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Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of its Discontents

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Abstract

The Liberal International Order (LIO) is currently being undermined not only by states such as Russia but also by voters in the West. We argue that both veins of discontent are driven by resentment towards the LIO's status hierarchy, rather than just economic grievances. Approaching discontent historically and sociologically, we show that there are two strains of *recognition struggles* against the LIO: one in the core of the West, driven by populist politicians and their voters, and one on the semi-periphery, fuelled by competitively authoritarian governments and their supporters. At this particular moment in history, these struggles are digitally, ideologically and organisationally interconnected in their criticism of LIO institutions, amplifying each other. The LIO is thus being hollowed out *from within* at a time when it is also facing some of its greatest external challenges.

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Keywords: Centre-periphery, hierarchy, liberal international order, populism, recognition, Russia, semi-periphery, social media, status, the West

Introduction

At the end of the last century the prevailing conviction was that globalisation had guaranteed the triumph of Western-style democracies. There was confidence that the Liberal International Order (LIO)² was here to stay even in the event of US decline, because it appealed to individual rationality, promoted global progress and democracy through diplomacy, and brought economic benefits to its member states, by facilitating trade, foreign direct investments and more efficient supply-chains. In the second half of the last decade, that optimism has been replaced by concern or even pessimism about the LIO's durability, with the growing realisation that liberal institutions are challenged by voters in the West itself, where established parties have either been taken over by populist forces or lost ground to them, or where anti-liberal policy agendas have found popular support through developments such as Brexit. At the same time, Putin's imprisonment of opponents, Erdoğan's assaults on journalists, Bolsonaro's targeting of universities, Trump's, Orban's and Salvini's attacks on immigrants all undermine international co-operation and regulation.³ With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, barriers between states have risen even higher, and the LIO has few genuinely enthusiastic defenders left.

Much ink has been spilled to explain this seemingly abrupt erosion of support for the LIO. Some argue that voters supporting politicians like President Trump have legitimate economic grievances due to the unevenly distributed benefits of globalisation,⁴ but that does

² The LIO is the combination of practices and visions of 'open markets, international institutions, co-operative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem-solving, shared sovereignty, [and] the rule of law' (Ikenberry 2011, 2). We focus primarily on the LIO's political components, see the definition in the Editors' Introduction. For debates on liberal order, see Jahn 2018; Goddard 2018; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019.

³ Mead 2011, 42.

⁴ Inglehart and Norris 2016; Muis and Immerzeel 2017.

not explain significant support for populist policies in economically higher strata of Western societies.⁵ Others blame the rot on Russia and to a lesser extent on semi-peripheral member states of the LIO – Hungary, Poland, Turkey etc. – for fomenting disunity and openly flaunting the rules,⁶ as well as meddling in the politics of core liberal countries via lobbying firms, hacking and other means.⁷ But even if the impact of such actions is not exaggerated,⁸ we do not yet have a good explanation for why these states have so easily turned their backs on an order they once seemed eager to join, nor how their message appeals to voters in the West.

This article starts by observing that two distinct forms of opposition to the LIO are in fact working *in tandem* to undermine it from *within*. These are ‘populist’ politicians and their voters in the *core*, and recently anti-liberal or illiberal governments on the *semi-periphery* (yet often technically inside. When we refer to the ‘core’ or ‘centre’ in this article, we mean societies that feel a strong cultural ownership both of the label and the symbols associated with the term ‘West’. When we refer to the ‘semi-periphery’, we mean states that could be classified as Western (or have been at times) but could also be classified as non-Western (or have been at times).⁹ Furthermore, we will argue, by drawing on theories of recognition¹⁰,

⁵ Mutz 2018.

⁶ Ikenberry 2018.

⁷ See e.g. Lanoszka 2016; Stukal et al. 2017.

⁸ See e.g. Hacker 2006; Brubaker 2017, see also Weiss and Wallace, this issue.

⁹ Not all such states are today members of the LIO’s institutions, but many have been since the end of the Cold War.

¹⁰ Hegel 1807; Goffman 1963; Adler-Nissen 2014a; 2014b; Adler-Nissen and Tsinoi 2019; Zarakol 2011; 2018.

that the root causes of discontent with the LIO lie beyond pure economics,¹¹ and are largely driven by dissatisfaction with it as a *recognition* order. The discontented are frustrated with their perceived positions in the recognition hierarchy¹² created by the LIO. Furthermore, we argue that the degree to which the LIO was genuinely embraced has been overestimated, even within its founding member states. The perceived golden age of liberalism with widespread political and public support for multilateralism is a historical fiction.¹³ Continuous ambivalence towards the LIO has existed throughout, especially outside the core, where many viewed liberal institutions as furthering Western interests¹⁴ or as status clubs deliberately disadvantaging non-members.¹⁵ Put another way, many in the semi-periphery have perceived the LIO as merely a friendlier version of previous Western-centric and hierarchical international orders extending back to the nineteenth century colonial order. Even formal entry into the LIO fails to eradicate suspicions that the discourse of liberalism is simply a front for more explicit forms of domination. In the core, positive attitudes have seemed superficially more stable, but substantial demographic groups in the West have actually never fully bought into the concept of the LIO, seeing it as undermining their self-perceived rightfully dominant position in the world.

The international system's hierarchical nature also explains why recognition struggles manifest differently in the core and the semi-periphery. The LIO promised to remove social

¹¹ The political economy articles in this special issue also conclude that the social dimensions of grievance in world politics have been overlooked. See e.g. Rogowski and Flaherty; Broz, Frieden and Weymouth; Mansfield and Rudra; Goldstein and Gulotty this volume.

