The Normalization of Contestation: The Sociology of Knowledge and Endogenous Challenges to the Liberal International Order

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Published in:
Global Studies Quarterly

Publication date:
2024

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Document license:
Unspecified

Citation for published version (APA):
The Normalization of Contestation:  
The Sociology of Knowledge and the Challenges to the Liberal International Order

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Forthcoming in *Global Studies Quarterly, 2024*

This commentary is accepted for publication in a special forum in *Global Studies Quarterly* on endogenous challenges to the liberal international order edited by Stacie E. Goddard, Ronald R. Krebs, Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, & Berthold Rittberger.¹

Abstract

Many of the in-built contradictions in the liberal international order were pointed out by critics early on. Why were these voices not heard? How was contestation ignored or made acceptable by the people governing within liberal sub-orders, articulating progress, rationality, and equality? Drawing on insights from the sociology of knowledge and theories of organizational culture, I address this puzzle through the lens of the ‘normalization of deviance’. Beyond understanding the challenges as a crisis of and within the liberal international order, I argue that they unveil the limitations of hegemonic expertise governing this order. Part of the current predicament of the liberal international order has to do with the entrenched positioning and organizational cultures of political leaders and experts, making them blind to their own blindness. As they justify deviations and defend ‘their’ order, they normalize contestation. The implications extend beyond the immediate challenges to the liberal international order, offering insights into reimagining its future and prompting a reconsideration of the discipline dedicated to understanding it.

¹The ideas for this paper were first presented at an authors’ workshop in October 2021 at the Akademie für Politische Bildung Tutzing, Germany. I thank the editors Stacie E. Goddard, Ronald R. Krebs, Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, & Berthold Rittberger for their comments as well as the interventions of other participants, including Thomas Risse, Michael Zürn, Ayse Zarakol, Kathleen McNamara, George Lawson, Manuela Moschella, Michael C. Williams, and Jean-Francois Drolet. I gratefully acknowledge support from DIPLOFACE StG 680102 and the Carlsberg Foundation.
Introduction

Historian Adam Tooze, in a candid admission on a 2023 podcast openly expressed his unease regarding what he called the ‘polycrisis’ of the liberal international order.2 Tooze’s anxiety, he revealed, stemmed from his perceived incapacity to think beyond confines of the world he was raised in, a realization that his own positionality was acting as a blinding force. This self-reflective acknowledgment by Tooze underscores the critical intersection of individual intellectual baggage, authoritative expertise, and societal positioning in shaping perspectives on the future of the liberal international order.

This special forum is not driven by fear, but by a motivation to systematically conceptualize in-built contradictions in the liberal international order. It shows that many of the impasses and shortcomings are endogenous, part of the original design of the liberal international sub-orders. Moreover, those who are eager to save the liberal international order face grave challenges both when they engage in active attempts to defend the status quo and when they seek to accommodate contestations (Goddard et al., this forum, see also Wiener 2014). Paradoxically, the more a sub-order aligns with liberal ideals—both normatively and institutionally—the more susceptible it becomes to challenges that undermine the established order.

This commentary grapples with the perplexing puzzle stemming from the forum: Even in cases where the challenges to the liberal international sub-orders were visible to most people, they could hide in plain sight. When, for example, African states such as Sudan and Kenya advocated for normative modifications within the International Criminal Court (ICC), their pleas garnered little interest, even when presented to the UN General Assembly (Lesch et al, this forum). The ensuing lack of responsiveness and acknowledgment over time fueled disengagement.

The overarching question emerges: why did policymakers, particularly in the West, not fully confront these contestations and contradictions earlier, especially when they were voiced early on? Is it only now that core political elites themselves may be vulnerable to the effects of these contradictions that they begin to reflect on them? Is it mere self-defence? Or should we look more to the

organizational cultures of international decision-making and bureaucracy? Addressing the endogenous challenges, this commentary suggests, requires a sociological exploration of knowledge. In the subsequent sections, I argue that the contestation within liberal international sub-orders not only reflects a crisis within the orders themselves, but is also indicative of a broader crisis in the established knowledge surrounding them.

