sup>102</sup> Weaker states are willing to cede autonomy and comply with the hegemonic order if they are credibly assured that the hegemon will enforce and abide by the rules. Lake views this process as generating authority, legitimacy,

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98 Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders*, 255–56.

99 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 199.

100 Gilpin, 33.

101 Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, ‘The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order’, *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–96; Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

102 Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 109–11.

and establishing international hierarchy.<sup>103</sup> Under this social contract, the hegemon obtains lower costs of enforcement and weaker states forgo the costs of power balancing and coordination.

These theories place inordinate emphasis on the power and agency of a hegemonic state to produce international orders. Economic and military resources can certainly create the possibility for an actor to reshape the international order, yet the international order can also change despite the preferences of the materially powerful. Although the ends of major wars have often been the points when the international order is altered, they are not the only times when this happens. This conceptualization also implies that the rules of the game in world politics have been stable since the last ordering moment in 1945. But this is simply not the case, as illustrated by major changes in the practices of sovereignty and international economic relations during this period. A brief overview of this history shows problematic anomalies for theories that explain change and stability in international orders as outcomes of a hegemonic state's actions.

Since 1945, the basic practices of sovereignty have been revised despite minimal support from the dominant powers. Decolonization was a major change in the international order, a process where “a world of empires transformed into a world of states.”<sup>104</sup> Self-determination was not understood as enshrining a right to independence from colonial rule in 1945; it was considered to protect the rights of existing sovereigns and empires, not colonized peoples who lived under them. Its present interpretation as applying universally only came about in the 1960s and 1970s because of anti-colonial contestation, including of UN institutions “originally infused

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103 David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 28–33. Importantly, Lake views hierarchy as the existence of authority and the opposite of anarchy. This contrasts with more recent conceptions, which I follow here, that primarily see hierarchy in terms of relative ranking and status.

104 Christian Reus-Smit and Tim Dunne, ‘The Globalization of International Society’, in *The Globalization of International Society*, ed. Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

with imperialist logics.”<sup>105</sup> This took place with at most the opportunistic support of the Cold War superpowers. Similarly, the emergence of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine in the post-Cold War period was another important shift in the practice of sovereignty, a foundational element of international orders. Yet the US as hegemon had little to do with these alterations to one of the foundational pillars of the international order; it was spearheaded by “middle power” states and the UN Secretariat. Likewise, the proliferation of sovereignty in the late 20th century and the growing illegitimacy of imperialism are important changes in the international order that took place without hegemonic leadership.

The collapse of the Bretton Woods system is one example of how the hegemon can be a source of instability and may act as a revisionist.<sup>106</sup> This is in stark contrast to hegemonic stability theory, which remains prominent in the analysis of international orders despite its controversial status. Indeed, monetary affairs is one specific area where hegemonic stability theory is seen as suspect.<sup>107</sup> The decision by the US to end dollar-gold convertibility in 1971 introduced floating exchange rates and dramatically revised the international monetary order. Amid growing pressure from balance of payments deficits, the US aimed to stem the outflow of dollars. But the unintended consequences were even more far-reaching. It created permissive conditions for the later emergence of economic globalization, financialization, and the rise of neoliberal ideology,

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105 Jennifer M. Welsh, ‘Empire and Fragmentation’, in *The Globalization of International Society*, ed. Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 160. A key example is the UN Trusteeship Council.

106 Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

107 Barry Eichengreen, ‘Hegemonic Stability Theories of the International Monetary System’, NBER Working Paper no. 2193 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1987).

and thus to an unanticipated but fundamental shift in politics between and within states over the following decades.<sup>108</sup>

As the unipolar hegemon of the post-Cold War period, the US has also shown revisionist ambitions that have had mixed success, at best. Unilateralist policies under the presidency of George W. Bush aimed to undermine institutional constraints on the US. But despite its clear military and economic preponderance, Washington failed to gain acceptance for the Bush doctrine of preventive war in 2003; many of its closest allies refused to support the Iraq War or openly condemned it. More recently, the Trump administration has attempted to reshape the international order governing trade to reflect an overtly mercantilist worldview.<sup>109</sup> However, this has had little impact on the ordering framework preferred by other states, and since 2017 the US has repeatedly been isolated at multilateral summits like the G7 and G20 as leaders of other major economies seek to maintain the status quo of relatively open global trade. A similar outcome is seen with the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a major multilateral trade liberalization agreement that has now been ratified despite the US withdrawal.<sup>110</sup> Despite its overwhelming military and economic power, the US finds it very difficult to get even close allies to do what it wants, and has struggled at great expense to impose desired outcomes against insurgent forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>111</sup> These examples illustrate that relying on the concept of power as material capabilities is inadequate to make sense of international order contestation.

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108 Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

109 For a first-hand statement of this, see Peter Navarro, 'Why the White House Worries about Trade Deficits', *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 March 2017.

110 Now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), it is identical to the TPP originally signed except that it suspends provisions on intellectual property the US had bargained for. This further illustrates that point that the hegemon's participation is not always necessary or even conducive to international cooperation and order maintenance.

111 Reich and Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony!*, 3.

The case studies thus challenge the view of hegemonic construction as the explanation for the nature and governance of international orders on two counts. Firstly, they undermine the notions that orders are inherently sticky and stabilized by hegemonic power, and that major changes only come about through peace settlements after major wars. Secondly, it highlights the possibility of both evolutionary and unexpected change. Undoubtedly, powerful states have continually striven to design international orders to suit their interests. But if they have to be frequently dismantled and redesigned because of changing situations, the conventional view of hegemony and institutions as rationally designed and only changing as the result of cataclysmic events like major wars is untenable. Social positioning provides an account of international order change that can explain not just post-war ordering moments, but also the contestation and evolution of international orders that takes place without hegemonic wars.

Finally, while institutions are seen as channelling and mitigating power politics, institutionalists rarely consider them capable of wielding power in and of themselves. However, any attempt to describe present-day international orders cannot ignore the role of organizations like the UN agencies or the IMF in disciplining states towards orthodox practices, and indeed wielding power over them. Firms, international organizations, and activist groups engage in agenda-setting, influencing preferences and policy goals. More than being capable of acting in contradiction of state interests, they work to define what those interests are in the first place.<sup>112</sup> Hence, we also need to understand how the activities of non-state actors produce, reinforce, or alter the background knowledge and orthodox practices of world politics.

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112 Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 27–29.

### *Status-seeking and international orders*

Theories of status-seeking focus on issues of vertical ranking among states. Although my argument shares the concern of status theories with social hierarchies and inequality, my focus is on how international orders are changed or reproduced, and not on status itself. In contrast, status-seeking theories address international order contestation either as a secondary issue, or by conflating international orders with the hierarchy, in some cases adopting this from power transition and hegemonic order theories discussed above. Theories of status suggest that international order contestation is instigated by dissatisfied states who feel that the existing international order denies them their status ambitions. States that perceive they have less prestige than they deserve, given their military strength and wealth, may act aggressively to gain status.<sup>113</sup> This can lead to violent conflict unless it is defused through recognition or accommodation of a status-seeker's ambitions.<sup>114</sup> However, attempts to gain status do not necessarily challenge or change existing institutions and practices. In fact, status-seeking can reinforce international orders if it ends up reifying existing schemes of social competence and categorization by showing that rising powers subscribe to them too. Thus, while this suggests a direct link between status-seeking and international order contestation, how exactly these are connected remains underspecified.

If revising the hierarchy simply means giving different states greater inclusion and influence in existing global governance arrangements, this would not by itself amount to a change in international orders. That would require an extra step of changing prevailing practices and insti-

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113 William C. Wohlforth, 'Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War', *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 28–57; Volgy et al., 'Major Power Status in International Politics'; Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

114 Thomas Lindemann, *Causes of War: The Struggle for Recognition* (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2010); Murray, *Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*.

tutions, which does not necessarily follow. But one aspect of status-seeking does suggest how status-seeking can be connected to the contestation of international order: the attempt to alter the basis of status itself. Thus, some works distinguish “normative revisionism” from demands for the redistribution of resources or representation.<sup>115</sup> However, when it is understood from the perspective of status, the deeper implications of a change in the criteria for ranking and prestige are severely underplayed. For instance, in one influential approach to status in world politics based on social identity theory in psychology, “social creativity” is presented as a “positive-sum” strategy by states wanting to “gain preeminence on a different ranking system.”<sup>116</sup> However, an alternative basis for hierarchy may also be asserted in ways that aim to supplant existing schemes or to challenge the legitimacy of existing valued attributes (such as liberal identity, or military capability). In fact, although social creativity is considered the least threatening to the status hierarchy and most amenable to cooperation, efforts at “promoting new norms or a developmental model,”<sup>117</sup> which is given as a key example of social creativity, are a key means through which international orders are directly contested and potentially altered.

Background knowledge and identity performance are thus needed to specify how status-seeking might be linked to the contestation of international orders. Michelle Murray points to the relevance of tacit understandings about the social order in writing that “it is always by way of performance to collectively known schemas that actors are empowered and gain the social status they desire.”<sup>118</sup> Likewise, Marina Duque argues that international actors recognize others

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115 Steven M. Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 16–21; Edward Newman and Benjamin Zala, ‘Rising Powers and Order Contestation: Disaggregating the Normative from the Representational’, *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 5 (2018): 871–88.

116 Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, ‘Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy’, *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 74.

117 Larson and Shevchenko, 73–74; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 11–13.

118 Murray, *Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*, 50.

who have “similar values and resources as them,” which matter because of “their symbolic value of socially ascribed meaning”.<sup>119</sup> But not only that, those values and meanings are in the process enacted as claims about the background knowledge that ought to order the actions of participants in international politics. What status-seeking underplays is how social positioning not only draws upon but also potentially reconstructs those “schemas” or meanings through practical performances. Furthermore, the background knowledge being activated is not just about vertical ranking. Recognition and accommodation, or status denial and the construing of a rising power as a threatening revisionist, all take place through discursive practices that must utilize existing background knowledge.

Status thus only scratches the surface, as it depends on stratified aspects of social categorization which are built on deeper, more tacit beliefs about the fundamental values and purposes of international society and how world politics works. To understand changes in the system of social positioning, we need account for its linkage to background knowledge and its basis in beliefs about fundamental values and ontology. These ideational structures, in fact, are what status-seeking is based on. Psychological approaches to status-seeking, in particular, tend to take for granted the substantive content of identities and the meanings of social categories.<sup>120</sup> These meanings are significant because they manifest and enact the nature and governance of international orders when practical action in world politics is based upon them. It makes a difference between saying that China and Russia want to gain status and that they are socially positioning

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119 Marina G. Duque, ‘Recognizing International Status: A Relational Approach’, *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2018): 581.

120 Leonie Huddy, ‘From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory’, *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2001): 142–43.

as great powers, because “great power” is a meaningful social category that is laden with deeper ideational implications for how world politics should be conducted.

Ultimately, where agents seek to socially position themselves depends on who they think they are. It is not superiority for its own sake, but specific relations with specific others that are sought, and primarily because it allows the agent to perform an identity that fits with its sense of self. This helps explain acquiescence to inferiority, as something that is internalized and simply comes along with the social position that facilitates identity performance. Focusing on status-seeking would mean we cannot tell how an agent could choose between being a leading member of a low-status group or a marginal member of a prestigious group.<sup>121</sup> In chapter 4, I argue that Greece had an identity-driven imperative of remaining in the eurozone, accepting a stigmatized place in the core of Europe at great cost to its autonomy. This nonetheless allows Greece to perform an identity that has been defined in contrast to Turkey and the Balkan states. It is thus not just social stratification in and of itself, but the deep structures that produce that inequality which are at stake.

Social stratification or status-seeking is thus only the tip of the iceberg. This becomes apparent when we shift the focus away from just status and ranking themselves, and place it on the processes through which identity performances may alter background knowledge. Implicit assertions about background knowledge are necessarily embedded in claims about stratification between and within social categories. Thus, instead of taking status as the central issue, I focus on how the politics of social positioning influences the emergent production of international orders. Calling for international relations to adopt hierarchy-focused scholarship, some scholars

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<sup>121</sup> Zarakol, *After Defeat*, 46–56.

argue that international orders are defined by authority and governance relationships that create social inequalities between states.<sup>122</sup> But we need to take this insight further to better understand the implications of these structuring, stratifying effects of background knowledge on what actually happens in international politics. Struggles over relative rank and status-seeking have the effect, intended or not, of contesting international orders because those social structures define legitimate practices in world politics, and it is through what we do that we become who we are.

## **Conclusion**

International order contestation is conventionally understood as driven by shifts in the material hierarchy, or the breakdown of institutional bargains. However, historical context shows that orders have been changed without such conditions being present, while other aspects have been highly resilient even to major wars. Furthermore, while it is now widely accepted that status ambitions fuel dissatisfaction and revisionism, status theories tend to focus on vertical stratification. As a result, status tells us little about how the nature and governance of international orders might spark contestation. This is an important gap because those practices and the ideas they embody are the root of some agents being denied the social position and identity they desire. We thus need to examine how hierarchies are outgrowths of background knowledge if we are to grasp how the political contestation of relations, positions, and ideologies in international orders are linked to each other.

International actors try to shape the institutions and practices that make up international orders through the practices they enact on the world stage. They engage in power struggles to reinterpret background knowledge in ways that will allow them to perform their identity. At the

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<sup>122</sup> See Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Hierarchies in World Politics', *International Organization* 70, no. 3 (2016): 637–39.

same time, those with a stake in the status quo contend to reinforce and adapt existing practices in ways that leave the contingent orthodoxies about collective purposes and political ontology intact. Crisis events, by forcing habitual actions to be justified and background knowledge to be articulated explicitly, can provide opportunities for agents to induce or force others to adopt change. These struggles have the potential to change the tacit understandings of social categorization, fundamental values, and political ontology that structure international orders. In the following chapters, I examine the symbolic power struggles to justify, interpret, and legitimate actions and claims by international actors seeking to position themselves in the social game of international politics.

## Chapter 2 REDEFINING SOVEREIGNTY: MIDDLE POWER POLITICS AND THE UNITED NATIONS

International orders are supposed to be defined by great powers and hegemons. After all, it is military and economic might that allows a state to impose its preferred institutions and practices on others. Fundamental institutions like sovereignty, if they can be changed at all, are only revised through titanic struggles among the most powerful states. Against this conventional wisdom, I argue in this chapter that in the two decades after the end of Cold War, the meaning and practice of sovereignty was contested and changed. This was not driven by the United States, the unipole of the international system in the post-1989 era, but rather by “secondary” states and an international organization. This change was enacted through the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) doctrine, which was unanimously approved by UN member states at the 2005 World Summit. Furthermore, the concept originated in Africa and was first legally enshrined as part of African regionalism – agents usually seen as receivers rather than makers of norms. Indeed, the fact that RtoP came to be promoted most prominently by an Anglo-European state and international actors perceived as “Western” was one of the political obstacles it had to overcome.

By pushing the notion of sovereignty as responsibility, advocates of RtoP revised a fundamental constitutive principle of world politics. This change was part of a wider shift in the background knowledge structuring international orders after the Cold War. In the new political ontology, the sources of international security problems were no longer tensions between states but problems within them, caused by state tyranny or incapacity. Collective purposes and fundamental values also shifted, from emphasizing systemic stability and national self-determination, to prioritize instead the welfare and security of individual people. These changes in the orthodox

assumptions of international politics altered the criteria for social categorization. Through these taken-for-granted understandings, those who could perform their selves as liberal and modern gained or reinforced their social superiority. They acquired the power and prerogative to brand some states as inferior outcasts from international society on the basis of their “backward” political and social characteristics. At the same time, by inducing greater social recognition of their own attributes and social assets, enacting this liberal-hegemonic background knowledge helped them claim their own social positions and secure their identities.

I thus argue that social positioning is a necessary explanation for why these revisions to international orders were pursued, and how they were enacted. I focus on the political processes and manoeuvres to formulate and formalize RtoP, and the ideational changes that both motivated its advocates and were advanced through their efforts. My analysis departs from two common narratives about RtoP. In one view, RtoP is a domineering Western project, foisting an interventionist liberal human rights agenda onto weaker countries. In fact, RtoP’s advance would not have been possible without advocacy from influential African states. By preventing major Global South organizations like the G77 and Non-Aligned Movement from opposing RtoP, Rwanda, South Africa, and Tanzania played a crucial role in securing its acceptance by unopposed consensus.<sup>1</sup> In another view, RtoP is considered a failure because state violations of human rights continue to go unpunished.<sup>2</sup> Notably, this presumes the problem is a lack of armed interventions, which sets a no-win standard for RtoP’s effectiveness. Put differently, RtoP is criticized both for legitimizing military interventions, and for not sufficiently encouraging them.

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1 Harry Verhoeven, C.S.R. Murthy, and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, “‘Our Identity Is Our Currency’: South Africa, the Responsibility to Protect and the Logic of African Intervention,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 14, no. 4 (2014): 509–34.

2 Aidan Hehir, *Hollow Norms and the Responsibility to Protect* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 142–44; 164.

Though this is certainly an important debate, here I do *not* address the effectiveness of RtoP in preventing and punishing mass atrocities.<sup>3</sup> Instead, my focus is on the change in the practices of sovereignty that the doctrine embodied. Before this shift, non-intervention was prioritized as the basic principle of sovereignty, after it, human rights could take priority. Sovereignty is what separates the international from the domestic. As a basic constitutive principle of international politics, a change in sovereignty practices is necessarily a consequential revision to the international order.<sup>4</sup> RtoP is commonly criticized as ineffective, watered-down, or ambiguous.<sup>5</sup> But the fact that the understanding of sovereignty that it embodies is explicitly seen as a threat that needs to be countered, such as in Russia’s foreign policy strategy document,<sup>6</sup> is itself testament to its significance.

Indeed, it is surprising that such a perception of RtoP as a threat exists. China and Russia are nuclear powers with the right to veto any UN Security Council resolution, so the prospect of RtoP being used against them or their vital interests makes little sense. Moreover, if sovereignty in terms of the “exclusion of external actors from internal authority” is something violated and ignored when convenient,<sup>7</sup> then RtoP and other contingent interpretations of sovereignty should have little impact on international relations. Perhaps these political actors are mistaken about the substantive effect of RtoP, but that still means international politics will be shaped by those per-

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3 On the various criteria and assessments of the “success” of RtoP, see Alex J. Bellamy, *Global Politics and the Responsibility to Protect: From Words to Deeds* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 162–64; Jennifer M. Welsh, “Norm Robustness and the Responsibility to Protect,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 53–72.

4 Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 6–7.

5 Examples include Theresa Reinold, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect: The Power of Norms and the Norms of the Powerful* (London: Routledge, 2013); Hehir, *Hollow Norms and the Responsibility to Protect*.

6 “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 1, 2016), para. 26(c), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248) This paragraph originally appeared in the 2013 version.

7 Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 7.

ceptions. My argument suggests that RtoP is indeed more than two fairly lengthy paragraphs of the World Summit outcome document, whittled down to be politically acceptable for all UN member states. In political practice, as well as in academic scholarship, RtoP is commonly perceived and treated as being much more wide-ranging than it actually is because it also embodies a broader, tacit background knowledge. It is part of and represents ideational structures in world politics that suit the interests of some agents while working against others. Thus, the contestation of RtoP is one channel through which power struggles to define the ideational structures of world politics take place.

This chapter's argument is made in three parts. Firstly, I show that RtoP does embody a major shift in the understanding and practice of sovereignty, in which a state's internal conduct is now regarded as a matter of international concern. As part of a broader human security agenda, this allowed the use of humanitarian justifications for coercive measures, like sanctions and military force, to be used against states for reasons that were unacceptable in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, I argue that this shift was driven by the actions of international actors whose advocacy and action was motivated by social positioning. The UN aimed to establish and reproduce a social position as *central arbiter* in international politics, reinforcing its influence in world politics, while the Canadian state was able to perform a *middle power* social position that helped reproduce a desired national identity. I trace the historical basis of these conceptions and how the ethno-nationalist conflicts of the early 1990s motivated efforts to revise the international security order. This was already taking place when the controversial 1999 NATO intervention in the Kosovo War galvanized efforts to formally encode these shifts in background knowledge in the form of the RtoP doctrine. I then explore the contention that emerged over the

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8 Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 75–77.

efforts to formulate RtoP and enact it, including a late intervention by the US that nearly derailed the 2005 World Summit where RtoP was formally endorsed. In the final section, I address the major alternative explanations based on human rights as the rational dissemination of norms, and US hegemony in deciding the shape of international orders.

### **New needs for old identities**

By dramatically changing the international environment, the end of the Cold War forced international actors to rethink their identity conceptions. It abruptly overturned social relations between countries, as well as their sense of place in the social order more generally. “New world order” was the phrase used by both the Soviet leader and the US president to describe this shift. For the United Nations, freed from the deadlock of the superpower conflict, this presented the opportunity to carve out a new role. Liberal institutions could finally achieve the post-1945 promise deferred by the superpower conflict. In this context, the 1994 Rwandan genocide was especially jarring, as it was the very type of ethnicity-based atrocity that developments in international law after World War II were supposed to prevent. Furthermore, it took place in a historical context of liberalism’s ideological triumph, at a time when identities and borders were supposed to be eroding and the liberal peace was at hand. Sovereignty, now cast as a relic of the absolutist past that allowed states to abuse their populations with impunity, became a problem that needed to be solved.

#### *Canadian identity and the middle power concept*

The “middle power” concept is prominent in Canadian foreign policy and has been central to how Canada has understood its identity and place in international politics. Foreign policy, through which the nation is performed on the international stage, is a powerful and persistent

way in which national identity is enacted through the practical activities of the state that performs it.<sup>9</sup> The middle power concept is also the subject of debates such as what behavior follows from the social position, and whether specific states fit the definition.<sup>10</sup> In spite of the intense debate and absence of an agreed definition, in practice whatever the operative meaning of “middle power” is creates an identity and social position that policymakers believe they need to enact.<sup>11</sup>

For Canada, the *middle power* social position has long defined the sense of the country’s place in the world and its foreign policy goals. It has been understood to demand an active and influential role in global politics, particularly in the form of creating and maintaining international rules and institutions. The 15 years after World War II is tinged with nostalgia as the “golden age” of Canadian foreign policy, against which current efforts are invariably judged and found lacking.<sup>12</sup> Lester B. Pearson’s role in resolving the 1956 Suez Crisis and the creation of the UN Emergency Force acquired mythological status, particularly when it was recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize. Leadership and participation in UN peacekeeping thus became a cornerstone of Canadian national identity,<sup>13</sup> and such a mission had placed its troops in Rwanda

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9 Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 26–27.

10 Eduard Jordaan, “The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers,” *Politikon* 30, no. 1 (2003): 165–81; Andrew F. Cooper, “Testing Middle Powers’ Collective Action in a World of Diffuse Power,” *International Journal* 71, no. 4 (2016): 529–44; Laura Neack, “Searching for Middle Powers,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. William R. Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

11 Monica S. Jeong, “Critical Realism: A Better Way to Think about Middle Powers,” *International Journal* 74, no. 2 (2019): 243–48.

12 The most influential example is Andrew Cohen, *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003); a key critique is Adam Chapnick, “The Golden Age: A Canadian Foreign Policy Paradox,” *International Journal* 64, no. 1 (2008): 205–21.

13 Robert C. Thomsen and Nikola Hynek, “Keeping the Peace and National Unity: Canada’s National and International Identity Nexus,” *International Journal* 61, no. 4 (2006): 848–58; David Jefferess, “Responsibility, Nostalgia, and the Mythology of Canada as a Peacekeeper,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2009): 709–27.

during the genocide. Lloyd Axworthy, who became foreign minister in 1996, casts his pursuit of a human security agenda as following the Pearsonian legacy, to which he links his sense of nationhood and belief that Canada's "integrity as a people is tied up inextricably with exercising an active, independent, and constructive role in the world."<sup>14</sup> In the aftermath of the country's near-death experience in the 1995 Québec independence referendum, there was also a need to enact a unifying national identity. Specifically referring to this historical context, Axworthy claims the human security agenda "demonstrated how an activist, internationalist policy can help shape an identity and promote unity in the country."<sup>15</sup>

The middle power concept is a clear example of a social category deliberately constructed to push claims for institutional and practical recognition. The term was first deployed in 1944 during the conferences on the institutional design of the United Nations organization that was to be formed once World War II had ended. There, Australia and Canada lobbied unsuccessfully for the Security Council to have a second-tier group of six to ten countries on the basis of their significant military contributions to the war.<sup>16</sup> Afterwards, the concept lived on as a shorthand for both countries' ambitions to wield international influence independently of more powerful countries, and to distinguish themselves from insignificant "small" powers. As much as possible, Canadian policymakers sought to shape the international order in ways that maintained and increased the importance of diplomatic institutions like the UN, and the practice of multilateral diplomacy in general.<sup>17</sup>

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14 Lloyd Axworthy, *Navigating a New World: Canada's Global Future* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2003), 31.

15 Axworthy, 59; Andrew Lui, *Why Canada Cares: Human Rights and Foreign Policy in Theory and Practice* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).

16 Adam Chapnick, *The Middle Power Project: Canada and the Founding of the United Nations* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005).

17 Tom Keating, *Canada and World Order: The Multilateralist Tradition in Canadian Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed. (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5–6.

The middle power identity has usually been interpreted as prescribing a multilateralist grand strategy, although at times a rival interpretation emphasizing bilateral relationships and narrower coalitions with “like-minded” allies has also been active. Under conservative governments, Australia and Canada tended to emphasize alignment with the US and the “Anglosphere” or NATO while treating wider international arenas dismissively. Nonetheless, an international order where multilateralism is taken-for-granted practice helps maximize their autonomy and capacity to act by restraining more powerful states, while making those with greater diplomatic capabilities more influential.<sup>18</sup> Canada’s tendency towards multilateralism was thus rooted in its comparative advantage in diplomatic capital, which has its best exchange rate into symbolic power when the dominance of international law and institutions like the UN in ordering international politics is taken for granted in political practice.

Responding to events of the 1990s, countries defining their identities through this middle power concept thus aimed to maintain the value of their investments of symbolic capital in liberal internationalism by addressing its highly visible failures. State sovereignty, and specifically the non-intervention principle, was blamed for justifying inaction in the face of mass atrocities. In this way, the Rwandan genocide marked a crisis for international peacekeeping practices, an area of international security which has typically been central to the performative definition of the middle power social category as important contributors to global public goods.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, these practices enacted a social position of generalized superiority, which is distinct and not deferential to dominant actors while still aligned with purportedly universal interests in a lib-

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18 Richard A. Higgott and Andrew F. Cooper, “Middle Power Leadership and Coalition Building: Australia, the Cairns Group, and the Uruguay Round of Trade Negotiations,” *International Organization* 44, no. 4 (1990): 589–632.

19 Ronald M. Behringer, “Middle Power Leadership on the Human Security Agenda,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 40, no. 3 (2005): 305–42.

eral international order. The effort to change the meaning of sovereignty and pursue a human security agenda was by itself an attempt by Canada to perform its identity as a middle power.

### *The identity of the United Nations*

The end of the Cold War created new expectations for the UN. The Security Council had been sidelined due to the superpower rivalry, since either the US or the Soviet Union could use their veto to block resolutions. The Soviet Union voting with the US in the UN Security Council to authorize the 1991 Gulf War was a watershed in this regard. Unipolarity and the end of this ideological deadlock raised the prospect of the UN becoming the primary forum for international dispute settlement and international security issues. Furthermore, international policy practitioners viewed this as the opportunity for the organization to finally live up to the UN Charter's vision of collective security.<sup>20</sup> The self-image of the institution and these expectations were set out in the 1992 report by Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace*, which focused on security and peacebuilding issues. This declared, already, that "[t]he time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty... has passed."<sup>21</sup> As a social positioning move, it explicitly aimed at placing the UN Secretariat, and the UN as a diplomatic venue, as the *central arbiter* on international security matters.

This identity of the UN, as an organization distinct from the obvious ideological diversity among its member states, is steeped in the liberal internationalism on which it was founded. The UN identifies as an entity that is impartial, upholds universal values and principles, and fosters

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20 Michael Barnett, "Bringing in the New World Order: Liberalism, Legitimacy, and the United Nations," *World Politics* 49, no. 4 (1997): 526–51; Andrew J. Williams, *Failed Imagination? The Anglo-American New World Order from Wilson to Bush*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 197–200.

21 United Nations, "An Agenda for Peace: Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization" A/47/277 (June 17, 1992): 5, para. 17.

international peace and cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Within an international social context structured by liberal background knowledge, these claims to uphold common, universal purposes are a key source of political and moral authority.<sup>23</sup> To competently perform its identity, the UN thus needs to be an active and central player in solving international problems. More, it must solve them in ways that align with humanitarian ideals and the improvement of the global political environment. The UN's identity is thus a product of background knowledge that induces other agents to positively evaluate its rational-legal, diplomatic character and liberal ideals. At the same time, this constructs an interest in performing and reproducing these ideational structures as universal values, or at least, as universal as possible.

Kofi Annan, who became UN Secretary General in January 1997, was a key player in the institutionalization of the RtoP doctrine. His experiences shaped his conception of the UN's identity and the threats to it, as well as the kind of international orders to be brought about to sustain its social position in world politics. Prior to becoming Secretary General, Annan had been head of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations during the Rwandan genocide and the massacre in Srebrenica. While mostly escaping personal blame, Annan viewed these failures as a "terrible stain" on the UN.<sup>24</sup> He thus made changing the interpretation of the UN Charter and existing international law to support interventions against gross human rights violations a priority. Motivated by this problem of restoring the UN's social position, Annan personally played a major role in the process that led to the formalization of RtoP and the changed practice of sovereignty. In line with the observable implication that crisis situations create demands and oppor-

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22 Jean-Philippe Thérien, "The United Nations Ideology: From Ideas to Global Policies," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 20, no. 3 (2015): 226.

23 Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 24.

24 Kofi Annan and Nader Mousavizadeh, *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace* (London: Penguin, 2012), 75.

tunities to reshape background knowledge and international orders, the UN Secretariat moved to reaffirm the organization's central social positioning.

Annan perceived that the UN's relevance depended on updating its ways of doing things to keep up with the changing world. The practices he saw as imperative for the UN to adopt were based on background knowledge that progress takes the form of liberal modernization. He identified the problem in these terms:

For far too long, the UN had been considered the sole prerogative of states and their representatives... stepping into a UN hall often felt like entering a time machine to the most arid North-South debates of the 1970s.<sup>25</sup>

Annan sought to change this by increasing UN engagement with NGOs, the private sector, and putting "the individual at the heart of everything we did," so that the UN would be a key player in security, economic, human rights, and international law issues.<sup>26</sup>

The UN was also competing against alliances and regional organizations to assert a central role in international security. In fact, many policymakers in the Anglo-European countries became disillusioned with the UN very quickly. The October 1993 "Black Hawk Down" incident in Somalia led to the US effectively ending its involvement in UN peacekeeping. As perceptions of the UN's competence and effectiveness declined, working outside the UN and forming narrower coalitions began to seem more attractive. For many of its members, NATO came to be seen as a better vehicle that reduced the need for compromises, evading the veto power of China and Russia in the UN Security Council. In later years, regional groupings like the African Union also sought to assume a security role that they believed the Western-biased UN was systematic-

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25 Annan and Mousavizadeh, 12.

26 Annan and Mousavizadeh, 84.

ally neglecting.<sup>27</sup> The UN thus faced a looming danger of losing its central position in international security.

*Social positioning, performance and power*

Both the Canadian state and the UN Secretariat were highly invested in forms of symbolic capital that induce recognition based on their liberal internationalist credentials. Their social prestige and influence were dependent on the wider acceptance and dominance of liberal background knowledge in international politics. Hence, their ability to perform their desired identities and gain respect and recognition for them is tied to the effectiveness of international orders structured by liberal orthodoxies. The sense that international society is working properly, that it identifies the relevant problems and offers effective solutions to them, reflects positively on prominent supporters and generates returns on their symbolic capital. Conversely, the perceived failure of liberal orthodoxies would devalue their social assets and compromise their ability to embody and perform their identities. It was thus crucial to be able to represent the post-Cold War world as increasingly peaceful and humane, showing that the liberal world order was able to deliver on its promises.

The events of the early 1990s thus posed a direct challenge, interpreted as showing the need to revise the international order to fit new realities of international security. The Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the Srebrenica massacre in 1995 seemed to demonstrate the failure of the status quo and the urgent need for fundamental change. These events galvanized action because they involved genocide occurring in the presence of UN forces that were not equipped to prevent it. Sovereignty was both cited as an excuse for inaction by states who felt pressure to inter-

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27 Thomas Kwasi Tieku, "African Union Promotion of Human Security in Africa," *African Security Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 26–37.

vene but were unwilling to,<sup>28</sup> as well as those opposed to interventions in principle. Because of this, reformers considered sovereignty, as the practice of non-intervention, to be a key obstacle that needed to be removed in order to address this failure. These events helped drive the evolution of the concept of international security away from a state-centered ontology. The Rwandan genocide was only the first act in what became a wider regional war which was the deadliest conflict since 1945. With the complexity of the conflict, featuring non-state actors, rebel groups, and intersecting loyalties, it was difficult to sustain the idea that interventions were the primary danger to international stability and security. Instead, the practice of sovereignty as non-intervention came to be seen as an obstacle or tool that political actors manipulated for their advantage. According to this changing political ontology, the greater threat to international peace and security was the failure to intervene in such incidents, and the obstacles non-intervention created for the resolution of conflicts where non-state actors were major combatants and civilians were direct targets.

IOs and states not only aim to classify themselves favorably through their performances, they convey background knowledge through them. Agents tend to have identities and social assets adapted to existing assumptions about the social order's ontology, purposes, and social categories. These investments of symbolic capital can be devalued or lost if the background knowledge in which they are based loses its dominance. In the context of highly visible failures of existing practices, the international security orders had to be revised to show that they could in fact address mass atrocities. The perception that international social settings dominated by liberal thinking fail to achieve their moral purposes erodes the value of the symbolic capital that

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28 Two examples during the Rwanda genocide are recounted in Roméo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (London: Arrow, 2004), 351; 375.

international actors have invested in it. Thus, agents can guard against the erosion of their own symbolic capital and the power that derives from it by trying to revise international orders to “work better” according to the contingent, intersubjective ideas about what properly functioning orders would be like.

### **Sovereignty during and after the Cold War**

The Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) doctrine both expressed and enacted a shift in the tacit background knowledge underpinning international orders that structure activities in security, peacebuilding, and diplomacy. It charges member states with the responsibility to protect their populations from “genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity,” and the UN Security Council may authorize measures including armed intervention against national authorities that “are manifestly failing” in this responsibility.<sup>29</sup> Hence, in the form adopted by consensus of all UN member states in the outcome document of the 2005 World Summit, RtoP legitimizes coercive measures against states where the most serious human rights violations are taking place. RtoP did not create any new legal obligations. This was, in fact, part of the strategy: Annan and other RtoP advocates marshalled existing international law, notably the Geneva Conventions, Genocide Convention, and Chapter VII of the UN Charter.<sup>30</sup> Although RtoP entailed a dramatic change to the practice of sovereignty, it was firmly based on reframing existing commitments in ways that focused not on states’ rights but their responsibilities.

The World Summit thus formalized an important change in the practices of sovereignty from those that prevailed in the post-1945 period. Particularly during decolonization in the 1960s, non-intervention was prioritized as the key practice of sovereignty. This was in line with

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29 UN General Assembly, “2005 World Summit Outcome: Resolution 60/1 of the UN General Assembly,” September 16, 2005, paras. 138–139.

