Whose Revisionism, Which International Order? Social Structure and Its Discontents

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While the distinction between status quo and revisionist states is well established in International Relations, only more recently have scholars begun to refine the concept of revisionism itself, emphasizing that revisionism comes in different forms. A number of typologies have been introduced to capture this diversity. In this article, we offer a critique of these typologies, highlighting how many of these works elide the rule-governed and contextual nature of what counts as revisionism. Building on an understanding of international orders as social structures, we argue that the revisionist character of state conduct can only be determined with reference to the conception of the legitimate ends and means current in a particular international order. This leads us to distinguish between three types of revisionism: competitive revisionism that is transgressive of the legitimate means; creative revisionism that is transgressive of the legitimate ends; and revolutionary revisionism that is transgressive of legitimate ends and means. We further emphasize that determining the revisionist character of state conduct always involves interpretation and judgment. The concern for analytical precision conveyed by the development of different typologies of revisionism must therefore be followed by an equally deliberate concern for the politics of revisionism—in both theory and practice.

Bien que la distinction entre les États prônant le statu quo et les États révisionnistes soit bien établie en relations internationales, ce n'est que très récemment que les chercheurs ont commencé à affiner le concept de révisionnisme lui-même, en soulignant qu'il revêt différentes formes. De nombreuses typologies ont été introduites pour représenter cette diversité. Dans cet article, nous proposons une critique de ces typologies, en mettant en évidence que nombre de ces travaux omettent la nature légale et contextuelle de ce que l'on qualifie de révisionnisme. En concevant les ordres internationaux comme des structures sociales, nous affirmons que la qualité révisionniste du gouvernement ne peut être établie que par référence à la conception des fins et moyens légitimes qui caractérise un ordre international spécifique. Nous pouvons ainsi distinguer trois types de révisionnisme : le révisionnisme concurrentiel qui transgresse les moyens légitimes, le révisionnisme créatif qui transgresse les fins légitimes et le révisionnisme révolutionnaire qui transgresse les fins et les moyens légitimes. Nous mettons ensuite en évidence que la détermination de la qualité révisionniste du comportement d'un État implique toujours l'interprétation et le jugement. Le souci de précision analytique inhérent à l'élaboration de différentes typologies de révisionnisme doit donc s'accompagner d'une préoccupation tout aussi évidente pour la politique de révisionnisme, tant en théorie qu'en pratique.

Si bien la distinción entre el orden establecido y los estados revisionistas queda bien demostrada en las relaciones internacionales, ha sido solo de manera más reciente cuando los académicos han comenzado a refinar el concepto de revisionismo en sí mismo, enfatizando que el revisionismo se presenta de diferentes formas. Con el fin de captar esta diversidad, se han introducido varias tipologías. En este artículo, ofrecemos una crítica de estas tipologías, destacando cuántos de estos trabajos evitan la naturaleza contextual y gobernada por reglas de lo que cuenta como revisionismo. Sobre la base de una comprensión de los órdenes internacionales como estructuras sociales, argumentamos que el carácter revisionista de la conducta estatal solo puede determinarse con referencia a la concepción de los objetivos y los medios legítimos de actualidad en un orden internacional particular. Esto nos lleva a distinguir entre tres tipos de revisionismo: revisionismo competitivo que es transgresor con relación a los medios legítimos, revisionismo creativo que es transgresor con relación a los objetivos legítimos y revisionismo revolucionario que es transgresor con relación a los objetivos y a los medios legítimos. Además, enfatizamos que determinar el carácter revisionista de la conducta del estado implica siempre interpretación y criterio. La preocupación por la precisión analítica transmitida por el desarrollo de diferentes tipologías de revisionismo debe, por lo tanto, tener continuidad en la forma de una preocupación, igualmente deliberada, acerca de las políticas del revisionismo, tanto en la teoría como en la práctica.