¹² For overviews of the hierarchy literature see Lake 2009; Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Zarakol 2017a; 2017b.

¹³ See Acharya 2017; 2014; Nye 2017; Barma, Ratner and Weber 2013.

¹⁴ See also Alter and Raustiala 2018.

¹⁵ See e.g. Suzuki 2017; Naylor 2018; Viola, forthcoming; Zarakol 2011, 2013.

and economic inequalities between the West and the non-West created by previous international orders, but never quite managed to achieve equality within its own order. States in the semi-periphery blame the LIO for perpetuating the modern international system's historical hierarchies and resent its failed promises of equality. By contrast, in the core, discontented groups blame the LIO (and its elites) for stating aspirations of equality, which they resent for undermining or failing to protect historical hierarchies privileging Western supremacy. The former group challenges the LIO as a Western-centric hierarchy, best replaced by a non-Western alternative. The latter group wants to retain Western supremacy by dismantling the LIO itself. Nevertheless, the end result is the same: as an obstacle to the high stature recognition to which they feel entitled, the LIO is the perceived enemy of both recognition struggles.

We provide an answer to the question posed by this special issue by approaching populism¹⁶ in the West and anti-liberalism in the non-West from a historically and sociologically-informed theoretical perspective. We contend that the reason for our current predicament can be found within the social hierarchies of modern world politics, some created by the LIO itself and some predating the current order but nevertheless interfering with its workings. There is an irony in that after decades of assuming threats would come from outside the order, the LIO's real vulnerability lies within. The LIO is not being bested by a rival (yet) but hollowed out by recognition grievances, at a time when challenges such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic make our need for a working international order more acute than ever. IR must pay more attention to the desire for recognition as a

¹⁶ We follow Mudde's definition of populism as 'an ideology that considers society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" where politics should express the will of the people' (2004, 543).

driver in political behaviour, along with the ways such a search intersects with material concerns.

Our argument develops in five sections. Building on social theory, the following section details our understanding of recognition as well as our diagnosis that a two-pronged intersectional struggle for recognition challenges the LIO. A primarily domestic challenge from its core increasingly fuses with a primarily international challenge originating at its frayed edges, or semi-periphery. Section two explores the discontent of various groups within the West; section three explores the historical roots of semi-peripheral members' resentments. The fourth section discusses the merger between these two strains, highlighting structural and material drivers, providing examples of the points of connection as well as clarifying why some agents – e.g. Russia – have been especially well-placed within the international order to take advantage of such drivers. Our concluding section delivers our prognosis for the LIO and discusses the implications for IR theory.

Theorising the LIO as a Recognition Order with its Discontents

In IR scholarship, recognition is typically understood in a legalistic sense, where states are recognised as sovereign entities. In other fields, such as philosophy, however, recognition is seen as a vital human need to be known, understood and affirmed.¹⁷ The struggle for recognition manifests not only a desire to be acknowledged, but is fundamental to identity development, whether as individuals, groups or states. Misrecognition – understood as a gap between an individual or group's desired identity and how they experience being seen

¹⁷ Hegel 1807; Taylor 1992; Markell 2003.

by others – destabilises self-identity.¹⁸ Recognition struggles are complicated by the fact that genuine recognition from others is almost impossible to attain; our interactions always involve a modicum of misrecognition.¹⁹ In that sense, the struggle for recognition is continuously ongoing and performed by all actors. However, struggles for recognition do not always become destabilising to existing orders. Here we focus on recognition struggles that become politically salient,²⁰ i.e. when a multitude of diverse and ambiguous individual experiences are articulated into a public discourse of misrecognition.²¹ Our focus here is on subsets of actors who once had or tell themselves they had some standing and now feel *misrecognised particularly due to a loss of stature*, real or imagined, in the recent or distant past. Such actors aim to restore hierarchies that elevate them to the high status to which they believe they are entitled.

There is a well-established literature extending recognition theory to group rights, especially in the context of multiculturalism.²² Scholars argue that group identities need recognition too and can suffer from its absence.²³ More recently in IR, an emerging literature argues for a understanding of state recognition beyond *de jure* sovereignty,²⁴ finding that

¹⁸ Adler-Nissen and Tsinoi 2019. For instance, victims of racism and colonialism suffer by being stigmatised as inferior, but their resistance to this negative depiction is complicated by the fact that inferiority has been internalised and naturalized, Fanon 1952, see also Buzás this volume.

¹⁹ See the 2018 special issue on misrecognition in *Review of International Studies*.

²⁰ How and which experiences are mobilised cannot be fully answered within the confines of this article. There may be parallels to the literature on revolutions and social movements. See e.g. Lawson 2019.

²¹ Adler-Nissen and Tsinoi 2019.

²² Taylor 1992; Honneth 2001; Fraser and Honneth 2003.

²³ Gutmann 2003; Taylor 1992.

²⁴ See e.g. Ringmar 2002; 2014; Agne et al. 2013; Bartelson 2013; Lindemann 2013; Lindemann and Ringmar 2014; Wolf 2011; Friedrichs 2016; Strömbom 2014; Epstein, Lindemann and Sending 2018;

gaining legal sovereignty does not necessarily meet states' needs for recognition and that absence of recognition drives states to engage in status contests. Some draw an analogy between individuals and states in order to make this argument²⁵, others argue that states' quests for recognition are historically contingent, and the modern state in particular must care about external recognition because it is domestically tasked with solving its citizens' recognition problems.²⁶ International status competitions become a means for states to simulate a solution; if states rank high in international hierarchies, their citizens feel relatively recognised even if their individual situations are not ideal.²⁷ Though material achievement facilitates a rise in international hierarchies, such achievement does not always guarantee recognition. When social recognition, expressed in social and symbolic markers of status, fails to match the acquired material state, the result is 'status inconsistency', breeding resentment. These observations are not specific to the LIO, and are generally applicable to any international order. Furthermore, like any order, the LIO also recognises some actors more than others.