30 Welsh, “Norm Robustness and the Responsibility to Protect,” 54.

an even firmer understanding that the state was the sole focus of rights and duties in international law. RtoP and the post-Cold War practices of sovereignty prioritize the rights of individuals, instead of emphasizing the rights of minority groups within states or the self-determination of colonies, as was the case in the 17th and mid-20th century respectively.<sup>31</sup> As Glanville's historical study highlights, the notion that sovereignty carries responsibilities is not new, and has always coexisted with the notion of sovereignty as non-intervention. The tension between sovereign rights and responsibilities goes back to the beginning of the concept of sovereignty itself.<sup>32</sup> During the Cold War period, the actual practice of sovereignty emphasized non-intervention, but this changed in the twenty years after it.

In keeping with this dominant background knowledge in the post-1945 era, the standard practice for UN peacekeeping missions was to observe strict neutrality. In the wake of a major war instigated by annexations and imperial expansion, the tacitly accepted political ontology held that threats to international security emerge primarily from conflicts *between* states, rather than *within* them. Furthermore, decolonization reinforced the dominance of sovereignty practiced as self-determination and non-intervention in internal affairs between 1945 and 1990. Decolonization had a high moral priority in international politics during the Cold War, and in this context the advancement of human rights was associated with the liberation and independence of colonies. Self-determination was framed as a necessary outgrowth of existing human rights norms, and it was taken for granted that this meant the achievement of sovereignty for colonized peoples.<sup>33</sup> Thus, anti-colonial aspirations for national sovereignty prioritized inde-

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31 Krasner, *Sovereignty*, chap. 4; Luke Glanville, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect: A New History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 158–59.

32 Glanville, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect*.

33 Christian Reus-Smit, "Human Rights and the Social Construction of Sovereignty," *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 534; Neta C. Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics,*

pendence and non-intervention as key practices through which freedom from colonial rule was expressed and experienced. Both superpowers played into this by construing themselves as anti-imperial powers, contrasted against countries like Britain and France. Their claims to support self-determination were made as they competed to gain influence and allegiance from post-colonial states in Africa and Asia. In this context, “the moral gaze of international society was primarily external.”<sup>34</sup>

RtoP replaced this with the understanding that a state’s sovereignty entailed responsibilities and could be legitimately overruled if it allowed or perpetrated serious human rights violations within its territory. It is also a highly visible expression of a shift in background knowledge that legitimized interventions in a wide range of policy areas to enforce conformity to a specifically liberal vision of a properly governed society. Hence, RtoP is only one manifestation of a changed understanding of sovereignty and governance that became dominant in the post-Cold War period.

Strictly speaking, RtoP is constrained to issues of international security and the protection of civilians. However, the same background knowledge that legitimizes a role for international actors in defining appropriate domestic policy is also evident with interventions in other areas. Both post-conflict peacebuilding activities and the everyday work of major international organizations aim to discipline states towards an ideal model of liberal modernity in all aspects of social life. RtoP also did not stand alone, but was part of a broader shift towards the concept of human security. The same period also saw political efforts that yielded treaties against landmines, chemical weapons, and the protection of civilians. These all explicitly countered and

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*Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 293; 316–17.

34 Reus-Smit, “Human Rights and the Social Construction of Sovereignty,” 530.

constrained the latitude for states to define “security” and pursue any means they deem necessary to attain it. The principles of RtoP thus revised existing understandings of what sovereignty means, and set the terms for debates about legitimate interventions that continue today. Counter-efforts to contest RtoP would be unnecessary and pointless if it was as insignificant as critics of the principle claim;<sup>35</sup> indeed it is now RtoP that is the accepted norm being contested.

Thus, despite the constrained form that was eventually adopted at the 2005 World Summit, “RtoP” signifies something more than the two paragraphs of a UN resolution. As an abstract ideal, it signifies the primacy of individual rights over state authority. It carries within it a political ontology where international stability is seen to result from the internal characteristics of states, and the individual is the focus of security. It fixes the moral purpose of international orders as the preservation and advancement of human rights, and it enables states to be socially categorized as deviants and as less legitimate if they do not meet those standards. RtoP does not act by itself: it is by using it to reinforce the tacit background knowledge of what separates the normal states from the outlaws that international actors can construe themselves as leaders of international society.

### **Enacting a new ontology of security and sovereignty**

Political ontologies consist of beliefs about what exists in the social world and how it functions. Beliefs about the sources of international peace and stability, and the dangers to it, changed significantly in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Martha Finnemore writes that patterns of intervention are influenced by “the understanding states have of the mechanisms by which order is to be maintained,” and secondly of “the kinds of domestic rule conducive to stability and

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35 Hehir, *Hollow Norms and the Responsibility to Protect*, 78.

order.”<sup>36</sup> Both of these are vital components of the political ontology that forms the base of the dominant background knowledge in the international order. International security practices meant to address violent conflicts in the post-Cold War period had the effect of revising these understandings through their performance. This enacted a changed ontology rooted in liberal ideology and specifically the liberal peace and modernization theories.<sup>37</sup> The key aspect of this collective understanding about social reality and how it works was that international stability and peace were considered to depend on the internal characteristics of states.

A basic change in the political ontology was that liberal, democratic governance within states became seen as vital to international peace and collective security. Built upon this, the tacit moral purpose of international orders also evolved. In liberal ideology, notions of fundamental justice and the good in social life prioritize the rights of individuals, and the sovereign equality and self-determination of colonized peoples had been seen as necessary to achieve this during 1950s to 1980s. But the dominant political ontology now saw state weakness as the source of international security problems, and non-intervention understandings of sovereignty as a shield for perpetrators of genocide. Prioritizing non-intervention suited the moral purposes and political ontology of international orders in the era of decolonization and the Cold War. But events of the 1990s were seen to necessitate a drastic rethinking of these orthodoxies. The universal cultivation of liberal democracy and human rights thus came to be practically enacted as the primary moral purpose of the international order.<sup>38</sup>

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36 Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 86.

37 Piki Ish-Shalom, *Democratic Peace: A Political Biography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, “Neo-Modernization? IR and the Inner Life of Modernization Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 1 (2002): 103–37.

38 Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 135–36.

### *New wars and insecurity from inside states*

The end of the Cold War was marked by a series of intra-state conflicts, which were diagnosed as problems of state disintegration. Some scholars argued this to be a new type of war, which rarely saw major battles but featured constant low-level violence. Most of this violence was directed against civilians, and with goals and methods that were less about capturing territory or seizing power but rather to undermine existing political communities and create new friend-enemy distinctions.<sup>39</sup> And they were more than wars between armies but between communities, featuring “a fundamentally different nexus between combatants and civilians.”<sup>40</sup> Despite skepticism and debate over how new or severe these internal conflicts really were,<sup>41</sup> for policymakers this conception of security problems came to define the international agenda. For instance, leaders like US president Bill Clinton rationalized foreign policy in liberal peace terms, seen for instance in the claim that advancing democratic governance in other countries was needed because “democracies don’t attack each other, they make better trading partners and partners in diplomacy.”<sup>42</sup> The perception that war had changed helped to make claims that international orders had to adapt to this new reality more convincing. This was explicitly cited as the rationale for RtoP in the ICISS report.<sup>43</sup>

What stood out about the main conflicts attracting international attention in the 1990s was their ethnocentric and identity-driven character, marked by systematic violence against civilians.

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39 Mary Kaldor, “Old Wars, New Wars, and the War on Terror,” *International Politics* 42, no. 4 (2005): 492–93.

40 Kalevi J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39.

41 Errol A. Henderson and J. David Singer, “‘New Wars’ and Rumours of ‘New Wars,’” *International Interactions* 28, no. 2 (2002): 165–90; Erik Melander, Magnus Öberg, and Jonathan Hall, “Are ‘new Wars’ More Atrocious? Battle Severity, Civilians Killed and Forced Migration before and after the End of the Cold War,” *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 3 (2009): 505–36.

42 Bill Clinton, “State of the Union Address” (speech to joint session of US Congress, Washington, DC, 25 January 1994).

43 ICISS, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001), 3–7.

These events, and how they were understood, reinforced an ontological shift where the problems of international security were now seen as originating primarily from *within* states. Furthermore, these wars were conceived as fundamentally irrational, based on ancient hatreds and constructed identities of “inferior, deluded” actors, rather than because of genuine security interests or legitimate grievances.<sup>44</sup> This contrasted with the Cold War period when the primary source of international instability was considered to be tensions *between* states and especially the two rival superpowers. The absence of major power rivalry in the post-Cold War period joined with the ideological victory of liberalism to create expectations of moral progress in international politics. As Barry Buzan noted in 1997, “it is the very success of the liberal project that now gives rise to the demand for a wider security agenda.”<sup>45</sup> Put differently, the imagined universalization and victory of liberal ideology created a situation where those who violated liberalism’s fundamental moral precept of the underlying equality and sameness of all humans became threats, who had to be fought to make progress and the claim of a better, more liberal world, real.<sup>46</sup>

In political discourses, these expectations were placed upon an imagined “international community,” an undefined group which might mean all states, humanity in general, or some subset of socially legitimate international actors. This trope is widely used by activists, journalists, political leaders, and the literature they produce.<sup>47</sup> One notable example was British prime minister Tony Blair, speaking while NATO airstrikes were hitting Yugoslavia in 1999, advocating a “doctrine of international community” defined in terms of expanding liberalism’s ideational dominance. Blair cited the familiar liberal peace thesis that international security is

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44 Oliver P. Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 109–11.

45 Barry Buzan, “Rethinking Security after the Cold War,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 32, no. 1 (1997): 23.

46 Brad Evans, “Foucault’s Legacy: Security, War and Violence in the 21st Century,” *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (2010): 413–33.

47 Tanisha M. Fazal, “What Is the International Community?” (unpublished working paper, September 2019).

increased when democracy and openness prevails. In terms of peace and conflict, this meant the question was “to identify the circumstances in which we should get actively involved in other people's conflicts,” driving past the question of whether there should be intervention at all.<sup>48</sup>

The perception that existing UN peacekeeping practices were ineffective rested upon the fact that they were adapted for goals set during the Cold War. But there were now tacit expectations of progress towards a new world order of liberal peace, without any adaptation of the means to achieve them.<sup>49</sup> The quintessential model was the deployment of a lightly-armed, neutral force that would police and enforce a peace agreement or cease-fire. The 1956 UN Emergency Force, deployed during the Suez Crisis, was the prototypical example. In the context of the Cold War, one objective of peacekeeping was to prevent escalation of US-Soviet superpower rivalry by keeping a lid on potential flashpoints and proxy wars.<sup>50</sup> Existing practices thus assumed that troops were deployed into an environment where they would serve as an impartial arbiter between two sides who accepted their presence.

Instead, the 1990s thrust peacekeepers wearing UN blue berets into situations where practices built on these assumptions proved ill-adapted to the problems they encountered. This was both in terms of the situations troops encountered on the ground, and the tacit change in the purposes and expectations placed upon them, in the context of an international order characterized by an ascendant liberal hegemony. Faced with situations featuring a range of irregular forces, no clear front lines, large numbers of refugees and displaced persons, and the deliberate targeting of

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48 Tony Blair, “Doctrine of International Community” (speech to Chicago Economic Club, Chicago, IL, 22 April 1999) Available at <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=279>

49 Alan James, “Peacekeeping in the Post-Cold War Era,” *International Journal* 50, no. 2 (1995): 260–63.

50 Sean M. Maloney, “Helpful Fixer or Hired Gun? Why Canada Goes Overseas,” *Policy Options*, January 2001; Karsten Jung, *Of Peace and Power: Promoting Canadian Interests through Peacekeeping* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 47–49.

civilians and sometimes peacekeepers themselves, these practices failed with horrific consequences.<sup>51</sup> UN peacekeeping forces in Rwanda were mandated only to use force in self-defense, and the bulk of the force was withdrawn at the height of the genocide because the violence was perceived as the resumption of civil war. The existing interpretation of the background knowledge was that the international community should withdraw so as to remain impartial towards such internal conflicts. Likewise, in Bosnia, the report on the Srebrenica massacre identified “a philosophy of impartiality and non-violence wholly unsuited to the conflict” as a root cause of the mission’s mistakes.<sup>52</sup> The practice of impartiality had been key to the UN’s identity during the Cold War and central to the traditional mode of peacekeeping, as well as the non-intervention understandings of sovereignty that required the mission to have consent from the host state.<sup>53</sup> These practices now appeared perverse with the new expectations for the UN to advance and support a liberal world order.

Peacekeeping missions thus proved inadequately equipped, both in doctrine and in armament, for the active conflicts they were given the task of resolving. These failures to prevent and ameliorate mass atrocities and genocide indicated to actors like the Canadian state, which was strongly invested in these practices and the social order that they reified, that there was a serious problem in need of fixing. For actors like the UN Secretariat and Canada, a crucial basis of their social positioning risked being discredited and devalued unless the order was revised. These problems threatened to undermine the perceived competence and identity performances of those who had much invested in the success of peacebuilding interventions. They were understood as

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51 Mats Berdal, “United Nations Peacekeeping and the Responsibility to Protect,” in *Theorising the Responsibility to Protect*, ed. Ramesh Thakur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 229–30.

52 UN General Assembly, “Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35: The fall of Srebrenica,” A/54/549, 15 November 1999, para. 499.

53 Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, 150–53.

failures of the “old” model of sovereignty and order, and served as the impetus for revising the perceived realities of international politics and the collective purposes that international politics.

At least among Western policymakers, the “internal mode of security” became the dominant understanding of international security problems.<sup>54</sup> That is, security problems were viewed as originating primarily from inside states and due to their domestic institutions and internal order. The problems included weak and failed states unable to control their territory, states that inflicted atrocities on their own people, and other failures of proper governance that led to the development of violent grievances. According to the liberal peace ontology, these problems could be solved with the spread of properly designed institutions. With restraints on government power, checks and balances, and the emergence of a democratic culture, conflicts would be resolved peacefully through rational debate, negotiation, and conciliation. The vast majority who suffer from war and conflict would assert themselves through the political process to ensure peaceful outcomes. As dominant liberal theories of modernization and development held, fostering a middle class and civil society would lead populations to transcend the parochial illusions of ethnic nationalism and identity politics.<sup>55</sup> Political leaders would no longer be able to engage in nationalist demagoguery to incite the public to ethnic hatred and violence.

Viewed according to the political ontology of the causes and definitions of international security problems, this meant the solutions to international security problems were internal to states. Doctrines of democratization and institutional reform were applied through the peace-

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54 Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 150–51.

55 Nils Gilman, “Modernization Theory Never Dies,” *History of Political Economy* 50, no. S1 (2018): 148–49; for an overview of contemporary development and democratization theories, see Barbara Geddes, “What Causes Democratization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Robert E. Goodin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

building practices of international agencies and donor states. Reforming and transforming “failed” states and conflict-riven societies was considered necessary to socialize and normalize populations into proper, peaceful behavior.<sup>56</sup> In the discourses and policies of institutions from NATO to humanitarian relief organizations and the EU’s European security strategy, the diffusion of democratic norms was considered a collective security interest and domestic problems within states were perceived as important concerns for international security.<sup>57</sup>

This tacit knowledge was institutionally performed by key international actors, leading to a self-reinforcing nexus between security and development issues.<sup>58</sup> It created fertile conditions for the development and institutionalization of RtoP. This meant agents could gain symbolic capital by performing actions perceived to serve collective purposes and the common good. Democratic reform and human rights protection were seen as the key ways to reduce the likelihood not only that a state might act aggressively towards others, but also the risk of internal conflict that might spill over international borders. In this context, sovereignty came to be seen as something that should be conditional on a state’s domestic actions. This dovetailed with the growing influence of democratic peace theory, which features a central claim that regime type is a variable affecting the probability of conflict.

#### *Human security and social categorization*

International actors with a comparative advantage in diplomatic and cultural forms of symbolic capital used this opportunity to enact revised interpretations of the international order that emphasized liberal modernity and progress as collective values and goals of international soci-

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56 Laura Zanotti, *Governing Disorder: UN Peace Operations, International Security, and Democratization in the Post-Cold War Era* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 62.

57 Alexandra Gheciu, “Security Institutions as Agents of Socialization? NATO and the ‘New Europe,’” *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (2005): 5.

58 David P. Chandler, *Hollow Hegemony: Rethinking Global Politics, Power and Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 26–27.

ety, and a basis for stratified social categorization. The ontological shift took place in interaction with moves to reinforce the validity of liberal notions of the normative purposes of international politics. In a context where internal conflicts of states were being treated by the international community as sources of global insecurity, liberal reformation was touted as the solution. By implication, this reified and reinforced “individual purposes and potentialities” as the moral purpose not just of the state, but of international orders more broadly.<sup>59</sup> The concept of human security and the pursuit of this agenda was a key way in which this was enacted in the post-Cold War period.

Through human security, the political ontology that peace and conflict are determined by the internal characteristics of states interacted with a new emphasis on human rights as the fundamental values of the international community. Of course, this was not new, as the 1949 Universal Declaration on Human Rights attests. But it was during the post-Cold War period, and drawing upon that history, that human rights gained priority as the tacit understanding of the international order’s collective purpose. During the Cold War, maintaining international stability through a strong non-intervention stance regularly took moral priority in the practice of world politics and by institutions like the UN. But after the Cold War, state sovereignty was now seen as an obstacle to human rights, rather than the necessary condition for them. Reinterpreting and contesting the meaning of sovereignty in the post-Cold War period, actors with the symbolic power to fix such claims worked to construe individual well-being as a fundamental purpose to be served by a legitimate international order. The emphasis on individual welfare and the protection of civilians meant a corresponding decline in the moral priority of non-intervention.

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<sup>59</sup> Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*, 122.

In terms of background knowledge, dominant political ontology and moral purposes produce stratified social categorizations. Agents who are classified as deviants from those tacit standards, in their practices or identities, are construed as inferior. In both popular media and policy-oriented portrayals, those who are unlike the core in-group are socially categorized as less advanced and “backward” in their social, political, and economic development. Going further, labels like “failed” or “rogue” do more than classify and stratify. Being branded as an outcast is even more important than pushing the agent downward and depriving them of status: the agent has the identity of a threat to the common good forced upon it. They are not just lacking in certain standards, their behavior is classed as immoral and contrary to the collective social purposes that international actors ought to support. This tacit social categorization becomes real when enacted in discourses and practices, which may take the form of criticism, shaming, and intervention. IOs and civil society organizations are particularly active in international shaming and ranking, practical actions that reinforce background knowledge and enact social hierarchies based on them.<sup>60</sup> This is not only necessary for enacting the background knowledge, but implicitly claims the social positioning to judge others, placing oneself as a privileged actor if the judgement and one’s ability to make it are socially recognized.

The idea of some countries being more advanced than others is deeply connected to the notion of linear progress that is a basic premise of liberal beliefs. Modernization theory defined societies as advanced or modern if they met criteria that in effect measured countries on their

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60 André Broome, Alexandra Homolar, and Matthias Kranke, “Bad Science: International Organizations and the Indirect Power of Global Benchmarking,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 514–39; Rochelle Terman and Erik Voeten, “The Relational Politics of Shame: Evidence from the Universal Periodic Review,” *The Review of International Organizations* 13, no. 1 (2018): 1–23.

resemblance to the US.<sup>61</sup> This definition of what it meant to be advanced was opposed to “backward” and “traditional” societies, creating an implicit hierarchy. Although modernization theory itself is now widely discredited, this underlying logic remains strong. In the context of liberalism’s continued intellectual dominance, liberal conceptions of individual rights and good governance are key criteria for social categorization and stratification.<sup>62</sup> The image of what a “modern” society looks like is tacitly defined by liberal ideals of rationalized democracy and market capitalism. Those regarded by this background knowledge as advanced, modern, examples to be followed have a social interest in perpetuating an ideational structure which enables them to perform liberal identities and places them in desirable social positions with symbolic power. For those who have made costly efforts adapting themselves to these schemes of social categorization, there is an investment at risk of being lost if that background knowledge loses its structuring influence. In this sense, those invested in the liberal background knowledge needed to reinforce that structural power by demonstrating its ability to address international problems.

### **Enacting the responsible sovereign**

Under the post-1945 orthodoxy, sovereignty meant primarily non-intervention and self-determination. While these principles can be found in the UN Charter, they gained much stronger force in the decades after 1945 as post-colonial states gained independence. The defining principle was thus understood as the sanctity of the state from uninvited outside influence and the formal equality of all states.<sup>63</sup> This moral reasoning came as part of the move for decolonization: if all people are equal, then this should be represented in the equality of the world’s states. Non-inter-

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61 Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

62 Ann E. Towns, “Norms and Social Hierarchies: Understanding International Policy Diffusion ‘From Below,’” *International Organization* 66, no. 2 (2012): 183–84.

63 Gerry Simpson, “The Diffusion of Sovereignty: Self-Determination in the Post-Colonial Age,” *Stanford Journal of International Law* 32, no. 2 (1996): 259–60.

vention and non-interference were thus based on the background knowledge that sovereign independence was a human right and the prerequisite for other rights.<sup>64</sup> This interpretation of sovereignty was enacted in practices specifying that no intervention should take place in the midst of mass atrocities in the early 1990s. It was this interpretation that was challenged and changed by states aiming to perform a “middle power” identity, and a UN Secretary General who perceived the organization’s competence as an international actor to be at stake.

### *Legality and legitimacy in Kosovo*

From the beginning of his term as UN Secretary General in 1997, Kofi Annan had set out his stall to advocate for the universality of human rights. One of his first major speeches was an address to the Organization for African Unity in June 1997. Annan directly attacked the view of human rights as a Western imposition as “demeaning of the yearning for human dignity that resides in every African heart,” with observers commenting that he was perhaps the only person in a position to make such an argument to this audience.<sup>65</sup> Subsequently, events in Kosovo pushed the questions of intervention and sovereignty to the top of the international agenda. As Yugoslavia’s state-sponsored ethnic cleansing escalated in June 1998, Annan gave a speech at Ditchley Park in the UK that laid out his thinking on these issues. He argued that “sovereignty implies responsibility, not just power” and that the UN Security Council is “the only institution competent” to decide when forceful intervention is warranted, because of its internationally respected authority.<sup>66</sup>

Against resistance from the US and UK, who feared he would be too dovish, Annan

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64 Glanville, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect*, 132.

65 James Traub, *The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American Power* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 73.

66 Jean E. Krasno, ed., *The Collected Papers of Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, 1997-2006*, vol. 1 (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012), 439; 441.

attempted to assert a role for the UN in resolving the Kosovo situation. One tactic was to “sneak” Kosovo onto the Security Council agenda under the category of “other business.”<sup>67</sup> The US and NATO countries also preferred to deal with Kosovo outside the Security Council because Russia was expected to veto any resolution authorizing the use of force. Moreover, the US gave little weight to issues of international law. When UK Foreign Secretary Robin Cook raised the fact that British government lawyers had concluded that the lack of Security Council authorization would make military action illegal, Secretary of State Madeline Albright said that he should “get new lawyers.”<sup>68</sup> This choice to operate in a legal grey zone was because of fears that the clarity of a resolution being voted down or vetoed at the Security Council would close off future action.<sup>69</sup>

The Security Council chamber had thus seen minimal debate on the use of force against Yugoslavia before NATO began its bombing campaign on 24 March 1999. It was only on 26 March when a meeting was called to debate Russia’s draft resolution demanding the end of NATO airstrikes. Russia’s foreign minister Sergey Lavrov argued:

The illegal use of force by NATO... directly undermines the fundamental base of the entire modern system of international relations, which is based on the primacy of the United Nations Charter. One’s worst fears are now being fulfilled. The virus of lawlessness is spreading to ever more spheres of international relations.<sup>70</sup>

Lavrov’s argument presumed the necessity of Security Council authorization for the use of force to be legal, and thus performatively asserted it as a matter of fact. But only China and Namibia voted with Russia, and the resolution failed with all the 12 other members voting against it. This

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67 Traub, *The Best Intentions*, 94–95.

68 James Rubin, “Countdown to a very personal war,” *Financial Times*, 30 September 2000.

69 Axworthy, *Navigating a New World*, 179; Simon Chesterman, “Legality versus Legitimacy: Humanitarian Intervention, the Security Council, and the Rule of Law,” *Security Dialogue* 33, no. 3 (2002): 293–307.

70 UN Security Council, “Kosovo (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia),” *Provisional Verbatim Record S/PV.3989* (March 26, 1999): 5–6.

created a curious situation: there was broad international support for the NATO intervention, which blocked a resolution that would have effectively declared it illegal. But it still lacked Security Council authorization, and was thus “illegal but legitimate,”<sup>71</sup> as an independent commission initiated by the Swedish government would later conclude. The vote and the Security Council debate also revealed that non-Western countries were willing to accept intervention against mass atrocities in principle.<sup>72</sup> Non-permanent members Argentina, Bahrain, and Malaysia all made statements supporting the principle that state actions causing humanitarian crisis are legitimate grounds for military intervention.<sup>73</sup> This was notable because these three represented regions that tended to be highly sensitive about sovereignty and international intervention.

This also raised a serious dilemma for the UN Secretariat. Inaction against the atrocities being carried out in Kosovo would have meant a repeat of the events that had so deeply damaged the UN’s perceived competence. But at the same time, the airstrikes violated the UN Charter by using force without Security Council authorization. Moreover, in social positioning terms the UN was being placed in a way that prevented the organization from performing its desired identity as the central arbiter on international security issues. This brought out a deep divide among UN officials and Annan’s advisers on how to respond, in line with the observable implication that performing the right identity was a crucial consideration in decision-making about what kind of international order to pursue. The political and legal affairs staff were the

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71 Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *The Kosovo Report: Conflict, International Response, Lessons Learned* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 186.

72 Alex J. Bellamy, “Kosovo and the Advent of Sovereignty as Responsibility,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3, no. 2 (2009): 163–84.

73 UN Security Council, “S/PV.3989,” 7–9.

most troubled by the idea of the Secretary General endorsing a circumvention of the UN Charter, while close advisers were less inclined to view international law as the ultimate good.<sup>74</sup>

In the end, Annan decided to respond by saying that “there are times when the use of force may be legitimate in the pursuit of peace.”<sup>75</sup> Annan himself found the choice to use the word “legitimate” extremely difficult, as it was “close to heresy” for the orthodoxy that the UN should be impartial and could not accept the use of force without a Security Council mandate.<sup>76</sup> Looking back on that decision, Annan writes he believed the UN “needed to stand for the rights of the individual as strongly as for the rights of states.”<sup>77</sup> In doing so, he also distinguished the stance of the UN from that of powerful member states who had blocked the Security Council from acting. It had become all the more important to align with the ascendant background knowledge that domestically oppressive states are threats to international security, and individual welfare is an overriding moral purpose of international orders.

Annan continued to question the existing practice of sovereignty as non-intervention in his public advocacy over the following year. He was determined to push the issue because he felt that after Bosnia and Rwanda, the UN “was being judged on its ability to deal with gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity.”<sup>78</sup> Annan prefaced his September 1999 speech opening the new session of the General Assembly by publishing an essay in *The Economist* arguing for a distinction between individual sovereignty and state sovereignty.<sup>79</sup> In his speech, he built on this with the claim that “strictly traditional notions of sovereignty can no longer do

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74 Traub, *The Best Intentions*, 97.

75 United Nations, “Secretary-General Deeply Regrets Yugoslav Rejection of Political Settlement,” SG/SM/6938, 24 March 1999.

76 Traub, *The Best Intentions*, 96–98.

77 Annan and Mousavizadeh, *Interventions*, 89.

78 Annan and Mousavizadeh, 90.

79 Kofi Annan, “Two concepts of sovereignty,” *The Economist*, 18 September 1999, 97-98.

justice to the aspirations of peoples everywhere to attain their fundamental freedoms.” Against the backdrop of his controversial decision to acquiesce to the NATO intervention in Kosovo, Annan also argued that unless the Security Council was seen to be defending the “common interest... in an era of human rights, interdependence and globalization, there is a danger that others could seek to take its place.”<sup>80</sup>

This interpretation of the meaning of sovereignty raised hackles among the audience of ambassadors and state leaders. The ambassador of Namibia, who was serving as president of the General Assembly, used his toast at a diplomatic reception following the speech to criticize Annan’s remarks, “an astonishing breach of etiquette” showing the widespread resistance to this norm entrepreneurship.<sup>81</sup> Many of the G77 countries shared a widespread fear, attached to the historical use of humanitarian intervention to justify colonial imperialism, that redefining sovereignty would once again institutionalize and legitimize self-interested Western interventions. The negative reaction prompted Annan to step back from the issue, a tactical retreat that prompted other advocates to step forward. In fact, when approached by Lloyd Axworthy with the idea for what became the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), he encouraged Canada to do it outside the UN while promising he would later endorse it and receive the report.<sup>82</sup> Annan seems to have calculated that he had reached the limit of his and the UN’s symbolic power for the moment, and a separate initiative by another agent was now needed.

### *The performance of middle power politics*

The NATO intervention in Kosovo, by acting as if RtoP was already accepted practice, was a

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80 UN General Assembly, *Official Records*, A/54/PV.4 (20 September 1999), 2-3.

81 Traub, *The Best Intentions*, 101.

82 Axworthy, *Navigating a New World*, 191.

decisive contribution to it actually becoming legitimate. The coalition was able to cast its actions not as self-interested but as serving collective values and purposes. This drew on the symbolic power of the Western alliance to reinforce the emerging background knowledge that mass atrocities were a problem that the international security order ought to prevent and punish. This aspect of the Kosovo intervention as a political performance highlighted the gaps between the international security problems of the 1990s, popular expectations placed upon the international system, and the existing practices of sovereignty, intervention, and non-intervention. If the post-Cold War shift in the background knowledge now refused to accept the primacy of the state and international stability as an overriding moral purpose, how could this triple dilemma be resolved?<sup>83</sup> The Canadian government took the next major step towards redefining the practice of sovereignty in September 2000 by initiating and sponsoring the ICISS. It was chaired by Gareth Evans, former foreign minister of Australia, with members selected to ensure regional representation. This commission's report gave the foundations and name to the doctrine that would eventually be adopted in 2005.

The ICISS process and the role that the Canadian government played in advancing RtoP was part of a broader foreign policy agenda. Both Canada's historical role in the creation of UN peacekeeping, and its involvement in notable failed missions of the 1990s like Rwanda and Somalia meant its symbolic capital was highly invested in issues around international intervention. The concept of human security was thus identified as "fundamental" to Canada's international role.<sup>84</sup> The pursuit of this agenda saw initiatives like the Ottawa Treaty against landmines

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83 Ramesh Thakur, "Rwanda, Kosovo, and the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect*, ed. Alex J. Bellamy and Tim Dunne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 106–7.

84 Axworthy, *Navigating a New World*, 64.

in 1997, and advocacy to establish the International Criminal Court leading to the adoption of the Rome Statute in 1998. Canada then became a member of the UN Security Council in 1999 and decided to use its two-year mandate to entrench the protection of civilians as an international security concern. This would both draw upon and enact the idea that war crimes and mass atrocities are matters of “international peace and security.” This reference to article 24 of the UN Charter reinterpreted existing law in a way that made serious human rights violations a responsibility of the Security Council even if they had no spillover effects on another state (such as by causing refugee flows).

On a practical level, this effort was seen as fixing problems evident in the Somalia and Rwanda missions, where the understanding of humanitarian “assistance” as the limit of appropriate intervention had been considered to rule out actively “protecting” civilians in danger.<sup>85</sup> But this also drew upon and enacted background knowledge: the ontology that the nature of war had changed, and individual welfare was a moral purpose that the international order should prioritize. Through these moves, Canada sought to socially position itself in the category of *middle power*. This positioning enabled the performance of its national identity, inducing others to recognize it as an influential, competent, and prestigious agent in the social domain of international politics. This also sought to assert and teach to others its interpretation of background knowledge and the social order of international politics, in line with the observable implications of social positioning.

It was also against this background that the explicit possibility of intervention against mass atrocities without the consent of the target state was first formalized in an international set-

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85 Elissa Goldberg, presentation to “Roundtable on Twenty Years of the Protection of Civilians Agenda” (McGill University, 28 January 2020).

ting. This was in the Constitutive Act of the African Union, drafted and signed in 2000 as the ICISS was still carrying out its work.<sup>86</sup> The strong non-intervention practice of the Organization for African Unity, which the AU replaced, was seen as having stymied “African solutions” to civil wars and regional conflicts.<sup>87</sup> Here, African states had in mind not just the Rwandan genocide but the Second Congo War that came after it – the world’s deadliest conflict since World War II embroiling much of central Africa.<sup>88</sup> The firm insistence on the integrity of arbitrary colonial borders had been accepted when the alternative was seen to be a total breakdown.<sup>89</sup> Now, it ended up leaving the region’s security problems subject to interventions (or the lack thereof) by an international community seen as largely inattentive to Africa’s problems.<sup>90</sup> It also created the right of intervention for the Union to act without the target state’s consent. In establishing a protection mandate, the new African Union staked a claim for the maintenance of security on the African continent.<sup>91</sup>

The idea of sovereignty as responsibility originated with the efforts of Francis Deng, a southern Sudanese diplomat, to address the problem of internally displaced persons. Gareth Evans suggests “responsibility to protect” was itself an important phrasing. By adopting this term, the ICISS aimed to put the focus on the duties of all states towards their populations rather

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86 This establishes “the right of the Union to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.” *Constitutive Act of the African Union*, 11 July 2000, UN Treaty Series 2158, article 4(h).

87 Kwesi Aning and Samuel Atuobi, “Responsibility to Protect in Africa: An Analysis of the African Union’s Peace and Security Architecture,” *Global Responsibility to Protect* 1, no. 1 (2009): 90–113.

88 Paul D. Williams, “From Non-Intervention to Non-Indifference: The Origins and Development of the African Union’s Security Culture,” *African Affairs* 106, no. 423 (2007): 253–79.

89 Corinne A. A. Packer and Donald Rukare, “The New African Union and Its Constitutive Act,” *The American Journal of International Law* 96, no. 2 (2002): 369.

90 Tiekü, “African Union Promotion of Human Security in Africa”; Glanville, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect*, 179–80.

91 Kristiana Powell and Thomas Kwasi Tiekü, “The African Union’s New Security Agenda: Is Africa Closer to a Pax Pan-Africana?,” *International Journal* 60, no. 4 (2005): 950–52.

than justifications for powerful states to attack others.<sup>92</sup> By *not* emphasizing intervention, they also hoped to move away from the focus on military action. Rather, the international response should include prevention and post-conflict peacebuilding. The ICISS thus aimed to make RtoP distinct and disassociated from humanitarian intervention, as evident from a section in the report dedicated to disavowing the term.<sup>93</sup> As a phrase loaded with colonialist baggage, it was feared any association between RtoP and humanitarian intervention would lead their proposals to be immediately rejected by the wider UN membership. This was a pitfall that RtoP advocates had to work to avoid, because the claim that sovereignty should be conditional on the state's domestic conduct echoes efforts to deflect decolonization in the 1950s. Western countries argued at the time for "internal self-determination or democracy as paramount," against the emphasis on sovereignty for the colonized.<sup>94</sup> To gain consensus, it was important to ensure that the doctrine would minimize any colonialist implications, and the support of an African coalition was necessary for this.

These moves by a range of different actors had the effect of casting the issue of violence against civilians as a matter to be addressed by intervention. By designating the UN Security Council as the proper setting to address the protection of civilians, it was accepted as an international security issue and thus something of prime importance in international politics. This framing is what helped make it possible to alter the practice of sovereignty, and the background knowledge about fundamental values and social categorization in international politics that is embedded within it. At the same time, this meant that protection of civilians and action against

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92 Gareth Evans, *Incorrigible Optimist: A Political Memoir* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2017), 237–41.

93 ICISS, *The Responsibility to Protect*, 9.

94 Crawford, *Argument and Change*, 316–17.

mass atrocities became closely tied to intervention, and especially armed intervention. As a result, unexpected events at the dawn of the 21st century came close to unravelling these efforts.