Introduction

We are witnessing a revival of interest in the concept of revisionism within the discipline of International Relations (IR). As times are unsettled, this may seem a relatively clear case of theory attuning itself to practice. In fact, a shift in the distribution of power may be underway, as a number of states—China and Russia most prominently—are assuming an ever more assertive posture and breaking the "rules of the game" as we had come to think of them. At the same time, the United States increasingly handles its business outside of the multilateral fora that underpin the liberal international order, and favors more ad hoc coalitions (see, e.g., Karlsrud and Reykers 2020). To the extent that times are unsettled and the foundations of the international order may be at stake, it is neither surprising nor unwelcome that IR scholarship has turned its attention again to the concept of revisionism.

One feature of the new literature on revisionism is that it includes sophisticated attempts at distinguishing between forms of revisionism. As typologies of revisionism proliferate, they have focused on how revisionist foreign policies can vary in intensity, in the ends pursued, and in the means employed. The broad agreement about this variation is an important step toward a better understanding of the phenomenon. However, many of these typologies share a problem, namely that they overlook the extent to which context matters in identifying revisionism. They underestimate the extent to which the identification of revisionism is intrinsically linked to one's conception of the international order. One important consequence of this blind spot is both an overestimation and an underestimation of the prevalence of revisionist conduct.

In what follows, we discuss this problem in the current literature before proposing a remedy, stressing that an inherent feature of revisionism (violent or peaceful) is that it transgresses or is perceived to transgress the rules that organize coexistence in the international order. In short, we contend that no form of violence or peaceful behavior can be assumed to be revisionist without taking into account the rules governing a particular international order. Building on an understanding of international orders as a category of social structure, we take these rules to concern the "legitimate ends" and "legitimate means" that members of international society may pursue and employ.[1] On this basis, we identify three types of revisionism: *competitive revisionism* that is transgressive of the legitimate means; *creative revisionism* that is transgressive of the legitimate ends; and *revolutionary revisionism* that is transgressive of legitimate ends and means.

Running through our account is a consistent "constructivist" appreciation of how social structures endow the "rules of the game" with normativity or legitimacy. Furthermore, the identification of revisionism involves an act of judgment about the illegitimacy of the conduct labeled so—on the part of both actors and observers. In consequence, we end the paper with a reflection on the politics of revisionism. Here, we suggest that it is fruitful to treat typologies of revisionism, including our own, as a heuristic for studying revisionism at the level of action rather than at the level of observation. Doing so allows for a better understanding of the politics of (naming) revisionists and contributes to a better grasp of the international order and its potential future form.

Revisionism in International Relations

A Classical View

In order to untangle the dimensions of revisionism and international order, and before delving into the recent IR scholarship on revisionism, it is useful to establish a standard against which to discuss these different frameworks, a standard definition. Arnold Wolfers, who introduced the distinction between status quo powers and revisionist powers (Wolfers 1962, 125–26), provides us with such a benchmark. He distinguished between them in terms of three dimensions: (1) the desire to either preserve or change the established order; (2) the renunciation or the readiness to use force in order to attain said change; and (3) the pursuit

of either an equilibrium or the superiority of power. Accordingly, he explained that

> "revisionist" countries […] are bent on changing the *status quo* by force if necessary […]. They accept balanced power only with utter resignation since they know that only in quite exceptional cases can the established order be seriously modified without at least the threat of a force so preponderant that it will overcome the resistance of the opposing side. […] [Their] power goal must thus be assumed to be superiority of power rather than balanced power. (Wolfers 1962, 126)

The key takeaway from this definition is the relationship between revisionism and *order*, namely the implication that it is impossible to define revisionism without reference to a particular conception of "the established order." Depending on one's conception of international order, an act of foreign policy may be said to be either in tune or out of tune with the demands of that order, and thus may be deemed to express a desire to either preserve or change that order. If one assumes international order to coincide with the so-called liberal international order, for instance, one will reach a different conclusion about the revisionist character of Chinese foreign policy than if one identifies it with what the English School calls "pluralist international society" (Buzan 2018; Chan et al. 2021). This observation further raises the question of who gets to decide what the established order is. Is it for the dominant countries to decide, or for the international community, including its less powerful members? And if so, how? Or is it possible to define the constitutive elements of the established order in a more objective manner? In the absence of at least a strongly shared intersubjective agreement about the nature of international order, deciding whether a particular act of foreign policy expresses a challenge to the status quo will always be contested (e.g., Sakwa 2019).