What makes the LIO different from previous orders is that, at least rhetorically, it disavows hierarchy, especially in terms of recognition. And precisely because it puts such emphasis on politics being based on notions of equality, rights and rationality, the LIO is seen as *hypocritical* by its discontents. Such resentment stems partly from the LIO's failure to acknowledge the significance of some of the historical hierarchies it has inherited and partly

Holm and Sending 2018; Gallagher 2018; Aalberts 2018; Kinnvall and Svensson 2018; Reus-Smit 2013; Wendt 1999; Lebow 2008.

²⁵ Ringmar 2015.

²⁶ Zarakol 2018. Others focus on struggles for the mutual recognition of norms which does not necessarily involve status or attempts to fit into an order, e.g. Wiener 2018.

²⁷ Smith and Jarrko 1998.

from – despite its emphasis on progress – its failure to level others.²⁸ Many semi-peripheral (and non-Western) states that previously lost their historical stature vis-à-vis the core continue to feel misrecognised within the LIO, resenting it for its *lack* of progress. Concurrently, to the extent that the LIO has made progress towards equal recognition, this has come at the expense of certain Western demographic groups once privileged in the twentieth century²⁹, so those groups within the core resent the LIO *for* its progress. This is why the LIO is currently undermined from within, both domestically and internationally. Frustrated authoritarian and quasi-authoritarian regimes in the semi-periphery and status-losing groups in the core find common cause in one enemy: the cosmopolitan liberal elite which promised material and symbolic equality with the LIO.³⁰ On both sides, the LIO is seen as an obstacle to the creation of alternative order(s) that would recognise the high stature demanded by the discontented.

The Centre Cannot Hold: Discontent in the Core

In the centre, the backlash against the LIO is driven by communities previously catered to by political parties, domestic welfare and solidarity mechanisms, but now feeling misrecognised. Some members of majoritarian racial or national groups feel increasingly threatened by immigration, the domestic extensions of civil rights, the growing recognition of previously ‘out-groups’, the relative loss of their economic power and the projected future

²⁸ A common criticism of liberalism in and outside of academia is its apparent amnesia about the degree to which it benefited and continues to benefit from realpolitik and Western imperialism. Hobson and Sharman 2001; Acharya 2018; Mann 2007.

²⁹ Kimmel 2017.

³⁰ Some populists explicitly address the LIO, while others use different regional and national proxies (e.g. EU, disloyal national elites with powerful international networks).

loss of international stature for the West.³¹ They blame the LIO for all of these developments.³² Indeed, as Drolet and Williams explain, the New Right project ‘while diverse, has significant transnational linkages and affinities, and has questions of international politics at the heart of many of its most important elements’.³³

As the distance between these core constituencies and domestic political elites grows, they increasingly disavow the LIO as a ‘bureaucracy’ that did not exist when ‘times were better’ and when they were symbolically privileged.³⁴ This is exactly the sense of misrecognition at play when, for example, Brexit voters long for British exceptionalism and domination, rooted in a nostalgic view of British imperialist history.³⁵ Ironically, because these groups are found in core states whose governments created and sustained the LIO, they are often conflated by outsiders with the proprietors of the LIO. In reality, these voters suspect the LIO of undermining the dominant position of their nation – and the West more generally – within international hierarchies.

The making of the LIO was largely an elite project,³⁶ possible due to a ‘permissive consensus’: the idea that the public does not have clearly-defined preferences regarding

³¹ Rathbun et al. 2016.

³² There is widespread evidence from surveys that populist leaders citizens in developed democracies blame international organisations such as the WTO, IMF or the EU for policy outcomes, sometimes exonerating national politicians: e.g. Hobolt and Tilley 2014; Alcañiz and Hellwig 2011. National decision makers also play the blame game, gaining in domestic popularity if criticised by international organisations for e.g. democratic backsliding, Schlipphak and Treib 2017.

³³ Drolet and Williams 2018.

³⁴ E.g. as the ‘American heartland’, ‘real Americans’; see Gest, Reny and Mayer 2017.

³⁵ Bhambra 2017.

³⁶ Colgan and Keohane 2017. See also Martin 2000.

foreign policy.³⁷ As long as governments and experts stay within a 'zone of acquiescence', they can engage in a range of foreign policy decisions.³⁸ While there was a rich debate about the importance of domestic politics for the success of new liberal institutions³⁹ and some insisted on the importance of broad-based support⁴⁰, many diplomats (and scholars) in the early years after WWII considered ordinary people uninterested in or incapable of forming opinions about foreign policy. This was partly reflected in the self-understanding of acquiescent groups which did not, at least not in the first decades of the liberal international project, object to its creation. Instead, polls from the 1940s and 1950s often show majorities in the West answering 'Don't know' or 'No opinion' when questioned about the LIO's institutions.⁴¹ Official Gallup commentary on these polls notes that the unwillingness to answer questions about international affairs was 'natural', given that these people were workers, farmers or women.⁴²

Western working classes focused on climbing the social ladder, emulating the taste of the upper classes, acquiring material and symbolic goods from cars to education⁴³, and engaging in strategies not unlike those adopted by many non-Western states in the twentieth century, as will be discussed in the next section. While prosperity grew, most people had 'a sense of

³⁷ Hooghe and Marks 2009, 5.