### *The Iraq War and the threat of hegemony*

Although some critics saw RtoP as a front for American hegemonic interests, the United States was initially “hostile” to the concept.<sup>95</sup> This came from two sides, each concerned the US would be forced to do either too much or too little: some feared that RtoP might create an obligation to undertake military deployments, and others that it might create constraints on them by imposing new standards of legitimacy.<sup>96</sup> The ICISS report was eventually released in December 2001, and thus risked being swamped by dramatic changes in the international security agenda brought about by the September 11 attacks. As the world’s most militarily powerful state turned its primary focus to the problem of terrorism, issues of human security and protection of civilians seemed certain to be ignored. Secondly, there was a serious possibility that the US might seize control of the discourse on sovereignty as responsibility and armed intervention. The adoption of human rights and democratic values as part of justifications for the Iraq War were thus viewed by RtoP advocates as dangerous for the doctrine,<sup>97</sup> undermining RtoP’s claims to reflect universal values, not the interests of the powerful.

The overt use of human rights justifications for the 2003 Iraq War by the US and UK was thus highly damaging for efforts to win support for RtoP. This runs counter to standard expectations that hegemons are uniquely able to create and alter international institutions, and it also contradicts the idea that norm diffusion increases when powerful actors adopt and start using a

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95 Ronald M. Behringer, *The Human Security Agenda: How Middle Power Leadership Defied US Hegemony* (London: Continuum, 2012), 161.

96 Theresa Reinold, “The United States and the Responsibility to Protect: Impediment, Bystander, or Norm Leader?,” *Global Responsibility to Protect* 3, no. 1 (2011): 71.

97 Glanville, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect*, 193–94.

norm in their discourses.<sup>98</sup> Leading up to the war, George W. Bush claimed that the Iraqi people would be the first to benefit from regime change and that “America’s cause is right and just: liberty for an oppressed people.”<sup>99</sup> Amid international skepticism of US claims that Saddam Hussein was actively developing weapons of mass destruction, his regime’s character was clearly being used as a secondary justification. This provided a highly salient example of RtoP-type reasoning being applied in a self-interested manner. Going further was the argument, made in the pages of the influential magazine *Foreign Affairs*, that RtoP implies there is a “corollary” duty to intervene against non-democratic states who acquire weapons of mass destruction.<sup>100</sup> Coupled with the “Bush doctrine” of preventive war against anyone deemed a threat to the US, this gave an ominous cast to these arguments. Since many Global South countries were already suspicious that RtoP might be used to justify interventions against them, these developments seemed to confirm their fears. Thus, the most powerful state’s attempt to use the principle did not help to advance this change to the practices of sovereignty, in fact, it worked against the acceptance of RtoP.

Kofi Annan took the next move at this stage by convening the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change in September 2003. As part of a wide-ranging effort to build consensus on the nature of international security threats and how the UN could address them, it marked the entry of the ICISS report into the UN process.<sup>101</sup> This was a crucial move to rescue RtoP, which faced an international political situation haunted by the spectre of unilateral military

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98 See Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887–917.

99 George W. Bush, “Remarks on the future of Iraq” (speech to American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, 26 February 2003). See also Glanville, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect*, 194.

100 Lee Feinstein and Anne-Marie Slaughter, “A Duty to Prevent,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 1 (2004): 137.

101 UN General Assembly, “A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility, Report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change” A/59/565 (December 2, 2004).

intervention. European states, which had previously been highly supportive of RtoP, pulled back for fear that it would give post-hoc legitimacy to the Iraq War. This left Canada, whose government had also openly opposed the US-led invasion, practically alone as a state actor in continuing to advocate for RtoP at the UN,<sup>102</sup> although as noted earlier significant moves were made within the African regional framework, pushed especially by Rwanda and South Africa.<sup>103</sup> Handling the issue of legitimate intervention was key, and this report, released in December 2004, set the agenda for further wrangles over RtoP at the World Summit.

### *The 2005 World Summit*

Evident from the contention over RtoP leading up to the World Summit was the very different perceptions of its strategic implications among the various actors. Since opponents of RtoP held such wildly divergent perceptions of what its effects would be on their security and sovereignty, this casts doubt on the argument that calculated material interests drove its promotion and adoption. Two points of contention illustrate this incoherence. The ICISS proposed that the five permanent members should commit to voluntarily refrain from using the veto in cases of mass atrocities. While the P5 unsurprisingly resisted this, pressure for this “code of conduct” also faded in the wake of the Iraq War. This was because the wider UN membership went from concern about inaction due to great power interests deadlocking the Security Council, to seeing the veto as a desirable constraint on Western interventionism.<sup>104</sup> Secondly, there was also a split among the P5 on whether there should be explicit criteria for intervention. China, Russia, and the US were all opposed but for directly contradictory reasons: the US feared criteria would constrain its ability to act, while China and Russia feared they would be too enabling and allow states to bypass the

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102 Alex J. Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect: The Global Effort to End Mass Atrocities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 70–72.

103 Bellamy, *Global Politics and the Responsibility to Protect*, 25.

104 Bellamy, 165.

Security Council.<sup>105</sup> In other words, the same provision was seen as too restrictive and too permissive at the same time.

Whether interventions could take place without UN Security Council authorization was another important point of contention. The US and UK were insistent on alternatives to the Security Council like NATO or regional organizations, but they faced a broad majority who thought that the primacy of the Security Council was needed to constrain Western interventionism.<sup>106</sup> This served Annan's aim to improve the UN's social position by asserting the centrality and exclusive competence of the Security Council. The ideal here was to avoid a repeat of Kosovo, both by making it harder for the Security Council to become deadlocked by the threat of a veto, and by discouraging action through alternative international bodies. Nevertheless, there were only isolated objections to the general principle of sovereignty as responsibility, and a broad agreement was reached on this notion. An important compromise was to specify genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing as the only grounds for RtoP to be invoked, thus addressing the fear that RtoP might lead to any kind of authoritarian practice being used to justify sanctions or the use of force.

In August 2005, however, the arrival of John Bolton as the American ambassador to the UN threw the negotiations over the outcome document into disarray. This move is often portrayed as an attempt to stymie RtoP by one of the staunchest neoconservatives of the George W. Bush administration. However, Bolton was more concerned with blocking the Global South's development agenda and disrupting existing practices of UN summitry, which he viewed as producing discourses that worked against American interests. Bolton found the World Summit pro-

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105 Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect*, 84–85.

106 Bellamy, *Global Politics and the Responsibility to Protect*, 22.

cess “perverse” in principle because, with the UN Secretariat’s direct involvement in drafting the outcome document, it was an illegitimate “product of bureaucrats.”<sup>107</sup> Bolton writes that “these gatherings, and the declarations that they invariably adopted, were potentially quite pernicious” as they resulted in documents “filled with buzz phrases that were far too often used later against the United States.”<sup>108</sup> Because of the macroscopic nature of this stance, Bolton was unable to say what specifically the US found unacceptable when challenged to set out his red lines by other diplomats.<sup>109</sup> When specific amendments were finally proposed in one of Bolton’s later “Dear Colleague letters,” the basic concept of sovereignty as responsibility was not at issue. Rather it was the word “obligation” that he objected to, believing it might create military obligations for the US.<sup>110</sup> This stance can be seen as a conservative fear of creating expectations that the US will act in certain situations, or risk compromising its identity as hegemon. Resistance to change in the background knowledge can in this way be considered to be linked to social positioning concerns.

RtoP-oriented scholars understandably focus on the effect that Bolton’s attempt to derail the World Summit had on that specific issue. But Bolton’s impact on RtoP was mostly indirect. Apparently unaware of how important development issues were to Global South countries, the US Mission “was taken by surprise by the ensuing uproar” when Bolton sought to remove references to targets for foreign aid and the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>111</sup> This took away what many Global South countries regarded as their trade-off for accepting RtoP. More, the sudden

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107 John R. Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2007), 199–200.

108 Bolton, 196–97.

109 Bolton, 204.

110 Letter from Representative of the United States to the United Nations, 30 August 2005. Available at [http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/files/US\\_Boltonletter\\_RtoP\\_30Aug05\[1\].pdf](http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/files/US_Boltonletter_RtoP_30Aug05[1].pdf)

111 Traub, *The Best Intentions*, 374.

dissent of a socially prestigious actor emboldened resistance from those who had suppressed their objections. The US taking this stance meant there was less fear of stigma from opposing a practical enactment of the dominant orthodoxy's political ontology and moral purposes of international society. China and Russia revived their opposition, supported by others lower in the pecking order who had been bound by fear of being branded as spoilers and blamed for a failed summit, like Algeria, Egypt, and Pakistan. As a result, consensus broke down and RtoP was removed from the list of agreed issues with three days to go. At this point, Canadian ambassador Allan Rock commented to the press that "it's unclear that we will have an outcome document at all."<sup>112</sup>

Ultimately, it was the adroit diplomatic work by African supporters, the UN Secretariat, and Canada which ensured RtoP and the agreement on the World Summit outcome document would pass. The strong support for RtoP by states like Rwanda, South Africa, and Tanzania ensured that the G77 and Non-Aligned Movement could not reach the necessary consensus to oppose it.<sup>113</sup> This in turn likely dissuaded China, which has traditionally positioned itself as a standard-bearer for regionalism and the Third World, from continuing to oppose RtoP.<sup>114</sup> Canada's ambassador to the UN Allan Rock directly engaged with the Russian delegation to address its objections and defused a spate of last-minute objections from India.<sup>115</sup> Finally, the Secretariat and the summit facilitators led by Jean Ping manoeuvred around John Bolton, creating a parallel draft for which they gained support directly from US Secretary of State Con-

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112 Bellamy, *Global Politics and the Responsibility to Protect*, 23; Steven Edwards, "Too easy to say U.S. stalling UN deal: Rock", National Post, 10 September 2005.

113 Traub, *The Best Intentions*, 374.

114 On the evolution of the PRC's attitudes towards sovereignty practices see Sarah Teitt, "Sovereignty as Responsibility," in *The Globalization of International Society*, ed. Christian Reus-Smit (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 325–44.

115 Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect*, 87–88.

doleeza Rice and then released directly to the permanent five. These moves were all vital in producing a World Summit outcome document that created a momentary international consensus interpreting sovereignty as the responsibility to protect individual persons and prevent mass atrocities.

The performance of the World Summit drew upon and enacted background knowledge: the ontology that the nature of war had changed, and individual welfare was a moral purpose that the international order should prioritize. By advancing this intersubjectively valued orthodoxy, the Canadian state performed a national identity as a liberal, internationally influential country, performatively enacting itself as a competent, prestigious actor in international politics through the social category of *middle power*. Likewise, the UN positioned itself as the body where decisions about social categorization would be made: where states could be designated as outlaws, in turn reinforcing the status of “normal” states and reproducing the symbolic power of those who are most influential in making that categorization. As critics have noted, RtoP raises questions about who has the authority to determine when a state is failing in its responsibilities, what protection is, and how the collective interest of the international community is defined.<sup>116</sup> Claiming and being recognized as having such authority is both an exercise and reinforcement of symbolic power by agents who have little ability to impose themselves by force or arms. Their power derives, however, from the influence they can exert to turn vaguely accepted principles and values into tangible practices that are regarded as the standard ways of doing things. It is through this activity that they both assert and elicit recognition as competent leaders who push others towards collectively valued goals.

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116 Anne Orford, *International Authority and the Responsibility to Protect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 188.

## **Alternative explanations: institutionalism, hegemony, and status-seeking**

### *Human rights as rational norms*

Institutionalist theories thus have little to say about how the background knowledge might have evolved or been contested, because they take that backdrop as a given. Rational institutionalist theories suggest that international human rights instruments, whether in the form of treaties, international bodies, or soft law declarations like RtoP, serve to facilitate international solutions to “specific substantive and political problems.”<sup>117</sup> The spiral model explaining the spread of human rights norms addresses domestic reforms, which begin as “tactical concessions” to transnational moral pressures. For this to work, it has to be assumed that human rights are already universally valued, taking as given the question of why and how this became the case. This same presumption is made in institutionalist theories where improving human rights is treated as a coordination problem, which implies an existing international consensus that it is a universally desired good.<sup>118</sup> Based on observations that states with poor human rights records tend to ratify human rights treaties in similar patterns as states with the best human rights records,<sup>119</sup> rational institutionalist theories posit that ratifying human rights treaties defuses popular demands and helps to maintain international legitimacy.<sup>120</sup> Authoritarian governments may also hope to either attract or avoid losing investment and aid from wealthy democratic states,<sup>121</sup>

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117 Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal, “Hard and Soft Law in International Governance,” *International Organization* 54, no. 3 (2000): 421.

118 Beth A. Simmons, “From Ratification to Compliance: Quantitative Evidence on the Spiral Model,” in *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance*, ed. Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 49–52.

119 For an overview see Emilie Hafner-Burton, “International Regimes for Human Rights,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012): 269–71.

120 Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Kiyoteru Tsutsui, and John W. Meyer, “International Human Rights Law and the Politics of Legitimation: Repressive States and Human Rights Treaties,” *International Sociology* 23, no. 1 (2008): 115–41.

121 James H. Lebovic and Erik Voeten, “The Cost of Shame: International Organizations and Foreign Aid in the Punishing of Human Rights Violators,” *Journal of Peace Research* 64, no. 1 (2009): 79–97; Richard A. Nielsen and Beth A. Simmons, “Rewards for Ratification: Payoffs for Participating in the International Human Rights Regime?,” *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2015): 197–208.

ratify human rights treaties prior to a regime transition as a means to bind the future government not to persecute them,<sup>122</sup> or as credible commitments to resolve domestic conflicts peacefully.<sup>123</sup> A state might even ratify a treaty it intends to violate as a signal of its resolve to crush domestic dissent.<sup>124</sup> However, these arguments can and are only applied to authoritarian states.<sup>125</sup> More significantly, it does not explain how improving human rights became an international priority, and thus how there came to be human rights instruments to ratify in the first place. This takes for granted what needs to be explained about international order change and contestation, presuming that what is collectively regarded as morally desirable is both uncontroversial and constant over time.

Another more specific problem is with the implicit presumption that international society will necessarily regard human rights as a desirable good and a high priority, which is clearly not the case. That repressive states to have something to gain by ratifying human rights treaties is an assumption behind the claim that they have “even stronger incentives than liberal ones to commit formally to the regime.”<sup>126</sup> The logic is that states lose out if they are seen as not supporting human rights. For this to be the case, the dominant background knowledge has to be one in which agents collectively perceive that liberal conceptions of human welfare define morality in international society. This lurks in the background of theories about states being shamed into

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122 Andrew Moravcsik, “The Origins of Human Rights Regimes: Democratic Delegation in Postwar Europe,” *International Organization* 54, no. 2 (2000): 217–52.

123 Beth A. Simmons and Allison Danner, “Credible Commitments and the International Criminal Court,” *International Organization* 64, no. 2 (2010): 225–56.

124 James R. Hollyer and B. Peter Rosendorff, “Why Do Authoritarian Regimes Sign the Convention Against Torture? Signaling, Domestic Politics and Non-Compliance,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 6, no. 3–4 (2011): 275–327.

125 Moravcsik, “Origins of Human Rights Regimes,” 220; Simmons and Danner, “Credible Commitments and the International Criminal Court,” 235.

126 Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, and Meyer, “International Human Rights Law and the Politics of Legitimation,” 123.

respecting human rights,<sup>127</sup> or seeking to bind future governments to keep to the path of righteousness.

Rational institutionalist accounts must therefore attribute inconsistent motives to international actors based on their identities. For some, the idea that liberal actors advocate their ideals is obvious and their motives need no further inquiry. But if a rationalist logic is consistently applied, established democracies should generally oppose international human rights regimes because they have nothing to gain from self-binding.<sup>128</sup> Even if RtoP is as an outlier in this regard, a general problem remains that some international actors still had to expend resources to create the social conditions which are necessary for the rationalist logic explaining patterns in human rights regime commitments to operate. This is a difficult paradox: rational institutionalist explanations predict that the conditions necessary for its process to work should never have been created.

Furthermore, we are given little insight into the motives of non-state actors like international organizations. IOs are treated as facilitating bargaining and resolving distributional conflict between states, but not given any interests or power of their own. Likewise, liberal and norm diffusion theories also presume a moral framework in which the desirability of international cooperation or preventing bodily harm to individuals is already taken for granted.<sup>129</sup> This makes something which takes considerable political effort, as the empirical narrative has shown, appear like a naturally-occurring phenomenon, an inexorable trend towards liberal ideals as

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127 Cullen S. Hendrix and Wendy H. Wong, "When Is the Pen Truly Mighty? Regime Type and the Efficacy of Naming and Shaming in Curbing Human Rights Abuses," *British Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 3 (2013): 651–72; Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, "Sticks and Stones: Naming and Shaming the Human Rights Enforcement Problem," *International Organization* 62, no. 4 (2008): 689–716.

128 Moravcsik, "Origins of Human Rights Regimes," 219–20.

129 Darren G. Hawkins, "Explaining Costly International Institutions: Persuasion and Enforceable Human Rights Norms," *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (2004): 787.

individuals and civil society express their authentic desires. But the changes in background knowledge and the normative structures that come out of it must necessarily contest and displace existing beliefs about moral and normative priorities. Sovereignty as non-intervention is often cast as a “bad norm” in the story of mass atrocity prevention, but it was itself driven by a moral vision against colonial imperialism and the racial discrimination it was based on. The standard model of norm diffusion does not account for how and why existing moral commitments lose their power, but social positioning suggests that events, their interpretation, and their impacts on agent identities may drive political moves to contest existing norms and promote revised ones.

More generally, the contestation of the existing non-intervention practice of sovereignty did not come from dissatisfied actors. Or more precisely, the nature of the UN Secretariat, Canada, and other RtoP advocates’ dissatisfaction with the status quo is not accurately captured by the notion of international orders as a rational bargain between powerful and secondary states. Indeed, a credible commitment to non-intervention is a crucial component of any bargained hierarchy, since the central concern is how to reassure subordinates that they will not be exploited.<sup>130</sup> Within the framework of international orders as rational bargains, a possible implication is that US ambivalence was due to concern that RtoP might weaken the credible commitment not to unduly interfere or use its authority against weaker states. Yet nothing like this reasoning was offered by the representatives of the US on the world stage, and using RtoP-like rhet-

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130 G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 61–62; David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 9.

oric to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq implies that the Bush administration did not see this as a valid concern.<sup>131</sup>

### *Human rights and hegemonic orders*

If hegemonic ordering explains the revised understanding of sovereignty as responsibility and non-absolute in matters of serious human rights violations, then the United States should have played an active role in promoting RtoP. This follows from claims that hegemons externalize or seek to impose their values onto the international order.<sup>132</sup> We observe the opposite: the Bush administration was opposed to the concept, or at best ambivalent, and its UN ambassador attempted to derail it. John Bolton's primary concern was the ability of the World Summit Outcome to provide future discursive resources that might be used in unforeseen ways, not with specific issues like RtoP. If anything, he seems to have considered RtoP unimportant; it is mentioned only once in Bolton's chapter-long account of his battle in August 2005 to reverse the anti-US dynamic of the UN. This single mention is to dismiss RtoP as "a moveable feast of an idea that was the High Minded *cause du jour*."<sup>133</sup> In 2008 he again dismissed RtoP as merely a "feel-good concept."<sup>134</sup> Bolton's relative inattention to this issue is remarkable given how much he emphasizes preventing norm proliferation by the UN as a key goal of his work in the Bush administration and as ambassador to the UN.<sup>135</sup>

Condoleeza Rice ultimately overruled Bolton, but she herself makes no mention of the World Summit or RtoP in her memoirs, where sovereignty implications only enter the picture

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131 Strikingly, this is stated in the preface to Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* as what prompted the work on this theory in the first place.

132 Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 185; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 44.

133 Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option*, 207 Emphasis and capitalization in original.

134 Quoted in Reinold, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect*, 64 from interview with the author.

135 Other examples include Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option*, 89–91 and the index entry on "norming."

when discussing the implications of abstaining from the Security Council resolution referring Sudan's Omar al-Bashir to the International Criminal Court.<sup>136</sup> Autobiographies give writers the chance to emphasize what they consider their most important accomplishments. RtoP and human security are given prominence by those of Kofi Annan, Lloyd Axworthy, and Gareth Evans. In contrast, the inattention to the principle in the accounts of the two most directly involved US decision-makers suggests that RtoP cannot be viewed in terms of hegemonic order creation. The dominant hegemonic power in the early 2000s would likely have opposed RtoP based on the belief that it might constrain its power, if not for key officials' apparent indifference to it.

Conversely, it could also be argued that the weakness of the human rights regime is due to the lack of hegemonic leadership and the hegemon's reluctance to support strong enforcement.<sup>137</sup> This implies that RtoP would have been stronger and more effective if the US had supported it. The political context of the 2005 World Summit and of the debates on intervention and sovereignty, however, suggests otherwise. The history of US interventions in Latin America and the intense controversy over the Iraq War gave credence to existing fears that RtoP was simply humanitarian intervention all over again. Advocacy of RtoP by the hegemon would have heightened suspicions and accusations of a cloaked imperialist agenda, making it impossible to gain consensus for the principle. This points to something that is not well-appreciated: a hegemon is incapable of pursuing some kinds of changes to the international order precisely because of their materially dominant position. Materially and militarily powerful actors tend to invoke suspicion and resistance towards their order-creation projects if they depart from the hegemonic

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<sup>136</sup> Condoleeza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown, 2011), 388.

<sup>137</sup> Tony Evans, *US Hegemony and the Project of Universal Human Rights* (Basingstoke, UK: MacMillan, 1996), 9.

ideas. In contrast, symbolic power and the manipulation of those hegemonic ideas can dramatically alter international orders in ways that make revisions appear as the logical improvement of the status quo.

### *Status-seeking and positioning*

The formalization of RtoP might be seen as a classic case of status-seeking by a non-great power. Indeed, promoting new norms is cited as an example of “social creativity”, a way of gaining status that does not challenge existing hierarchies but instead seeks to gain status by constructing new dimensions of comparison.<sup>138</sup> Supporting international institutions and cooperation is argued to be the hallmark of a particular kind of status-seeking on the “moral dimension” by small states who, by acting to promote international peace and security, gain recognition from great powers as reliable partners.<sup>139</sup> But in this case, the status-seeking move was to alter the existing order in ways that major powers were reluctant to accept. As shown above, China, Russia, and the US resisted the alterations to international practices and the concept of sovereignty that the RtoP concept implied. Status theories focus on vertical positioning, and in this case it certainly played a part in the case of Canada. The notion of a *middle power* implies by its very name a place in a rank hierarchy. But the analysis cannot stop here, as a focus on vertical positioning only partially captures the significance of social positioning by Canada and the UN in this case, and gives little insight into how these types of agents might contest and change international orders.

The multidimensional social space envisioned by social positioning thus gives more lever-

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138 Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 73–74.

139 Iver B. Neumann and Benjamin de Carvalho, “Introduction: Small States and Status,” in *Small State Status Seeking: Norway’s Quest for International Standing*, ed. Benjamin de Carvalho and Iver B. Neumann (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 10–11.

age in terms of understanding the role of international organizations and non-state actors. While it is difficult to see how non-state actors could have more status than states or what that would mean, positing that organizations like the UN aim to place themselves in a position of centrality captures how non-state actors have the potential to generate change in international orders. Placing itself as the central forum or node in the network both entails and enables performances by the Secretariat and key UN representatives of its humanitarian, modernist, and internationalist identity. To the extent that this also involves the pursuit of status or prestige, these are instrumental to the identity performance. The World Summit and the enactment of RtoP, therefore, can be understood as reshaping international orders to enable the performance of desired identities by international actors like Canada and the UN.

## **Conclusion**

The mass atrocities of the 1990s and the failure of peacekeeping and international security practices to respond to them led to efforts to revise what sovereignty meant. RtoP was integral to the change in the international security order, and altered the background knowledge that underpins the staging of international politics. This background knowledge shift took place at the most tacit level of political ontology as events were interpreted to show that international security problems come from within states, rather than between them. The collective purposes and fundamental values no longer focused on the self-determination of nations and systemic stability, but on individual welfare and the achievement of the liberal peace. Social categorization shifted accordingly, with notions of modernity and advancement creating a social hierarchy that privileged liberal actors in international society. In this anti-pluralist social context, illiberal gov-

ernance was increasingly stigmatized because of its inconsistency with those dominant ideas about the collective good of international society and how to achieve it.

This case also shows how international actors that are typically not considered capable of revising international orders can in fact instigate evolution and change. Without the diplomatic efforts of the UN Secretariat and the Canadian state, RtoP would have been excluded from the 2005 World Summit outcome document entirely.<sup>140</sup> A coalition of African countries also played an important role in securing consensus by preventing key Global South actors from rejecting RtoP. Supporters had to overcome resistance from the US, based on its fear of creating obligations and constraints on its use of military force. Quite the contrary to hegemony theories of international order creation and change, not only was RtoP not driven by the hegemonic power, but overt US support would likely have made it harder for the principle to become accepted. RtoP's appeal was based on its expression of purportedly universal values, and it could not have succeeded if it had been cast as serving a hegemon's interests.

Through pushing for these notions of the collective good, the Canadian state and the UN Secretariat sought to secure their self-conceived identities. As the notion of performance suggests, it was through the use of symbolic power to advance the RtoP doctrine that they put on a performance of their identities as influential international actors, promoting humanitarian and internationalist values. Playing upon and reinterpreting dominant ideas, they contested and changed the practices of sovereignty in the international order, reifying liberal ideas as background knowledge and structuring the social space that fit them into key social positions. It also reinforced international practices of multilateralism and diplomatic dispute settlement in which

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<sup>140</sup> Bellamy, *Global Politics and the Responsibility to Protect*, 88.

they have a comparative advantage in symbolic capital that helps maintain their positions and perform their identities.

The fundamental uncertainty evident from the contradictory arguments that China, Russia, and the US gave against RtoP suggests that it was far from obvious how this reinterpretation of sovereignty would affect the interests of major powers. The acquiescence of these states does not make RtoP a hegemonic ordering project, but rather points to the ability of coalitions of “secondary” states and international organizations to influence and change international orders. In any event, for authoritarian states, RtoP is a threat in the sense that it undermines their social positioning and the reception of their self-image. As a result of the liberal basis of the fundamental values of the international order, non-liberal states are stigmatized in ways that negatively impact their social positioning and influence in world politics. In an international order structured by liberal background knowledge, RtoP works asymmetrically against them. Liberal democracies find it easier to have even their contentious actions perceived and recognized as legitimate, compared to authoritarian powers. This was an outcome of the social positioning of international actors who were able to change fundamental principles of international politics in ways that secured their identities and ideals.

A coda to this chapter is the 2011 intervention in Libya, which can be considered the strongest application of RtoP to date. Through the UN Security Council, armed intervention was imposed against the will of a state found to be committing mass atrocities against its citizens, explicitly invoking the RtoP principle. The strong regional support from the Arab League and the African Union was a crucial reason that China and Russia abstained from the Security Council resolution imposing a no-fly zone, allowing it to pass. The expansion of this mandate into

NATO airstrikes and regime change, however, has led both those countries to pull back from an earlier cautious acceptance of RtoP.<sup>141</sup> The backlash against the dominant liberal background knowledge and the revised practice of sovereignty that RtoP embodied is an important theme in the next chapter.

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141 See Alex J. Bellamy and Paul D. Williams, “The New Politics of Protection? Côte d’Ivoire, Libya, and the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 825–30; Andrew Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’: The Implications of the Libyan Intervention,” *Asian Journal of International Law* 2, no. 2 (2012): 375–93.

### Chapter 3

## PERFORMING HEGEMONY AND GREAT POWER IDENTITY IN THE POST-COLD WAR ORDER

Like a mirror, the situation in Ukraine reflects what is going on and what has been happening in the world over the past several decades. After the dissolution of bipolarity on the planet, we no longer have stability. Key international institutions are not getting any stronger; on the contrary, in many cases, they are sadly degrading.

– Vladimir Putin, March 18, 2014<sup>1</sup>

Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 were political shocks that marked a deep deterioration in relations between Russia and the Anglo-European countries. The annexation of Crimea is taken to signal the revival of great power rivalry and geopolitics in world affairs. Russia is now seen as actively seeking to subvert the basic values of Western societies, even before president Vladimir Putin claimed in 2019 that “the liberal idea has become obsolete.”<sup>2</sup> But it would be wrong to see this as a wholesale revolt against the existing order. Russia is not seeking to tear down international institutions, rather it is making use of them to influence world politics. Russia claims to promote what it considers to be more legitimate and effective forms of global governance, based on civilizational identities and pluralism.

In this chapter, I argue that Russia's contestation of the liberal background knowledge that structures the post-Cold War international order is a product of its efforts to perform an identity that needs to be supported by social positioning as a great power. Crucially, this conflicts with efforts by the United States to position itself as a hegemon. The disruptive, oppositional, and occasionally aggressive stance that Russia has adopted is ultimately driven by a normative

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1 Vladimir Putin, ‘Address by President of the Russian Federation’ (The Kremlin, Moscow, 18 March 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

2 Lionel Barber, Henry Foy, and Alex Barker, ‘Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has “Become Obsolete”’, *Financial Times*, 27 June 2019.

worldview about what the international order should be like and how Russia should rightfully be categorized within it. Doing things considered to be restricted to a privileged few is one way to assert rightful membership in that social category. This chapter thus examines the post-Cold War power struggles over the performance of socially stratified practices. Russia sought to perform and enact practices associated with its desired identity as a “great power,” and in doing so attempted to redefine the background knowledge of international orders in ways which support that self-conception. I begin by examining how the US and Russia conceptualized the social categories of hegemony and great powers, and came to express their identities through those labels in the post-Cold War period. The conflicting implications of these concepts thrust them into a power struggle over the background knowledge that gives rise to international orders and their social hierarchies.

In the years after the end of the Cold War, Russia became increasingly resentful of patterns of interaction with Anglo-European countries that placed it in a relationship of inferiority. This came both in the context of its relations with the US and European institutions, and indirectly from Washington’s wider claims of global leadership. In response, Russia has sought to formulate and enact a different ideational basis for international institutions and practices that enables it to perform its identity as a great power on the world stage. The social positions of a hegemon or great power are tied up in claims and performances of special rights and responsibilities, defining the roles different states play in the international order.

To empirically substantiate these arguments, I examine the contention between Russia and Western countries over the status of Abkhazia, Crimea, Kosovo, and South Ossetia. To do this, I examine speeches, statements to the media by key officials, and statements at the UN Security

Council and General Assembly. The concern is to capture the official discourse by those who represent and perform the state in international settings. For speeches by Russian leaders, I use official English translations of key speeches and press conferences provided on the Kremlin government website. I also examined Russian media transcriptions by BBC Monitoring, which provides coverage of domestic media around the world, authored by specialized analysts. Relying on translations from Russian will not capture the full range of meanings that might be evident to a russophone audience. But since I use the same translations made available to transnational and English-speaking policymakers, journalists, and public audiences, this would capture the performance on the international stage that is the primary focus of the analysis.

What is analytically important is to find evidence of how Russian leaders wanted international audiences to perceive the actions of the Russian state. For the same reason, the issue of propaganda or hidden motives behind rhetoric does not compromise the analysis. I do not aim to read leaders' minds or test whether Putin was sincere in his declared belief that Russia's actions during the Ukraine crisis were in compliance with international law.<sup>3</sup> We can safely assume that any speaker aims to promote their interests and convince their audience, whether or not their words reflect their true beliefs. Moreover, the goal of propaganda is to persuade others, or at least to defuse opposition. The question to ask is thus why that particular argument is made, and why use these justifications and not some other ones? Thus, as part of the analysis I aim to draw out the meanings and political effects these discourses are intended to produce. By doing this, I aim to show that the rhetoric and discourses aimed to shape the international order to support

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3 “We proceed from the conviction that we always act legitimately. I have personally always been an advocate of acting in compliance with international law.” The Kremlin, ‘Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists’ Questions on the Situation in Ukraine’ (Novo-Ogaryovo, Moscow region, 4 March 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>.

different agents' social positioning and identity conceptions, that actions were taken to support those positioning claims, and thus to substantiate the argument that international order contestation emerges from contention over identity performances.

### **Social positioning struggles and international ordering**

In the post-Cold War period, the US and Russia pursued the social positions of *hegemon* and *great power*, respectively. These social positions are integral to the performance of their identities, but they rely on incompatible visions of how the international order should be organized and governed. This is crucial to make sense of their disagreement over what the proper institutions and practices of post-Cold War international orders should be. The great power identity can only operate in a pluralist international order where a small group of states is entitled to govern international security. This inherently contradicts a hegemonic order in which one state exercises leadership, and where governance is based on purportedly universal values. This section examines how these social positions became integral to their respective identity conceptions.

#### *Hegemony and American identity*

The end of the Cold War confronted the United States with the need to reformulate its identity. This was certainly not as wrenching an event as the breakup of the Soviet Union was for Russia. But the end of a conflict that had defined its international role for almost a half-century swept away the basic assumptions on which US foreign policy identity had been built. The US was now the unipole, but what should it do and who should it be given these material circumstances?

The choice to assume and pursue the social position of *hegemon* was driven by several factors. To begin, the longstanding identity narrative of American exceptionalism is one source

of a sense that the US rightfully occupies a place of superiority.<sup>4</sup> However, it was American exceptionalism in interaction with a specific political ontology that saw this identity expressed by seeking to dominate world politics rather than isolation from it. Hegemonic stability, modernization, and democratic peace theories were understood as facts about the political world.<sup>5</sup> The implication at the layer of political ontology and fundamental values is that universalist liberal principles foster peace and prosperity, and should be diffused by promoting democracy and openness to economic flows in other states. An international hierarchy was thus conceived with a single hegemon as the leader, and states socially categorized and stratified according to their “modernity” and adherence to liberal ideology. To perform this identity as global hegemon, the US would maintain material preponderance and use it to ensure international peace and stability. This commitment was something common to both liberal internationalists and neoconservatives, the main contending foreign policy ideologies in US politics during the post-Cold War period. Both see the proper social position for the US as a hegemon with unchallenged global leadership.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, many American foreign policy elites hold heroic views about the virtue of US dominance for the world as a whole. For instance, three prominent academics argued in 2012 that the result of US retrenchment of its overseas commitments would be global instability and the closing up of trade routes.<sup>7</sup> This claiming of social position as hegemon is not only directed

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4 Ian Tyrrell, ‘The Myth(s) That Will Not Die: American National Exceptionalism’, in *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, ed. Gérard Bouchard (New York: Routledge, 2013), 46–64.

5 Piki Ish-Shalom, *Democratic Peace: A Political Biography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); David Ekbladh, *The American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

6 Inderjeet Parmar, ‘Foreign Policy Fusion: Liberal Interventionists, Conservative Nationalists and Neoconservatives - the New Alliance Dominating the US Foreign Policy Establishment’, *International Politics* 46, no. 2–3 (2009): 178–82.

7 Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, ‘Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment’, *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012): 7–51.

at those seen as potential adversaries, but also at Western allies from whom “symbolic obeisance” is expected.<sup>8</sup> One example of this has been the consistent American opposition to European efforts at defense integration such as the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy.<sup>9</sup> Such initiatives potentially threaten US identity as the global hegemon because they could provide a means for independent security cooperation and custodianship. If friends can undermine social positioning of the hegemon, we can expect to see it pay even greater attention to its relational positioning with an actor habitually seen as an adversary and still regarded with suspicion.

In his theory of the society of states, Hedley Bull argued that hegemony is not compatible with an arrangement of great powers. Bull viewed the great power concept as based on the collective management of international politics among an elite group who maintain an implicit equality among themselves.<sup>10</sup> But the social category of hegemon is performed by establishing social supremacy and singular leadership. This contradicts and rejects the legitimacy of the great power concept because social supremacy is performed by claiming a monopoly on special rights and responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> This excludes treating anyone else as an equal or sharing those special responsibilities with other players. This incompatibility of hegemony and great powers is in analytical terms, and does not mean that we will not see US leaders using the phrase “great power” in ways that are not in line with Hedley Bull’s concept. Just because they might explicitly describe another country as a great power does not mean they necessarily recognize the prac-

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8 David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 165.