The second important aspect of the definition is its distinction between *means* and *ends*. The definition puts a premium on a country's choice to renounce or accept the use of force. A state wanting a change to the status quo would not be revisionist in Wolfers' view unless it used force or threatened to do so in order to achieve that end. As such, his definition of revisionism concerns both the ends (i.e., a change to the status quo) and the means (the use of force) of a state's foreign policy. As it stands, however, the identification of the use of force as a definitive aspect of revisionist foreign policy is arbitrary. It may express common sense, but this does not ensure its theoretical validity. More recent engagements have suggested that revisionist ambitions can also be pursued by nonviolent means (Goddard 2018; He et al. 2021; Egel and Ward 2022), but typically leave intact the presupposition that recourse to the use of force indicates a strong(er) desire for change. While we are inclined to agree with this assessment as a matter of empirical fact, we nonetheless find it theoretically unsatisfying, at least from our constructivist perspective. After all, in historical (or hypothetical) contexts, the use of force can be socially sanctioned as an acceptable or even commonplace part of the behavioral repertoire. Where the use of force is not met with the same legal and moral disapproval that it does now, the performance of violence cannot readily be assumed to indicate a (strong) revisionist desire. This is the situation that Alexander Wendt (1999) theorized as a Hobbesian culture of anarchy. While this theoretical situation may lack an empirical counterpart, it must nonetheless be contemplated as a theoretical possibility since it raises the important

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[1] Our conceptualization of legitimate means and legitimate ends as the main elements of a social structure owes greatly to Robert K. Merton, most notably his essay "Social Structure and Anomie" (Merton 1938). Merton, a classical of American mid-century sociology, pioneered studies of deviance and social structure in sociology.

implication that revisionism cannot be defined in terms of the willingness to use violence. Instead, revisionism must be understood in terms of the willingness to employ "means" that do not enjoy *social sanction*.[2] Violence is neither the only nor a theoretically necessary instance of that category.

Finally, the definition offers an interesting albeit slightly ambiguous take on the place of the pursuit of power in revisionist foreign policy, thereby also dealing with the extent to which revisionism aims at improving one's position in the distribution of power. As we read Wolfers, the pursuit of a "superiority of power" functions for the revisionist state as a necessary means to the end of changing the status quo, of altering international order. As such, a successful revisionist policy not only involves the pursuit of power, but also entails a change in the revisionist state's position in the distribution of power. To be more precise, to the extent that the state aspires to be successful in its revisionist agenda, its position in the distribution of power will have to have improved. However, it is unclear if the pursuit of power itself counts as a revisionist ambition. We accept that dominant countries may experience the pursuit of power by less powerful ones as the expression of a revisionist desire (and therefore as threatening), but this does neither mean that they cannot be mistaken in that judgment nor that they should get to decide. Instead, while revisionism *always* involves an ambition to change the distribution of power, shifts in the distribution of power need not be the result of revisionism or revisionist intent.

It may be useful again to think about these issues in terms of social sanction or of legal permission and prohibition (institutionalized social sanction). Consider the resources typically assumed to feed into a country's material power and thus to affect its position in the distribution of power, such as population size, economic wealth, and military capabilities. There are no rules prohibiting states to seek an increase in their population size or counseling against it. Similarly, there are no formal or informal rules prohibiting states from fostering their economic development or spending most of their national budget on their military apparatus.[3] Given that there are no such rules in place, it is a puzzle to us why the very pursuit of power or a shift in the distribution of power must necessarily indicate a revisionist desire. This, again, highlights the difficulty of determining what constitutes revisionism and what does not given the absence of a clear and intersubjectively shared understanding of the nature of the established order, and highlights the inherently political of that endeavor (Turner and Nymalm 2019; He et al. 2021, 164).