³⁸ Lindberg and Scheingold 1970; Daddow 2012.

³⁹ See Martin and Simmons 1998.

⁴⁰ Haas 1970.

⁴¹ In 1949, in a Gallup survey of public satisfaction with the UN, 40% of the Dutch, 39% of Canadians, and 25% of Americans answered, 'Don't know' or 'No opinion', in contrast to most surveys of today, where only between 5-10% feel unable to answer similar questions.

⁴² e.g. Gallup 1956; 1958.

⁴³ Gartman 2004.

their place,⁴⁴ with strong class identities along with attachment to the nation-state. This hierarchical context forms part of the domestic landscape in which Western elites engaged in the construction of ambitious liberal institutions including the UN, NATO and the European Communities. In the US, bipartisan co-operation increased during WWII, consolidated⁴⁵ during the Cold War with the perception of the common Soviet threat.⁴⁶ Public opinion did not feature much until the Vietnam War.⁴⁷ In Europe, the expectation was that 'permissive support' would, as material gains from increased trade and co-operation became apparent to the voter, lead to affective support.⁴⁸ This was partly because these groups felt *recognised* as 'the owners' of their nation-states. They may not have had a lot of say in these elite projects, but politicians symbolically and rhetorically catered to them. Today, by contrast, anxiety among those who see themselves as losers is grounded in deep discontent with politics.⁴⁹ This feeling of abandonment was compounded by the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-8 and the way it was managed by the political establishment. Increasingly declining trust in authorities found a voice in national elections, especially regarding single-issue votes, especially in the digital environment.⁵⁰ Such empowerment of previously more privileged and now frustrated non-elite groups is an important ingredient in the challenge to the LIO from the centre.

⁴⁴ As Goffman 1956 put it.

⁴⁵ See Wittkopf 1990.

⁴⁶ Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007.

⁴⁷ Since then foreign policy has become the 'subject of an unprecedented level of partisan and ideological dispute' (Wittkopf 1990: xvii).

⁴⁸ Lindberg and Scheingold 1970.

⁴⁹ Hochschild 2016.

⁵⁰ See Pepinsky 2017, 11.1+ópp

While economic issues have played a crucial role in the emergence of populist parties in the West and the end of ‘permissive consensus’, contemporary articulations of such grievances are also driven by recognition demands. Cross-national survey data from twenty ‘developed’ democracies demonstrate populists care significantly more about recognition than redistribution.⁵¹ Indeed, many lower income white voters supported President Trump because he ran on a nativist, anti-internationalist platform that appealed to them.⁵² These voter segments feel stigmatised⁵³ by views faulting individuals for their absence of success in education, housing, job attainment etc. They also feel betrayed by the increased recognition they think immigrants and/or minority groups receive. Representative panel data shows that voting for Trump can be better explained by perceived threats to American global dominance and the rise of a majority–minority America: issues that threaten white Americans’ sense of dominant group status, rather than economic hardship.⁵⁴ Indeed, not all populist voters are lower income. Anxiety about the West’s loss of stature vis-à-vis the rest of the world transcends such class lines.

The populist coping strategy successfully mobilises such anxieties and grievances into a positive social identity centred on the idea of representing the ‘real people’ who are not adequately recognised by the liberal elite.⁵⁵ Populist parties and politicians in the core of the LIO represent a variety of population segments and may differ in ideological programmes, ranging through anti-immigration, anti-globalism, anti-Semitism, ultranationalism, anti-

⁵¹ Gidron and Hall 2017; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Cramer 2016.

⁵² Carnes and Lupu 2017, quoted in Pepinsky 2017, 10.

⁵³ Stigmatisation differs from simple discrimination in that a crucial component of stigma is its internalisation by the stigmatised actor. Goffman 1963. See also Adler-Nissen 2014a; 2014b, Zarakol 2010; 2011; 2014.

⁵⁴ Mutz 2018.

⁵⁵ De Vries and Edwards 2009; Rooduijn et al. 2016.

capitalism; and in Europe: anti-Americanism and Euro-scepticism to secession. Yet they all share a sense of their identity being threatened by liberal internationalism, displaying anger against e.g. global markets, open borders, international regulation and representative democracy.⁵⁶ The populist backlash against the LIO is further fuelled by how established parties and elites deal with challenges to their positions. In countries like France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Austria and Sweden, the establishment's use of terms like 'pariah' may ultimately have reinforced the extremists' populist appeal.⁵⁷

To sum up, populism in the West is embedded in feelings of vulnerability and nostalgia⁵⁸, increasingly expressed in the form of anti-internationalism rather than traditional left/right party politics.⁵⁹ As strong positive class identities have atrophied, populism has become a viable coping mechanism for diverse groups sharing a sense of marginalisation and misrecognition, targeting domestic political elites as out of touch⁶⁰ and rejecting international institutions in favour of nationalist retrenchment.⁶¹

The Widening Gyre: Discontent in the Semi-periphery

IR scholarship generally attributes the LIO's appeal to semi-peripheral and non-Western states to one or a combination of the following: US investment and commitment, the post-

⁵⁶ Support for the LIO relates to the cleavage around GAL/TAN issues (Green/Alternative/Libertarian vs. Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist). Hooghe et al. 2002.

⁵⁷ Ellinas 2010.

⁵⁸ Spruyt et al. 2016; McDermott and Hatemi 2018.