I. The normalization of deviance

The sociology of knowledge holds important lessons for how we can understand the mechanisms through which the liberal international order became blind to its own blindness. The sociologist-ethnographer Diane Vaughan’s (1996) concept of ‘normalization of deviance’ is particularly illuminating. Her study of the 1986 Challenger accident traced the factors that produced a cultural disposition among NASA engineers and managers towards the rationalization of risk. She shows how a pattern of decision-making over time led to the normalization of deviance. This gradually moved practice away from safety standards and towards disaster and paved the way for the spacecraft accident. The normalization of deviance has since been identified across multiple industries and organizations across the world. Following Vaughan (1996), we can analyze the contestations of the liberal international order as revelatory of how those with power (in particular, but not only in the West) together developed patterns that, to paraphrase Daniel Kahneman, made them blind to their own blindness (Kahneman 2011, 24).

The normalization of deviance points to one of the reasons why the tensions were not taken seriously earlier on. When defenders of the liberal international order resist contestation, they often portray order-consistent contestation as ‘illegitimate’, ‘irrational’ or indeed ‘deviant’. Using liberal rhetoric, contestation is stigmatized, which means that listening or ‘offering any concessions to their demands is unnecessary’ (Goddard et al. this forum, see also Zarakol 2014). This then leads to a spiral of escalation where contestants — frustrated with being ignored — turn to order-challenging confrontations. Goddard et al. (this forum) explain the modes through which liberals resist contestation (or respond with legalization or institutional inclusion) in ways that do not allow for politics or deliberation to play out. But they do not explain why liberals resist the politics of contestation in the first place. Why was warning signals not taken seriously at first? And when they were responded to, why was it often done with a lack of
genuine engagement? Part of the answer, I suggest, is that deviance – the way in which a liberal sub-order begins to deviate from its stated ideal – is normalized.

Diane Vaughan emphasizes the located nature of knowledge, that knowledge is inescapably positioned in time and space. How problems or events are viewed, interpreted, and described are intrinsically connected to the positioning of individuals and the organizations and hierarchies of the broader social fields to which they belong (on the situatedness of knowledge, see also Adler-Nissen and Kropp 2015). Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore’s (1999) pathbreaking study of the pathologies of international organizations drew on Vaughan’s research to explain how the UNHCR has steadily lowered the barriers to repatriation, which went from being an exception that was actively debated, to a ‘new normal’. To do this, ‘bureaucracies create social knowledge and develop expertise as they act upon the world (and thus exercise power)’ (Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 718). More recently, Fligstein et al, (2017) used this cultural-cognitive sociological lens to explain why regulators such as the Federal Reserve were failed to anticipate the 2008 financial crisis, and Schmid (2019) shows how a ‘nuclear normalcy’ is being establishing, as tasks and responsibilities are divided between a ‘safety’ and a ‘security community’ leaving fundamental knowledge gaps in global nuclear governance.

But the way bureaucracies are constituted to accomplish these ends can, ironically, create a cultural disposition toward undesirable and ultimately self-defeating behavior. The normalization of deviance is an incremental process that explains how people who work together can sustain an understanding of the situation as normal when faced with increasing evidence that something is going wrong.

Key to the normalization of deviance is the processes through which signals of potential danger are rationalized.3 By normalization of deviance, Vaughan does not mean becoming accustomed to wrongful behavior, rather she points to the ‘prerational forces’ such as organizational priorities, which shape the options of a decision. Gradually, those in power normalize signals of potential danger or risk,

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3 The normalization of deviance is characterized by a five-stage pattern: (1) Signal of potential danger; (2) Official act acknowledging escalated risk; (3) Review of the evidence; (4) Official act indicating the ‘normalization of deviance’: accepting risk; (5) Continued operation. Interestingly, these official ‘acts’ often acknowledge and endorse the level of risk current practice carries as acceptable, signaling that we should continue to operate as normal despite a seemingly obvious increased risk (Taylor and Goodwin 2022, 673).
resulting in decisions that can have catastrophic consequences. This is not only a question of the development of new norms but about the incremental expansion of normative boundaries; how small changes – new behaviors that were slight deviations from the normal course of events – gradually became the norm, providing a basis for accepting additional deviance. Emphasizing the locality of such perspectives, Dekker et al. (2011, 39) further suggest that from the inside, the drifting away from standards becomes invisible. Seen from inside of people’s own working situation and life world, deviations become compliant behavior.