Forms of Revisionism

As discussed above, Wolfers distinguished status quo powers from revisionist powers. Yet, he did not introduce any further distinction within these categories. This changed with subsequent scholarship. There seems to be a growing consensus now that not all forms of revisionism are alike and

that they need not be equally threatening to the international order. However, there remains no consensus on how to categorize revisionism in its various guises. Typologies proliferate (Krickovic 2022). And however tempting it may be to add yet another typology, to introduce a new set of distinctions and a new set of labels, what we propose to attempt here is to get a handle on the existing typologies and work from that basis (see appendix).

What distinguishes various types of revisionist policies in the current literature? We find there to be three main categories: (1) their intensity, (2) their ends, or (3) their means. To our knowledge, no typology of revisionism integrates more than one of these dimensions. Larson and Shevchenko's (2019) account of three strategies of status improvement—social mobility, social competition, and social creativity—forms a partial exception to this observation. However, because it is not actually conceived as a typology of revisionist foreign policy (but as a typology of status-seeking), Larson and Shevchenko's account does not explain when or why status seeking (of any kind) can (or ought to) be considered a revisionist undertaking. Another partial exception is the recent typology introduced by Krickovic (2022). However, while Krickovic distinguishes between the immediate ends pursued by revisionists and the means they employ in a manner akin to the framework developed here, his framework does not foreground the importance of (actual or perceived) transgression in conceptualizing revisionism. As such, it does not account for the nature of status quo behavior nor for the limits of revisionism. This is a more general problem of the literature on revisionism. It identifies what differentiates forms of revisionism from one another, but seldom spells out what differentiates it from status quo conduct, what makes them revisionist in the first place.

A first distinction was introduced by Randall Schweller (1994, 100–104), who distinguished between "jackals" and "wolves." As he portrays them, both types of revisionist powers harbored the same revisionist ends (the maximization of power, typically taking the form of territorial expansion) and employed the same revisionist means (the threat and use of violent force), but *they differed in the intensity of their dissatisfaction with the status quo* and thus also in their willingness to take risky action. Schweller (1994, 104) explained that wolves are "uninhibited by the fear of loss [and] are [therefore] free to pursue reckless expansion," while jackals are more risk averse and opportunistic. They seize the moment when it presents itself by bandwagoning with a revisionist leader, but they do not attempt—whether due to lack of capacity or lack of will—to create that moment themselves. Jackals leave it to wolves to initiate revisionist action. Their revisionism takes the form of "predatory buckpassing." It takes the form of "attempts to ride free on the offensive efforts of others" (Schweller 1994, 103). This is a revealing formulation, as it makes clear that jackals join the wolf, yet Schweller does not make a substantive distinction between two *forms* of revisionism. His emphasis is on the distinction between roles—leaders and followers—characterized in terms of the intensity of their revisionist desire in the same revisionist project. Notice also that Schweller seems to assume that revisionism takes the same form across the historical record: territorial expansion by way of violent force. He thus compiled a list of historical wolves, explaining that "Alexander the Great, Rome, the Arabs in the seventh and eight centuries, Charles V, Philip II, Frederick the Great, Louis XIV, Napoleon I, and Hitler all lusted for universal empire and waged all-or-nothing, apocalyptic wars to attain it" (Schweller 1994, 104).

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[2] As will become clear in due course, also this formulation is in need of reformulation: not every form of revisionism entails the use of illegitimate means.

[3] One could interpret the prohibition on the proliferation of nuclear weapons as an instance of such a rule, but this does not invalidate our point. When it comes to the right of states to develop their military capabilities and thus to uphold a crucial dimension of their material power, and with the exception of a number of military technologies (nuclear weapons, landmines, possibly also "killer robots"), Friedrich Kratowchil (2014, 153) suggests that this might be considered part of *jus cogens*. "In the light of later developments, such as [. . .] the imposition of stringent disarmament conditions [. . .] as in Iraq, we would have to conclude that all violate *jus cogens*."