⁵⁹ The ideology of the old extreme right (anti-Semitic and radical anti-democratic) was rendered largely impotent in the West by the outcome of WWII. However, the extreme nationalist right is now sufficiently freed from shame to become politically potent. Rydgren 2005.

⁶⁰ Pew Research Center 2017.

⁶¹ See also Hall 2020 on the logics for the turn toward populism.

WWII hegemony⁶², the strength of its institutions and rules⁶³, the rationality of its economic incentives⁶⁴, the persuasiveness of its normative model and norm entrepreneurs⁶⁵ or their cooperative-security practices⁶⁶. However, as critical scholarship has long argued,⁶⁷ liberalism also rests on historical (social,⁶⁸ economic and political) hierarchical relationships between the West and the non-West, without which it could not have come into being in the first place. For this reason, it cannot be assumed that semi-peripheral (or non-Western) countries have joined (or rejected) the LIO for entirely 'rational' reasons; they have done so because many saw (and still see) the LIO as yet another Western status club privileging its members, with membership offering a way to rise within the international hierarchies of the modern order.

The nineteenth century was pivotal in the creation of the modern international order⁶⁹ because for the first time economic indicators in 'the West' manifestly surpassed those of Asia.⁷⁰ Equally important, however, was the emergence during the long nineteenth century of a particular social relationship between the West and the rest of the international system, a relationship that would characterise international relations for the next century and

⁶² Ikenberry 2001; 2011; Lake 1999; Nye 2017.

⁶³ Keohane 1984; Pevehouse 2002; Simmons 2009; Lake 2010; Ikenberry 2018.

⁶⁴ Marinov and Goemans 2013; Eichengreen and Leblang 2008.

⁶⁵ Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

⁶⁶ Adler 2008.

⁶⁷ See e.g. Bell 2016; Morefield 2005; 2014.

⁶⁸ Social hierarchies include racial, religious, cultural, national and other identity-based hierarchies.

⁶⁹ Buzan and Lawson 2015.

⁷⁰ Pomeranz 2009; Osterhammel 2015.

beyond.⁷¹ 'The West' came to be seen as the centre of the world; its standards, from political to cultural, came to define what was seen as 'normal',⁷² shaping expectations of how international actors should behave (internally and externally). Those falling short of these expectations were stigmatised,⁷³ initially formally via the 'Standard of Civilisation'⁷⁴ which deprived states not considered 'civilised' of equal legal recognition, and later in the twentieth century through more informal hierarchies such as modern vs traditional or First World vs Third World. This can be thought of as an 'established-outsider' relationship: those who are 'established', or early-arrivers, in a social setting have the power to set norms and they look down on those who are 'outsiders', or late-comers, as being anomic even if material differences between them are insignificant.⁷⁵ Social power allows differences to grow and/or to be reproduced over time.⁷⁶ Being considered inferior to actors who define what is 'normal' has significant material consequences as well. In the nineteenth century, for example, non-Western states, even when independent, had lower legal standing and therefore fewer economic protections than had European states and their former colonies settled by whites.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Mazower 2013; Morefield 2005.

⁷² Manela 2007; Zarakol 2011.

⁷³ See footnote 51 above.

⁷⁴ Gong 1984; Towns 2010.

⁷⁵ Elias 1965; Zarakol 2011.

⁷⁶ The influence of social hierarchies in modern world politics is also confirmed by the English School. Keene 2002; Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017 and post-colonial scholarship. Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bilgin and Morton 2002.

⁷⁷ This did not end in the nineteenth century. For example, Manela (2007) has shown how India, China, Egypt and Korea sought in vain to activate Wilson's rhetoric of national self-determination in their fights for independence, leaving a legacy of disappointment towards liberal internationalism.

Actors ranking lower in the social hierarchy of international politics are thus driven to overcome their stigma(s).⁷⁸ The twentieth century offers examples of two types of stigma-management strategy.⁷⁹ A few countries attempted to embrace their stigmatisation by the core, wearing this as a badge of honour. The Soviet Union was the most high-profile example of this kind, as a stigmatised state attempting to create its own normative/ideological universe and gain recognition from the leadership of other similarly situated states instead.⁸⁰ However, even within its own sphere of influence, the USSR never managed to overturn the primary narrative underwriting the social hierarchy of the modern international order: i.e. the notion that the rest of world had to 'catch up' with the West. By contrast, many more semi-peripheral⁸¹ and non-Western states attempted to move up the international system's social hierarchy by 'correcting' their stigmatising attributes and by joining the status clubs of the West, i.e. by assimilating into the 'Western order'. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show many such states adopting 'Western' norms, from seemingly trivial matters such as dress codes to more serious ones such as legal codes,⁸² as well as signing treaties and joining Western organisations for status-related reasons.⁸³ Most importantly for the present discussion, we see some of this same pattern also after the end of the Cold War, when Central and Eastern European states joined the LIO.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Zarakol 2011; 2014; Adler-Nissen 2014a; 2014b.

⁷⁹ Zarakol 2011; Adler-Nissen 2014a; Naylor 2018; Towns and Rumelili 2017; Suzuki 2017.

⁸⁰ The Non-Aligned Movement as well as China's attempts in Africa and elsewhere during the Cold War fall under this heading. See e.g. Suzuki 2017.

⁸¹ Another way of thinking about this is that the semi-periphery is constituted by countries who have seriously exercised this strategy.

⁸² Note that this is different from being forced to adopt such rules under colonial administration.

⁸³ Bull 1984; Checkel 2001; Anno 2018.