II. How contestation was normalized

With this sociology of knowledge perspective, I now turn to how the normalization of deviance plays into the challenges against the liberal international order and its sub-orders. Going beyond a mere diagnosis of a crisis, the contributors to the special forum look at the specific dynamics of contestation and the mechanisms of reactions and how liberal commitments play into that equation.

Most contributions take the reader decades back to demonstrate that a particular sub-order was contested from the very beginning, either in an order-consistent or order-challenging way. There were often warning signs that the regime would not be easy to uphold or that some of its members were worried about its implementation. In the case of order-challenging dynamics, Hoffman (this forum) shows that when, where, and how to intervene in an armed conflict was always deeply contested. As she argues, when it comes to collective security and its attachments to human rights rather than national sovereignty, contestation was there from the beginning. States such as Russia and China have contended with the liberal peace template from the outset.

The way in which contestation is ignored and deviance normalized can often be explained by perceptions of natural knowledge hierarchies (see also Hobson and Sharman 2005). As Lesch et al. conclude (this forum) in their analysis of the sub-

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4 This may also be reflected in how non-Western IR approaches have been perceived in Western IR scholarship. Zhang and Kristensen (2017) explain how the Chinese school of international relations was never really taken seriously in Western IR scholarship: ‘Where knowledge is produced often determines whether it is accepted as a genuine contribution to knowledge and the
order of human rights and international law, hierarchical institutional settings, such as the International Criminal Court, can aggravate conflict by leaving even order-consistent challengers with the perception that they have been dealt with unfairly and ‘betrayed’ (see Hurd 2022 on the power politics of international cooperation and law).

Similarly, Tannenwald (this forum) effectively shows that while the nuclear nonproliferation regime was framed as a universalist and liberal order, it was in fact always skewed towards nuclear powers. The non-nuclear states saw through the smoke, pointing to the double standards embedded in the treaty that permits the five ‘declared’ nuclear states to possess nuclear weapons indefinitely but denies such weapons to the majority of the world.

In other instances, such as the liberal refugee regime, as Lavenex (this forum) documents, deviations were gradually invented by Western core states as they grew increasingly unhappy with the demands of the regime—a regime they themselves instilled. For example, the EU developed ‘safe third country rules’ allowing states to deny access to formal asylum procedures on the ground and to return the asylum applicant to another safe country. No rules were officially broken. Instead, small and creative adjustments were made to the regime, precluding access for asylum seekers to EU territory. Over time these adjustments amount to a normalization of deviance, instigated by the core states who become increasingly deaf to order-consistent challenges against them. Instead, they develop justifications for the ‘new normal’.

Have the inherent tensions between liberal and democratic (see Goddard et al., this forum) been felt more deeply outside of the core of the West? And is it only now that the tensions affect the more privileged core states (and their more or less liberal elites) that the endogenous issues are visible for them too? It is certainly one possible interpretation. To take an example, Koch (this forum) argues that within the West, populists’ failed efforts to ‘oppose liberal priorities’ in international organizations lead liberal international orders to be perceived as undemocratic and thereby strengthen populists who campaign in the name of ‘popular sovereignty’. His argument is that Western societies are becoming undone as previously politically disadvantaged minorities – including migrants

degree of its universality/particularity, and thus how it is accepted, ordered, disseminated and consumed in the discipline’ (Zhang and Kristensen 2017, 454).
and refugees – are seen to benefit from the liberal politics of liberal international orders. This leads ‘previously higher-status citizens and states’ to perceive ‘political liberalization as decreasing their social rank’, cultivating populism in the West (Koch, this forum). As he writes, ‘political radicalisation under liberal international institutions now reaches even the seemingly immune global North used to benefiting disproportionately from a liberal international order it historically built and controlled’ (Koch, this forum). The populist warning signals were overhead by Western decision-makers, sometimes because complaints from the lower ranks of society were deemed ‘racist’. Over time, the liberal international orders turned out to work better for some than others, not just outside the core of the West, but also increasingly within its own societies. The result was a gradual normalization of deviances, inequalities and injustices. This raises difficult questions, including a very basic one: What happens when the West stops being a privileged place for liberalism?5