However, this is not a self-evident list. It is not obvious at all that the "lust for universal empire" constituted a revisionist ambition in these various historical epochs, or that it did so in the same way or to the same degree. That assessment depends on the "rules of the game" that pertained in these various times and places and whether the "lust for universal empire" was considered normal or transgressive. In the time of Napoleon I, it certainly was considered transgressive, but it is less clear that this applies to all imperial endeavors on the above list. By failing to take differences in historical contexts into account, Schweller's take fosters an ahistorical understanding of the concept of revisionism that runs the risk of conflating normal behavior with behavior considered transgressive. This is a recurring problem in the current literature on revisionism, which also applies to typologies that focus on the *ends* that revisionist powers pursue, such as that developed by Steven Ward (2017; further articulated in Cooley, Nexon, and Ward 2019).

Whereas Schweller identified revisionist goals with "territorial expansion," Ward explains that there are three types of revisionism depending on which aspect of the international order a state expresses dissatisfaction about and seeks to revise. The international order, in his view, can be broken down into two elements: (1) the distribution of resources and (2) "the rules, norms, and institutions that constitute and naturalize the distribution of resources and regulate interaction" (Ward 2017, 10–11). On the one hand, there are revisionists who are primarily dissatisfied about the distribution of resources and pursue a policy of "distributional" or "positional" revisionism "which aims at achieving more of a material, economic, or social resource." On the other hand, there are those who are primarily dissatisfied about the rules, norms, and institutions that structure the international order. These, in turn, pursue a policy of "normative" revisionism, which "rejects or aims to overthrow the normative and institutional foundation of the status quo." Finally, there are revisionists who are dissatisfied about both components of the international order.

The merit of this typology is two-fold. Not only does it offer an "inclusive and nuanced" conception of revisionism (Egel and Ward 2022, 753), it also affords a more dynamic understanding of the revisionist character of particular states, who can become more or less radical in their revisionist ambitions (Davidson 2002; Ward 2017). However, the typology raises a difficult question too, namely whether the satisfaction of any desire for change makes for the satisfaction of a revisionist desire. Compare Ward's definition of positional revisionism as the attempt to achieve "more of a material, economic or social resource" with He et al.'s (2021, 165) contention that "it is not their enhancement of power capabilities [. . .] that would make [states] revisionists." We are inclined to agree with the latter position, because it retains the common understanding that revisionism entails an element considered to be transgressive of the established order. Aggressive territorial expansion in a world in which the rule obtains that the territorial integrity of other states ought to be respected counts as an instance of revisionism because it is considered transgressive. It did not necessarily count as such in medieval Europe, where order itself was maintained through territorial expansion (see, e.g., Elias 1994, 446–48; Ikegami 1997; de Carvalho 2015).[4] The mere build-up of military capabilities or the development of a country's

economic capacity does not make for revisionism—except if the current distribution of power had been institutionalized and attributed intrinsic normative value. In an international society committed to the "balance of power," a policy aimed at achieving material predominance by way of economic and military enhancement could be considered an act of revisionism by some. Similarly, in a world in which a country's predominance enjoys legitimacy, the enhancement of its material power by another country, with the intention to help establish a multipolar order, could be considered a revisionist policy by others. However, in both instances, positional revisionism would coincide with normative revisionism and its transgressive (and revisionist) nature would not be in doubt. In and of itself, however, it is difficult to sustain that the mere enhancement of power capabilities makes a policy revisionist.