9 Stephanie Hofmann, ‘Why Institutional Overlap Matters: CSDP in the European Security Architecture’, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 49, no. 1 (2011): 101–20. More recently see Tomáš Valášek, “European Defense versus NATO: Not the right fight,” *Politico*, 16 February 2018.

10 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 194–95.

11 Mlada Bukovansky et al., *Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 52.

tical, substantive implication that the US will share the management of international politics with that country in a Concert-style arrangement. Another definition of hegemony, which describes its tacitly expected performances, demands agenda setting (defining what global problems are and what should be done about them), custodianship and sponsorship of widely-accepted institutions.<sup>12</sup> Such functions may be delegated out of expediency, but others are to be excluded from independently exercising them. In contrast, an international hierarchy with great powers implies relative equality between the bearers of special responsibilities, which are exercised within exclusive spheres of influence, contradicting the universal premises of a hegemonic order.

Hegemons thus aim to be seen and accepted as a public goods provider and promoting common values because “as special responsibilities create rightful social powers, they become focal points in the struggle for power.”<sup>13</sup> These claims, and political struggles over their validity, are contests over the background knowledge that structures international politics itself. Hence, the basis on which Russia places itself in the social position of a great power, or on which the US places itself as a hegemon, constructs and produces that social category’s existence and meaning. This, in turn, enables and creates the staging on which they can use their power resources to influence and impose upon other international actors.

American international policy thus pursued social domination because US leaders needed to perform, experience, and perpetuate a national identity closely linked to a social position as

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12 Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 36–49.

13 Ian Clark and Christian Reus-Smit, ‘Liberal Internationalism, the Practice of Special Responsibilities and Evolving Politics of the Security Council’, *International Politics* 50, no. 1 (2013): 42. See also Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

the global hegemon. Having defined the “proper” identity of the US in such terms, interacting with Russia (or indeed any country) as an equal power would compromise its sense of self. Thus, the main conflict of relational positioning between the US and Russia is the effort by Russia to assert equality while the US continually seeks superiority. Contention over what background knowledge defines the international social space is thus based on these incompatibilities. An order founded on liberal ideology with rules enforced by a hegemon cannot be staged at the same time as a great power concert or a pluralist world divided into distinct civilizations. The co-existence of these world ordering concepts is thus unstable. An accommodation where Russia could act in the great power role Moscow envisioned for itself would have directly undermined American identity. This is why it has generally been unacceptable or even unthinkable to US policymakers after the Cold War.

### *Russia searches for its place*

In the early 1990s, Russian leaders sought integration into the Western community and to gain full membership in institutions like NATO and the IMF.<sup>14</sup> Reformist leaders like Andrei Kozyrev, Russia’s first post-Soviet foreign minister, conceived of Russia’s identity as a “normal great power” that would continue to play a decisive role in global affairs.<sup>15</sup> For these leaders, integration with trans-Atlantic institutions, including joining NATO, was viewed as the preferred means to this end.<sup>16</sup> However, Russia was continually held at arm’s length as a junior partner or outsider in European security issues. Liberal reform was also blamed for the eco-

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14 Andrei Tsygankov and Pavel Tsygankov, ‘National Ideology and IR Theory: Three Incarnations of the “Russian Idea”’, *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010): 670–73; Ted Hopf, ‘Identity, Legitimacy, and the Use of Military Force: Russia’s Great Power Identities and Military Intervention in Abkhazia’, *Review of International Studies* 31, no. S1 (2005): 225–243.

15 Andrei Kozyrev, ‘Russia: A Chance for Survival’, *Foreign Affairs* 71, no. 2 (1992): 1–16; Andrei Tsygankov, ‘Vladimir Putin’s Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power’, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2005): 132–58.

16 Michael C. Williams, *Culture and Security: Symbolic Power and the Politics of International Security* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 85–86.

conomic disaster that saw Russia's GDP fall by 30 per cent in the 1990s. It had thus visibly failed to achieve the promise of restoring Russian prestige. But even after this, as incoming president in 2000, Vladimir Putin was still cautiously optimistic about Western integration. When asked whether Russia could join NATO in the future, he responded "I don't see why not," emphasizing the real issue is that Russia must be treated as an equal.<sup>17</sup> Russian leaders had not yet decisively shifted from viewing integration with the West as the fulfillment and recovery of its European destiny, to seeing it as a humiliating subordination to American hegemony. In contrast, by 2011 Putin was commenting that "[w]e would like to be allies with the United States, too, but what I see now... is not alliances. Sometimes it seems to me that America does not need allies, it needs vassals."<sup>18</sup>

It was only in the early 2010s that Russia's identity ambitions moved from Atlanticist visions of restoration as part of a liberal European order, towards a Eurasianist self-image viewing Russia as a distinct non-Western civilization.<sup>19</sup> This issue of timing is important because it shows that the oppositional turn of Russian identity performances was a response to US and Western moves in the two decades after the end of the Cold War. It was not the deterministic outcome of geopolitics after 1989, or the necessary result of Putin's professional experience in the Soviet security services. Rather, it was an adaptive response to Western exclusion and stigmatization of Russia directly, and to US social positioning as a global hegemon, indirectly. The perception that liberal reformists had failed to secure Russia's identity and position in the world

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17 The exact quote was: "I don't see why not. I would not rule out such a possibility – but I repeat – if and when Russia's views are taken into account as those of an equal partner." *BBC Breakfast with Frost*, British Broadcasting Corporation, 5 March 2000. Transcript available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio\\_video/programmes/breakfast\\_with\\_frost/transcripts/putin5.mar.txt](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/breakfast_with_frost/transcripts/putin5.mar.txt)

18 Reuters, "Highlights – Russian PM Putin holds call-in show," 15 December 2011. Available at <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-putin-highlights/highlights-russian-pm-putin-holds-call-in-show-idUKTRE7BE16120111215>

19 Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 'National Ideology and IR Theory'.

was necessary before a different, civilizationalist narrative could replace it. However, the social position of Russia as a great power was a consistent aim even as identity conceptions and strategies shifted around this objective.

### *Two visions of international order*

What is the great power concept that Russia tries to embody, and how does it emerge in the contestation of international orders? For an agent's great power identity claim to be recognized, the social category of "great powers" must first be collectively perceived as real and current (and not something imaginary or obsolete). Thus, socially positioning oneself as a great power necessarily involves enacting an international order in which great powers exist, as a special category of actors who have special rights that other states do not have.<sup>20</sup> For Moscow today, the background knowledge embodied in the practices of the historical Concert of Europe, established in 1815, is a useful reference and discursive resource for several reasons. Firstly, it is distant enough from current political situations to have an appearance of objectivity. At the same time, it is still modern enough to be portrayed as a relevant example for present-day politics, although this means that it does not entirely avoid long-standing perceptions of Russia's international performances being outdated and obsolete.<sup>21</sup> The Concert era was also when Imperial Russia's social positioning as a great power was unambiguously recognized and institutionalized.<sup>22</sup> This history, along with presenting the Russian state as the representative of a distinct and important cultural civilization, enacts claims of Russia's inherent greatness. The performances assert and

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20 Christian Reus-Smit and Tim Dunne, 'The Globalization of International Society', in *The Globalization of International Society*, ed. Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 35.

21 Iver Neumann and Vincent Pouliot, 'Untimely Russia: Hysteresis in Russian-Western Relations over the Past Millennium', *Security Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011): 105–37.

22 Iver Neumann, 'Russia as a Great Power, 1815-2007', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11, no. 1 (2008): 138.

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**Table 1.** Background knowledge of liberal and classical international orders

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	<b>Liberal order</b>	<b>Classical order</b>
Examples of performative expression	Responsibility to Protect Democracy promotion	Spheres of influence Balance of power
Social categorization logic	Hegemonic stability	Preeminence of “great powers”
Fundamental values	Self-determination, liberal rights	International stability
Basic ontology	Rational individualism; atomistic world	Geopolitics; mechanistic world

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seek to teach others that these not only should be, but already *are* the rightful basis for structuring the international order and hierarchy.<sup>23</sup>

The Concert was an international order where formally recognized great powers acted as the guarantors for peace and security in Europe, and consulted multilaterally to manage the continent’s affairs. These practices set them apart from other states as having special responsibilities and prerogatives. War was considered a means of obtaining legal redress for sovereign misconduct, such as violations of treaties or a sovereign’s failure to pay debts.<sup>24</sup> Unilateral interventions in response to troubling developments in other states’ domestic politics were acceptable to preempt a wider crisis that could otherwise draw in multiple powers. During this period, “the Great Powers not only enforced their will on Europe but regarded themselves as possessing a right to

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23 See Andrei P. Tsygankov, ‘Finding a Civilisational Idea: “West,” Eurasia,” and “Euro-East” in Russia’s Foreign Policy’, *Geopolitics* 12, no. 3 (September 2007): 375–99; Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia’s Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity and Security Interests* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

24 Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), chap. 2.

do so.”<sup>25</sup> The concerns of smaller states were considered unimportant, and they were subject to territorial partitions and redrawn boundaries. This served the moral priority of maintaining a balance of power and thus, international stability. Balancing and a stable international equilibrium as fundamental values drew on a political ontology that viewed the social world and the nature of power as subject to Newtonian mechanics.<sup>26</sup> Set against this backdrop, social positioning as a great power thus requires the assertion of superiority over weaker neighbouring states, recalling the practice of spheres of influence.

Great powers belong to a social category that served fundamental values in the classical international order by contributing to the preservation of the “conditions under which the system of states can endure,” which involved the “unilateral exercise of local preponderance” in their spheres of influence.<sup>27</sup> In this understanding, rules must necessarily be transgressed by those who enforce them, serving the greater good of systemic stability. A key difference between the classical order and the prevailing practices of the early 21st century is which norms take priority. According to background knowledge in the classical order, the priority is to maintain a proper material balance between great powers, which is what will ensure peace. The great power concept enacted by contemporary Russia is directly connected with this notion of a moral responsibility to maintain global balance and prevent oppressive global hegemony.<sup>28</sup> Territorial integrity and sovereign equality can, through this logic, be overridden to achieve higher goals.

Beliefs in the continued relevance of past practices of the Concert of Europe are grounded

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25 Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States: Unequal Sovereigns in the International Legal Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 105.

26 Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1996), 43.

27 Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 200; 207.

28 Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Whose World Order? Russia's Perception of American Ideas after the Cold War* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 54.

in the fact that present-day institutions have features recalling them. Russia's permanent seat on the UN Security Council helps to validate understandings of the international order in which Moscow has an inherent right to exercise great power custodianship. Russian policymakers have continually enacted practices reflecting the perception that as a "great power," it is self-evidently entitled to manage global affairs. This background knowledge was both what Russian leaders in 2014 saw as rightfully defining the world and what their actions were meant to assert. Both the historical background of the great power concept and their interpretations of peers' recent behavior thus informed Russian leaders' beliefs, and is embedded in the practices they enacted.

However, in the dominant liberal background knowledge that Western as well as many other countries consider self-evident, Russia's identity performances are simply out of place. Violating territorial integrity and interfering in the politics of neighbouring countries marks Russia as an imperialistic outlaw, rather than working to ensure international stability. German chancellor Angela Merkel's reported remark to US president Barack Obama during the Crimea crisis that Putin seemed to be "in another world" indicates how this appears to the other performers on the stage.<sup>29</sup> This dilemma is what set up the crises in 2008 and 2014 not just as threats to post-Soviet states' sovereignty, but the basic principles of the international order.

### *The liberal hegemonic order*

After the Cold War, the US used its power resources to socially position itself as a hegemon. Its performances asserted a background knowledge that justified and naturalized this claim as the dominant ideational structure. Anglo-European countries were induced to accept this because it resonated with their own identities and notions of social categorization. This meant that despite

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Baker, "Pressure rising as Obama works to rein in Russia," *The New York Times*, 3 March 2014.

being implicitly lower in status rank, this vertical stratification for Western countries was less important than how this background knowledge facilitated their positioning within a core “in-group” in world politics. The tacit superiority of the US might have rankled, but it could also be tempered through practices of multilateralism, such as diplomatic summits where formal equality is visibly performed and maintained. Particularly in trans-Atlantic security relations, shared cultural values of liberalism and democracy were key in providing a social category that reinforced the identities of “Western” states.<sup>30</sup>

In the post-Cold War order’s liberal background knowledge, the political ontology took democratic peace and hegemonic stability theory as facts about the social world. Free-market capitalism and liberal democracy were presumed to be the legitimate moral destinations of world politics. Accordingly, social categorizations emerged in which states and societies were judged by their achievement of those ideals. The US performed itself as the embodiment of those values, while also seeking to make them universal. This was a crucial performative claim, that is, an argument stated as fact in a way that aims to make it true: a deliberate attempt to make a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Against this backdrop, democratic peace and liberal hegemony came to define how institutions and practices were performed. Most importantly, NATO was reconceived as an “expression of a value-based civilizational structure” and not merely a military alliance.<sup>31</sup> The redefinition of NATO and its expansion was driven by and performed the liberal order’s basic ontology, and admitting new members was understood as expanding the zone of democratic peace.<sup>32</sup>

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30 Williams, *Culture and Security*, 72–75.

31 Williams, 76.

32 Alexandra Gheciu, ‘Security Institutions as Agents of Socialization? NATO and the “New Europe”’, *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (2005): 975.

Efforts were made at outreach to Russia, such as the launch of Partnership for Peace in 1994 and the NATO-Russia Council in 2002. But these did not integrate Russia into the security structure but rather kept Moscow at arm's length. And even this gave up too much for some officials within the Clinton administration. Unhappy with vice-president Al Gore portraying the process to Yeltsin as a spaceship docking manoeuvre requiring mutual adjustment, Strobe Talbott argued in an internal memo that "it's Russia that must move toward us," as the US is the "lighthouse" of liberal, capitalist modernity.<sup>33</sup>

NATO's prominence after the Cold War contrasts with the relatively low profile of another major European security organization, the OSCE (CSCE before 1995), where Russia is nominally an equal partner.<sup>34</sup> The OSCE was sidelined, in essence, because its staging of the international security order was not in line with American social positioning performances. This was because the institution's staging of international security produced performances of relational equality, contradicting the dominant actor's identity conception as a hegemon. Meanwhile, both US and British officials were dissatisfied that Russia was seeking to claim equal status by promoting the OSCE as an overarching framework.<sup>35</sup>

Viewed through the lenses of the classical order's background knowledge, this confirmed to Moscow that NATO was fundamentally an anti-Russian alliance and the US was reprising the containment strategy of the Cold War. Intended or not, this reflected that Russia was seen and treated with suspicion and any objections or issues it might raise against Western actions were illegitimate. They would be seen, almost as a reflex, as the pursuit of self-serving interests rather

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33 Quoted in M.E. Sarotte, 'How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993-95', *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 36-37.

34 William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 100-101.

35 Sarotte, 'How to Enlarge NATO', 26.

than the universal values served by the liberal international order. The effect was to exclude and stigmatize Russia, something that could only be sustained as long as Russia saw integrating into the European social domain as a desirable goal.

### **Unilateralism and the spectre of hegemony**

While the historical context of the 1990s shows many tensions in Russia's relations with the West, the most important rupture came only after 2001. This responded to the unilateralist approach of the George W. Bush administration, which made the social positioning claims of US superiority and hegemony impossible to ignore. Just as important to the deteriorating relationship was Russia's exclusion and outsider status in trans-Atlantic institutions. Thus, it was both in terms of vertical stratification and alienation from a social category that Russia was being placed in an undesirable social position. Furthermore, the 1990s saw disillusionment with liberal reform within Russia with an economic crisis that saw a sovereign default and devaluation of the ruble in 1998. Disagreements over European security issues were particularly acute, first in the Yugoslav Wars, and then in 1999 with the NATO intervention in Kosovo. June 1999 saw a dramatic demonstration of this when NATO and Russian troops came into a direct confrontation over control of Pristina Airport. This incident could easily have escalated if a British general had not refused orders from the American Supreme NATO Commander to use force against Russian troops who had seized the airfield first.<sup>36</sup> But after the 2003 Iraq War and overt declarations of US unilateralism such as the Bush Doctrine, Russia turned towards a sharply oppositional "anti-hegemonic" strategy.

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36 This account comes from British officers involved in the operation, primarily the general, Sir Michael Jackson, and James Blunt, who was an army captain at the time. BBC News, "Confrontation over Pristina airport," 9 March 2000; Michael Jackson, "Gen Sir Michael Jackson: My clash with Nato chief," *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 September 2007; BBC News, "Singer James Blunt 'prevented World War III'," 14 November 2010. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-11753050>.

The neoconservative vision of US supremacy was expressed in the unilateralist actions of the Bush presidency. Superficially, neoconservatism seems opposed to liberal internationalism in the context of American foreign policy debates. But in the international context, both share key fundamental similarities. Both are committed to American hegemony and an anti-pluralist insistence on universal values, and thus to an international order that allows the US to claim a social position of global superiority. The Bush administration's democracy promotion efforts likewise reflect a shared political ontology that sees democratic peace theory as a factual description of the external world. A symptom of this was the expectation that the US invasion of Iraq would unleash its citizens' universal desires for freedom and modernity.<sup>37</sup> As vice-president Dick Cheney predicted, "we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators."<sup>38</sup> The use of democratic peace rhetoric about support for civil society was a staple of US democracy promotion policy. When put into practice in former Soviet republics, the Color Revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus between 2004 and 2006, this raised Russian suspicions of a strategy to induce pro-US regime change. This deepened the social positioning struggle in two ways. Firstly, it reinforced the stigmatization of Russia and its isolation from the Western community. Secondly, because Russia considered the US to be categorized as an equal great power, unilateralism and other performances of American hegemony provided a script to be emulated in order to performatively claim Russia's position in the same category.

The overt unilateralism of the Bush presidency was also interpreted, given that Russian leaders subscribed to the background knowledge that the world continued to be governed by the classical international order, as demonstrating the danger of hegemony. The 2003 Iraq War and

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37 Ish-Shalom, *Democratic Peace: A Political Biography*, 128.

38 Quote from "Meet the Press," *NBC News*, 14 September 2002. Transcript at [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3080244/ns/meet\\_the\\_press/t/transcript-sept/](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3080244/ns/meet_the_press/t/transcript-sept/)

the controversy it provoked was received in Moscow as both an imperative and opportunity to build a counter-hegemonic coalition to contain the US. In May 2003, the leaders of Canada, France, and Germany, who had all publicly opposed the war, travelled to Russia for celebrations of St. Petersburg's 300th anniversary. For over an hour, on a long bus trip together with Putin, the four discussed "how to link Western Europe and Russia economically and politically to build a countervailing force to the supremacy of the United States."<sup>39</sup> It appears that Putin hoped Europe's disenchantment with the Bush Doctrine might finally prompt Western leaders to recognize the global peril that US hegemony posed to international order. This would have accorded with the classical worldview, in which maintaining the balance of power is a normative goal in itself that ensures collective security, in terms of independence from influence by other states.

Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 was the major public performance of this counter-hegemonic great power positioning. It also fits the observable implication that the ontological shift towards liberal peace, and its enactment through the use of democracy promotion to justify armed force, was seen as a dangerous shift in the background knowledge. It threatened to produce social categorizations that would prevent Russia from enacting a great power identity. Warning of the rise of a "unipolar model" in which the uncontained use of force "is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts," Putin made clear to the audience of Western government and military leaders who was to blame:

One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?<sup>40</sup>

Notably, the logic that unipolarity and hegemony is an inherent threat to the security and inde-

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39 Jean Chrétien, *My Years as Prime Minister* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008), 329.

40 The Kremlin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," 10 February 2007. <http://en.kremlin.ru/d/24034>.

pendence of all states is rooted in the classical order's background knowledge and the ontology of balance of power theory. But if the hope of this performance was to win Europeans over to the idea that US unipolarity had to be balanced against, this was a vain one.

What Putin misjudged was that European identities were closely tied to the liberal hegemonic order. Its background knowledge was the basis of their "Western" identities, and defined how they perceived the social reality and ideal destination of world politics. European leaders had no reason to abandon the existing order and the background knowledge that structured it, even amid tensions and resentment over American policies and insulting dismissals of "old Europe" by the US Secretary of Defense.<sup>41</sup> Neorealist analysis of Russia-Western relations speaks of "liberal delusions" that blinded the Atlantic alliance to the threatening implications of NATO expansion and interventions in Eastern Europe to Russia.<sup>42</sup> If so, Russian foreign policy is also marked by a "romantic realism" that imagines itself as the fulcrum of the global balance and seeks to put on quixotic performances of its inherent greatness.<sup>43</sup>

### **Geopolitical social strategies and the post-Soviet space**

Russia's social positioning as a great power sees two overarching themes in its international practices. Firstly, its positioning claims require the rejection of American superiority in the social hierarchy as a hegemon in international society, as seen overtly in Putin's 2007 criticism of the "unipolar model" of international relations. This involves opposition to US-led military interventions, which were themselves performances of the fundamental values of a liberal-hege-

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41 John Hooper and Ian Black, "Anger at Rumsfeld attack on 'old Europe'," *The Guardian*, 24 January 2003.

42 John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 1–12.

43 Viatcheslav Morozov, 'Resisting Entropy, Discarding Human Rights: Romantic Realism and Securitization of Identity in Russia', *Cooperation and Conflict* 37, no. 4 (2002): 409–29. My thanks to Karushige Kobayashi for discussions on this point.

monic international order. Surprisingly from the perspective of neorealist expectations that Russia would obstruct and oppose Western-led military actions as geopolitical threats, the 2001 Afghanistan War actually improved Russia-US relations. Russia voted to authorize the war at the UN Security Council, and Putin offered the use of its bases in Central Asia and Georgia to US military aircraft despite domestic criticism. Strikingly, Russian security elites were willing to accept a junior partner role to the Atlantic alliance in circumstances where Russia's military assets were given greater symbolic value.<sup>44</sup> Aligning with Russia's own brutal anti-terrorist war in Chechnya, the US "War on Terrorism" bolstered Russia's ability to perform its identity by acting as a crucial leader and contributor to international security.

The second part of the positioning strategy is to claim Russia's equal positioning as a great power, by construing its actions as equivalent to those taken by the US. This also *places* the US by enacting relational equality and countering American claims of global leadership. Both strategies are clearly visible in Russia's use of humanitarian intervention justifications in Georgia and the annexation of Crimea. Russia not only recited Western justifications but simultaneously asserted its own equal prerogative to enact them. This fits the observable implication that Russian leaders would act, and represent their state as acting, in ways that fit the performance of what a "great power" does. Each side attempts to give the other a lesson about what the correct background knowledge behind the international order is, and what their "correct" positions are. The interplay of actions and public discourses between state leaders provides a key source of evidence.

The general pattern that will be evident below is that Russian leaders performed their

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44 Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 212–13.

state's identity as a great power through the actions they took and the meanings they sought to attribute to them. Firstly, they *claimed* social position by casting Russia's actions as the exercise of great power prerogatives in the Concert of Europe. Secondly, Russian leaders also appropriated and emulated humanitarian intervention justifications, a performance which sought to *place* the US as an equal "great power" to Russia, countering American identity performances of a superior social position as the global hegemon. This also placed Georgia as subordinate to Russia and subject to its special responsibilities and great power management. These patterns of action were based on an imagined global hierarchy of states, and the means through which Russian leaders performed that hierarchy as a representation of social reality. Furthermore, these performances can be seen as attempting to teach other states background knowledge that stability is to be prioritized over democracy and to reinforce statist practices of sovereignty.

#### *Great power positioning in Georgia*

The 2008 Russia-Georgia War saw performative claims of Russia's great power social position. Russia sought to perform as if it had special responsibilities in its region, and to resist and subvert liberal interpretations of sovereignty and concepts of human security. The liberal order's background knowledge makes it more than just difficult for Russia to perform its great power identity, it refuses to recognize such a social position at all. This also pre-dated the civilizationist turn that can be traced to Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. Hence, there was less use of cultural discourse or appeals to Russia's civilizational greatness in 2008, whereas these became central in 2014. This bears out the theoretical implication that the basic ontology of the international order being enacted will vary with the background knowledge of the performers, and the narratives they think will gain audience recognition. As it came just months after the Western

recognition of Kosovo's independence, Russia's claims of equality through emulation of US actions was also evident in its official discourse.

Western recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty in 2008 was accompanied by an emphasis that it constituted a "special case" because of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia and the history of ethnic cleansing.<sup>45</sup> France, the UK, and US were the first to accept Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and most EU members recognized Kosovo within a few days. For the "P3" (as the three Western members of the Security Council are often referred to among UN diplomats), this performed their social positions as privileged actors in international politics with the prerogative to define communal problems and decide solutions to them. Management of international affairs, as noted earlier, is a key defining characteristic and role for a hegemon to perform. The US declared Kosovo to be a unique case to avoid setting a precedent, but just six months later, Russia asserted its own right to declare exceptions with its intervention in Georgia in August 2008.

The first aspect of Russia's performative strategy in the crisis was citing Concert-era precedents for great power practices, namely spheres of influence and the duty to police the system. At the war's outbreak on August 8, Russian president Dimitry Medvedev said his decision to order the invasion was because "Russia has historically been a guarantor for the security of the peoples of the Caucasus, and this remains true today."<sup>46</sup> A second way in which Russia cast itself in the great power role was by portraying its actions as the enforcement of an international mandate, namely the Sochi agreement of June 1992 on the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Russia's mil-

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45 US State Department, "US recognizes Kosovo as independent state," 18 February 2008. Available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/02/100973.htm>

46 The Kremlin, "Dmitry Medvedev made a statement on the situation in South Ossetia," 8 August 2008. Available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1043>

itary action was therefore cast as the exercise of a great power's duty to act as the guarantor of a peace agreement. This drew upon the practices of the Concert era in which formal recognition as a guarantor, which conferred explicit rights and obligations to engage in managerialism, went hand-in-hand with the social recognition of great power status.<sup>47</sup> It also reinforced the concept by creating a situation in which to enact that performance.

### *Subverting civilian protection*

Russia's social positioning claims of equality to the US and Western countries also took the form of emulating the justifications for intervention previously used by them. Russian leaders frequently used analogies to Western actions in the Balkans in statements and speeches on the Georgia War.<sup>48</sup> They sought to interpret their actions in the conflict as consistent with the international ordering practices of the US and NATO in the Balkans. Furthermore, their actions were defined as part of the practice of intervention for the protection of civilians. This claimed Russia's own prerogative to determine legitimate exceptions by virtue of its social position as a great power in international society. This discursive strategy would be repeated during the Ukraine crisis in 2014, where Russian leaders portrayed the situation as an outbreak of ethnonationalist violence in the wake of a coup d'état. Finally, emphasis was placed on portraying Russian actions as the fulfillment of duties, responsibilities, and allegedly objective norms and principles. The convincing show of impartial disinterest helps render relational domination legitimate, and induces acceptance of contingent social orders.<sup>49</sup>

At the end of hostilities, Russia carved out one-fifth of Georgia's territory by recognizing

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47 Benjamin Zala, 'Great Power Management and Ambiguous Order in Nineteenth-Century International Society', *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (2016): 367–88.

48 Christian A. Nielsen, 'The Kosovo Precedent and the Rhetorical Deployment of Former Yugoslav Analogies in the Cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 1 (2009): 171–89.

49 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 169–70.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. In addition to citing the 19th-century Concert as an authoritative reference for the proper conduct of international politics, Russia emulated the justifications used in recognizing the independence of Kosovo. Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov sought to utilize human rights discourses by claiming that Russia had to enforce the Responsibility to Protect doctrine given Georgia was attacking its own citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>50</sup> Announcing Moscow's recognition of the territories' independence on August 26, president Medvedev sought to link the wars in Yugoslavia and Georgia as two performances of the practice of humanitarian intervention. He accused Georgian leaders of "genocide," violating the UN and OSCE conflict resolution regimes, and having "dashed all the hopes for the peaceful coexistence [of the three ethnic groups] in a single state."<sup>51</sup> He also recounted the previous 1991-92 war in order to portray this dismemberment of Georgia as a last resort driven by its atrocities against Abkhazians and Ossetians.

This rhetoric deliberately echoed Western uses of the history of oppression, ethnic cleansing, and irreconcilable differences in justifying the exceptional recognition of the independence of Kosovo without Serbia's consent. Indeed, this link to Kosovo was raised by Russian leaders, implying they saw it as a potential weapon in the discursive conflict. In June 2007, senior US State Department official Daniel Fried said in a briefing for Serbian journalists that "Milosevic lost Kosovo when he went to war with NATO and committed atrocities against the Kosovars."<sup>52</sup> Reprising this logic and implicitly equating the president of Georgia to Slobodan Milosevic,

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50 UN Security Council, *Provisional Verbatim Record S.PV/5952* (8 August 2008): 5. See also Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 156–59.

51 The Kremlin, 'Statement by President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev' (26 August 2008), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/1222>.

52 US State Department, "The future of Serbia and Kosovo," 15 June 2007. Available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/86773.htm>

Russian UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin argued at the Security Council that “Saakashvili himself put an end to the territorial integrity of Georgia by using crude and blatant military force against people whom... he wanted to see as part of his State.”<sup>53</sup> In an interview on Rossiya TV the following month, prime minister Vladimir Putin directly compared the events in Georgia to the Srebrenica massacre. He asserted that not only had Russian forces acted to protect civilians in a situation where Dutch peacekeepers (would have) fled, they were fulfilling Russia’s obligations rather than its self-interest.<sup>54</sup> This emphasized again the great power social positioning Moscow wished to enact.

The narratives of great power obligations and humanitarian intervention were used to support Russia’s claims that its actions served to uphold international stability and security. The choice of one legitimacy narrative over other viable ones is important evidence that social positioning was a priority. An alternative could have been to assert that Russia was defending its vital security interests in an area on its border. But Russian officials avoided claims based on Russian national security, or invoking the right to self-defense in the UN Charter. Where references were made to Russian citizens (i.e, the passportized residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Russian troops, and the Black Sea fleet, they were couched in terms that emphasized a broad international security role for the Russian state. Emphasis was placed on “Georgian aggression against South Ossetia,” and the deaths of Russian peacekeepers who were purportedly upholding regional stability. This evidence again fits the observable implication that

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53 UN Security Council, *Provisional Verbatim Record S.PV/5969* (28 August 2008): 8.

54 BBC Monitoring, “Putin points out West’s dependence on Russian exports,” 7 September 2008. Translated from a Rossiya TV broadcast on the evening of 6 September. Over 8000 Bosniak civilians were killed by a Serb militia in the town of Srebrenica in July 1995. It had been declared a safe zone by the UN Security Council but Dutch peacekeepers had been unable to demilitarize the area and were criticized for failing to prevent the massacre.

strategic choices about what actions to take and what discourses are used to represent them will be made based on whether those words and actions are thought to convey the desired identity performance.

In the one instance where it was invoked, the right to self-defense in Article 51 of the UN Charter was used as a *threat* of retaliation if Russian ships were attacked, not a justification of what had already occurred.<sup>55</sup> This choice of discursive strategy shows that Moscow needed not just an excuse for military action, as could have been attained with an Article 51 justification, but placing itself in the great power category through the claim to be upholding broader international purposes. The claim of self-defense would not necessarily have been any more or less acceptable, but it would have had different social positioning implications than a “peace-enforcing” justification. Claims implying the disinterested exercise of its international security role were necessary to perform Russian social positioning as a great power. The right of self-defense is a practice that any state can claim as a justification, and thus confers no social positioning in relation to other states. In contrast, carrying out special responsibilities, influence and leadership claims relative superiority to other states. It is based on and attempts to promulgate an international order organized around great power domination and management, rather than liberal hegemony.

### **Civilizations and the invasion of Ukraine**

Vladimir Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 solidified a shift to civilization-based conceptions of world politics in Russian foreign policy. Greater focus was placed on civilizational identity and efforts to build a regional order around the concept of Eurasia.<sup>56</sup> As a regional project,

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55 UN Security Council, *Provisional Verbatim Record* S.PV/5953 (10 August 2008): 9.

56 Fabian Linde, ‘The Civilizational Turn in Russian Political Discourse: From Pan-Europeanism to Civilizational Distinctiveness’, *The Russian Review* 75 (2016): 607.

the Eurasia concept aims to construct a new social domain encompassing the former Soviet Union in which Russia would be clearly placed in the dominant position. It also marks a rejection of positioning within the liberal international order, whose tacit fundamental values discount Russia's social assets and advantage Western countries. Moscow's official discourse during the Ukraine crisis, as compared to during the invasion of Georgia, illustrates the greater emphasis in 2014 on civilizational and cultural ties in its efforts to legitimize Russian actions and enact social positioning as a great power. Instead of trying to gain position in the liberal Western international society, Russia was now attempting to construct its own.

Citing and reinterpreting the classical order's background knowledge, Russian performances now tried to redefine the social category and concept of a great power as a state that represents a major cultural group. In performing this identity, the conflict intensified because Russia moved even further away from background knowledge underpinning the Western conception of international orders. Contention had already taken place over the social category of great power and the kind of hierarchy it implied, which the liberal order considered obsolete. In addition to this, civilizations and cultures and the maintenance of pluralism were now also asserted as a moral purpose of the international order, and cultural essentialist presumptions as part of the political ontology. This contested the liberal order's background knowledge at the deeper and more tacit level of political ontology, since it sees culture is as either something to be neutralized or a potentially threatening source of irrational conflict.

A key reason that promoting a civilization-based worldview was politically useful is the convenient shorthand it provided for claims about Russia's inherent greatness. This worldview sees Russia as the pivot of the world where Europe and Asia must inevitably converge. Accord-

ingly, Russia is the core of a Eurasian civilization founded on Orthodox Christianity and the Russian language.<sup>57</sup> It must resist the efforts of the liberal West to enforce global homogenization. Thus, Russia need not worry about its negative image in the West, because Russia cannot be judged by social categorizations of a different civilization. This helps to relieve the problem of Russia being positioned as an outsider in Western-dominated international social settings, by creating an alternative worldview where this undesirable placing of Russia was irrelevant.

In this way, Russia could construct its separate and equal position to the liberal West and escape an alienating relationship of inferiority.<sup>58</sup> Eurasianism thus offered an ideational structure that could resolve its troubled identity and give credibility to its social positioning claims. Instead of being judged by standards of liberal modernity, this shifted the basis of symbolic power in favour of those forms in which Russia can claim qualitative parity, namely its historical legacy and its cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions. Although this largely overlaps with vertical social positioning, it is also important to note how Russia turned to the regional level in the attempt to promote a different ideational structure. This is vital to make sense of how the pursuit of status in terms of religious and cultural identity does in fact challenge the liberal, modernist ontology and fundamental values of the international order. It also reveals that the subject of political contention is not just over whether Russia is a great power, but whether that social category and the model of international relations that it implies has any validity in the present day.

The official statement of Russian foreign policy issued in 2013 illustrates that civiliza-

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57 Peter J. Katzenstein and Nicole Weygandt, 'Mapping Eurasia in an Open World: How the Insularity of Russia's Geopolitical and Civilizational Approaches Limits Its Foreign Policies', *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 2 (2017): 428–42.

58 Andrei Tsygankov, 'Crafting the State-Civilization: Vladimir Putin's Turn to Distinct Values', *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 3 (2016): 157.

tional thinking influenced how its policymakers defined the problems they faced and what were considered strategic solutions. It states that “global competition takes place on a civilizational level” and that the trend of world politics shows “increased emphasis on civilizational identity.”<sup>59</sup> While the previous edition in 2008 made similar statements they were speculative in tone, rather than assertions of fact as in 2013. And going further back, the word “civilization” did not appear at all in the 2000 version of Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept, when Putin first became president. The civilizational worldview also substantiates existing claims of multipolarity through the insistence that having a distinct culture is as important a consideration for international leadership as military and economic capability.