III. Is hypocrisy particularly dangerous for the liberal international order?

Hypocrisy runs through several of the contributions. It is also one of the three significant pathways identified by Goddard et al. (this forum) through which the liberal international order is contested.6 First, they argue, the liberal international order may be unequal, distributing its benefits unevenly. Second, it may be internally contradictory as different liberal norms may collide. Third, it may be perceived as hypocritical. Yet I would argue that both inequality and the internal contradictions between norms amount to some form of hypocrisy where the order cannot live up to its stated aims. In other words, hypocrisy is the basic problem.

For example, Pouliot and Patterson (this forum) explain how the economic sub-order of embedded liberalism expresses a ‘liberal hypocrisy’ because it worked for the core, but not for the postcolonial periphery. Specifically, they show how many postcolonial states had to commit to the international side of the compromise of embedded liberalism (liberalization, whether through the IMF’s

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5 At stake in the response to contestation over the liberal international order are also the liberal self-understanding of many elites, as articulated by, for example, French President Macron (Staunton 2022).

6 See also Lawson and Zarakol 2023 on the ‘hypocrisy charge’ against the liberal international order.
conditional lending or GATT’s most-favored-nation clause), but they lacked the resources to implement its domestic side (welfare programs and other macroeconomic adjustments performed in most OECD countries at the time). Despite the complaints from these former colonies that the economic regime did not work for them, the leaders and decision-makers promoting and upholding the compromise of embedded liberalism never took their considerations and concerns seriously. Deviance was normalized through domestication.

Hypocrisy is often interpreted as the consequence of not finding adequate ways of resolving inherent contradictions. Across a range of policy areas, from migration to security, what is presented as a liberal regime is in fact sometimes a cover for decidedly illiberal practices. What looks like order often appears more disorderly, not just for those in the periphery or outside the core, but also for Western audiences. What is called international has its own local or ‘domestic’ logic.

For example, Heinkelmann et al. (this forum) show that the hegemonic US, responding to accusations of hypocrisy by excluded states when it was preaching liberal inclusiveness, was forced to open up the liberal regime order to other states. This again lead to institutional paralysis and the US contesting the WTO, engaging in counter-institutionalization.

It might be that hypocrisy is more dangerous for liberal orders than for other kinds of international orders as Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2021, 615) suggest. Is this due to its commitments to equality, rights, and rationality? Or is it similarly problematic for a nationalist right-wing Hungarian Member of the European Parliament to be found in a gay club in Brussels during one of the Covid-19 lockdowns? Is it just as damaging for the Russian ruling elite when the hypocrisy of Vladimir Putin’s use of taxpayers’ money on swimming pools, stables, and palaces is revealed? Or is it generally risky for anyone in power, as Martha Finnemore (2009) argued in her analysis of the US as a unipole? Finnemore claimed that it is the deceptive quality of a unipole’s self-branding and promises that made the US unipole’s positioning counterproductive, not references to liberal values and norms (Finnemore 2009, 74). Goddard et al. (this forum) emphasize how ‘the unique liberal aspiration of liberal orders shapes how its defenders respond to initial contestation’. Future research should investigate the

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work that the notion of liberal does in terms of accounting for the endogenous challenges, including the contention that it is hypocritical.