We encounter a similar problem in the third type of typology of revisionist foreign policy. These are typologies that make *a distinction between different forms of revisionism in terms of the means that they employ.* Wolfer's classical definition, we saw, associates revisionism with the threat and use of force (Wolfers 1962)—an assumption Schweller (1994) radicalized when he explained that wolves "waged all-or-nothing, apocalyptic wars." However, more recent research has introduced a more comprehensive view of the instruments of revisionist foreign policy. This agenda has run in parallel to efforts at diversifying, contextualizing, and historicizing our understanding of power–political repertoires (Goddard, Macdonald, and Nexon 2019). He et al. (2021), for instance, distinguish hard revisionism (a violent form) from various manifestations of soft revisionism (all nonviolent). Soft revisionism denotes various ways of working with and against the institutions through which an international order manifests itself. "The soft approach" to revisionism, they write, has states "seeking gradual institutional reform and promoting new norms," but also "includes malign neglect and deliberate disengagement" (He et al. 2021, 162). This leads them to distinguish four subtypes: institutional reform, institutional obstruction, institutional exit, and institutional competition. These categories overlap to a large extent with a prior typology developed by Stacie Goddard (2018), who distinguishes between integrated revisionists (pursuing a strategy of institutional engagement), bridging revisionists (pursuing a revolutionary strategy of institutional reform), isolated revisionists (pursuing an exit strategy that may involve establishing alternative institutions), and rogue revisionists (taking recourse to violence and exemplifying hard revisionism). The merit of these kinds of means-centered typologies is again two-fold. In addition to "revealing that revisionist behavior [the employment of means, that is] is far more variegated than [classical] approaches suggest" (Goddard 2018, 766), they also enable more fine-grained theorization of why and how states pursue which kind of revisionist foreign policy. However, at a conceptual level, the typologies suffer from a similar shortcoming to the other ones, as they fail to make explicit the revisionist character of the strategy. Is the revisionist character of the means of revisionism determined by the ends that they serve? Or is their revisionist character a supposed feature of the means themselves? In the latter case, one would expect again, in line with common understanding, an element of transgression to mark revisionist

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[4] Note that Cooley, Nexon, and Ward (2019, 699) acknowledge the context dependence of the revolutionary revisionist character of practices such as territorial adjustment. In some contexts, they explain, territorial expansion makes for normative (or revolutionary) revisionism. In other contexts, it makes for positional revisionism only. As a result of our assumption that the concept of revisionism

connotes transgression, we are wary about their concept of positional revisionism and therefore question their effort to fix the meaning of territorial expansion as necessarily one or another type of revisionism. This is why we have made historical reference to the supposed order-maintaining character of territorial expansion in medieval times.

means. However, existing means-centered typologies do not make that aspect explicit. And while one could argue that an element of transgression characterizes hard revisionism and certain forms of soft revisionism (obstruction, exit, competition), it is less obvious, though not unthinkable, that this applies to the other forms too (engagement, reform).

Who Are the Revisionists?

In addition to a growing acknowledgment of the necessity to distinguish between various forms of revisionism, recent scholarship has also begun to pay more critical attention to the question "who are the revisionists?." The traditional answer was often limited to pointing at so-called rising or emerging powers (Gilpin 1981; Murray 2018). To the extent that revisionism is seen to spring from dissatisfaction with the existing order, and to the extent that rising powers are more likely to be dissatisfied with the existing order, it makes sense to assume that rising powers will be more likely to harbor a revisionist desire. What is more, as they become more powerful, rising powers develop the capacity to actually pursue a revisionist policy. They combine revisionist intention with revisionist capability. It is not surprising, then, that most of the empirical and policy-oriented research on revisionism zooms in on the cases of China and Russia or on pre–World War II Germany, Italy, and Japan.

However, more recent theoretical scholarship on revisionism does not find this answer satisfactory. It insists on three points. First, it points out that not all rising powers choose to pursue a revisionist policy and that certainly not all rising powers pursue a "radical" revisionist agenda (Ward 2017). To explain why some rising powers do while others do not (or the same rising power at a different moment does) turn radically revisionist, causal narratives should pay attention to domestic politics. Domestic political entrepreneurs, that is, can choose to politicize the (supposedly unacceptable) status position of their countries and the (supposed unfairness of the) international order that determines their position, or they can choose to do neither. It is when domestic political entrepreneurs, as well as the politicians that they advise or otherwise exert influence over, do indeed develop these kinds of narratives that their states have the greatest likelihood of pursuing a revisionist foreign policy.