### *Constructing geopolitical Eurasia*

Russian leaders then acted to turn these beliefs into social reality. There had been earlier attempts at Eurasian regionalism in the late 1990s, and the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) originates in the early 2000s. But these did not generate much political focus or progress towards integration until Putin began to prioritize the project of a regional social domain dominated by Russia after 2012. Importantly, this regional project contains exclusive mechanisms that force a choice by making participation in European or global orders more difficult. For instance, to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member states had to raise their tariffs to match Russia’s, thus discouraging trade with countries outside the customs union.<sup>60</sup> This also fosters dependence on the Russian export market and energy resources, which Moscow can use for political leverage. The institutional design of the Eurasian regional order aims at making the

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59 Russian Federation, ‘Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation’ (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 February 2013), paras 13–14, [http://archive.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D](http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D).

60 Seçkin Köstem, ‘Regional Powers and Their Neighbours: National Identity and the Politics of Regional Economic Leadership’ (PhD diss., McGill University, 2016), 149.

belief in distinct civilizations real – that is, it is performative of this background knowledge – by working to reduce ties and interaction across the imagined divides.

This helps understand the identity-based threat that Russia perceives when states it considers part of “its” Eurasian civilizational zone try to join Western and European institutions. The efforts by Russia to arm-twist other states into a social context it dominates are not economically advantageous when compared to the alternative of fostering economic ties with the rest of Europe. Given that Russia’s trade and investment flows with EAEU members are small compared to EU countries, the economic benefits for Russia are at best marginal. While the EU countries account for 38.5 per cent of Russia’s total trade, the EAEU countries make up only 8.3 per cent.<sup>61</sup> The exclusive nature of the customs union is actually harmful to Russia’s economic interests due to opportunity costs and trade diversion.

Despite these material costs, Russia has been particularly sensitive to moves by states it considers to belong to its sphere of influence to strengthen ties with the EU. Economic coercion was applied to dissuade Moldova and Georgia from signing EU trade and association agreements. This entailed banning imports of wine and agricultural products from the two countries and suspending preferential tariffs. Energy supplies and pipeline ownership are also key leverage points, which have been used against Ukraine in particular. In 2006 and 2009, Russia cut off gas supplies to Ukraine and accused it of diverting gas transiting its territory to the rest of Europe, hoping to drive a wedge between Ukraine and the EU countries.

While the construction of a Eurasian civilizational order sought to bias international flows inward, Russia also attempted to exert coercive inclusion. Ukraine is a particularly important

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61 2016 data from World Integrated Trade Solution, World Bank. Available at <http://wits.worldbank.org>

part of the Eurasianist project because of its large population, industrialized economy, and symbolic significance as the place where Kievan Rus', regarded as the earliest Russian polity, was founded. In this geopolitical imagination, Ukraine and Russia are conceived as "one space and one people" sharing a common historical and cultural heritage.<sup>62</sup> This had a notable counterpart in American geopolitical thinking. Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to two US presidents, considered Russia to be defined by its relationship to Ukraine. The independence of Ukraine by itself means that "Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire" and its relations with Ukraine are a bellwether for its relations with Europe and the West.<sup>63</sup> Read from the perspective of Russian nationalists, the corollary is that Russia needs a closely integrated relationship to Ukraine if it is to achieve its desired social positioning and place in the world.<sup>64</sup>

Accordingly, Russia focused inordinately on trying to discipline the foreign relations of Ukraine with the West. This took a new intensity in 2013, when Ukraine's negotiation of an EU Association Agreement prompted Russia to alter customs regulations creating barriers towards Ukrainian goods. Then, on August 14, it stopped all imports from Ukraine, aiming to pressure Ukraine to join the Eurasian customs union instead. Moscow also offered the carrot of greater discounts on natural gas and to buy US\$15 billion of Ukrainian bonds. When the Yanukovich government suspended preparations to sign the EU Association Agreement on November 21, protesters in Kyiv rallied and occupied the Ukrainian capital's Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti). "The Maidan" became the central focus of a protest movement demanding Yanukovich's resignation and the signing of the agreement with the EU. Yanukovich was even-

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62 Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 204–5.

63 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 121–22.

64 Toal, *Near Abroad*, 206.

tually forced out of office, an event which led to the Russian seizure of the Crimean peninsula and another confrontation over social positioning and the international order.

### *Social positioning and the annexation of Crimea*

To legitimize and rationalize the annexation, Russia argued it was protecting the equal rights and national self-determination of the Crimean people under Article 1 of the UN Charter. Russia also tried to conjure democratic legitimacy through the holding of a referendum. Thus, rather than outright disregarding international norms, Russia actually tried to promulgate its own interpretations of sovereignty and national self-determination. While this move served its immediate need to justify annexing another state's territory, the transgressive nature of the move itself was also a social positioning claim.

Russian leaders portrayed the Maidan protests and the ousting of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich as a “state coup” and a “result of the armed takeover by radical extremists.”<sup>65</sup> The annexation of Crimea was cast as an intervention supporting the peninsula's right of national self-determination. Russian leaders also cited precedents and used analogical arguments to claim that the intervention was equivalent to those undertaken by the US. This socially positioned Russia as equal to the US, which is clearly recognized as ranking highly in the international social hierarchy. Putin invoked humanitarian intervention language in a press conference on March 4, declaring that Russia's concern was to protect individual civilians in danger. He claimed there was a “rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces going on in certain parts of Ukraine, including Kiev.”<sup>66</sup> At the UN, ambassador Vitaly Churkin compared

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65 UN Security Council, *Provisional Verbatim Record S.PV/7125* (3 March 2014): 3.

66 The Kremlin, ‘Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists’ Questions on the Situation in Ukraine’ (4 March 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>.

the situation to the 1983 US intervention in Grenada.<sup>67</sup> This claim implied that Russia's prerogatives in its sphere of influence are comparable to, and thus no less legitimate than, previous US actions in the Western hemisphere.

This was reinforced with Putin's speech marking the formal annexation on March 18 where he compared Crimea's declaration of independence to Ukraine's secession from the USSR in 1991. One portion of Putin's speech on March 18 citing the possibility that "NATO's navy would be right here in this city [Sevastopol] of Russia's military glory" has been taken as indicating the security-strategic motives for the annexation. However, this was actually framed in cultural and historical terms as rhetorical support for a contention that if Russia did not assume sovereignty over Crimea, "you and we – the Russians and the Ukrainians – could lose Crimea completely."<sup>68</sup> The implication was that for the good of the Eurasian civilization that encompassed both Russia and Ukraine, Crimea was safer in Russian hands.

Russia thus enacted through its performances a culturally-defined sphere of influence in which it maintains order and peace by wielding decisive coercive power and civilizational leadership. Here, the geopolitical and essentialist premises of Eurasianist ideology help explain this logic and the political importance placed on cultural identity. A move by the Ukrainian parliament to abolish official status for languages other than Ukrainian was emphasized as evidence of a violation of cultural rights, although this bill was actually vetoed and so never took effect. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov used it to argue that the intervention ensured the self-determination of Crimeans and their "rights to the native language, culture and history."<sup>69</sup> Rus-

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67 UN Security Council, 3 March 2014, 3.

68 Putin, 'Address by President of the Russian Federation'.

69 Sergey Lavrov, 'Statement at the 69th Session of the UN General Assembly' (United Nations, New York, 27 September 2014), [http://www.un.org/en/ga/69/meetings/gadebate/pdf/RU\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/ga/69/meetings/gadebate/pdf/RU_en.pdf).

sia's official discourse repeatedly invoked its co-civilizational identity with "our brotherly neighbour Ukraine":

While the Ukraine is merely a geopolitical playground for some Western politicians, for us it is a brotherly country to which we are bound by many centuries of common history.<sup>70</sup>

This implied that it was unthinkable that Russia's actions could be against the "natural" interests of Ukraine or Crimea, within an essentialist, civilization-based political ontology.

A worldview where the trend of international politics is defined by civilizational conflict had become increasingly influential in Russia's foreign policy establishment by 2014. Placed in context, this provides evidence that Russia conceived of its social position as a great power based on its civilizational leadership of a "Eurasian" sphere of influence. The claims made to legitimize the annexation of Crimea were hence of a prerogative to intervene based on Russia's social position. By portraying this as consistent with past American actions, this claim of equality also had the effect of placing the US as another equal-ranking great power instead of a superior hegemon. At the same time, the references to the independence of Kosovo and US intervention in Grenada did more than accuse the West of hypocrisy. It asserted Russia's special role in the international system and the equivalence of such actions, given its identity as one of the privileged category of states that have historically been the arbiters of international order.

Specific material conditions need to exist in order for discursive moves to have desired effects. Hence, while actions can only have the meanings that are discursively attached to them, actions are also performed so that they can sustain those meanings. That Crimea was occupied by "little green men" in unmarked uniforms rather than a column of tanks under the Russian flag was itself a strategic move. This made a great difference in the ability to achieve further political

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70 UN Security Council, 3 March 2014, 3–4.

objectives. In this case, a (nearly) bloodless occupation of Crimea was needed to support and impose discursive moves. Namely, these were its accession to the Russian Federation through a referendum, and the narrative of Russia rescuing the peninsula from ethnonationalist chaos.<sup>71</sup>

### **Audience reaction and international hierarchy**

How did the audience of other states respond to the contending claims about the legitimacy of Russia's annexation of Crimea, and by extension to the contestation of the international order between the West and Russia? With the crisis being brought before the General Assembly, the wider audience responded with performances that sought to reinforce sovereign equality, rejecting the validity of social categorization that would include classical great powers. This hence reflected their own social positioning concerns and the desire for a social context that would best serve them. Russian performances of a relationship of superiority over specific states and identity as a great power had undesirable implications for the wider audience. It was represented as a threat to sovereign equality and territorial integrity, implying an international order in which the interests of a powerful elite take normative priority over other states. With its 19th-century connotations of imperialism and its stark hierarchical implications, this vision conflicts with the social positioning interests of a large number of states who might otherwise be sympathetic to Russia's "anti-hegemonic" discourse. At the same time, a large number of states made public statements dissenting from the Western-led consensus but when it came time to vote on a General Assembly resolution which expressed these principles, abstained instead of opposing it. Why was this the case?

In representing the Russian intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea as illegitimate, Western states worked to undermine Russia's competence as a great power and thus to hold

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<sup>71</sup> Toal, *Near Abroad*, 217–32.

special responsibilities. Stigmatization seeks to relegate another agent in the social hierarchy while giving reasons that assert and reinforce the existing order's basic values and normative basis.<sup>72</sup> To render the annexation of Crimea illegitimate, Western leaders explicitly rejected Russia's social positioning in the great power category. Instead, Moscow's attempts to perform a great power identity were construed as incompetent practice: outdated and disruptive, rather than stabilizing and security-enforcing. US president Barack Obama explicitly stratified Russia as a subordinate "regional power" acting "not out of strength but out of weakness,"<sup>73</sup> while senator John McCain more bluntly described Russia as "a gas station masquerading as a country."<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, Russia's actions and justifications were painted as outdated, regressive, and harmful to international society. At the first UN Security Council meeting on the Crimea crisis on March 3, 2014, French ambassador Gérard Araud highlighted an image of temporal regression: he began by saying Russia was speaking with "the voice of the past", referenced the Soviet repression of Prague Spring in 1968, and said that "Russia is taking Europe back 40 years."<sup>75</sup> Later, Obama adopted this narrative with a speech in Brussels, arguing the US could not allow "the old way of doing things to regain a foothold in this young century."<sup>76</sup> The international order being performed and enacted here was a liberal-hegemonic one in which the Concert practices and the concept of a great power itself were obsolete.

Broader international legitimacy and recognition of the annexation was also elusive. UN

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72 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society', *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (2014): 149.

73 Scott Wilson, "Obama dismisses Russia as 'regional power' acting out of weakness," *Washington Post*, 25 March 2014.

74 *State of the Union*, Cable News Network, 16 March 2014. He repeated this in a Twitter post on 24 March. <https://twitter.com/SenJohnMcCain/status/448126001865052160>

75 UN Security Council, 3 March 2014, 6.

76 Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President in Address to European Youth' (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 26 March 2014).

General Assembly resolution 68/282, which passed by a margin of 100 in favour and 11 against, declared the referendum on the status of Crimea held the following day to have no legal significance. It shows that Russia has generally been unable to convince the society of states to accept its interpretation of the legitimate international order. More specifically, the attempt to place its actions as within the existing practice of intervention failed, and along with it the associated attempt at claiming its desired social position as a great power. Furthermore, a large number of states who dissented from the Western-backed resolution nevertheless abstained rather than vote against it. In so doing they reproduced their own social positions as part of the group of “normal” states. Doing this emphasized relational equality and territorial integrity as basic parts of the current practice of sovereignty – both against the liberal hegemonic vision of the West and the great-power system envisioned by Russia.

During the UN General Assembly session on March 27, support for the resolution was associated with supporting norms of territorial integrity and the fixity of borders. The resolution itself was titled “Territorial integrity of Ukraine.” The Russian statement in the Assembly debate called for the recognition of the referendum as a reflection of democratic will, after which “Russia could not refuse the Crimeans’ wish to support their right to self-determination.”<sup>77</sup> The failure of this argument was reflected by the fact that even states voting with Russia who spoke at the session did not adopt it. Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, North Korea, and Venezuela instead articulated the norm of non-intervention as their primary concern, portraying the crisis as an instance of US-instigated regime change in Ukraine. The condemnation by North Korea of America’s “historical human rights conspiracy”<sup>78</sup> was aligned with fears among Russia’s political elite of

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77 UN General Assembly, *Official Records A/68/PV.80* (27 March 2014): 3.

78 UN General Assembly, 21.

being overthrown through Western instigation of popular protest and civil society opposition. However, consistent with my argument's implication that interventions are a great power prerogative Russia would avoid delegitimizing, Lavrov's statement avoided citing non-intervention in domestic affairs as an important principle, even though this could have provided discursive ammunition for his position.

Although a large number of countries dissented from the resolution, they were nonetheless averse to voting against it. This would have meant positioning themselves outside the mainstream, and positioning themselves with the social outcasts who did, like Sudan, Syria, and Zimbabwe. The Chinese ambassador's statement is probably the most significant while being representative of the rhetorical strategy taken by these countries. It voiced support for "independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries," but criticized the resolution as unhelpful for vague or entirely unstated reasons ("will only further complicate the situation").<sup>79</sup> Uruguay and St. Vincent and the Grenadines (although notably, not Argentina) questioned why the Crimea referendum should be viewed differently from the 2013 referendum in which the Falkland Islands voted to remain a British dependency. However, if they did not want to endorse the resolution by voting for it, they also were averse to opposing the more orthodox discourse and preferred to abstain. Finally, to avoid taking any stance which could have implications for the status of Kosovo, its desire to integrate with Europe, and its ties with Russia, Serbia's delegation was absent from the vote. The necessity and interest in performing themselves as part of the social mainstream in international politics thus worked to reproduce orthodox understandings and the liberal background knowledge in the international order.

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<sup>79</sup> UN General Assembly, 11.

The illegitimacy of Russia's annexation of Crimea was thus a result of the Western states utilizing their own symbolic power to interpret and represent Russia's moves as a violation of the territorial integrity norm. Territorial integrity was revealed to have greater moral and instrumental value than self-determination in the eyes of the international audience. One reason for this was a collective political ontology that took for granted the association between territorial aggrandizement and war.<sup>80</sup> In substance, the actions Russia had taken were difficult to represent as disinterested and serving a common purpose, particularly when it involved a seizure of territory for itself. Its competence as a humanitarian, democratic, and lawful actor was also viewed skeptically, further undermining Moscow's ability to credibly make the arguments which it did.

This also had material consequences: the international sanctions imposed because other states regarded the annexation as illegitimate inflicted serious damage on Russia's economy, hampering among other things its military modernization projects. Furthermore, even if intended to create security-enhancing buffers, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Donbass instead created zones of political corruption, instability and criminality exacerbated by their dependence on subventions from Moscow.<sup>81</sup> This, again, is a direct result of their illegitimacy in the eyes of other states, which in turn is due to Russia's failures in the discursive struggle.

## **Alternative explanations and rethinking hegemony**

### *Status theories and power transition*

Russia's emphasis on restoring its international status is a key theme in scholarly analysis of its post-Cold War foreign policy. One way in which status has been linked to international order is through the concept of status inconsistency, based on theories of status in world politics that

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80 Mark W. Zacher, 'The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force', *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (2001): 215–250.

81 Toal, *Near Abroad*, 282–83.

draw on power transition theory. The basic claim is that the status hierarchy, which is considered as coterminous with the international order, remains static even as the distribution of material power changes. Rising powers tend to become dissatisfied with not having status or prestige commensurate with their growing power, and thus act aggressively to assert their rightful social position.<sup>82</sup> Given that Russia is considered to be status-conscious and has overtly challenged the legitimacy of existing institutions, status inconsistency may seem like a plausible candidate theory.

The problem with this explanation is that Russia is actually in decline relative to the US, taken as the status-quo hegemon. The long-term trend in economic output since 1990 has only seen the US increase its lead over Russia (see figure 2). Indeed, scholars working in this framework generally described Russia as a state given *more* recognition than it objectively deserved, and thus unlikely to be aggressive.<sup>83</sup> This prediction was clearly incorrect. Although Russian military expenditure increased by 63 per cent between 2009 and 2016,<sup>84</sup> temporal sequence shows that Russia is not challenging the international order because growing capabilities *allow* it to be more assertive. Rather, Moscow is allocating more of its relatively declining resources to military spending to support a policy *choice*. Given that Russia is now further behind the US than it was in the 1990s, the pursuit of a provocative radical revisionist strategy seeking to expand territory and influence looks strangely quixotic from within these theories.<sup>85</sup> More

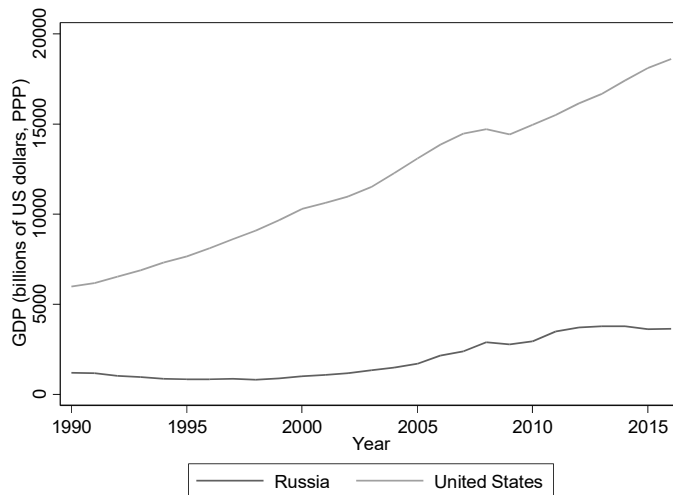
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82 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); William C. Wohlforth, 'Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War', *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 28–57.

83 Thomas J. Volgy et al., 'Status Considerations in International Politics and the Rise of Regional Powers', in *Status in World Politics*, ed. T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 64.

84 In constant 2016 US dollars. Data from SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

85 This adopts the typology of revisionist strategies in Steven M. Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 13–21.



**Figure 2.** Comparison of economic output, 1990-2016. Source: World Bank.

broadly, this casts doubt on the premise that whether a state will support or attack existing international orders can be inferred from its material and structural position.<sup>86</sup>

Another influential, status-oriented analysis of Russia’s behaviour comes from the perspective of social identity theory. Russia was considered too weak to engage in geopolitical competition with the West and instead pursued status through “social creativity” efforts. In this view, Eurasianism was initially a bid to advance Russia’s prestige on alternative cultural dimensions, not a challenge to the social hierarchy or the international order.<sup>87</sup> But with the EU’s Eastern Partnership Program and Western tendencies to marginalize Russia in international politics, the West has effectively refused to recognize and accommodate Russia’s status aspirations. This has fuelled emotions of grievance and humiliation in Russian leaders, leading an escalating

86 Alastair Iain Johnston, ‘Is China a Status Quo Power?’, *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 5–56.

87 Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, ‘Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy’, *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 73–74; Clunan, *Social Construction of Russia’s Resurgence*, chap. 3.

rivalry with the West.<sup>88</sup> This is congruent with my argument that a desire to secure its identity conception drives Moscow's efforts to socially position itself as a great power. But it does not connect the contestation of social hierarchy with the contestation of international orders, in part because it assumes they are the same thing. Furthermore, it only examines the social positioning of the status-seekers, while leaving out the social conflict that is likely to ensue as others react by defending their positions and visions of the social order. Status-seeking's emphasis on social positioning in vertical terms would also miss the substantive meaning of social categories like "great power" and the importance of the tacitly known characteristics of the mainstream, normal category. The meanings attached to social positions are crucial in making sense of international orders, and political contention to define them.

The value-added of social positioning is thus to show that status requires the performance of relations with other actors, producing social settings structured by a specific background knowledge. The social identity theory approach argues that "social creativity does not try to change the hierarchy of status... but rather tries to achieve preeminence on a different ranking system."<sup>89</sup> Yet this different basis of ranking would likely conflict with the tacit fundamental values and political ontology of the existing background knowledge. When this is the case, social creativity can in fact be an effort to de-legitimize and change the basis of the existing social hierarchy. The logic of social categorization is the most explicit layer of background knowledge. Depending on the nature of the performances and claims being made, contention over the top layer can easily spill over to the more tacit commitments about fundamental values and political ontology. This is how disagreements over social categorization and relational ties

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88 Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Russia Says No: Power, Status and Emotions in Foreign Policy', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3-4 (2014): 269-79.

89 Larson and Shevchenko, 'Status Seekers', 74.

can potentially involve foundational contestation of international orders. The social identity approach thus fails to account for the wider effects of social positioning on the practices and institutions in which those rivalries and conflicts are necessarily embedded.

More rationalist theories of international status see states as engaged in status signalling and Bayesian updating towards an objective hierarchy.<sup>90</sup> But from this perspective, it is hard to make sense of the stark divergence in information which has occurred since 2014. Russian elites and the public believe that the annexation of Crimea have enhanced their country's prestige, but people in the rest of the world have directly the opposite perception. According to a 2017 survey by Pew Research, 59 per cent of the Russian public saw their country's importance in the world as having improved in recent years. There was also increasing confidence in Putin's handling of foreign affairs and the proportion who believed Russia is getting the international respect it deserves more than doubled between 2012 and 2017,<sup>91</sup> despite economic sanctions and overt denunciations of Russia's actions by other countries. Indeed, the perception outside Russia is quite the opposite. In a 2017 public opinion survey across 18 countries, 49 per cent of respondents saw Russia as having a negative influence on world affairs, ranking it among the worst on this measure.<sup>92</sup>

This poses serious problems for the concept of status-seeking as an issue of resolving the disequilibrium between, or misperception of, recognized status and material power.<sup>93</sup> Renshon

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90 Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, 'After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline', *International Security* 36, no. 1 (2011): 41–72; Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

91 Margaret Vice, "Russians remain confident in Putin's global leadership," Pew Research Center, 20 June 2017; Levada Center, "Crimea: two years later," 10 June 2016.

92 Globescan, "Sharp drop in world views of US, UK: global poll," 4 July 2017. Available at <https://globescan.com/sharp-drop-in-world-views-of-us-uk-global-poll/>

93 See Wohlforth, 'Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War'; Thomas Lindemann, *Causes of War: The Struggle for Recognition* (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2010).

models status conflict as an information problem, arguing that dissatisfied states tend to initiate winnable conflicts in order to increase their status rank. By demonstrating their power, they force others to update beliefs about their status.<sup>94</sup> Yet Russia's imposition of material outcomes on Georgia and Ukraine has produced a downwards revision of its status for the wider audience. As a result of successfully demonstrating its military capability, Russia has become stigmatized as a threatening and deviant actor. The problem is not about distorted *information*, but commitments to different background *knowledge*. It is not just information that matters but the knowledge structures through which information is interpreted and used. And as a result, the rationalist framework does not address how stratification is created by international orders and their ordering principles, nor how the struggle for social positioning that allows agents to perform desired identities potentially changes the social context of world politics.

#### *Geopolitics and NATO expansion*

The revisionist turn taken by Russia in recent years has also been blamed on NATO expansion. This is an area of congruence between my argument based on social positioning and those who see the geopolitical reaction as structurally determined. But how can these explanations be distinguished, and why is social positioning a better explanation than geopolitical security? In short, because the neorealist explanation for Russian revisionism depends on the existence of conditions which we need the politics of social positioning to explain. Moscow's perception of the eastward expansion of European and North Atlantic institutions as a security threat is a necessary condition for the claim that "the taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement" to hold.<sup>95</sup> However, as I have outlined, the post-1991 Kremlin did not consistently perceive NATO

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94 Jonathan Renshon, 'Status Deficits and War', *International Organization* 70, no. 3 (2016): 535–40.

95 Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin', 1.

as a threat, and the status of the Russia-NATO relationship has fluctuated between cooperation and conflict even during the Putin era.

Furthermore, it also does not explain timing: why this aggressive response in 2014, and not earlier? From a geopolitical perspective, the Baltic States and Finland are at least as important to Russia's national security as Ukraine. Their territories adjoin the maritime approach to St. Petersburg and Russia's central economic region, which is why the Soviet Union annexed the Baltic States in 1940, invaded Finland, and enforced foreign policy dominance over Helsinki during the Cold War (hence the term "Finlandization"). Finland became an EU member in 1995 and the Baltic States joined both NATO and the EU in 2004.<sup>96</sup> Yet in June 2002, Putin signalled that "[i]t would be strategically and tactically wrong for us to obstruct Estonia joining NATO. If Estonia wants to join, let it."<sup>97</sup> Since a key argument for Western policymakers against NATO enlargement was the risk of antagonizing Moscow, this statement smoothed the path for the Baltic States' accession by easing those concerns.

In doing this, Putin acquiesced to something which Russia had long opposed, and which according to structuralist theories ought to have been just as threatening as Ukraine strengthening ties with the EU in 2013. Why was Estonia's NATO membership not considered as serious a security threat as the later, more tentative moves to increase ties with Western Europe by Ukraine and Georgia? The perception of a security threat to Russia must thus be explicated with reference to Ukraine's symbolic significance within the Eurasianist worldview and what "losing" Ukraine would mean for the Russian identity conception. Furthermore, it needs to account for how the change in that identity concept over time also changed what constituted a security

96 See also Toal, *Near Abroad*, 30–33.

97 Marcus Warren, "Baltic States' move to join NATO earns Putin's reluctant approval," *National Post*, 25 June 2002. Marko Mihkelson, "With Russia's blessing, Baltics head west," *The Moscow Times*, 18 November 2002.

threat. This is where a theory based on identity performance is more useful than a structuralist explanation in making sense of international political events.

Furthermore, while directly challenging the legitimacy of some aspects of the international order, Russia continues to support other important pillars. It is hard at this point to see Russia even considering withdrawal from the UN, and in 2011 Russia completed an 18-year membership process to join the WTO. This was a costly move, as Putin acknowledged to domestic audiences when he warned it would cause short-term economic pain.<sup>98</sup> In fact, Russia is keen to portray its actions as upholding global stability by promoting a more multipolar, “anti-hegemonic” international order. Even if this is disingenuous, the important point is that Moscow would like others to view its actions as supportive of a more rational and stable classical mode of international relations, as opposed to the dangerous revisionism encouraged by the liberal Western order. At the same time, Russia has continued to maintain cooperation on Arctic issues and international spaceflight, areas in which it could have used leverage on the interests of Western states. Alternative approaches do not help make sense of why Russia supports some aspects of the international order but opposes others.

## **Conclusion**

International relations scholars need to define great powers in certain ways for analytical purposes, even if they dismiss this issue as “common sense.”<sup>99</sup> But in political practice, the criteria for being a great power are intersubjectively constructed by international actors. What does being a great power entail, and how do state leaders come to know the script? Being a great power requires an agent to carry out actions which are construed as being iterations of those

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98 Gleb Bryanski, “Putin Says Russia’s Economy to Suffer from WTO Entry,” *Reuters*, 21 November 2012.

99 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979), 131.

accepted practices. This might mean pursuing military capabilities to sustain a war against the most powerful state, collaborating to manage the balance of power, or engaging in strategic rivalries.<sup>100</sup> The literature on international status has also probed the politics of claims to embody the identity of a great power, and efforts to elicit recognition of those claims. But this obscures the political contest to define what a great power or hegemon actually is. The struggle by states to define themselves as “great powers” is a social and political process that fabricates those labels and applies them to specific social actors. Great powers are not a natural feature of international politics that simply needs to be understood and analyzed, like chemical elements or quarks. It is a social category jointly imagined and constructed by policy practitioners and academics, and the way that it is understood has performative effects on world politics. The concept itself can change the social world to conform to the theory when it is the basis for the actions of empowered social agents.

This case study examined the interaction between political efforts to secure the American “hegemon” and Russian “great power” identities. As the geopolitical rivalry that defined their foreign policies for decades dissolved, both had to reformulate their concepts of the national self and their places in international society. Initially, the sense of liberal triumphalism and unipolarity established an international order which helped to ratify the social superiority of the US. Despite early hopes of inclusion and partnership within the trans-Atlantic community, Russia increasingly felt it was not being treated as a social equal by the US and major European countries. Instead, from micro-level diplomatic interactions to the lack of genuine consultation over major security problems as Yugoslavia violently came apart, political elites in Moscow per-

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100 These definitions are from William R. Thompson, ed., *Great Power Rivalries* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

ceived that Russia was placed in a stigmatized and inferior position. Initiatives to construct its own regional bloc, promote nationalist and statist ideologies, and emphasize civilizational legacies, therefore reflect efforts to create a social context in which Russia can perform its supposedly inherent greatness and social preeminence. It also separates the Russian state from a social context structured by liberal ideology, which in civilizationist discourses of Russian identity are incompatible with its interests. Going further, if Moscow now defines Russian identity in opposition to the West, rivalry and tension in the relationship may, perversely, help stabilize both Russian and American identity.<sup>101</sup>

On the global stage, Russia's determination to perform its identity as a great power clashes with the understandings that the society of states currently take as orthodox and self-evident background knowledge. Because the practice of great power politics is strongly linked to colonialism and spheres of influence, it is at odds with the basic moral purposes that many agents see as the basis of their social positions as sovereign members of the society of states. Sovereign equality may be a hypocrisy or a fiction, but it is nevertheless a crucial one which many states have an interest in protecting. Even if non-Western states often resist the liberal background knowledge of the global order, they also have a stake in the socially-equalizing implications of its institutions. Finally, this case brings out how power is embedded in background knowledge, which structures the practices and relations between agents. Most states were reluctant even to symbolically oppose the dominant understandings of proper international conduct in voting on a UN General Assembly resolution.

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101 See Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–70.

## Chapter 4 CONTENTIOUS ORTHODOXIES AND THE EUROZONE CRISIS IN GREECE

I was dismayed when the Greek delegation walked out of the negotiations. That's not how we do it in the EU. In Europe we negotiate until the very last moment. [...] and I especially refuse to accept that the Commission and its President should be described in this way [as 'terrorists']. You can't behave like that in Europe.

– Jean-Claude Juncker, 7 July 2015<sup>1</sup>

The eurozone crisis brought the European regional order to the brink of collapse. After four years under an austerity program that put Greece into an economic depression, voters elected a government promising to renegotiate the loans and restore the nation's dignity. Turning this democratic mandate into policy sparked a confrontation that made Greece's departure from the eurozone seem inevitable. Why did the EU states and institutions persist with a bailout program that the IMF, which they had brought into the Troika for its expertise in dealing with sovereign insolvency, continually warned was unsustainable and counterproductive? Why did the IMF nevertheless consistently defer to the Europeans, risking its credibility and ever-greater amounts of its resources? Despite the awareness that the IMF was the part of the Troika most sympathetic to their objectives, why did Greece try to minimize the IMF's role and, in 2015, still attempt to exclude them from a new deal?<sup>2</sup>

I argue that this contention over the European regional and monetary orders emerged from struggles to define social positioning and categorization. During the eurozone crisis, states and international organizations (IOs) contended to maintain and revise the ideational structures of

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1 European Commission, "Speech of European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker on the Review of the Latvian Presidency and Ahead of the Euro Summit on Greece" (SPEECH/15/5319, Strasbourg, July 7, 2015).

2 In later years, the IMF even criticized Athens for committing to a primary surplus it regarded as too high. David Lawder, "IMF says Greece should meet lower surplus target," *Reuters*, 6 February 2017; Liz Alderman, "Europe says Greece is a comeback story. The IMF isn't convinced," *The New York Times*, 31 July 2018.

the European regional order. In this symbolic power struggle, ideals and concepts like democratic legitimacy, European unity, expertise, and fiscal responsibility were all wielded as discursive weapons. These political moves sought to define orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the European monetary order, and in international politics more broadly.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, for non-state actors like the IMF and the EU institutions, performative moves to define and teach background knowledge to others were, by themselves, instrumental to the performance of their identities.

Social positioning interests are hence necessary to explicate the course of the crisis. The ECB and Germany aimed to maintain the ordoliberal ideational structure of the European monetary order, and thus treated Greece as a recalcitrant EU member on which to impose discipline. Greek leaders bought into the subordinate positioning until 2015. Continued recession and poor prospects propelled Alexis Tsipras's Syriza to power on promises to end the creditor-imposed austerity, leading to confrontation. The IMF sought to play a part in the crisis due to a need to regain its social positioning as the preeminent site of international economic expertise, after suffering years of criticism and being peripheral to coping with the 2008 global financial crisis. The Fund, however, found its efforts to apply lessons learned from its earlier misadventures, by advocating debt relief and softer conditionality, were at best partially successful.

### **International organizations and the contestation of international orders**

International organizations can exert significant influence on international orders. Existing views of IOs emphasize their perception as impartial, rationalized, technocratic entities as a source of their legitimacy. In this way, IOs exercise power through their ability to classify the

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3 Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, *Symbolic Power in the World Trade Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 51–55.

world, fix meanings, and diffuse new norms and rules.<sup>4</sup> IOs are also viewed as promoting international cooperation through information sharing, monitoring, and dispute resolution, helping states to maximize collective gains and generating socialization towards norm-following behaviour.<sup>5</sup> Critical scholars do not necessarily contradict this description but emphasize that as a consequence, IOs tend to support and reproduce existing background knowledge, and in doing so reflect and reinforce dominant social arrangements.<sup>6</sup> These characteristics might also be construed as reasons for some political actors to distrust IOs, something highlighted by arguments that there is a democratic deficit in global governance. While these views of IOs are not wrong, they underplay the agency IOs can exert, through those functions, to alter international orders. Their insider position in dominant social structures means they have a greater potential to improvise and reinterpret background knowledge in ways that are accepted because of their privileged social position. IOs themselves also have social positioning interests and may seek to involve themselves in various areas to buttress their relevance and importance.

Furthermore, IOs try to shift orthodoxies through their claims to superior expertise, and need to do so in order to maintain that socially perceived expert position. Even if they were part of an existing orthodoxy that is seen as having failed, they can maintain their symbolic capital by reinvesting it in the advancement of revised doctrines. This maintains their standing and perceived competence by showing that the IO has learned its lesson, is responsive to changed circumstances, and remains impartial and objective in pursuit of the best expertise and knowledge.

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4 Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 20–41.

5 This is a vast literature. On these specific points see Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal, “The Rational Design of International Institutions,” *International Organization* 55, no. 4 (2001): 761–99; Jeffrey T. Checkel, “International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework,” *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (2005): 801–26.

6 Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony, and International Relations: An Essay in Method,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (1983): 172.