⁸⁴ Zaborowski 2006; Krastev and Holmes 2019.

The USSR could not sustain the parallel recognition hierarchy it created, and its failure only reinforced (at least in the 1990s) the notion that the West was both the centre *and* the future of world politics. The choice for the semi-periphery especially was between being recognised as Western or as ‘developing’.

The post-WWII and the post-Cold War expansion of the LIO must be understood against this historical background. LIO’s attraction for semi-peripheral (and non-Western) actors was not merely due to the material benefits offered but also due to concerns of recognition and belonging. To attribute its creation primarily to US power, the persuasiveness of its elites, economic incentives or the intrinsic appeal of its norms, misses a primary reason many countries joined it⁸⁵: they saw it as the inner core of the international system, a status club conveying special privileges and increased recognition.⁸⁶ The choice involved not only the substantive merits of this order but a desired identity label: ‘Western’ or ‘First World’ or ‘developed’ vs. its undesirable corollaries.⁸⁷ The new entrants were not necessarily persuaded by the substantive arguments. Because the appeal of LIO for many⁸⁸ was primarily about recognition and acceptance, joining did not require internalisation of or acquiescence to liberal norms or rules. Without substantive persuasion, the resentment at having to perform those norms festered beneath the surface within certain segments of these

⁸⁵ Holsti 1992, 439.

⁸⁶ Rumelili 2008; Mälksoo 2009; 2010; Subotic 2011; Zarakol 2011; Aydın-Düzgit 2018.

⁸⁷ It should be noted that ‘liberalism’ is almost a dirty word in many societies outside of the centre of the LIO. Hendrickson 2018.

⁸⁸ And especially liminal actors in Eastern Europe and elsewhere whose belonging was in question.

societies⁸⁹, made more acute when nominal acceptance into the LIO club failed to deliver the desired levels of recognition.⁹⁰

It is also important to note that while resentments towards Western-centric hierarchies predate the LIO, the success of the LIO itself has ironically played a significant role across semi-peripheral states in the rise of governments more representative of the resentful, anti-Western segments of those societies. First, especially from the 1980s and 1990s onwards, the norms of political and economic liberalisation helped dismantle twentieth century modernising regimes of any ideology, thus opening up electoral competition, generating political leaders more dependent on mass support.⁹¹ While they were pro-LIO and/or pro-democracy in opposition, once in power, many these leaders consolidated their positions by channelling resentments against the LIO, sometimes even by invoking conspiracy theories,⁹² and by ‘standing up’ to the Western dominance their domestic constituencies view as having treated them unfairly, for the historical reasons we reviewed above. Second, global gains made under the LIO outside of the Western core economically empowered these groups in the semi-periphery. Finally, the unequal effects of the 2007-8 Global Financial Crisis and the investment channelled to ‘emerging markets’ after 2008,⁹³ made such

⁸⁹ Zarakol 2014, cf. Búzás 2018.

⁹⁰ Emulation, the attempt to move up in the hierarchy by mimicking high-ranked actors, never quite garners the desired recognition for the assimilating actor. The ‘established’ cannot afford to have all emulating outsiders join their ranks for fear of losing their own status. At the very least there is resistance, as we discussed in the previous section. Informal hierarchy even among formally equal members is thus propped up by shifting the criteria for emulation as soon as they are close to being reached. See Bourdieu 1984; Bauman 1991, 75-80; Zarakol 2011, 2014.

⁹¹ McCargo and Zarakol 2012; Zarakol 2013 discusses these developments in the cases of Turkey and Thailand, but the trajectory is generalisable.

⁹² Galston 2018.

⁹³ Tooze 2018.

governments seem more successful and these countries more economically successful than they actually were, further emboldening their governments' active roles in international politics, undermining the LIO from within.⁹⁴

Things Fall Apart: How the Merger of Discontents Hollows out the LIO from Within

As previous sections made clear, discontents in the centre and semi-periphery are unhappy with the LIO as an order of recognition, but for seemingly opposite reasons: while the former thinks the LIO has undermined Western supremacy, the latter sees it yet as another manifestation of the same. While their motivations for undermining the LIO and their plans for the aftermath are divergent, currently these two strains are reinforcing each other, creating a challenge to the LIO that is more than the sum of its parts.

Three features of the present international system in particular make this interaction more potent. First, digital technology speeds up global dissemination of ideas and activism, and gives a voice to those who did not previously feel they had one. Indeed, 'the Internet produced electorates that were more plugged in to political debates and more independent-minded (although not necessarily better informed), which made them more critical of and less deferential toward traditional elites.'⁹⁵ The discontented find mutual recognition via the global platforms of Facebook and Twitter.⁹⁶ Digital disinformation, fake news, and information-flooding tap into and give shape to the frustrations⁹⁷ of a worldwide demographic of people who never fully bought into the LIO.

⁹⁴ Zarakol 2019.

⁹⁵ Mudde 2016, 28.

⁹⁶ Singer 2014; Hjorth and Adler-Nissen 2019.

⁹⁷ See Adler and Drieschova this volume.