Second, in addition to insisting that not all rising powers pursue a revisionist foreign policy, recent scholarship also increasingly entertains the possibility that "non-rising" powers also pursue revisionist policies. In this vein, Cooley, Nexon, and Ward (2019) remark that most commentators agree that a "declining Russia" has adopted a more radically revisionist posture than a "rising China," and also argue that there is no reason to presume that even a "hegemonic" actor would not want to change the international order—whether that be its distribution of power or its normative foundation. Recall, for instance, President Bush's bullish unilateralism during the swansong of America's unipolar moment. Similarly, Egel and Ward (2022, 758) show that also "weak states" take on revisionist agendas, although the poverty of their material resources constrain the options that they have: "smaller states will often lack the ability to embark on plausible efforts to advance their status and influence [. . .]," but acting in concert—as a coalition of revisionist small states did with the negotiation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons—offers them a way out (Sauer and Reveraert 2018). Clearly, then, revisionism is not a prerogative of rising powers nor is it reserved to powerful ones.

Third, as will already have become clear, recent scholarship tries to determine which states—that is, which states

occupying which structural position—engage in which kind of revisionist behavior. Even if it is the work of domestic political entrepreneurs that decides whether states turn revisionist at all and perhaps the intensity with which they pursue their revisionist foreign policies, this leaves open the form of revisionist foreign policy they will pursue. Stacie Goddard (2018) provides an especially sophisticated answer to that question, associating the various types of revisionism she identifies with the "network position"—defined in terms of access and brokerage—which states occupy. Steven Ward (in work with coauthors: Cooley, Nexon and Ward 2019; Egel and Ward 2022) has hinted at similarly structural arguments, proposing that hegemons are more likely to be positional revisionists (Cooley, Nexon, and Ward 2019: 11) and small states to be subversive revisionists (Egel and Ward 2022, 759). Each type of state, due to its structural position, has access to particular types of resources, and employs these resources to give shape to its revisionist project. We find this idea to be wholly plausible.

In sum, the literature on revisionism has made considerable progress in deepening our understanding of the forms that revisionism may take, and who the revisionists may be. However, the new wave of revisionist scholarship discussed above shares a common ambiguity with regard to what should count as revisionist. We attribute this ambiguity to an insufficient acknowledgment of the contextual and rule-dependent character of revisionism. In what follows, we seek to resolve this problem by theorizing the contextual nature of revisionism.

Reconsidering Revisionism

Social Structure and the Determination of Revisionism

We start with the simple but crucial assumption that revisionism is a form of *social* action made meaningful by it being embedded in a *social* structure. This means both that revisionist foreign policy can plausibly be assumed to be motivated by states' experience of that social structure and that a particular action or policy only counts as an instance of revisionist foreign policy within the context of that particular social structure. These are basic insights from the sociology of deviance (Cole 1966, 47; Clinard and Meier 2013). The first insight is paralleled in IR scholarship by the understanding that foreign policy revisionism expresses dissatisfaction with the international order, with the notion of "international order" being a particular manifestation of the broader category of "social structure." International orders, that is, are the social structures that organize the coexistence among states and within which states articulate and pursue their foreign policies—revisionist or otherwise. The second insight, namely that an act of foreign policy can be discerned as an instance of revisionism only in the context of a particular social structure, and that the determination of the revisionist character of a particular act of foreign policy happens (and must happen) with reference to the rules and norms that define that particular social structure, has been taken up much less explicitly in IR scholarship.