IV. Bound to fail?

The liberal international order’s contradictions and tensions are often detected and articulated first by actors, perceived as peripheral or subordinate. Why do core members not listen? In multilateral organizations, national governments and bureaucracies, infected by the normalization of deviance, insiders are often incentivized to downplay potential problems and contestation. Gradually, decision-makers face a challenge whenever the same issue arises again: they can no longer admit that a deviation will violate established liberal standards without admitting that they have already violated them in the past. Instead, they collectively develop ‘cultural-cognitive dissonance’ (Krzyżanowski 2020, 440), embracing a deviant logic amid a discourse of normality and progress.

Most of the contributions point to turning points or situations where contestation was especially forceful and where those in power could have taken (different) action. The struggle over the global climate regime is illustrative of this (Thompson, this forum). While the climate sub-order demonstrated flexibility and adaptation in the face of criticism from vulnerable countries, many other liberal international sub-orders overlooked early complaints and warning signals. However, at some point, the underlying drivers of the contestation begin to show, and by that time, the accumulated decisions over time have removed the barriers that could have prevented the problems from becoming disastrous for the sub-order.

So how do we know if a liberal international sub-order is bound for deep conflict or even collapse? It matters greatly if a sub-order’s self-undermining dynamics could be altered, leading it to accommodate contestation or to contain it, as Goddard et al. (this forum) put it, or whether they are an in-built design feature. Could some of the self-undermining dynamics of the liberal international order have been changed by the leaders and institutions that upheld it or is this order, as Mearsheimer (2019) puts it, ‘bound to fail’? Again, the sociology of knowledge is helpful. Organizations can work to avoid the normalization of deviance. One of the most well-documented strategies is increased internal reflexivity and risk-assessment procedures. High-risk industries, such as airlines, now meet the standard of being high-reliability organizations. The key is to move from a notion
of individual or compartmental responsibility to a systematic process and deep change of culture. It also involves leaders rewarding self-critical reports and evaluations among subordinates (Tinsley, 2011). However, the first and perhaps most difficult step is to accept that unless something is done, the normalization of deviance tends to creep into the most well-meaning institutions and organizations. As Goodwin (1994, 606) notes ‘[a]ll vision is perspectival and lodged within endogenous communities’. The first step is to begin becoming aware of the inevitable limits of one’s own vision.

In addition to increased self-reflexivity among those with decision-making power, Flyvbjerg’s (2013) ‘outside view’ offers an intriguing approach to tackling the normalization of deviance. The outside view, originally developed by Kahnemann and Tversky (1979), represents a constructive alternative to the inside view often adopted by those in power. As an active participant in the governance of any organization or system, it can be very difficult, sometimes even painful, to willingly modify your perspective. It helps when the ‘outside view’ is called in. For Flyvbjerg this includes changing the incentives of leaders, benchmarking new projects against previous and different projects in other fields, and establishing independent bodies to ensure that the outside view is taken seriously (Flyvbjerg, 2013). The aim is to force insiders to become more aware of their cognitive biases (e.g. optimism bias) and reduce political and organizational biases (e.g. strategic misrepresentation) resulting in a more realistic estimation of the value, implementation and costs of projects.

In truth, discussions surrounding the liberal international order seldom delve into matters of organizational culture; rather, they predominantly revolve around different interpretations of national interests and conflicting ideologies. The nature of these debates often goes beyond mere critiques of inconsistencies or organizational hypocrisy; instead, they reflect opposing political and social commitments, i.e. order-challenging contestation (Goddard et al., this forum). Ultimately, critical voices may not just be a disagreeing over how best to manage a sub-order, but of whether that sub-order ought to exist at all. In every instance, it is crucial to recognize and proactively address the contestation, as ignoring it is unlikely to make it disappear.

Adam Tooze (2019) wrote that the international liberal order ‘has come under threat from its own internal dysfunction’. He argued that only the power grab by a new geopolitical stakeholder would resolve the current tension. While it is
difficult for current leaders governing the liberal international sub-orders to address the challenges against them and what is perceived as ‘their’ order, it is not impossible. Insights from the sociology of knowledge and its role in organizational culture underscore the importance of addressing hypocrisy early on and integrating outside perspectives. Ultimately, the normalization of contestation is at the core of our current predicament. Combatting it requires a collective commitment to critical reflection and adaptive response.
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