Taking advantage of these frustrations, Russia waged a multi-front disinformation campaign to affect the 2016 US election by supporting political extremist groups, ‘users dissatisfied with [the] social and economic situation’ and those inclined to ‘use any opportunity to criticise Hillary and the rest (except Sanders and Trump – we support them)’.⁹⁸ The wider influence campaign included hacking attempts, information theft, and digital advertisements. Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) created social media accounts purporting to belong to ordinary American citizens. Facebook estimates 126 million people were served content from the IRA during the election. Other studies have found IRA social media updates unintentionally embedded in traditional news media, serving as *vox populi*.⁹⁹ In Germany, the most famous case of pro-Kremlin online disinformation was that of ‘Our Lisa’: the supposed rape of a Russian-German girl in January 2016 by three ‘Muslim’ or ‘Arab’ men. Such disinformation triggered Russian-German demonstrations across Germany, leading to a spat between the German and Russian Foreign Ministers.¹⁰⁰ In France, after Macron’s initial surge in the Presidential election in 2017, the Kremlin-sponsored platform Sputnik claimed that Macron was a closeted gay with ‘a very rich gay lobby’ behind him, and his campaign was targeted by Russian hackers.¹⁰¹ These techniques are effective because they play on fears that elites serve and recognise other, previously ‘out’ groups instead of the discontents.

Second, since the end of the Cold War, the global decline of ideologies and party politics associated with that period¹⁰² has lifted barriers to collaborations between groups and states

⁹⁸ US v. Internet Research Agency: 14, 17.

⁹⁹ Lukito et al. 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Macharychev 2020.

¹⁰¹ Shekhovtsov 2018.

¹⁰² See Grossman and Sauger 2019; Rejai 2017.

previously in different camps, as shown in the networks being forged among parties and leaders in the non-Western world. For example, 'Islamist' Erdoğan's July 2018 Presidential inauguration in Ankara, Turkey, was attended by Medvedev, Maduro, Orban and Vucic, to name a few, leaders running the gamut from supposed 'far-left' to 'far-right'.¹⁰³ Similarly, Netanyahu of Israel has strong ties with the illiberal leaders of Poland and Hungary, despite the latter's frequent anti-Semitic rhetoric.¹⁰⁴ Other examples include Bolsonaro's warm reception by Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Steve Bannon (Phillips 2018); the cosy relations between Trump and Modi; Jared Kushner's ties with MBS (Muhammed bin Salman) of Saudi Arabia (Kirkpatrick et al. 2018); and of course Vladimir Putin's 'friendship' with populists throughout Europe (Klapisis 2015) as well as the US (Laruelle 2018). In May 2019, early elections were called in Austria after a video emerged, showing the (nationalist) deputy chancellor offering public contracts to a woman he believed to be a Russian oligarch. These illiberal leaders are united by resentment of the LIO, as well as mutual financial interests and symbolic recognition: this sustains their networks. We are witnessing the emergence of unexpected connections between far-left groups, white nationalists, anti-Western Islamists, Russian conspiracy theorists, which seem at first glance to have no ideological affinity.¹⁰⁵ While it may be too early to suggest a 'nationalist international',¹⁰⁶ a globally interconnected vision is developing.¹⁰⁷ This cross-fertilisation creates ground-up pressures on Western politicians to change their discourses to match, while consolidating

¹⁰³ Uras 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Sternhell 2019.

¹⁰⁵ See Makarychev 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Abrahamsen et al. 2020.

¹⁰⁷ For its ideological roots, ideational trajectories and contemporary articulations, see Drolet and Williams 2018 and Tjalve ed. 2020.

authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes elsewhere by seeming to corroborate their rhetoric. As Drolet and Williams note, this is sometimes the result of an effective strategy: ‘ By stirring anxiety and mobilizing stigmas over foreign competition, unemployment, welfare and immigration, the [New Right] seeks to force mainstream political parties to revise their traditional positions to prevent an exodus of voters from the centre-right’ (Drolet and Williams 2018: 306).

The third feature setting our time apart from seemingly comparable periods is that the main vulnerability is generated mostly by the actors formally within the LIO or participating in its various aspects. This is true both for the discontented groups in the West but also for the semi-peripheral troublemakers. Though resentment towards Western domination is not new, what is thus novel is that current international challengers especially have in many ways been great beneficiaries of the LIO. Not only are their states members of LIO institutions and economic arrangements, but many of the regimes expressing grievances against the LIO were actively supported by liberal elites during periods of power consolidation and have been further buoyed by the economic developments of recent decades, as discussed in the previous section.¹⁰⁸ This undercuts the prevailing assumption in the literature that material benefits would produce ideational convergence.

The particular timing of this merger also has to do with a number of contingent factors, including the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-8, and the choices made by Putin’s Russia as referred to above. Russia plays a larger than expected role in channelling the two strains of discontent together for a number of reasons. It is a frustrated former Great Power, with attendant ambitions, a sense of entitlement regarding the international system¹⁰⁹, and

¹⁰⁸ See also Lake, Martin and Risse, this issue.

¹⁰⁹ Gilpin 1981.

grievances stemming from its loss of stature.¹¹⁰ But even more significantly, vis-à-vis the West, it is an actor able to play both sides of the West/non-West divide.¹¹¹ In the Western core of the LIO, Russia occupies a special place in popular and political imagination, unmatched by other non-Western states, who are more overtly seen as outsiders, strangers, or aliens. For historical and identity-based reasons, however, Russia is understood by at least some in the West,¹¹² more as a version of the Self¹¹³ that has gone wrong (or right, depending on the perspective). Historically, groups out of power in the West (nineteenth century absolutists, twentieth century communists, early twenty-first century right wing reactionaries/white supremacists) have cast Russia as the alternative ideal to whatever dominates at home. Russia is thus an 'Other' for the West but not so much of an 'Other' that it cannot be used by some as a model *for* the West. In reaching out to right-wing populists and white nationalists within the West via social media and other networks¹¹⁴, Putin's Russia knowingly presents itself as a mythical 'True West', the defender of Western

¹¹⁰ Schmitt 2020.