In fact, if an IO articulates a convincing vision of change, they can gain legitimacy and relevance by breaking old rules and norms or urging other agents to do so.

The IMF was anxious to play a role in the euro crisis in 2010, and in getting a seat at the table compromised itself in deference to the interests of EU states and institutions. But the IMF would not have been brought in without the intervention of Angela Merkel, and faced resistance from the European Central Bank (ECB) and its president Jean-Claude Trichet, in particular. As the crisis deepened, with critics unsettling the IMF's social position by attacking its expertise and apparent pro-European bias, the Fund became more assertive on the need to lighten fiscal austerity and restructure Greece's debt. These were issues staff and directors had been highly concerned about from the beginning but were downplayed when the Fund's priority was to get a seat at the table. Making the largest loan in its history meant bending its own rules on debt sustainability, country ownership of reform programs, and acquiescing to the leadership of European institutions. However, this was outweighed by the IMF's desire to regain its preminent social position in global economic governance, something that could only be done through practical action and finding a stage to give a competent performance.

The European Commission and ECB, in contrast, aimed to reproduce the existing background knowledge in the European monetary and regional order. Performing their independence and autonomy thus meant working to reinforce the monetarist disciplinary practices of the eurozone upon member states. These practices had become naturalized and perceived as a political ontology: taken-for-granted beliefs about how the world works. As a result, the EU institutions saw no contradiction between backing creditor states' political interests and maintaining the appearance of impartial objectivity. They considered the necessity of fiscal discipline and the

danger of debt restructuring self-evident facts of life that were ostensibly above politics. For the same reason, Greece's primary surplus became a symbolic issue signifying compliance and the program's success. This was despite the fact that the surplus did little to make the debt sustainable or resolve the crisis, and made the problem worse by contributing to economic contraction.

Given these differences in their basic ontological assumptions, the expertise of the international organizations involved did not lead to consensus on what the ideal or efficient solution would be. Instead, within the Troika, the IMF often clashed over policy with the ECB and European Commission. The background knowledge and orthodoxy of the European monetary order led the EU institutions and state leaders to construe "a crisis of finance as a crisis of the profligate state."<sup>7</sup> This orthodoxy was used to stigmatize debtor states, placing them in inferior social positions, and justified overriding their sovereignty to correct their incompetent governance. Legitimacy was thus created for the imposition of policy conditionality on states like Greece, aiming to reinforce the dominance of monetarist ideas in the European monetary order that the crisis was calling into question. Importantly, it also provided a narrative to rebut criticism and pressure for reform. Corrupt and profligate Greece was to blame for the crisis, not deficiencies in the European monetary order or the monetarist ordoliberal ideology on which it was based.<sup>8</sup> Placing Greece in a stigmatized category of states failing to live up to European identity was thus not just about depriving it of status, rather this social positioning move was instrumental to reinforcing the background knowledge underpinning the European monetary order. This shows the observable implication that maintaining and contesting social categorization,

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7 Mark Blyth, "Paradigms and Paradox: The Politics of Ideas in Two Moments of Crisis," *Governance* 26, no. 2 (2013): 210.

8 Magnus Ryner, "Europe's Ordoliberal Iron Cage: Critical Political Economy, the Euro Area Crisis and Its Management," *Journal of European Public Policy* 22, no. 2 (2015): 275–94.

collective purposes, and political ontology were central to decisions made in the context of a pressing economic crisis. In studying the eurozone crisis in Greece I pay particular attention to what agents' actions and justifications reveal about the background knowledge informing those practices, and how that orthodoxy was challenged.<sup>9</sup> To draw out the actions, claims, and justifications used by agents, I examine journalistic accounts, interviews and statements by key players, and institutional documents (such as IMF reports). The memoirs of two of Greece's finance ministers during the crisis period, George Papaconstantinou and Yanis Varoufakis, provide insider accounts of practices in the Troika, detailed insight into their beliefs and perspectives, as well as scathing assessments of each others' time in office. These sources provide evidence through the principles, norms, or other kinds of tacit knowledge that agents used to justify both what they did and what they did not do.

### **Social positioning and orthodoxy in the eurozone crisis**

In this section I examine the identities that the main agents in the Greece eurozone crisis performed, and the background knowledge that was embedded in and enacted through those performances. My argument's observable implication is that agents will try to preserve background knowledge that supports their social positions in an international order. They will attempt to change collective beliefs about social categorization and positioning that contradict their identity conceptions or put them in undesired relations of inferiority with others. The economic issues and high stakes of the crisis would seem most likely to be explicated with a primarily materialist analysis. However, social positioning played an influential role and is needed in order to explain materially counter-productive moves by the international actors involved with the crisis in Greece.

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9 Vincent Pouliot, "Practice Tracing," in *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*, ed. Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 237–59.

### *The IMF's doctrinal evolution and search for relevance*

The IMF suffered a crisis of legitimacy as a result of how it handled a series of economic crises in the 1990s and early 2000s, most visibly the Asian financial crisis in 1998. The stringent application of conditionality through structural adjustment programs was a central point of criticism, as were the “Washington Consensus” policies applied through them.<sup>10</sup> These policies, which emphasized capital mobility, floating currencies, and fiscal austerity, are expressions of economic policy ideas that had the status of orthodoxy in international economic orders since the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> The IMF played a key role in disseminating and disciplining states into this set of policies. However, the failure to properly handle the Asian crisis dealt a severe blow to the credibility of the IMF and that neoliberal background knowledge. Prominent critics latched on to the IMF’s imposition of ineffective and misconceived policy solutions, which in countries like Indonesia and Argentina was blamed for worsening the situation and turning economic crisis into sociopolitical turmoil.

The IMF’s relevance and existence were also endangered by material factors during this period. It depends on interest from outstanding loans as a source of income, and the low demand for such loans between 2002 and 2007 caused budgetary problems. Ironically, this was largely because of a healthy global economy. But it makes little sense to argue that the IMF had a material interest in pushing its involvement in the eurozone crisis because it needed to make a profitable loan. The IMF and organizations like it trade upon their social positions, reputation, and

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10 Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002); within IPE see Leonard Seabrooke, “Legitimacy Gaps in the World Economy: Explaining the Sources of the IMF’s Legitimacy Crisis,” *International Politics* 44, no. 2–3 (2007): 250–68; Jacqueline Best, “Ambiguity and Uncertainty in International Organizations: A History of Debating IMF Conditionality,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2012): 674–88.

11 Eric Helleiner, *States and the Reemergence of Global Finance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Rawi Abdelal, *Capital Rules: The Construction of Global Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

image. Its place as a key multilateral international economic institution is why it was entrusted with US\$500 billion in new funding at the height of the 2008 global financial crisis. But before this, the IMF's perception as an instrument of Western imperialism forcing austerity conditions onto helpless developing countries was a key factor in this budget crunch.<sup>12</sup> Because of the Fund's deeply negative image, when they could, debtor states repaid their loans early and engaged in regional self-insurance schemes to avoid needing IMF help.<sup>13</sup> Recognizing its legitimacy problem, the IMF sought to address these perceptions and rebuild its standing during this time. It revised its conditionality policies to emphasize "country ownership" of reform programs, implying greater flexibility and less reliance on neoliberal prescriptions.<sup>14</sup> This evolution towards becoming less doctrinally neoliberal was evident in 2008 when the IMF recommended the adoption of capital controls in Iceland.<sup>15</sup>

The IMF thus entered the 2010s with an acute need and desire to regain its stature as a key player in international economic governance. Its marginal role in handling the global financial crisis of 2008 contributed to the IMF's keen sense that it needed to find a way to make itself relevant again. Despite the expansion of its war chest to US\$750 billion, it was not the IMF but the US Treasury that did the most to maintain liquidity in the international financial system by setting up swap lines directly with other central banks.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, even these boosted resources

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12 Seabrooke, "Legitimacy Gaps in the World Economy," 255–58.

13 Jeffrey M. Chwieroth, *Capital Ideas: The IMF and the Rise of Financial Liberalization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 6.

14 Jacqueline Best, "Legitimacy Dilemmas: The IMF's Pursuit of Country Ownership," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2007): 469–88.

15 Silla Sigurgeirsdóttir and Robert H. Wade, "From Control by Capital to Control of Capital: Iceland's Boom and Bust, and the IMF's Unorthodox Rescue Package," *Review of International Political Economy* 22, no. 1 (2015): 103–33; Sarah Babb, "The Washington Consensus as Transnational Policy Paradigm: Its Origins, Trajectory and Likely Successor," *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 2 (2013): 268–97.

16 Eric Helleiner, *The Status Quo Crisis: Global Financial Governance after the 2008 Financial Meltdown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

are insufficient to deal with the insolvency of a large economy.<sup>17</sup> A constant fear in the eurozone crisis was contagion to Spain or Italy, which were “too big to bail.” However, for the Fund’s leaders, it was imperative that the IMF get involved if it were not to become irrelevant. Dominique Strauss-Kahn (IMF managing director 2007–2011) explained that his decision to push an IMF role in the eurozone crisis against largely unwilling European leaders was because sitting on the sidelines “would have been lethal to the IMF.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Performing the orthodoxies of European integration*

The background knowledge underlying the eurozone shares many tacit assumptions of the larger European regional order in which it is nested. The euro was designed to facilitate and drive economic integration in Europe, as part of the orthodoxy of “ever closer union” expressed in the 1957 Rome Treaty and reinforced in subsequent documents and everyday political practice.<sup>19</sup> To overcome Europe’s dark and violent history, states needed to “force interdependence and make war among them impossible.”<sup>20</sup> It is obviously debatable whether the EU would actually fall apart and lead to war if a country were forced out of the eurozone. But for most practitioners the strongly-held conventional wisdom as reiterated by Angela Merkel in 2011 holds sway: “Nobody should believe that another half a century of peace and prosperity in Europe can be taken for granted. This is why I say: if the euro fails, Europe fails.”<sup>21</sup> To understand this belief

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17 Daniel McDowell, *Brother, Can You Spare a Billion? The United States, the IMF, and the International Lender of Last Resort* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

18 Quoted in Paul Blustein, *Laid Low: Inside the Crisis That Overwhelmed Europe and the IMF* (Waterloo, ON: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2016), 146.

19 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, “Opting Out of an Ever Closer Union: The Integration Doxa and the Management of Sovereignty,” *West European Politics* 34, no. 5 (2011): 1092–1113.

20 Montserrat Guibernau, “The Birth of a United Europe: On Why the EU Has Generated a ‘non-Emotional’ Identity,” *Nations & Nationalism* 17, no. 2 (2011): 309–10.

21 “‘If the Euro Fails, Europe Fails’ – Merkel Says EU must be bound closer together,” *Der Spiegel*, 7 September 2011. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/if-the-euro-fails-europe-fails-merkel-says-eu-must-be-bound-closer-together-a-784953.html>

and what the practical implications were, we must go deeper into the political ontology underlying Europe's international orders.

The tacit political ontology underlying the eurozone was expressed through its institutional design and practices. As a form of disciplinary liberalism, it assumes the fundamental problem to be avoided is reckless government spending, which racks up excessive debt. Institutions are needed to constrain states into policies of fiscal restraint and stability as well as market-oriented social structures.<sup>22</sup> These constraints would bind governments and insulate policies from being influenced by public pressure. The euro was meant to induce states to make labor more flexible, create entrepreneurship and price flexibility, and shift the allocation of resources to more efficient uses. Compliance and the proper enforcement of the eurozone's rules would induce modernizing domestic reforms along a liberal model, leading to collective peace and prosperity.<sup>23</sup> Following these recipes would lead to "convergence" on the model of the eurozone's wealthiest members.

To govern the monetary order, the ECB was conceived as an independent central bank with controlling inflation as its sole priority. This was modelled on the Bundesbank to secure Germany's acceptance. Strict criteria of budget and debt targets for states to meet were applied at the founding of the eurozone, which underscores the disciplinary nature of the European monetary order.<sup>24</sup> Enforcing these rules to make the eurozone work thus conveyed and reproduced a monetarist ontology of the social world. This is not a necessary feature of an economic and monetary union, since in principle one can be designed to convey any kind of ideological con-

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22 Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 57.

23 Kathleen R. McNamara, *The Currency of Ideas: Monetary Politics in the European Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 27–29; Brendan Brown, *Euro on Trial: To Reform or Split Up?* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 23–24; Ryner, "Europe's Ordoliberal Iron Cage."

24 Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 441–42.

tent. But the European monetary order was aimed at creating “a particular form of market civilization that is dominated by investors and disciplined by market forces.”<sup>25</sup>

Just as important as the purposes to be achieved through the single currency are ideas about what the European monetary order needed to avoid. The key risk was believed to be fiscal indiscipline, and consequently this was the ontological lens through which both EU member states and the EU institutions perceived the crisis and its possible solutions. Solidarity and the prevention of moral hazard were the main design principles. Solidarity meant that the eurozone states have a joint responsibility to prevent any member from defaulting on its debt, putting emphasis on the sacrosanct nature of sovereign commitments. It was also necessary to create political assurances that the eurozone would not become a transfer union through which richer states subsidized the others. Popular opposition in northern Europe and especially Germany tends to focus on this issue. Thus, Berlin’s key concern was to deter any situation where it faced the prospect of financing the imprudence of other eurozone members.<sup>26</sup>

The 1992 Maastricht Treaty set out an institutional design that addressed what were assumed to be the possible problems. The “no bailouts clause” (article 125) made it illegal for the EU or a member state to assume the liabilities of another member state, and the ECB was prohibited from financing state deficits through monetary expansion. This was supposed to deter any state from getting into unsustainable debt in the first place, but it also ruled out measures to resolve such a problem. As a result of this clause, a major reason that debt restructuring for Greece was considered too risky when the crisis began was the possibility of contagion. This

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25 Stephen Gill, “European Governance and New Constitutionalism: Economic and Monetary Union and Alternatives to Disciplinary Neoliberalism in Europe,” *New Political Economy* 3, no. 1 (1998): 15.

26 Martin Sandbu, *Europe’s Orphan: The Future of the Euro and the Politics of Debt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 17–19.

was based on the fear that spooked investors would drive up borrowing costs for other vulnerable eurozone states in the absence of a rescue fund. In turn, the lack of a rescue fund and the resistance in 2010 against setting one up was based on the political ontology that it would create moral hazard.

The ontological assumptions of European integration are also visible in the problems they did not anticipate. Most glaringly, while taking stringent measures to insulate the monetary union from ill-disciplined governments and popular demands, few safeguards were put in place against risks from the private sector. Liberal faith in rational expectations theory and the invisible hand of the market blinded policymakers to the possibility that market actors could also act in reckless and irrational ways. Likewise, the monetarist economic assumptions underlying the eurozone meant that the order featured strict guards against excessively loose spending, but not excessive fiscal contraction.<sup>27</sup> A government spending too little could not possibly be a problem. In February 2014, IMF Europe director Reza Moghadam criticized this “Maastricht mindset” as failing to account for “financial market indiscipline.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, once the Troika of the IMF, European Commission, and ECB had formed it became clear there were clashing orthodoxies in play leading to different understandings of what the problems were and how to solve them.

Crucially, these rules of the game became embedded in conceptions of European identity, at least among political and social elites.<sup>29</sup> Having a market economy with capital mobility defined what it meant to be a European state, and is part of the body of law (known as the *ac-*

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27 Sandbu, 19.

28 Reza Moghadam, “Maastricht and the Crisis in Europe: Where We’ve Been and What We’ve Learned,” 12 February 2014, ECB/NBB conference, Brussels. Available at <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sp021214>

29 Hartmut Kaelble, “Identification with Europe and Politicization of the EU since the 1980s,” in *European Identity*, ed. Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 198–201.

*quis communautaire*) which prospective EU members must adopt.<sup>30</sup> As Jabko argues, “the market” served as a broad repertoire of strategic justifications for the European Commission and other pro-integration actors to rally disparate interest groups in pursuit of institutional change.<sup>31</sup> Giving these reasons for action reifies and reinforces monetarism as an empowered orthodoxy and the basis for international orders in Europe. Another part of the Maastricht Treaty was the Stability and Growth Pact, which provides for sanctions on eurozone members who violate limits on deficits and debt. Although these rules were breached and bent in practice, they nevertheless provide a reference point for social categorization and the stigmatization of debtor states. Once embedded as the basis of stratification, debatable monetarist theory became self-evident orthodoxy, and competently performing practices based on them became a measure of social standing. Furthermore, by defining European identity in these terms, political alternatives can be classified as “un-European,” and a basis to ostracize an agent from the collective identity. This threatens their ability to perform identity by excluding them from the social category and positioning that is part of their sense of self.

### *Social categorization: Defining and being European*

The social categorization of some agents as “European” derives from the ontological and normative assumptions that underpin European integration. Firstly, there is the notion of some countries as “naturally” part of Europe, which is itself a geopolitical part of the tacit ontology. European integration’s moral purpose is understood as being the unification of Europe, overcoming the artificial divisions imposed by the Cold War.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, social categorization is also

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30 Abdelal, *Capital Rules*, 82–84.

31 Nicolas Jabko, *Playing the Market: A Political Strategy for Uniting Europe, 1985-2005* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 5–7.

32 Helene Sjursen, “A Certain Sense of Europe? Defining the EU through Enlargement,” *European Societies* 14, no. 4 (2012): 512–14.

defined by the dominant concept of what a good European state is like, or in theoretical terms how to competently perform a European identity.

These definitions became contentious because they are the basis on which some states position themselves as the standard that others must match in order to be recognized as being part of the collective identity. When enacted through everyday representations and interactions, background knowledge necessarily stigmatizes those whose are construed as not measuring up to the group's collective identity.<sup>33</sup> This threatens the security of their identity conceptions, but it also makes the social categorization a basis of negative comparison. The stigmatized agent may try to regain a secure position through strategies to *claim* their rightful place that emphasize they meet the standards or are working to do so. But they may also push back by contesting and redefining the background knowledge that has *placed* them in a compromised social position, unsettling their horizontal positioning as part of a desired group.

The conception of Greece as a natural part of Europe was a crucial reason that Greece was granted accession to the European Community (forerunner to the EU) in the first place. Greece's application in 1976 came while Western Europe was in economic recession; it was an "inopportune time for a new enlargement."<sup>34</sup> Greece's accession was soon followed by the applications of Portugal and Spain, substantiating concerns about the potential problems of a new group of less wealthy states joining the economic union. What worked strongly in Greece's favour was playing upon its cultural capital, by emphasizing its historic legacy and impact on European civiliza-

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33 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "Are We 'Lazy Greeks' or 'Nazi Germans'?: Negotiating International Hierarchies in the Euro Crisis," in *Hierarchies in World Politics*, ed. Ayşe Zarakol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 201–2.

34 Eirini Karamouzi, *Greece, the EEC and the Cold War, 1974-1979: The Second Enlargement* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 37.

tion, such that “there could not be Europe without Greece.”<sup>35</sup> The Greek government also emphasized its alignment with European democratic values, its desire to participate in deepening integration, and the need for the European Community to bolster young democracies.<sup>36</sup>

Thanks to the symbolic capital of European philhellenism on which they drew, these performances found a receptive audience. The inclusion of Greece was thus a means of casting the European integration project as built on shared values drawn from a common democratic political heritage rooted in ancient Greece.<sup>37</sup> This action asserted the moral purpose of the European integration project as more than just a common market. If spreading democracy was part of its moral purpose, this defined European identity in terms of liberal and democratic values.<sup>38</sup> These tacit beliefs about the purpose of European union as being the integration of countries into a “European liberal community of states” were used again during another round of enlargement debates in 2004.<sup>39</sup>

The implicit expectation was that new entrants would assimilate into the founding members’ idea of Europe and become more like the core countries. This is where the second issue of the dominant criteria for being a “good” member of the social category enters the picture. The mechanisms of the integration process were designed to discipline member states into this vision. The process of later members becoming more like the Western founding members is even described as “Europeanization,” and treated as equivalent to modernization.<sup>40</sup> During the crisis,

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35 Luca Asmonti, “From Giscard d’Estaing to Syntagma Square: The Use and Abuse of Ancient Greece in the Debate on Greece’s EU Membership,” in *The Reception of Ancient Virtues and Vices in Modern Popular Cultures: Beauty, Bravery, Blood and Glory*, ed. Eran Almagor and Lisa Maurice (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 295.

36 Susannah Verney, “The Dynamics of EU Accession: Turkish Travails in Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 9, no. 3 (2007): 319.

37 Asmonti, “From Giscard d’Estaing to Syntagma Square,” 297–98.

38 Karamouzi, *Greece, the EEC and the Cold War, 1974-1979: The Second Enlargement*, 50–54.

39 Frank Schimmelfennig, “The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union,” *International Organization* 55, no. 1 (2001): 48.

40 Kevin Featherstone, “‘Europeanization’ and the Centre Periphery: The Case of Greece in the 1990s,” *South European Society and Politics* 3, no. 1 (1998): 23–24.

constructions of cultural identity were also deployed, but this time in ways that disparaged Greece's claim of rightful membership in the European category. Greece and other Mediterranean countries were cast as lazy, corrupt and not truly belonging to modern Europe. These claims sought to maintain the social positioning of "Europe" by casting the crisis-hit countries as failing to live up to this identity, placing them as deviants who did not properly fit the social categorization of being European.

This shows that by the turn of the 21st century, a shift had taken place in the dominant conception of Europe as a social category. With more emphasis placed on the Economic and Monetary Union, it was not just democracy but the embrace of neoliberal economic and social values that was demanded. Greece might have to be accepted as being intrinsically European based on history and culture, but it was to be disciplined into the economic and societal definitions of what a good European state was like. Greece was initially prevented from joining the monetary union as it did not meet the convergence criteria in 1999, before finally being admitted in 2001. For Greek governments, "Maastricht set targets that were met by diverse means,"<sup>41</sup> which is to say they did everything necessary to meet them but had little will to go further against political opposition to stronger structural reforms. This included cheating. It was later revealed that some of the improvement in Greece's fiscal and debt numbers was a sham achieved through an off-market debt swap organized by investment bank Goldman Sachs. This gave the illusion of taking 2 per cent of Greece's debt off the books.<sup>42</sup> The desperation of this scheme emphasizes the importance of social positioning as part of the European core for Greece's identity.

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41 Kevin Featherstone, "Greece and EMU: Between External Empowerment and Domestic Vulnerability," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 41, no. 5 (2003): 938.

42 Robert B. Reich, "How Goldman Sachs profited from the Greek debt crisis," *The Nation*, 16 July 2005; Allan Little, "How 'magic' made Greek debt disappear before it joined the euro," *BBC News*, 3 February 2012.

Being left behind in the “second class” group that failed to meet the criteria to use the euro could not be countenanced.<sup>43</sup>

In summary, the issue of being properly European was at stake in eurozone crisis. Greece had been recognized as being integral to defining Europe in terms of history and cultural identity. It was thus taken for granted that “Europe” could not lose Greece, and hence the prospect of Grexit threatened the overall European integration project. Likewise, Greece’s own identity conception emphasized its social positioning as prestigiously European, placing itself as distinct from its neighbours Turkey and the Balkan states. The background knowledge underpinning the European monetary order, composed of political ontology, moral purposes, and social categorization, is thus vital to make sense of two dynamics observed in the euro crisis. Firstly, why did the European creditors impose unworkable policy conditionalities despite contrary views and resistance from the IMF? Secondly, why were both Greece and the EU institutions were willing to pay such huge material costs not only to keep Greece in the eurozone but to minimize revisions of the order’s practices and background knowledge?

### **Last resort and the haircut, 2010-2011**

Backgrounded by the global credit crunch and financial meltdown of 2008, the crisis in Greece was set off when the newly elected Pasok government of George Papandreou revealed in October 2009 that previous governments had under-reported Greece’s budget deficits. The true figure of 12.5 per cent of GDP was more than twice what had previously been reported. Borrowing costs for Greece rose by almost 40 per cent over the following three months as yields on its ten-year bonds reached 6.9 per cent, and by the end of January 2010 costs of insurance against a Greek default rose to record levels. With investors unconvinced by Papandreou’s moves to cut

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43 Bernhard Herz and Angelos Kotios, “Coming Home to Europe: Greece and the Euro,” *Intereconomics*, August 2000, 171.

spending and raise taxes, the prospect of Greece being unable to finance spending and the need for external assistance was growing.

At this point, efforts to find a solution within the eurozone ran up against the dominant background knowledge structuring the European monetary order. In the eurozone's tacit political ontology, it was considered self-evident that investors price bonds based on the state's fiscal discipline, the hallmark of good economic governance. "Markets will respond if you show you can reduce the deficit," was the mantra that was told to Greece's finance minister George Papaconstantinou by German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble.<sup>44</sup> This reflected a monetarist orthodoxy that austerity would lead to growth through confidence effects. As the situation worsened in January 2010, ECB president Jean-Claude Trichet took aside prime minister Papandreou as they attended the World Economic Forum in Davos to reiterate that there would be no rescue and even more austerity was needed.<sup>45</sup> A secret meeting with IMF managing director Dominique Strauss-Kahn, held in the kitchens of the conference venue, explored the possibility of an IMF loan. But at that point the Greek cabinet considered it "equivalent to declaring default" and thus ruled it out.<sup>46</sup> EU state and institutional leaders sought to show through responding to the crisis that Europe was able to competently handle its own affairs. The center-left Pasok government of Greece played its part in this effort while seeking to maintain the regard of its peers and not harm the collective social position by defaulting on its debt or going outside of the European order for solutions.

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44 Quoted in George Papaconstantinou, *Game Over: The Inside Story of the Greek Crisis* (Athens: Papadopoulos Publishing, 2016), 58.

45 Papaconstantinou, 69.

46 Papaconstantinou, 78.

For this same reason, European leaders were highly resistant to the involvement of the IMF, with the ECB and France the most vocal on this issue. French president Nicolas Sarkozy saw eurozone membership as conferring “privileged solidarity” in the European club.<sup>47</sup> This reflects a *claiming* strategy that performs European collective identity as being inherently prestigious, and is in line with the observable implication that identity performance was a key consideration for deciding what to do in a crisis situation. Sarkozy viewed IMF participation as stigmatizing not just for Greece but for Europe, and avoiding IMF involvement was hence associated with Europe’s social superiority in a global context. Meeting with Greek leaders in Paris, Sarkozy told them: “Forget the IMF. The IMF is not for Europe. It’s for Africa – for Burkina Faso!”<sup>48</sup> Other state leaders and the ECB viewed Europe’s social position as being directly implicated by the question of whether European institutions were effective enough to handle their own internal problems. At an emergency meeting of the European Council on February 11, 2010, leaders continued to reject IMF involvement. During the meeting economic affairs commissioner Olli Rehn asserted that anything more than technical assistance from the IMF would signify “an end to the eurozone.”<sup>49</sup> To the media, leaders maintained the line that Greece had not asked for support, faced no threat of default, and there was no need for an IMF loan.<sup>50</sup> Involving the IMF was considered a performance that would be a mark of shame showing Europe’s incapacity.

The crucial exception was Angela Merkel, who viewed the IMF’s expertise and technocratic legitimacy as politically necessary to gain domestic support in Germany for an emergency

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47 Blustein, *Laid Low*, 97–98.

48 Papaconstantinou, *Game Over*, 93. The meeting took place on 7 March 2010.

49 Quoted in Papaconstantinou, 80–81.

50 Ben Hall and Tony Barber, “EU pledge on Greece fails to calm fears,” *Financial Times*, 12 February 2010; Stephen Castle, “European leaders vow to aid Greece, but skirt details,” *The New York Times*, 12 February 2010.

loan. Her insistence on IMF involvement proved decisive, but it came with a catch that co-opted the IMF into the European order's social performances. Aligning with an ordoliberal political ontology that saw the crisis as caused by government indiscipline and concerned with moral hazard, the bailout mechanism could only be activated as a last resort ("*ultima ratio*") if Greece was on the brink of default. The IMF went along with the European monetary orthodoxy in contravention of its standard practice of making an early intervention to create confidence and encourage financial markets to keep lending. Despite ostensibly having brought in the IMF for its expertise in such matters, the Fund's practices were rejected because in the orthodoxy of the European monetary order, such unwarranted generosity would encourage irresponsible profligacy. Merkel portrayed the insistence on harsh conditions as part of being "a good European... one who abides by the European treaties and national law and thus sees to it that the eurozone's stability isn't harmed."<sup>51</sup> The acceptable and conceivable rescue options during the crisis were connected to the social positioning of Germany and the ECB as moral guardians of the European order.<sup>52</sup> This was what was needed to make the single currency work, and what "good Europeans" would do to fulfil the European monetary order's moral purposes.

Thus, the tacit background knowledge that structured the European monetary order led through two mechanisms to the "extend and pretend" nature of crisis management. The pretense here was that Greece was not insolvent and just needed emergency help. Firstly, existing background knowledge formed the basis of a moralistic popular hostility to bailouts in Germany and many other creditor states. Policy choices, even necessary ones, were thus charged with political

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51 Philipp Wittrock, "Chancellor rebuffs 'Club Med': Merkel maintains firm course against Greece," *Spiegel Online*, 25 March 2010.

52 On the ECB's "guardian" identity see Susanne Lütz, Sven Hilgers, and Sebastian Schneider, "Accountants, Europeanists and Monetary Guardians: Bureaucratic Cultures and Conflicts in IMF-EU Lending Programs," *Review of International Political Economy* 26, no. 6 (2019): 1187–1210.

costs: publics feeling “blackmailed into keeping the show on the road.”<sup>53</sup> Secondly, the background knowledge was also practically expressed in eurozone institutions that made an early intervention and debt restructuring at the outbreak in 2010 impossible. The no bailouts clause and the lack of a rescue fund were key reasons that debt restructuring was not pursued in 2010.<sup>54</sup> It was feared the admission that Greece was insolvent could have led to crisis contagion because there were no mechanisms to prevent it. While these have in retrospect been treated as institutional deficiencies, they were not inadvertent design flaws, they were meant to serve as credible commitments to deter fiscal irresponsibility.<sup>55</sup> The absence of rescue equipment was supposed to prevent a crisis by ensuring everyone would be responsible.

*The IMF as outsider: contention over debt restructuring*

As IMF director Reza Moghadam’s criticism of the “Maastricht mindset” suggests, there were significant differences between the IMF and the EU institutions on the proper handling of the eurozone crisis. Ideologically, the disciplinary, austerity-oriented orthodoxy the European members of the Troika held was one that the IMF was moving away from. The 2001-02 crisis in Argentina had led the IMF to adopt a focus on debt sustainability, adopting a new rule in 2003 requiring IMF staff to certify a high probability that the loan would be repaid. If this was not the case, debt restructuring would need to be imposed on creditors before the IMF could disburse funds.<sup>56</sup> The IMF had also adopted a greater focus on the need for economic growth that led it to take a softer line on fiscal policy. This difference highlights the different identity performances that Troika members enacted in their practices. In line with their conception as enforcers of the

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53 Sandbu, *Europe’s Orphan*, 121.

54 Poul Thomsen, “The IMF and the Greek crisis: Myths and realities.” Speech at London School of Economics, 30 September 2019, para 39-43. Available at <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/10/01/sp093019-The-IMF-and-the-Greek-Crisis-Myths-and-Realities>

55 Sandbu, *Europe’s Orphan*, 109.

56 Blustein, *Laid Low*, 29–32.

disciplinary European order, the Commission and ECB were fixated on loan recipients meeting the Stability and Growth Pact fiscal targets. For the IMF, fiscal targets were only a means to the end of debt sustainability.<sup>57</sup> This new orthodoxy was itself a response seeking to correct previous failures that had diminished its social position in the global context. There was nothing to gain for the IMF in reproducing the European monetary order's ideational structures, but it ended up being co-opted into supporting them and keeping its objections behind the façade of Troika consensus.

In contrast with the IMF, at the beginning of the crisis European leaders did not face a threat to their identities that might have forced them to rethink the tacit background knowledge embedded in their practices. During the eurozone crisis the European Commission and ECB adopted much the same stance towards crisis-hit debtor states that the IMF had discarded after the Asian crisis, such as highly detailed lists of bailout conditions.<sup>58</sup> The IMF had to defer to its European partners in the Troika in order to play a role in resolving the crisis. Because of this, the Fund had to compromise with a program that did not fit its evolving practices on the need to secure domestic legitimacy ("country ownership"), carry out debt restructuring, and minimize the extent of conditionality. As an independent inquiry would later conclude, this led to the damaging "perception that the IMF treated Europe differently."<sup>59</sup>

For the IMF, securing a role to play on the stage of the eurozone crisis meant deferring to the leading players' insistence that debt restructuring was off the table. IMF directors grudgingly

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57 Lütz, Hilgers, and Schneider, "Accountants, Europeanists and Monetary Guardians," 1200.

58 Independent Evaluation Office, "The IMF and the Crises in Greece, Ireland, and Portugal" (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, July 28, 2016), 38, <https://ieo.imf.org/en/our-work/evaluation-reports/Completed/2016-0728-the-imf-and-the-crises-in-greece-ireland-and-portugal>.

59 Independent Evaluation Office, 37.

voted to approve the loan despite misgivings about the “unusually high risks” of the program.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, strictly speaking Greece was not eligible because IMF staff could not certify there was a high probability of the loan being repaid. Thus, a revision to the debt sustainability rule was also buried in the proposal allowing for exceptions when there was a risk of systemic spillover, raising directors’ suspicions that staff were trying to sneak it through.<sup>61</sup> The 2010 bailout package totalled €110 billion, of which the IMF’s share of €30 billion was the largest in history relative to Greece’s quota. Despite the insistence by both the Troika and the Greek government that debt restructuring was off the table, the bailout failed to convince investors and analysts. Bond market movements reflected the belief that either restructuring or full default was inevitable.

Although the IMF’s outsider position constrained its ability to assert its practices over those of the European institutions in May 2010, once its place was firmer it became more willing to push the issue of debt restructuring. Behind its public unity with the Troika, in spring 2010 some senior IMF staff already considered Greece’s debt unsustainable and began secretly working on a plan to force bondholders to take losses (a “haircut”).<sup>62</sup> Later that year, IMF economists went to Athens to discuss debt restructuring without the knowledge of their European partners in the Troika.<sup>63</sup> On April 14, 2011, the IMF threatened to pull the plug based on the IMF rule that programs must be “fully financed,” aiming to force Europe to haircut Greece’s debt. This debt restructuring would be the main area of contention over the following two years and was finally implemented as part of the second bailout in March 2012.

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60 IMF, “The acting chair’s summing up: Greece – Request for Stand-By Arrangement; Rule K-1 report on breach of obligations under Article VIII, section 5 of the Articles of Agreement.” Executive Board Meeting 10/45. 9 May 2010.

61 Blustein, *Laid Low*, 134–41.

62 Blustein, 114–20.

63 Blustein, 193.

The IMF also had to work to change the political ontology in the background knowledge of the other actors. Greece had to be prodded to see debt restructuring as in its interests, rather than a “catastrophic” move as prime minister Papandreou believed.<sup>64</sup> Why did the IMF need to do this? In short, because the Papandreou government bought into the European monetary order’s background knowledge and their stigmatization according to it,<sup>65</sup> and wanted to show its resolve to make tough decisions. Finance minister Papaconstantinou welcomed the impetus for structural reforms of what he regarded as “in a way the last Soviet economy in Europe.”<sup>66</sup> While asking for a longer time to meet the deficit reduction target, the Papandreou government did not challenge the austerity orthodoxy behind the program, nor what they recognized as a “moralistic and punitive” attitude from the European institutions.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the Samaras government (2012-2014) sought to perform Greece as a “good pupil” showing “a real will to change things.”<sup>68</sup> For the Greek establishment parties, restoring Greece’s social position within Europe meant accepting the socially stratifying criteria by which they failed to measure up, reinforcing their subordination. Even assuming that Greece’s material interest in fighting back was objectively discernible, for most of the crisis it was outweighed by an interest in maintaining social position as part of the European core.