¹¹¹ Zarakol 2011; Tsygankov 2012. The legacy also facilitates intervention in other countries' political affairs, see Way and Casey 2018.

¹¹² For images of Russia in European political discourse, see e.g. Neumann 1995; 1998. Russia has played a similar role in US perceptions. In the nineteenth century, parallels were often drawn between the US and Russia as recently expansionist states coming onto the world stage (for example between the Indian removal act and the Russo-Circassian War). During the twentieth century, despite its status as a threat, Russia/USSR continued to be idealised by an ideological minority as the future of the US (see Wisenhaut and Saul 2016). To be clear, Russia has not been seen as an Other or an enemy in the US but rather that its hybrid status allows its simultaneous perception as friend or enemy, the past or the future, by different groups in the West.

¹¹³ Recent statements by the US State Department that in China the US will face its first non-Caucasian competitor and must therefore prepare for a clash of civilisations (Gehrke 2019) could also be read as affirming the insider-outsider status of Russia.

¹¹⁴ Another important component here is Russia's facility with social media. See Stukal et al. 2017.

civilisation's white, Christian and conservative values. Italy's Far Right Northern League looks to Russia not only as an economic partner, but also as a model for 'the protection of the family.'¹¹⁵ For populists in the core, the Russian-promoted alternative may appear more attractive, not least because it promises a 'return' to a sovereignty-based, Westphalian order with spheres of influence, where i.e. Britain could regain its status outside the EU. This ideological cross-fertilisation is further fuelled, as multiple reports have exposed, by Kremlin directly financing the European far right. One of the first spectacular cases was the revelation in 2014 that the Front National had received 40 million euros from a Russian-controlled bank.¹¹⁶

At the same time, Russia's historical trajectory within the modern international system is much closer to other non-Western and semi-peripheral states. Thus, Russia has hybrid qualities and resentments specific to that hybridity that China, for instance, does not have, but which other disruptive semi-peripheral countries within or just on the fringes of the LIO share to some extent. Evidence also points to the Kremlin's financing of Hungary's far-right Jobbik since 2008,¹¹⁷ and its constant meddling in other parts of the semi-periphery, including in Turkey.¹¹⁸ The messages here resonate for different reasons than they do in the core. In reaching out to right- and left-wing populists within the Western centre (and authoritarian leaders of the semi-periphery), Russia performs as the country that can stand up to the LIO, either to save the West from it or to save others from the West. These claims

¹¹⁵ The Northern League has also created a cultural exchange program, the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association, receiving funding from the Russian propaganda outlet Sputnik. Klapsis 2015.

¹¹⁶ See Cooley and Nexon 2020 for an analysis of the transnational networks of illiberal parties, receiving financial and moral support from Moscow.

¹¹⁷ Klapsis 2015.

¹¹⁸ Ünver 2019.

work because they are in fact plausibly rooted in actual historical dynamics. No other country could pursue such a strategy, claiming simultaneously to be anti-West and the salvation of the West, and nevertheless resonating with target audiences.

The Prognosis for IR Theory and the LIO

The reason why so many misunderstand what is happening to the LIO is ontological: they assume that the threat is either international *or* domestic. If the problem is international, then it is seen as an external challenge of information or hybrid warfare,¹¹⁹ eliciting a combined response of fact-checking and cyber security at home and military deterrence abroad.¹²⁰ If the problem is seen as domestic, then it becomes about ‘audience costs’¹²¹ or how ideology enters the bureaucracy of foreign policy, to be addressed by examining domestic processes of opinion-formation and decision-making.¹²² Yet, if the opposition to the LIO has started to structure new types of transnational networks among the discontented, who may be opposition groups in some places but state actors in others, the domestic/international distinction ceases to be as meaningful as it was in the last century.

Only by understanding these emerging transnational ideologies and networks, often facilitated by digital technology, can we begin properly to assess the LIO’s current malaise. In terms of data and methods, this has fundamental implications for what becomes relevant for IR scholarship: along with the study of national security and strategy, we should also examine social media interactions by ordinary citizens. Our argument also challenges the long-standing belief within political science that not only is the West a separate analytical

¹¹⁹ Pomarentsev 2015.

¹²⁰ See Hoskins and Loughlin 2015.

¹²¹ Fearon 1994.

¹²² Gourevitch 2002.

category but that developments within the Western core can be studied without reference to what is happening elsewhere in the world.

Our framework suggests a way of understanding the seemingly disparate challenges the LIO is facing as stemming from similar recognition logics. Those wishing to save the LIO tend to ignore the key problem: the LIO is not only a system of rules and institutions, but also a *recognition* order, which inevitably produces discontents regardless of absolute gains. Arguably, the LIO has been better than previous Western-centric orders at addressing recognition problems outside of the core of the system. Indeed, its successes in this regard are partly to blame for some of the resistance it is facing from the centre. Both governments and voters who wish to dispense with the LIO have actually benefited from the pluralism of this order as well as its economic rewards. Furthermore, abandoning the LIO, as demanded by populist and anti-liberal challengers, would not remove the underlying recognition problems inherent in politics. Disruptive liminal states and populist Western voters are not advocating a more equal world, but rather their *own* hierarchical visions of the international (and domestic) order. Finally, it is important to remember that there are many more actors besides the proponents and the discontents of the LIO; the great majority outside the West perhaps fall on neither side while sympathising with aspects of each camp. The fate of the LIO lies with this majority. Those who want to salvage the LIO need to ask what the LIO can do to recognise *them*, and to do so before alternatives emerge.

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