On the other side, the creditor states and the EU institutions had social positioning incentives to stigmatize and punish Greece’s deviance. This served to reinforce the background knowledge that placed them in superior social positions. The relative social positions of Germany and

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64 Nicholas Paphitis, “Greek prime minister say no new austerity measures foreseen; rules out debt restructuring.” *Associated Press*, 12 September 2010.

65 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, “Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society,” *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (2014): 143–76.

66 Papaconstantinou, *Game Over*, 104; 129.

67 Papaconstantinou, 125.

68 Adler-Nissen, “Are We ‘Lazy Greeks’ or ‘Nazi Germans’?,” 216.

the EU periphery states was often depicted as a tutelage relationship, with Merkel described by the media as dealing with “unruly children.”<sup>69</sup> The ECB’s intransigence can also be attributed to the need to assert its independence by pushing back against the preferences of the eurozone’s most powerful states. In practical terms, this meant Trichet resisted measures that ultimately proved necessary to resolve the crisis, such as a bond-buying program and establishing a rescue fund. This was nevertheless in line with Trichet’s own notions of legitimate practices in the European order.

The IMF thus faced a catch-22. On the one hand, it needed to perform its identity through the euro crisis to show its relevance and importance in the international economic order. But the junior partner role and the policy compromises the Fund accepted for a seat at the table implicated the IMF in the Troika’s collective mistakes. These errors contributed to Greece’s economic depression and brought the eurozone itself to the brink of catastrophe. Fiscal austerity mandated by the 2010 bailout proved to be counter-productive as Greece’s economic output declined, pushing the debt-to-GDP ratio higher. Greece’s recession deepened in 2011 as output contracted by 9 per cent and unemployment rose to 18 per cent, and over 44 per cent for youth aged 18 to 25. This made the plan for Greece to resume normal government financing on the bond markets in 2012 increasingly unrealistic. Ratings agencies pushed its credit rating lower and lower, reaching junk status in June 2011. According to an IMF evaluation in 2013, the dampening effect of austerity on economic growth was two times what was estimated and the delay in debt restructuring let many private creditors off the hook.<sup>70</sup> The IMF thus became

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69 Konstantin von Hammerstein and René Pfister, “A Cold Heart for Europe,” *Der Spiegel*, 12 December 2012. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/analysis-of-chancellor-merkel-euro-crisis-approach-a-872195.html>

70 IMF, “Greece: Ex Post Evaluation of Exceptional Access under the 2010 Stand-By Arrangement,” Country Report 13/156 (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, June 2013), 21–22; 24–25, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2013/cr13156.pdf>.

increasingly open in its criticism of the European insistence on fiscal austerity in the Greek reform program, as it came into conflict with its doctrinal focus on debt sustainability.

### **Contestation and the brink of Grexit, 2015**

Alexis Tsipras became prime minister of Greece in January 2015 following an election victory that was as much about Syriza's programmatic promise to end austerity as its successful channelling of public anger and desire for confrontation. They engaged in counter-stigmatization to reassert Greece's social position as a sovereign equal of other EU member states. The Syriza government struck back in particular at narratives from both inside and outside the country that blamed the crisis on moral failings and corruption allegedly endemic to Greek culture and society.<sup>71</sup> A large part of their electoral appeal was thus the promise to restore Greece's dignity, status, and pride.<sup>72</sup>

The new Greek government's attempt at rhetorical coercion sought to emphasize their democratic mandate and the popular support for their bid to renegotiate the loan conditions. The new government sought to cast itself as having greater legitimacy to determine policy than the Troika because it was democratically elected. It demanded that concessions be made to address the "humanitarian crisis" of Greece's economic distress. This rhetoric attempted to leverage and threaten the EU's identity conception through claims that its treatment of Greece did not live up to the values of democracy and solidarity it promotes.<sup>73</sup> Germany's leadership was thus por-

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71 Donatella della Porta, Hara Kouki, and Joseba Fernández, "Left's Love and Hate for Europe: Syriza, Podemos and Critical Visions of Europe during the Crisis," in *Euroseptisim, Democracy and the Media: Communicating Europe, Contesting Europe*, ed. Manuela Caiani and Simona Guerra (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 219–40.

72 Reinhard Wolf, "Debt, Dignity, and Defiance: Why Greece Went to the Brink," *Review of International Political Economy* 25, no. 6 (2018): 829–53.

73 Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–58; Juan Díez Medrano, "The Public Sphere and the EU's Political Identity," in *European Identity*, ed. Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 94–95.

trayed as oppressive and victimizing, something that aimed to induce compromises from Berlin with the threat of being counter-stigmatized. The first official event Tsipras held as prime minister was to visit a memorial to the Greek resistance, located at the site of a 1944 mass execution by the Nazi occupation.

### *Identity performances and the struggle for social positioning*

The Syriza government had campaigned as a political party representing and channelling the people in a democratic struggle against the Troika and its neoliberal ideology.<sup>74</sup> Hence, their confrontational rhetoric on the international stage reflected popular indignation and desires for resistance, which often lashed out at Germany and German leaders as reprising the dark past of Nazi imperialism.<sup>75</sup> However, at the same time Syriza was ideologically committed to Europeanism and pushed its claims within the frame of seeking to reform the European project.<sup>76</sup> Behind the political rhetoric, Varoufakis consulted with a variety of sympathetic political insiders to couch policy proposals in acceptable technocratic codes. Their contestation of the European regional order aimed to de-legitimize its ordoliberal orthodoxy and practices, as part of an ambition to institute a different ideological basis for the order.<sup>77</sup> In addition to their immediate concerns as the governing party of Greece, Syriza hoped to ally with other anti-austerity movements in Europe to achieve institutional reform of the EU. Tsipras had called for banking union and a

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74 Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Left-Wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of Syriza," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 119–42.

75 Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, "The Ambivalence of Anti-Austerity Indignation in Greece: Resistance, Hegemony and Complicity," *History & Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2014): 488–506; Adler-Nissen, "Are We 'lazy Greeks' or 'Nazi Germans'?"

76 Nikolaos Nikolakakis, "Syriza's Stance Vis-à-Vis the European Union Following the Financial Crisis: The Persistence of Left Europeanism and the Role of the European Left Party," *European Politics and Society* 18, no. 2 (2016): 143.

77 della Porta, Kouki, and Fernández, "Left's Love and Hate for Europe"; Susannah Verney, "Waking the 'Sleeping Giant' or Expressing Domestic Dissent? Mainstreaming Euroscepticism in Crisis-Stricken Greece," *International Political Science Review* 36, no. 3 (2015): 279–95.

“European Marshall Plan” at a conference of European social democratic parties in 2013.<sup>78</sup> To mobilize this political support, they attempted to use appeals to democratic values and legitimacy as leverage against the Troika and the status quo in the EU. They also sought to build a transnational coalition for EU reform with parties like Spain’s Podemos, hoping to challenge the ordoliberal background knowledge of the existing order.<sup>79</sup> These ambitions necessarily presumed Greece’s European-ness and took for granted that its proper social position is within Europe. They challenged the tacit definitions of who is a more competent performer of European identity that are emergent from the background knowledge embedded in the EU’s economic institutions.

Since Greece could not unilaterally change these tacit meanings, the Syriza government was constrained by the ideational structures they referenced. Moreover, their performance of Greek identity needed to resonate with their domestic audience to maintain political support. For Greece, European integration was seen as helping to cement democratic change at the end of the Colonels Regime period of dictatorship in 1974 and its entry into the European Community.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, Greek popular discourse associates the euro and the EU with Greece’s social categorization as part of the modern West. Public opinion was thus firmly in favor of retaining the euro, a hallmark of this social position.<sup>81</sup> This slippage between Europe’s cultural and political-institutional meanings, and Syriza’s own political commitment to them, defined their interests and constrained their strategies because this meant leaving the eurozone was not an option.

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78 Alexis Tsipras, “What SYRIZA will propose to Europe,” presentation at the Bruno Kreisky-Forum, Vienna, 4 December 2013.

79 Nikolaos Zahariadis, “Values as Barriers to Compromise? Ideology, Transnational Coalitions, and Distributive Bargaining in Negotiations over the Third Greek Bailout,” *International Negotiation* 21, no. 3 (2016): 485–86.

80 Spyros Economides, “The Europeanisation of Greek Foreign Policy,” *West European Politics* 28, no. 2 (2007): 471–91.

81 Chris Rogers and Sofia Vasilopoulou, “Making Sense of Greek Austerity,” *The Political Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2012): 777–85.

Tsipras eventually backed down, making the calculation that Greek voters prioritized staying in Europe over ending austerity. This proved to be the politically astute choice as snap elections in September 2015 returned Syriza to power, after and despite the failed confrontation and the crisis Greece experienced.

### *Challenging and defending the orthodoxy*

To fulfil its campaign promise to “tear up” the memorandums, the Syriza government sought two key policy changes. Firstly, the reduction of the primary surplus target to 1.5 per cent of GDP, which would substantially reduce fiscal austerity, and secondly, debt restructuring in the form of swapping existing debt for growth-linked bonds with longer maturity dates. These were not radical proposals; as shown earlier the IMF had been pressing its European partners on both these issues for several years. Moreover, at the height of the crisis, ECB president Mario Draghi implicitly blamed Germany for the impasse when he told journalists: “It is uncontroversial that debt relief is necessary and I think that nobody has ever disputed that.”<sup>82</sup> It may be plausible that the EU creditors held firm simply to exert bargaining power and avoid domestic political costs, standard explanations that Varoufakis himself reached for in trying to understand how his proposals were received.<sup>83</sup> But it does not explain why they drove for an ideal point of macroeconomic conditionalities for Greece that the IMF and ECB told them was materially untenable and would harm their interests.

The desire to defend the background knowledge of the European monetary order helps to explicate why there was such strong resistance to Greece’s demands. The ontology that eco-

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82 David Charter, “Bailout is unworkable and Greece could leave, says Schäuble,” *The Times* (London), 17 July 2015.

83 Yanis Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room: My Battle with the European and American Deep Establishment* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017), 237; Nikolaos Zahariadis, “Bargaining Power and Negotiation Strategy: Examining the Greek Bailouts 2010-2015,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 24, no. 5 (2017): 657–94.

conomic progress would result from disciplined obedience to the rules was the tacit background knowledge on which the European monetary order was built.<sup>84</sup> In essence, supporting the status quo became conflated with supporting its tacit moral purpose, as well as how the social category of being “European” was defined. As IMF deputy managing director David Lipton observed in 2016, “[t]he problem of Greece was partly that it was a European country and part of the euro-zone and that Europe came to the subject with some strongly held views that European countries don’t have debt relief.”<sup>85</sup> A plausible course of action was thus ruled out because it was perceived as a performance that would endanger Europe’s identity. Prestigious social positions and perceived competence, accumulated through their own adherence to fiscal and economic discipline, would be undermined if these normative values were compromised. Moreover, those states with relatively less status in the EU context had incentives to align with the orthodoxy in order to support their categorization within the core group. They had taken stakes in the status quo and accumulated symbolic capital through their own austerity policies and adherence to bailout conditions. Varoufakis observed that in Eurogroup meetings the finance ministers from Eastern Europe and previous bailout recipients generally sought to “out-Schäuble Schäuble.”<sup>86</sup>

Greece’s rejection of the underlying principles of not only the loan programs but also those of the European monetary order created mistrust. This mistrust touched relations on an interpersonal level and was visible in the social friction between Varoufakis and the other finance ministers in the multilateral setting of Eurogroup meetings. At odds with the tacit understanding of the Eurogroup as an informal venue for finance ministers to work collaboratively on common

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84 Femke A.W.J. Van Esch, “Exploring the Keynesian-Ordoliberal Divide: Flexibility and Convergence in French and German Leaders’ Economic Ideas during the Euro-Crisis,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 22, no. 3 (2014): 288–302.

85 Shawn Donnan, “Greek debt deal reflects shifting powers among IMF members,” *Financial Times*, 26 May 2016.

86 Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room*, 274–75.

problems, Varoufakis approached them as a representative of Greece at a negotiating session.<sup>87</sup> In his first meeting on February 11 he infuriated his peers by consulting with prime minister Tsipras on whether to accept a draft communiqué and then following his instructions to reject it.<sup>88</sup> While this would have been entirely normal behaviour in a different diplomatic setting, in the Eurogroup they were grave violations of standard practice.

Hopes of compromise were raised on February 20 when Varoufakis secured flexibility on the primary surplus target in exchange for an extension to the 2012 bailout program. There was however no let-up in pressure as the Greek government was constantly scraping together cash to make scheduled payments to creditors. Its banking system was also relying on emergency liquidity assistance from the ECB simply to keep functioning. The April 24 meeting in Riga descended into acrimony over the Tsipras government's change to the practices of meetings with Troika officials, which sought to reassert the sovereign state's position of relational superiority to unelected technocrats.<sup>89</sup> Greece had insisted that meetings would only involve officials of the same rank, and would take place in Brussels or hotels in Athens rather than in ministerial offices.<sup>90</sup> Through this change, the Syriza government sought to end practices that symbolized and performed Greece's inferiority as a "debt colony."<sup>91</sup> With the Eurogroup demanding this be reversed, the Greek government's refusal to concede on this largely symbolic issue of relational positioning led to Varoufakis being pilloried with veiled threats of Grexit.<sup>92</sup> Fitting the observable implications of social positioning, this also contested background knowledge that priv-

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87 Chris J. Bickerton, "The Real Sins of Varoufakis," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 9, 2015.

88 Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room*, 243–44.

89 James Kanter, "Greece told to go faster in overhaul of economy," *The New York Times*, 25 April 2015.

90 Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room*, 340.

91 Varoufakis, 48–49.

92 Varoufakis, 386. Peter Spiegel, "EU frustration over Greece boils over at Eurogroup meeting," *Financial Times*, 24 April 2015.

ileged technocratic expertise over democratic mandates in determining policy, showing the salience of both identity performance and struggles to define background knowledge amidst crisis conditions.

If the European creditors thought Varoufakis was the problem, sidelining him from the negotiations did little to unblock the impasse because the fundamental disagreement about the economic practices of a good European state continued. Tsipras gave way by accepting a primary surplus of 3.5 per cent of GDP, but proposals for aggressive tax rises to meet it were sent back to Athens with extensive demands for revisions.<sup>93</sup> After more long hours in Brussels produced no progress, on July 26 Tsipras announced that Greece would hold a referendum on the last creditors' proposal in which the government would campaign for a "no" vote. Greece was being given an "extortionate ultimatum that calls for strict and humiliating austerity without end," his speech to Greek voters said.<sup>94</sup> But winning the vote actually left Tsipras cornered. On the night of the referendum with 61 per cent of voters voting no, Tsipras struggled to decide on his next move and told Varoufakis he had "messed up badly,"<sup>95</sup> suggesting the Greek leadership had not expected the result. Tsipras might have gone with the desire of many of his party's legislators who were willing to exit the euro in order to end austerity. Instead, he convened a seven-hour meeting with the leaders of the main opposition parties (excluding the fascist Golden Dawn), after which he announced the referendum result was a mandate for further negotiations, to the anger of his own party.<sup>96</sup>

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93 Blustein, *Laid Low*, 420–21.

94 Quoted in Zachary Karabell, "The Greek catastrophe is finally here (unless it isn't)", *Politico Magazine*, 29 June 2015.

95 Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room*, 467; 537.

96 Dina Kyriakidou, "The man who cost Greece billions," *Reuters*, 20 July 2015.

### *The brink of Grexit*

In the wake of the referendum, with capital controls imposed and Greeks limited to bank withdrawals of €60 per day, Tsipras was ready for a climb-down. He secured a vote in parliament to reopen bailout negotiations based on a new proposal which, as analysts noted, was similar to the “ultimatum” he had urged the voters to reject. However, some state leaders had already decided to go further and push Greece out. On July 10, Schäuble pre-empted the EU summit meant to discuss a deal by circulating a memo proposing that Greece be suspended from the eurozone, jolting the European Commission and ECB. Schäuble claims that 15 of the Eurogroup finance ministers were on board with his proposal to suspend Greece from the eurozone for five years, with only France, Italy, and Cyprus against it.<sup>97</sup> The July 11 Eurogroup meeting turned “aggressively anti-Greek.”<sup>98</sup> Finland and Slovakia had already ruled out a new bailout and tried to shift the agenda to coping with the expulsion of Greece. Germany’s two key demands, a five-year suspension from the eurozone and setting up a trust fund to sell off Greek state assets, were put into the memo for the leaders’ summit the following day.

The summit of EU leaders left most of them sitting idly around the European Council building while Merkel and French president François Hollande conducted an overnight ten-hour “mental waterboarding” of Tsipras in Council president Donald Tusk’s office.<sup>99</sup> Even with Grexit now clearly the consequence of a failure to reach agreement, it came perilously close to breaking down over the issue of how hypothetical money in a fund for the sale of Greek state assets should be earmarked. With both sides exhausted and convinced they had already given up

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97 Interview in Jean Quatremer, “Wolfgang Schäuble: ‘Quinze pays étaient en faveur du Grexit’,” *Libération*, 20 October 2015. Available at <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/2015/10/21/wolfgang-schauble-quinze-pays-etaient-en-faveur-du-grexit/>

98 Ian Traynor, “Three Days That Saved the Euro,” *The Guardian*, October 22, 2015.

99 Traynor. The quote is attributed to an unnamed senior EU official.

too much, a difference of €2.5 billion nearly proved the breaking point. With the other heads of government outside the room and Tsipras having agreed on the final sticking point, Merkel turned down the compromise and sought to end the talks. After Hollande's attempt to convince her to stay at the table, Tusk appealed to Merkel's sense of history and her legacy, saying that the EU was at stake because of a "paltry" €2.5 billion that might not materialize anyway.<sup>100</sup> While agreement was finally reached and Greece ultimately secured a third bailout, the outcome could very easily have been different.

This did not necessarily mean the status quo in the European regional order had been preserved. Reflecting on the outcome a few days later, Tusk told journalists, "I am really afraid of this ideological or political contagion, not financial contagion, of this Greek crisis. [...] Especially this radical leftist illusion that you can build some alternative to this traditional European vision of the economy."<sup>101</sup> Indeed, while not always from the left side of the spectrum, contestation of the European regional order and discontent with European integration did not end with Greece having been pulled back into line. Meanwhile, questioned during the subsequent election campaign about what had been gained from the crisis, Tsipras claimed, "the big victory... is that we changed the way that Greeks are seen by the European public. [...] The opinion now is that the Greek people were unjustly tortured and were paying the price for bad political choices and mistakes made by the previous Greek governments."<sup>102</sup>

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100 Traynor.

101 Interview in Peter Spiegel, "Donald Tusk interview: the annotated transcript," *Financial Times*, 16 July 2015.

102 Euronews, "Exclusive: Tsipras on why Greece is better off with a third bailout," *The Global Conversation*, 15 September 2015. <https://www.euronews.com/2015/09/15/alexis-tsipras-why-greece-is-better-off-with-a-third-bailout>

## Material interests and alternative explanations

A key alternative explanation for the course of the eurozone crisis in Greece would be to focus on the pursuit of material interests, approaching the crisis as an instance of bargaining with each side aiming to maximize their wealth and power. One problem in this case is that even if the players had clear perceptions of their material interests, the means to obtain them were not knowable. This is due to the existence of deep uncertainty, meaning that agents have no basis for attaching credible probabilities to what might happen in the future.<sup>103</sup> A simple approach is to take the material interests of the creditor states and the ECB as to minimize the size of the bailouts, and avoid Greece defaulting. However, the effect of the loan conditions imposed on Greece was to wreck the economy out of which loan repayments would be paid, making default even more likely in 2015 than when Greece was first bailed out in 2010. The mistaken and counter-productive belief in austerity led to the need for further, bigger bailouts, something obviously against the material interests of the creditors even if the consequences fell most heavily on the Greek people.

Even putting aside unintended consequences, the nature of the crisis means the loans were not really concessions or gifts to Greece. Several analyses model the crisis as a commonly desired adjustment of the eurozone institutions, in which the agents with more power imposed the costs of adaptation on the weaker parties.<sup>104</sup> But the first bailout was also a bailout of European banks. In December 2010, EU banks outside of Greece had €52.2 billion in exposure to Greece's public sector debt, or close to half the €110 billion of the first bailout; French and German banks

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103 Stephen C. Nelson and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Uncertainty, Risk, and the Financial Crisis of 2008," *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (2014): 362.

104 Frank Schimmelfennig, "Liberal Intergovernmentalism and the Euro Area Crisis," *Journal of European Public Policy* 22, no. 2 (2015): 191; Zahariadis, "Bargaining Power and Negotiation Strategy"; Darren J. Lim, Michalis Moutselos, and Michael McKenna, "Puzzled out? The Unsurprising Outcomes of the Greek Bailout Negotiations," *Journal of European Public Policy* 26, no. 3 (2019): 327–29.

accounted for two-thirds of this figure.<sup>105</sup> Thus, giving Greece too small a loan would, paradoxically, have been against the creditors' interests if it signalled to bond markets that the continued integrity of the eurozone was in question.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, managing market psychology was a crucial aspect of the crisis because of the prospect of "accidental Grexit." A panic leading to a bank run or massive bond sell-off could have turned expectations of eurozone collapse into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In 2010, it seemed self-evident that the aim was to avoid Greece leaving the eurozone, but a mutual interest in this outcome cannot be taken for granted. Over the course of the crisis, influential decision-makers began to depart from this consensus. German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble subscribed to the "infected limb theory" that forcing Greece and other vulnerable countries out of the eurozone was necessary for the future of European unity.<sup>107</sup> Schäuble raised this prospect as early as 2011, suggesting that Greece's short-term pain would be like his own experience of recovering from being shot in an assassination attempt.<sup>108</sup> He was not the only leader who became increasingly convinced that the eurozone would be more stable if Greece and other vulnerable states were forced out. In January 2012, a small group of IMF and European Commission officials became alarmed that state leaders and the ECB were mulling a move to force Greece out of the eurozone. In response, they developed a report to highlight the formidable costs, challenges, and uncertainties in order to show politicians that it was "something they could not conceivably back once they realized how difficult it would become."<sup>109</sup> Anger at Tsipras's holding of the July 2015 referendum became serious enough that

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105 Bank of International Settlements, *BIS Quarterly Review*, June 2011, 102.

106 Michele Chang and Patrick Leblond, "All in: Market Expectations of Eurozone Integrity in the Sovereign Debt Crisis," *Review of International Political Economy* 22, no. 3 (2015): 641–42.

107 Peter Spiegel, "Inside Europe's Plan Z," *Financial Times*, May 14, 2014.

108 Blustein, *Laid Low*, 247.

109 Spiegel, "Inside Europe's Plan Z."

European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker felt the need to publicly criticize “those within the EU who, either openly or secretly, are pushing for Greece to be expelled from the eurozone. [...] In Europe there are no simple answers.”<sup>110</sup> The deliberate expulsion of Greece was thus a very real possibility.

On the side of Greece, what happened over the course of the crisis also raised questions about whether remaining in the eurozone was in its material interests. From the euro’s inception, economists had debated its viability as an optimal currency area, and the outbreak of the crisis in 2010-11 highlighted the structural problems that being part of the eurozone created for the periphery countries.<sup>111</sup> Once the euro was introduced, financial markets underpriced the risk in countries like Greece because all eurozone bonds were believed to be equivalent to German bonds. This not only reflected a belief that the no bailouts clause was not credible, it made this belief real by making the clause practically impossible to comply with. The capital inflows generated a bubble in property values and private credit, and when the 2008 global financial crisis led to the popping of the bubble, the European crisis was triggered by this capital flooding back out.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, having in effect adopted a fixed exchange rate and overvalued currency, the eurozone periphery’s production industries were made artificially less competitive than they already were.

It was based on this economic reasoning that some in Greece also saw the euro itself as an obstacle to Greek recovery. Yanis Varoufakis recounts that when first approached by the Syriza leader for policy advice in early 2011, he had to convince Alexis Tsipras that Grexit was not an

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110 European Commission, “SPEECH/15/5319.”

111 Paul Krugman, “Revenge of the Optimum Currency Area,” *NBER Macroeconomics Annual*, 439-448, 27, no. 1 (2012); Barry Eichengreen, “European Monetary Integration with the Benefit of Hindsight,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 50, no. S1 (2012): 123–36.

112 Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2018), 102–9.

option Greece could pursue.<sup>113</sup> Eventually deciding to stay in the eurozone put Tsipras at odds with many in his own party. A quarter of Syriza members of parliament refused to support the third bailout, forcing him to rely on votes from the opposition parties to pass the necessary legislation. Even in the midst of the 2015 crisis prominent economists like Joseph Stiglitz argued that a yes vote approving the Troika's terms would mean "depression without end,"<sup>114</sup> while Paul Krugman argued that "it's the euro that is responsible for this disaster."<sup>115</sup> Whether or not one agrees with their claims, they show the reasonable uncertainty about what outcome would have been in Greece's material interests. Over the course of the crisis, Greece's economic benefits of euro membership had been nearly wiped out; its GDP in 2015 was less than in 2003. There was no reason to think that another bailout with more austerity conditions would reverse this. Thus, the belief that the both the European project and Greece would be better off from Grexit was real enough that efforts had to be made on both sides to dissuade decision-makers from pursuing it.

The pursuit of material interests is thus inadequate to make sense of the crisis in Greece because agents pursued goals and strategies that were incoherent. The Troika demanded austerity conditions that increased the likelihood of the uncontrolled default they were making massive loans to Greece in order to avoid. Greece demanded the IMF's removal from the program even though the Fund was the most sympathetic to debt relief and the kind of loan agreement they wanted.<sup>116</sup> Perceived rational pathways to desired objectives turned out to be illusory, leading deeper into crisis. In this light, explanations that presume the rational pursuit of ideal

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113 Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room*, 57–60.

114 Joseph E. Stiglitz, "How I Would Vote in the Greek Referendum," *Project Syndicate*, 29 June 2015.

115 "Krugman: I may have overestimated the competence of the Greek government," *Fareed Zakaria's GPS*, Cable News Network, 19 July 2015. Transcript at <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2015/07/19/paul-krugman-i-may-have-overestimated-the-competence-of-the-greek-government/>

116 Blustein, *Laid Low*, 446.

points and win-sets are unworkable because events were characterized by deep uncertainty. They end up becoming post hoc rationalizations of actions that were actually improvised under severe time pressure. But how then did the agents involved come to hold the preferences that they had, and how can we explain what happened?

Background knowledge and social positioning answer this question: the policies adopted practically enacted desirable visions of the social order, which allowed the most powerful agents to claim social positions of relative superiority. Austerity was a practical enactment of the ontology and moral purpose that underpinned the European monetary order and the wider European integration project. It was attractive to the creditor states because it produced a logic of social categorization that placed them in relations of social superiority towards the debtors. Their budget and trade surpluses were evidence of their superior virtue, rather than because of the structural advantages they enjoyed in the European single market and currency, which provides them with a preferential export market and artificial devaluation.<sup>117</sup> Against this dominant background knowledge, morality plays work more easily against reckless borrowing than reckless lending. The blame and stigma can thus be redirected at the less powerful agents.

This orthodoxy did show cracks at moments when the worsening of the crisis threatened to erode the social standing of the European project as a whole, or indeed portend its collapse. It was at these moments that actions contrary to the monetarist ordoliberal background knowledge were possible, like the setup of the rescue fund and the ECB's commitment to do "whatever it takes" to preserve the euro with a bond-buying program. It was also at these times that the IMF was more willing and able to assert its preference for debt relief and softer fiscal conditionality. Unlike the other members of the Troika, the IMF had no stake in European regional orders. Its

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<sup>117</sup> Tooze, *Crashed*, 369–70.

interest in promoting its preferred solutions were nevertheless based on the IMF's desire to position itself in the wider social setting of the international order as the preeminent site of international economic expertise. Finally, the stigmatizing symbolism of needing the IMF's help is necessary to explain why Greece consistently sought to end the IMF's involvement, even though it was the Troika member most sympathetic to Greece's demands for debt relief and less harsh fiscal austerity.

### *Status-seeking and humiliation*

Relational superiority and inferiority were important points of contention in the social positioning of Greece, the Troika, and other eurozone states. However, focusing on vertical ranking and social hierarchy by themselves give little insight into the form of the international order contestation that characterized the crisis. Firstly, concepts of status-seeking that model a mismatch between an agent's rising material position and their social standing give little traction on why contestation even emerged. It was, in fact, the massive contraction in Greece's economy that propelled the confrontation in 2015. More helpful is Wolf's status-oriented account of the Greek crisis, which lays out how anger and defiance erupted from a sense of humiliation inflicted by the state's interactions with the Troika and creditor states, especially Germany.<sup>118</sup> However, status theories focused on the issues of humiliation and vertical positioning do not account for the kind of challenge that Greece mounted to the international order of the eurozone. More than trying to improve its vertical positioning, the Syriza government engaged in contentious claims about values and identity.<sup>119</sup> The impact of these social positioning moves on international orders is not captured by a focus on status in terms of relative rank and hierarchy. Social positioning

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118 Wolf, "Debt, Dignity, and Defiance."

119 Zahariadis, "Values as Barriers to Compromise?," 488.

addresses this by focusing instead on political conflict over the background knowledge that brings ranks and hierarchies into being.

International actors like the IMF are not part of status approaches in international relations, even though they have ambitions for prestige and standing as much as states do. Given their central role in constructing and reproducing background knowledge, it is clear that their activities are vitally important to any understanding of contestation, evolution, and change in international orders. They may work to reinforce existing understandings, or to reform and change them. It is also important to consider how the same identity, such as that of the IMF, connotes credibility and symbolic power with some audiences but erodes trust and generates suspicion with others. Efforts to change the substantial content of background knowledge are also themselves part of the identity of international organizations like the IMF. At the same time, its involvement can itself be stigmatizing for others it interacts with as it symbolizes failure and a lack of competence on the part of state actors. Performance and practices help to make sense of how these can affect the social structures of international politics.

### *Hegemonies and the eurozone*

The lens of hegemony offers a very different view of the eurozone crisis, and in this context a hegemony theory would focus on the dominant leadership role of either Germany within the European regional order, or the United States in the international economy. We should expect to see that Germany as a regional hegemon acted to ensure that the practices and institutions constructed to serve its interests were preserved. This would portray the European monetary order as constructed around Germany's hegemonic leadership while the wider regional order offers credible constraints on German power and commitments not to exploit weaker states. Interna-

tional order contestation should be observed to follow a pattern where the dominant hegemon defends existing institutions and practices against challengers seeking to revise the order to suit their interests. But trying to fit the eurozone crisis into the traditional concept of hegemony as order management by a dominant state faces conceptual problems. The most widely accepted view of the European regional order's construction was as the result of bargaining among roughly equal agents.<sup>120</sup> In addition France, not Germany, is considered to have been the instigator of the move towards the single currency. Even those who take the notion seriously emphasize that Germany is a "reluctant" hegemon and any dominance is limited to the economic sphere.<sup>121</sup>

The central role of Germany and chancellor Angela Merkel in confronting the eurozone crisis is inescapable, but the course of the crisis is not explained by positing Germany attempting to maintain or create regional hegemony. Germany's trade surplus runs counter to the classic hegemonic stabilizer role, and domestic opposition to such a role ruled out acting as lender of last resort.<sup>122</sup> If Germany aimed to legitimize its economic dominance by providing public goods, it failed on both counts. Germany's legitimacy was directly attacked as a means of order contestation, with allusions to imperialism and the Nazi occupation a staple of protests in Greece. Even to maintain the status quo was a contradictory objective for Germany, since the ordoliberal content of the European monetary order conflicted with the goal of maintaining European integration and keeping the order from breaking apart.<sup>123</sup> Only in the sense of the tacit

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120 Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe*.

121 Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, "Germany as the EU's Reluctant Hegemon? Of Economic Strength and Political Constraints," *Journal of European Public Policy* 20, no. 10 (2013): 1387–1405.

122 For a fuller assessment see Bulmer and Paterson.

123 Simon Bulmer, "Germany and the Eurozone Crisis: Between Hegemony and Domestic Politics," *West European Politics* 37, no. 6 (2014): 1244–63.

background knowledge structuring the eurozone being aligned with German ordoliberal beliefs can we really say there was ideational hegemony. But this in turn depends on the social positioning argument I have outlined here to explain both its dominance and its contestation.

Efforts by the US to maintain or exert hegemony likewise give little explanatory leverage on the euro crisis. President Obama and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner were actively engaged on the issue from the beginning, working to encourage fiscal stimulus and aid for the crisis-hit eurozone countries. The early 2010s also featured a transatlantic debate over fiscal policy in which the ECB and Germany rejected pressure from the US to adopt a more Keynesian approach.<sup>124</sup> The “neoliberal old guard” argued instead for austerity, fiscal consolidation, and stoked fears about government debt.<sup>125</sup> The US ultimately had little influence on the rescues and the course that the crisis took not because of a failure to act, but because German leaders rejected US interventions.<sup>126</sup> Although it is possible to regard the euro as a challenger to the economic hegemony of the US,<sup>127</sup> it is clear the the Obama administration was not consciously trying to undermine the euro. Quite the opposite: the US saw a stable eurozone as necessary to bolster international economic stability and avoid further endangering the economic recovery of US from the 2008 crisis; especially with Obama running for re-election in 2012. The trans-Atlantic argument was over the means of ensuring the eurozone’s integrity and stability, which had already been taken for granted as a shared objective.

Furthermore, while the IMF has often been regarded as an instrument of US hegemony, the evidence here shows that it makes little sense to view the organization in such terms during

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124 Blyth, *Austerity*, 59–62; Tooze, *Crashed*, 352–55.

125 Blyth, *Austerity*, 60.

126 Peter Spiegel, “How the Euro Was Saved,” *Financial Times*, May 11, 2014.

127 Carla Norloff, “Key Currency Competition: The Euro versus the Dollar,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 44, no. 4 (2009): 420–42.

the euro crisis. It entered the Troika from a position of weakness, and was useful for European politicians as a source of expertise and legitimacy to their domestic audiences. Although the IMF's policy preferences were closer to the Obama administration than to Wolfgang Schäuble, it does not follow that it was channelling US interests or influence. Indeed, since eurozone members collectively control a greater voting share on its executive board than the US, it would be more likely for the IMF to be biased towards European interests. In any case, I argue that the IMF pursued its own agenda of advocating for its preferred policy solutions in order to perform its identity as a leading institution in international economic governance, rather than being a mere conduit for state interests.

## **Conclusion**

Social positioning struggles between Greece, the Troika, and other eurozone countries are crucial to understand the course of the confrontation in 2015 and its significance for the European monetary order. It also sheds light on the wider significance of the crisis, especially because of the isomorphism between the background knowledge that structures the eurozone and the wider international economic order. This perceived similarity is why the crisis had relevance to non-eurozone countries with their own identity troubles and problematic relations with "Europe", such as the UK, which would soon be plunged into its own referendum on leaving the EU. More generally, even with Tsipras backing down and being returned to office in parliamentary elections that September, it provided fuel for narratives of elites overruling democratic governments and sovereignty under attack.

This chapter also points to the need for international organizations to be analyzed not just as part of international orders but as agents who can exert their own influence on them. The sub-

stantial influence of the IMF and ECB over issues such as the primary surplus and debt restructuring were important parts of the crisis. Their involvement also had political implications as they helped to legitimize the bailouts to some audiences, at the same time as they symbolized the illegitimate and undemocratic nature of global governance for others. This is something that would be missed by reducing international organizations or institutions to functionalist instruments that facilitate state purposes.<sup>128</sup> My argument is thus in line with claims that IOs need to be taken seriously as agents that can substantially impact the normative structures on which international orders are based. Their attempts to uphold their credibility and legitimacy are likely to influence the ways they use their power to legitimate some ideas over others. This can also influence their symbolic power to generate and promote specific ideas as background knowledge that becomes taken for granted as facts of life.

This also highlights an important distinction between information and knowledge. Institutional theories view IOs as providers of information that promote cooperation by allowing states to better perceive each others' intentions. As an economic concept, information deals with discrete facts. An agent's willingness to comply with an agreement, the quality of a good being offered for sale, or Greece's budget deficit in 2009 are all examples of information. In international relations, IOs are seen as crucial because of their ability to provide information, facilitating international cooperation. Knowledge, in contrast, makes sense of information by fitting it to an existing ideational scheme. Thus, the information of Greece's deep recession during the bailout programs is interpreted differently based on one's background knowledge. For many this signalled the failure of austerity, while others interpreted it as more evidence of the country's

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128 Andrew Moravcsik, "Preferences, Power, and Institutions in 21st Century Europe," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, no. 7 (2018): 1648–74.

problems with clientelism and unwillingness to commit to reform. However, IOs do more than provide information, they also use knowledge to construct the social world.<sup>129</sup> If there are only information problems, this assumes the background knowledge structuring the interaction can be taken for granted. But when uncertainty is in play, knowledge, rather than information, becomes the key issue. Background knowledge is the basis for the social conventions that agents tend to fall back on when faced with the deep uncertainty of a crisis.<sup>130</sup>

The euro crisis also highlights a problem with the concept of credible commitments, which is widely used to understand international agreements and institutions from a rationalist perspective. Theoretically, faced with the problem of time-inconsistent preferences, states seek to tie their own hands, ensuring the long-term benefits of international cooperation are not lost because of short-term gains.<sup>131</sup> A monetary union in this light is a device for credibly committing not to pursue inflationary policies or competitive devaluation, reassuring investors and citizens.<sup>132</sup> The problem comes in assuming that such commitments float above the fray of politics that such agreements are necessarily utility-increasing. In the context of sharply deteriorating economic conditions, Greece did remain tied to the mast of the European monetary order. But with losses far more evident than benefits, public anger was directed at the institutions and credible commitments themselves.

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129 Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, 6–7.

130 Nelson and Katzenstein, “Uncertainty, Risk, and the Financial Crisis of 2008,” 364–69.

131 Jon Elster, *Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitment, and Constraints* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7–33; Beth A. Simmons, “International Law and State Behavior: Commitment and Compliance in International Monetary Affairs,” *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 4 (2000): 819–35.

132 David Stasavage and Dominique Guillaume, “Parallel Agreements and the Sustainability of Currency Unions,” *British Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 1 (2002): 119–46.

When the logic of credible commitments plays out in politics, it is hard to escape their lack of democratic legitimacy.<sup>133</sup> Instead of being thankful for being protected from their own passionate impulses, citizens in many Anglo-European countries have come to view commitment devices like international economic agreements and institutions as illegitimate. They appear as schemes of unaccountable “globalist” elites operated for their own self-serving benefit. This raises the empirical question of when credible commitments can be self-undermining. But more importantly, it calls into question the implicit normative theory that it is legitimate and desirable for such commitments to be so distant from democratic control.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, today’s mass politicization and contestation of international economic orders suggests that the virtues of self-binding are far from obvious to large segments of the public.

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133 Kevin Featherstone, “Conditionality, Democracy and Institutional Weakness: The Euro-Crisis Trilemma,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54, no. S1 (2016): 48–64.

134 Andrew Moravcsik, “Is There a ‘Democratic Deficit’ in World Politics? A Framework for Analysis,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 2 (2004): 336–63.

## Chapter 5 CONCLUSION

The sense of an international order in crisis is hard to escape in discussions of global politics today. Some fear a new Cold War, or draw parallels to the 1930s and the prelude to World War II: a breakdown of international cooperation, discontent with international institutions, and confrontations between major powers. Scholars have been debating the impact of rising powers and how international institutions and practices might need to accommodate or integrate them for years. Geopolitical shifts, like the rise of China and aggressive Russian nationalism, were considered the major problems, while identity politics was seen as taking the shape of al-Qaeda and Islamic State. But the sudden onset in 2016 of an acute phase of a crisis in the order was a surprise to most. Domestic discontent in the core countries, channelled through the vote for Brexit and the US presidential campaign of Donald Trump, was an unexpected source of international order contestation. Existing theories of international order contestation do not give much guidance on how to make sense of this disenchantment with the basic principles of existing international orders, especially within the countries that already dominate it. Because they narrow their focus to only the actors with the most economic and military resources, they also miss how international orders depend on the complicity of actors usually ignored as merely secondary players, and can be subverted and altered by them.

We thus get a very partial picture from viewing international orders through the lenses of hegemony or the hierarchical arrangement of states. What is really at stake is the institutions and practices of international politics, and this is not reducible to issues of hierarchy or hegemony. Indeed, Gilpin recognized these distinctions in developing hegemonic transition theory, distin-

guishing power from prestige and the governance and ordering of the system from the distribution of power.<sup>1</sup> This study's theoretical contribution is to explicate why and how identity performance and social positioning are linked to international order contestation, thus helping to clarify the mechanisms through which international orders structure world politics. International actors thus strive to shape collective background knowledge in ways that enable them to perform desired identities in world politics and experience a secure sense of self. Agents' identity conceptions are thus directly linked to the substantive content of international orders they try to bring about.

Put another way, international actors try to shape international orders to suit who they want to be. I show how this applies to insiders (the IMF, Canada, and the UN), subversive outsiders (Russia), or those pushed into last-ditch rebellion (Greece). Promoters of RtoP in the post-Cold War period contested an international security order where stability and non-intervention were prioritized over the protection of civilians from mass atrocities. The Responsibility to Protect principle was thus the tip of an ideational iceberg. As part of promoting the human security agenda, advocates enacted an ontology that democracy enhances international peace, the claim that individual welfare is the priority collective purpose of international orders, and a logic of social categorization that stigmatizes illiberal actors and places them in inferior positions. Fostering reform and revision of the international order was itself a performance that helped the UN and Canada reaffirm their respective social positions.

In a similar way, Russia's social positioning interests motivated it to oppose the hegemonic liberal ideational structure. To perform a great power identity and reject US performances

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1 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 28–34.

as the hegemon, Russia enacted an opposing essentialist ontology of the world divided into civilizational blocs. Balancing and stability were cast as collective goods that were endangered by US dominance. Thus, Russia's leaders staged a classical balance of power international order in which Russia was socially categorized as a great power that naturally imposes rulership over a sphere of influence. They enacted practices which allowed them to imagine Russia as a great power equal of the US and counteract practices of liberal hegemony.

Similarly, the eurozone crisis was rooted in a struggle over the ontology and collective purposes of the European integration project, and their implications for social categorization and the identities that agents could stage and perform. Macroeconomic orthodoxies were contested in ways that reflected contention over European identity and the IMF's efforts to assure its own relevance and legitimacy. The belief in the disciplinary role of the EU to ensure economic transformation towards an austere, "ordoliberal" model allowed creditor states to socially position themselves above the debtors. This background knowledge, and disciplining practices in ways that work to reproduce it, allows the creditors to justify their positions as the payoff of their superior virtue and contributions to the collective purpose, instead of structural advantages they enjoy in the eurozone's monetary order.

The cases thus highlight how international orders are contested, enacted, and reproduced through the practices and interactions between all kinds of agents, not just the powerful at the top of the hierarchy. Those often seen as supporters of the order also try to revise it as part of the performance of their identities. The IMF and UN both worked to change the background knowledge underpinning existing institutions and practices, positioning themselves as influential IOs that are central to the international economic and security orders. The contingency of social

structures and the need for them to be continually reproduced implies that it is in and through the actual practices of world politics that international order contestation takes place. Practices both express background knowledge and shape its future iterations. Applying this insight reveals both the ideational conflicts that are central to international order contestation, and the possibility of practical change through crisis events that makes them the key arena for that contestation.

### **Theoretical implications**

Three key themes of this study speak to current concerns about international orders and global governance, as well as to fears about breakdown of international institutions and the risk of major power rivalries and conflicts. Firstly, social categories convey background knowledge that structures international politics and its social setting. They do not have objective definitions, but rather are defined through political practices, which in turn convey and attempt to fix deeper aspects of background knowledge. Secondly, understanding international orders, hegemony, and hierarchy in terms of performances emphasizes the centrality of background knowledge on which relative ranking and social positioning depends. Thirdly, the contingency and radical uncertainty that is raised by crisis and contestation in international orders emphasizes the value of a practice-oriented, inductive approach. This involves taking seriously what is actually done and said in world politics, instead of abstracting from what actually happens in world politics by imposing logics of action that can be very far away from the actual intentions and interests of social actors. Doing this allows us to make sense of and international order contestation in the post-Cold War period, uncovering the mechanisms of power and influence through which this takes place.

### *Social categories and international orders*

One important way that social hierarchies are linked to international orders is through social categorizations that demand actors enact specific attributes or practices to “properly” perform their identities. Categories like hegemon, great power, or middle power cannot be just read off from a state’s material capabilities. Although differing in many other aspects, on this point my argument is congruent with theories that emphasize a distinction between unipolarity and hegemony. The distribution of material power is not the same as legitimacy, supplying international public goods, and other aspects of being a hegemon.<sup>2</sup> However, this tells us little about what the international order will actually be like in practice. Furthermore, the identity conception that the agent seeks to perform has to be inferred from what is articulated by its representatives, the historical context, expected relations to specific others, and beliefs about where it ought to place itself in international society. The social categories that can be used, because they are intersubjectively recognized, will necessarily be entangled with background knowledge about the social context in which they make sense.

Furthermore, and feeding into this dynamic, social categories and the worldviews embedded in them help constitute the political ontology used by agents to comprehend the world and act within it. Beliefs about social categories can themselves motivate and shape the process of international order contestation. An agent’s performances will enact beliefs about what it means to be European, a hegemon, or the world organization. Hence, the pursuit of these social positions decisively affects how international actors conduct international politics, and among other things it defines the social reality they view as legitimate and seek to enact. Social categoriza-

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2 Robert Jervis, ‘Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective’, *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 188–213; Ian Clark, *Hegemony in International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

tions thus drive agents to fit themselves to the behavior that is identified as corresponding to the identity they want.

Likewise, a state that considers hegemony integral to its identity is impelled to act like a hegemon, asserting superiority over both allies and rivals. Maintaining and performing social superiority may become rationalized as an objective security interest, as is clearly the case with discourses about the importance of “primacy” in the United States.<sup>3</sup> State leaders face strong pressures to perform the role because of intersubjective expectations from both domestic politics and international peers. Within the US, what one Obama administration official called “the Blob” resisting its foreign policy moves, and the unprecedented consensus among American foreign policy intellectuals that the Trump administration is doing everything wrong, are examples of this domestic pressure at work.<sup>4</sup>

Focusing on performances also shows how in practice, a social category like “great power” means what agents enact it to be. The practical use of social science theories by political actors, who may use them to make sense of the world and guide their actions, itself changes the social world that scholars observe. Major theories and concepts, like “great powers,” are likely to form part of the ideational furniture of social reality. By performing themselves, agents implicitly and unavoidably claim the reality of their identity conception and demand that others recognize it. If this conflicts with the identities of others, this tends to result in power struggles to fix a particular vision of the world as the legitimate one. Thus, social categorization and categories are not fixed, they are outcomes of political moves. Indeed, agents have strong incent-

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3 See Patrick Porter, ‘Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment’, *International Security* 42, no. 4 (2018): 13–16.

4 Gideon Rachman, “Trump, Obama, and their battle with the ‘Blob’,” *Financial Times*, 2 December 2019.

ives both to fit themselves to a tacitly known category and to attempt to redefine categories in ways that suit their social positioning.

This helps explain why the effort to specify a fixed definition of a “great power” or to debate about whether or not a state that acts like a great power really is one has been so difficult and fruitless.<sup>5</sup> This is precisely because some agents alter and reinterpret definitions to suit their interest in performing great power roles and socially positioning themselves as great powers. Imposing a “scholastic point of view”, which imputes rational logics or other motives to the agents who actually perform international politics, takes what needs to be explained as an assumption.<sup>6</sup> Political actors’ definitions of great powers and other social categories, not those of political scientists, are what ultimately influence their actions. Waltz’s dismissal of this issue as a matter of common sense was correct in a way he probably did not mean.<sup>7</sup> Who the great powers are and what defines the category are contingent beliefs that are fixed through symbolic power, and are thus made to appear as outcomes of an alleged natural order of things.

The fact that “great powers” and other social categories are intersubjective constructs does not mean they are not real. Indeed, social positioning implies that social categories have a pervasive effect on international politics because they mark out desirable social positions and are integral to some state and national identities. At the same time, logics of social categorization and stratification reflect and express the nature and governance of an international order. The

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- 5 Iver B. Neumann, ‘Status Is Cultural: Durkheimian Poles and Weberian Russians Seek Great Power Status’, in *Status in World Politics*, ed. T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 85–113; this is even clearer in the adjacent concept of ‘middle powers’. See David A. Cooper, ‘Challenging Contemporary Notions of Middle Power Influence: Implications of the Proliferation Security Initiative for “Middle Power Theory”’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 3 (2011): 317–36.
- 6 Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Scholastic Point of View’, *Cultural Anthropology* 5, no. 4 (1990): 380–91; Vincent Pouliot, ‘The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities’, *International Organization* 62, no. 2 (2008): 257–88.
- 7 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979), 131.

collective recognition and definitions of categories like “hegemon” or “great power” is closely tied to more tacit notions of collective purpose and political ontology. The notion that great powers are obsolete reflects a tacit rejection of the traits associated with that social category as valid principles for international ordering, especially the practices of imperialism and spheres of influence. If we were to impose pre-formed definitions of hegemons and great powers, we would miss this aspect of the struggle over social positions and international orders.

Instead of defining the social categories, I thus inductively examined what the concepts mean to the political agents who use them and how they played out in political action. While the great power concept has a pervasive presence in the study of international relations, it sits alongside the concepts like hegemon and middle power. In political practice, they are social categories that some agents take for granted or aspire to. Further research could explore changes in the social categories collectively believed to exist and what explains these variations across time and place. An implication of my theory is that the social categories are likely to reflect tacit understandings of basic ontology and moral purposes of international politics that operate in a particular place and time period.

### *Hegemony, hierarchies and stratification*

A link between social stratification and international orders is highlighted by recent studies on status and hierarchies in world politics. In this regard, my argument aligns with productive and positional concepts of hierarchy, to use one prominent typology.<sup>8</sup> The argument that hegemonic orders depend on tacit background knowledge is also in line with a thick conception of hege-

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8 Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, ‘Hierarchies in World Politics’, *International Organization* 70, no. 3 (2016): 623–54.

mony.<sup>9</sup> Hierarchies, which hegemonic orders are one type of, are thus “productive of power and power relations.”<sup>10</sup> Put in these terms, hierarchies can motivate international order contestation if they are based on background knowledge that places an international actor in a social position that prevents it from performing and expressing its desired identity. Likewise, some international actors will have an interest in defending and reproducing international orders because they are invested in the schemes of social categorization and hierarchy that are produced by it. Hierarchies and social stratification are thus an important aspect of international orders, expressing unequal relations and structures of power that are justified against the background knowledge and made to seem self-evident.

However, to explain the making and breaking of international orders, hierarchy should not be the main focus of inquiry because it only scratches the surface of background knowledge. Social categorization and notions about superiority and inferiority rest on more tacit layers of background knowledge: deeper beliefs about values and collective purpose in world politics. Contention over political ontologies and collective values is where the action is, and this would be overlooked if we focused only on hierarchies within and between social categories. Furthermore, social positioning is ultimately about enabling an agent to perform its desired identity, and the vertical ranking that hierarchy studies and theories of status emphasize is only sometimes relevant to that goal. Maintaining membership in a desired group or differentiation from an othered group, as in the case of Greece seeking to be part of Europe and distinct from the Balkans and Turkey, may force an agent into relations of subordination. Crucially, according to its iden-

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9 Bentley B. Allan, Srdjan Vucetic, and Ted Hopf, ‘The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order: China’s Hegemonic Prospects’, *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (2018): 844–47.

10 G. John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, ‘Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders’, *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 421.

tity conception, the necessity of that social positioning within a group that stigmatizes it demands the acceptance of subordination and the background knowledge that makes it seem natural. To perform its self and pursue its interests, it must also perform and thus reinforce the social orders that weigh it down.<sup>11</sup> An analysis solely focused on hierarchy would miss this deeper ideational dimension of the politics of group inclusion and exclusion.

Hence, performativity also implies that hegemony and hierarchies are dependent on the ideational structure that justifies relations of inequality and authority between social agents. It helps explain the connection between status-seeking and order contestation, and to understand the processes by which this plays out in practice. It also addresses a major gap left by rationalist approaches to international institutions and practices. By reducing international orders to transactional bargains or social contracts, they remove the political and contentious elements of what is at stake, and thus give little consideration of possible rifts over basic values and ideologies,<sup>12</sup> Social positioning performances are about securing identity and position in society, and they must draw on collectively held tacit understandings to make sense and be effective. These orthodoxies are also at stake in the staged dramas of international politics and social positioning.

The need for collective enactment of background knowledge further emphasizes that hegemony and hierarchy are not only produced through the actions of the dominant actors. They are also produced through the performances of subordinated players who cannot avoid using the dominant ideational structure if they are to secure their interests at all. On the one hand, this can be seen as a pessimistic assessment that we are often complicit in our own subordination. But

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11 Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 268–71.

12 Daniel J. Levine and Alexander D. Barder, 'The Closing of the American Mind: "American School" International Relations and the State of Grand Theory', *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 4 (2014): 878–79.

this also means that leadership depends on maintaining asymmetric symbolic power to perform compelling representations of social reality. Leadership and superiority can rapidly unravel if the performances of leadership start to appear incompetent, or when the background knowledge that supports it loses its taken for granted acceptance. Understanding the actions and beliefs of subordinated or “secondary” actors is hence just as important.

One glaring omission that this raises is that international organizations are largely ignored in theories of order contestation. IOs are assumed to be the creatures of powerful states, rationally designed as functional bargains to facilitate cooperation, carrying out tasks delegated to them by states.<sup>13</sup> They are often considered part of the international order, or at least to be inherently supportive and serving a maintenance function. But IOs are also important actors who have social positioning interests of their own, and they can also engage in both the reproduction and contestation of the background knowledge that structures international orders. IOs develop their own sense of what their roles should be, as well as what the international orders they work in should be like. Through IOs’ ability to exert power over background knowledge, they are also capable of contesting and changing international orders. They produce not just information, but knowledge, and their everyday activities produce ordering and ranking effects, such as by creating standards and rankings that states are judged by.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, IOs are not inherently non-political or impartial. The IMF is the most obvious example, its name evoking hatred and resent-

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13 Daniel L. Nielson and Michael J. Tierney, ‘Delegation to International Organizations: Agency Theory and World Bank Environmental Reform’, *International Organization* 57, no. 2 (2003): 241–76; Lisa L. Martin, ‘Distribution, Information, and Delegation to International Organizations: The Case of IMF Conditionality’, in *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations: Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions*, ed. David A. Lake and Darren G. Hawkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 140–64.

14 Ole Jacob Sending, *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Jacqueline Best, *Governing Failure: Provisional Expertise and the Transformation of Global Development Finance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); André Broome, Alexandra Homolar, and Matthias Kranke, ‘Bad Science: International Organizations and the Indirect Power of Global Benchmarking’, *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2018): 514–39.

ment in much of the Global South for the failed policies it imposed during the post-Cold War era. As we have seen, this was one reason it faced an identity problem it sought to ameliorate by seeking a role in the eurozone crisis.

My argument also challenges the hegemonic stability assumptions behind the conflation between the stability of international orders and US leadership. The implicit thinking here is that the US made the liberal world order in 1945, and so it somehow belongs to the US and can be maintained or abandoned at the whim of American leaders. Consciously or otherwise, much of the literature on hegemony and hegemonic orders thus equates international order with the dominance of the United States.<sup>15</sup> Believing international stability is enforced by a dominant state, they reason the US failing to assert hegemony in global politics will lead to chaos.<sup>16</sup> However, it does not follow that the international order should be described as “American” or “US-led” because it is not US dominance that defines the order. The essential characteristic of the post-1945 international orders is their basis in ideational structures steeped in liberal ideology,<sup>17</sup> not the preeminent social position that the US has generally held by reference to that dominant background knowledge.

Even if the aim is to offer policy relevance to political actors in Washington, this creates a dangerous blind spot. It complacently imagines that there is always appetite for US leadership, that others will follow where the US leads, and that only the US is capable of offering attractive

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15 Important examples include G. John Ikenberry, ‘The Plot against American Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2017): 2–9; For a critical overview see Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

16 Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Knopf, 2019); Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, ‘Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment’, *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012): 7–51.

17 This develops upon a key point in John G. Ruggie, ‘International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order’, *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 379–415.

and legitimate sets of institutions and practices. None of these are true. The sharply declining influence of the US today is not a function of an abstract power transition, but to practical actions that deviate from dominant beliefs about moral purposes of power in both its international relations and domestic society. Internally, its deep social inequities and poor governance have rarely been more internationally prominent, and these displays of incompetent practice tangibly erode US influence.

### *Contingency and background knowledge*

This study examined international order contestation through a focus on key crises of the post-Cold War period. This highlights something that most historians but only some international relations scholars have recognized: the contingency of events and the political outcomes that they lead to.<sup>18</sup> Contingency means that an event is neither necessary nor impossible; something else could have happened than what actually did.<sup>19</sup> And a crisis is by definition an unusual, surprising event, often leading to the questioning of core assumptions and “radical breaks with previous states of existence.”<sup>20</sup> In such conditions, it is difficult or impossible to have a clear notion of how to achieve one’s interests, even if they could be clearly specified. Contingency suggests that key events that actually lead to systemic changes in international orders, like the outbreak of World War I or the end of the Cold War, may have depended on agency or accident, not structural causes.

Dealing with contingency is a problem for theories that assume the world is linear,

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18 See George Lawson, ‘The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 2 (2010): 207; Richard Ned Lebow, ‘Contingency, Catalysts, and International System Change’, *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 4 (2000): 591–616.

19 Elena Esposito, ‘The Structures of Uncertainty: Performativity and Unpredictability in Economic Operations’, *Economy and Society* 42, no. 1 (2013): 123 note 2.

20 Matthew W. Seeger, Timothy L. Sellnow, and Robert R. Ulmer, *Communication and Organizational Crisis* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 4.

determinate, orderly, and predictable. These are dominant assumptions in international relations scholarship, reflecting a widespread psychological predisposition for closure and control. It reflects a cognitive bias among scholars towards systemic theories that reject and evade a reality of “agency, accident, and confluence.”<sup>21</sup> A implicit theory of history as linear and knowable is necessarily imposed by this assumption, but there are good reasons to think this is untenable.<sup>22</sup> After all, a major reason for crises is because unexpected things happen, and such events have an outsized impact on the world. If contingency and fundamental uncertainty are the salient features of the social world, international order contestation is more adequately and rigorously studied by being attuned to actual events and processes, and their specific contexts. This means we need to examine history and events as social processes and in ways that come to terms with what the actors believed and intended, not beliefs and intentions that are imposed by theoretical assumption. We should aim to take the empirical evidence of history seriously and on its own terms instead of something to be “ransacked in order to explain the present.”<sup>23</sup> In that sense, grasping the logic of practices and performance leads to a more scientific approach that actually tests theories in political science, rather than interpreting and fitting actions and reasons that actors gave for them into existing theoretical assumptions about social behavior.

In the case studies, we see that factors were often in play that were independent of the underlying causes, and that far from events logically following each other in causal chains, important proximate causes were idiosyncratic or could have easily happened differently. For

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21 Richard Ned Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 283–84. This is borne out in a survey experiment of historians and security studies specialists reported in the same book.

22 Joseph MacKay and Stephen LaRoche, ‘The Conduct of History in International Relations: Rethinking Philosophy of History in IR Theory’, *International Theory* 9, no. 2 (2017): 206.

23 Lawson, ‘The Eternal Divide?’, 207.

example, the interpreted meaning of the same kind of event changed over time. For Russia, NATO expansion was a minor issue when the Baltic states joined in 2004, but Ukraine taking a step that was far short of that posed a dramatic threat in 2014. Likewise, there was no reason that the genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia would necessarily have led to a shift towards a human security agenda and the reconceptualization of sovereignty in the form of the Responsibility to Protect. Conscious, deliberate, and dedicated effort was necessary to interpret them as a systemic problem of the international order; speeches had to be given, conferences had to be organized, diplomatic moves made, and public discourses shaped. The 9/11 attacks, the US War on Terror, and the co-opting of RtoP reasoning for the Iraq War, could all have torpedoed the initiative. A different Secretary General might not have been able to sway African support or charm US politicians and public opinion; failing to achieve the latter proved the downfall of Kofi Annan's predecessor, Boutros Boutros-Ghali. After all that, faced with the prospect of a last-minute breakdown at the World Summit in 2005, the UN Secretariat and Canadian diplomats took a calculated risk. They gambled that ambassadors raising last-minute objections, most importantly those of the US and India, would be overruled by their superiors to avoid the spectacle of a failed summit. They were right – but they could easily have been wrong.

There were also multiple ways the euro crisis in Greece might have taken a different course, had a different outcome, or had different consequences. Mario Draghi's promise to do "whatever it takes" to defend the euro and embark on a massive bond-buying scheme both calmed the wider eurozone crisis and, in a move that could not have been foreseen, took the sting out of Greece's later threat to default on its ECB debt. Had the rescue fund not been in place to deter contagion, Greece would have had a serious coercive threat available in 2015.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2018), 525.

But if not for the expiry of Jean-Claude Trichet's eight-year term as ECB governor in 2012, his staunch defense of the monetary order's ordoliberal background knowledge would likely have ruled out the stability mechanism and bond-buying program that Draghi embarked upon. If not for a party financing scandal that forced him to step down from the Christian Democrat party leadership in 2001, pro-Grexit Wolfgang Schäuble would likely have been German chancellor during the crisis, not Angela Merkel. The term of the ECB governor and events in German domestic politics are both causally independent of the global financial crisis and Syriza's electoral victory in Greece. But just one of these two minimal-rewrite counterfactuals could have seen the eurozone collapse under market panic before or during the height of the 2015 crisis in Greece, or have seen Greece forced out of the eurozone, again with unpredictable consequences for the fate of the European monetary and regional order.

These kinds of crisis episodes, when contingency and radical uncertainty come to the fore, force agents to rely on inarticulate "common sense," social conventions, or in short, background knowledge.<sup>25</sup> The shaping and interpretation of background knowledge through performances is thus fundamental to understanding the dynamics of international order contestation. This is especially relevant because a crisis creates opportunities to alter background knowledge by unearthing previously unnoticed assumptions and calling them into question. The performance of politics is often seen as "cheap talk" or merely posturing and rhetoric. The need for credible commitments is thus central to rationalist theories of deterrence, institutions and cooperation. But rather than cloaking hidden interests and power, political speech and action are themselves the means through which interests and power are constructed, used, and pursued. In other words,

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25 Stephen C. Nelson and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Uncertainty, Risk, and the Financial Crisis of 2008', *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (2014): 361–92.

what political actors say and do is the reality of politics itself, and it needs to be treated as such. Instead of starting by imposing interests (such as “security”) or patterns of behavior (such as rational choice) onto international actors, we should take seriously and seek to explain what those who actually practice international politics take as their interests and how they actually act to pursue them.

This is a needed theoretical move because hegemonic transitions and rational bargains are abstractions from social reality, which can only take place through proximate events with context-specific causes. Structuralist theories imply that history will proceed to the same destination given a set of conditions, and how exactly it gets there does not really matter. The determinism this implies is incoherent because contingency is necessary for things like power to work upon the world. Only if the world is not predetermined and consequential choices are possible does it matter whether you can get someone to do what they otherwise would not do. Likewise, collective action problems and the need for credible commitments arise only because agents have the ability to choose between cooperation and defection. Contingency thus demands that we pay attention to the proximate events and immediate, context-specific causes of the outcomes we are interested in. It is only in and through such situations that things like power transitions or hegemony are actually played out and affect the world.

International orders thus matter because they structure action in international politics on an everyday level. It is also through patterns of action that international orders owe their existence and come to define certain tropes and rubrics for performance, which political actors take for granted as “how things are done” in international politics. Through their performances, then, agents contribute to the creation of social facts that they later mistake for an objective reality

that is independent of their contribution.<sup>26</sup> Performances are central to the foundations and contestation of international orders. Moreover, crisis events put the spotlight on the performances of international actors: they face demands for action. It is here that we can observe the “social urgency of practices” that prevails over calculated deliberation.<sup>27</sup> How they respond to calls that something must be done depends on an existing set of practices.<sup>28</sup> And because they necessarily create precedents, performances rebound onto the background knowledge they enact and may redefine expectations and practices in the future.

The need to continually and consistently enact their identity through social positioning thus draws international actors into struggles over the tacit understandings that lie below the surface. But more, background knowledge allows agents to interpret the world and get on with things in face of the unknown unknowns that characterize social life.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, they enact performances that, more than just playing out a script, create options which did not exist before their enactment. Power thus exists and can be exerted in the ability to innovate and improvise.<sup>30</sup> Practical innovations, like economic profits, rely on the fact that the future cannot be predicted and entails not only doing what “others fail to expect, but also changing the rules of the game during the game.”<sup>31</sup> The course such struggles take depends on the contingency and uncertainty that is usually theorized out of international politics, but which approaches based on practices and performances are equipped to tackle directly.

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26 Esposito, ‘The Structures of Uncertainty’, 115; Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 169–70.

27 Pouliot, ‘The Logic of Practicality’, 265.

28 Iver B. Neumann and Ole Jacob Sending, ‘Performing Statehood through Crises: Citizens, Strangers, Territory’, *Journal of Global Security Studies* forthcoming (2020): 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz073>.

29 Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35–38.

30 Peter J. Katzenstein and Lucia A. Seybert, ‘Protean Power and Uncertainty: Exploring the Unexpected in World Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2018): 80–93.

31 Esposito, ‘The Structures of Uncertainty’, 112.

*The continuing relevance of performances in crisis*

More recent examples illustrate the relevance of this theoretical framework for analyzing world politics today. Identities and disputes over fundamental values have gained salience in international politics. The Vote Leave campaign's primary slogan in the UK's 2016 referendum on EU membership urged voters to "take back control" arguing that Britain was being subordinated to European institutions. They also played on identity conceptions and historical narratives which imply Britain's proper social position is outside the European integration project, and represented the eurozone and migration crises of 2015 as ontological threats. Similarly, the Trump campaign and presidency focused on a sense that the US was not in the position of supremacy that it deserved and construed the existing international order as biased against its interests. The apparent political resonance of these claims is odd given that few if any IR scholars in 2016 would dispute that the US was already the most high-status international actor and that the international order is, if anything, crafted to suit the American hegemon's interests.

The theoretical framework outlined here can thus help to make sense of these challenges to the liberal international order from states that are socially placed as insiders to it. As abrupt and surprising as these events were, they nonetheless reflected longstanding currents of Euro-skepticism and isolationism in the UK and US whose influence had been marginal but now grasped the reins of power. The challenges to existing international ordering practices and institutions also follow from the kind of ideational contestation that their discourses lead us to expect. International trade agreements were the particular focus of Trump's rhetoric, and one of the most significant challenges was the paralysis of the WTO dispute resolution system by the US refusing to appoint new judges. Overestimation of the White House's ability to overturn

multilateral institutions and the continued commitment by other Global North countries to existing practices have, however, limited the effectiveness of its attempts to disrupt G7 summits and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

This form of sovereigntist politics is now an important way in which international institutions and practices are being contested. Anti-globalism, broadly defined as opposition to increasing international linkage and cosmopolitanism, was a crucial part of the nationalist discourse that helped Donald Trump win election as US president. It can be understood as an ideological counter to the dominant background knowledge in the international order, which it frames in stark terms as the malevolent work of global elites.<sup>32</sup> It suggests a political ontology of nation-states in existential struggle, views the moral purpose of international politics as facilitating separate pursuits of national self-interest, and social categorization as based on civilizations or ethno-cultural groups. Among other things, racist practices of exclusion draw upon and seek to enact this as policy and “common sense,” especially through anti-immigration policies and stigmatization of refugees. Amidst the global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, political contention can also be seen in terms of social positioning struggles. The Trump administration blocked a G7 communiqué because other leaders refused to accept referring to the disease as “Wuhan virus”, then attacked the World Health Organization (WHO) and withdrew US contributions, alleging that the WHO was being controlled by China.<sup>33</sup> China has mounted its own efforts to define global perceptions through publicizing positive stories about its handling of the outbreak

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32 See Jeffrey C. Alexander, ‘Raging against the Enlightenment: The Ideology of Steven Bannon’, in *Politics of Meaning/Meaning of Politics: Cultural Sociology of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election*, ed. Jason L. Mast and Jeffrey C. Alexander (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

33 Katie Simpson and Alexander Panetta, “G7 ministers spike joint statement on COVID-19 after U.S. demands it be called ‘Wuhan virus’,” *CBC News*, 25 March 2020; BBC News, “Coronavirus: Trump moves to pull US out of World Health Organization,” *BBC News*, 7 July 2020.

and donations of medical supplies, and disinformation through claims the virus was planted in Wuhan by the US military. The key fear for China's leaders is that the interpretation of events may undermine their image and reputation for technocratic competence, destroying their political legitimacy.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in a recent commentary Stephen Walt argued that the display of government incompetence will harm US influence internationally.<sup>35</sup> Put differently, we might see the politicization of blame and struggles to control narratives and discourses shows the relevance and importance of putting on the right performance on the theatrical world stage of international politics, and even more so at the height of a crisis of once-in-a-century magnitude.

### **Shaping the world stage**

International order contestation results from political struggles to define identities and social positions on the world stage. International actors seek to secure their own identities and social positions, and in doing so are drawn into struggles to interpret and competently perform the background knowledge that structures international society. Political conflicts, from diplomatic quarrels to hegemonic wars, may thus be seen as struggles to assert relational position, and enact particular practices as the proper "way things are done" in world politics.

The fate of international orders thus turns on battles over identities and ideologies as they are played out in everyday politics. While powerful states can work to shape background knowledge, even the most powerful cannot maintain social positioning if they depart too far from the orthodox understandings of social reality and its imperatives. The authoritarian principles of China's political system create a disconnect between its identity and the liberal "mass common

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34 Raj Verma, 'China's Diplomacy and Changing the COVID-19 Narrative', *International Journal* 75, no. 2 (2020): 248–58.

35 Stephen M. Walt, "The Death of American Competence," *Foreign Policy*, 23 March 2020.

sense” that continues to prevail in many key countries.<sup>36</sup> Beijing’s efforts to exert power tend to invoke suspicion, despite efforts to promote a positive image such as through “panda diplomacy.”<sup>37</sup> The US faces a different challenges because its longstanding efforts to exempt itself from international agreements and collective action have become less tolerable when turned into active disruption. Other countries worked around US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and WTO dispute settlement by creating alternative arrangements or simply going ahead without the US. The US may find that once the habitual recognition of its performances of leadership is broken, it is not as indispensable as it once believed.

International orders are not changed only by titanic struggles of hegemonic wars, but by the everyday politics of what actions pass unquestioned and what actions are subjected to sanctions, stigmatization, and resistance. Moreover, international orders do not exist outside of the practices that instantiate them. What is done and said in world politics is itself the substance of what is being challenged or defended. Actions by agents, and their efforts to elicit, discipline, or coerce actions by others, are what makes social orders real, and potentially changes what was collectively assumed to be the legitimate set of practices. Thus, what really makes international orders hang together is the background knowledge behind the performances of politics on the world stage.

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36 Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf, ‘The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order’, 862.

37 Tom Mitchell and John Reed, “China softens tone in drive for Asia influence,” *Financial Times*, 3 January 2018.

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