Let us dwell on the concept of a "social structure" for a short while (see also table 1). Social structures emerge wherever people(s) coexist and are in regular interaction. For the most part, they are the products of evolution rather than design (Buzan 2004, 165). At their most basic, social structures organize the coexistence of people and peoples. Yet, social structures can be more or less successful in keeping people(s) in check and thus in ensuring their continued, more or less joyful coexistence (compare Bull 1977).

Table 1. The functions, dimensions, and mechanisms of social structures

Functions	Organization of coexistence		Distribution of status	
Dimensions	Legitimate ends	Legitimate means	Social stratification	Social mobility
Mechanisms	Orientation toward roles endowed with normativity		Mobilization of available resources	
Relation to revisionism	Transgression of rules and norms *constitutes* different forms of revisionism		Differential access to resources *causes* different forms of revisionism	

However, social structures perform an additional function too. Other than organizing the coexistence of people(s), they serve to distribute status to people(s) and the groups they belong to (Reus-Smit and Dunne 2017, 36). Its second function (distribution of status) may interfere with its first function (organize coexistence). If the distribution of status that results from the working of a particular social structure leaves people dissatisfied, they may question its legitimacy and cease to act in line with the rules and norms that define the social structure. A sufficient number of people engaging in this kind of deviant conduct over time can bring about structural change (Cole 1966).[5] And when this kind of deviant conduct has as its express purpose to bring about structural change, it makes for revisionist conduct.

Social structures vary in empirical content: their two core functions have found manifestation in historically variable norms, rules, and patterns. However, in spite of their historical variation, the norms, rules, and patterns that make for social structures can be grouped in theoretically meaningful ways. Sociologists have come up with a range of vocabularies to categorize the norms, rules, and patterns of social structures, but many of them identify four elemental ones: social roles defined in terms of the (1) legitimate ends and (2) legitimate means that an occupant of a role can pursue and employ, and factual patterns of (3) stratification and (4) social mobility (Crothers 1996, 84–125).[6] The first set of categories (legitimate ends and legitimate means) corresponds to a social structure's manifest function to ensure continued and more or less facile coexistence. These dimensions of the social structure are endowed with (ever contestable) normativity, hence the insistence that it concerns "legitimate" ends and means. People can choose to act otherwise, but their conduct may be considered transgressive. This will be the case unless and until more people begin to act in the same way and a new conception of legitimate ends and means reaches intersubjective validity. The second set of categories (stratification and mobility), for its part, corresponds to a social structure's (latent) function to distribute status. Patterns of stratification can be more or less egalitarian or hierarchical. In the former case, all (groups of) people in society stand on an equal footing, enjoying access to roughly the same amount of (material and nonmaterial) resources. In the latter case, they do not. Similarly, social mobility can be higher or lower. In

the former case, it is easy for a person to move up the social ladder. In the latter case, it is not. Patterns of stratification and mobility, it bears emphasis, are first and foremost matters of social fact, allowing, at least in principle, for objective description. In and of themselves, they lack the kind of normativity that a social structure's legitimate ends and means enjoy. Their contribution to the reproduction and transformation of the social structure is primarily causal in nature, mediated by people's variable access to resources.

However, a complication of this last observation is in order. It happens often that patterns of social stratification end up being endowed with normativity. When this happens, people will consider the existing distribution of power not just a social fact to be reckoned with but a moral fact to be valued.[7] Orderly coexistence, it is then assumed, depends on the top stratum remaining the top stratum, and on the top stratum having authority and the lower strata showing deference. In international politics, for instance, the great power club is famously difficult to join and its members guard their status jealously, legitimate their superior status with reference to its order-enhancing effects, and thus at least attempt to endow it with normativity. They attempt to turn the (mere) social fact of stratification into a moral fact of rule (Kustermans 2023). In consequence, from the standpoint of the dominant, any instance of (or aspiration to) social mobility can potentially be experienced as a transgression of the social order.

As a matter of practice, this is a recurrent process. Dominant states regularly blame rising powers for their supposed revisionism. However, as a matter of theory, we do well to proceed more carefully. Social structures may determine revisionist conduct, but the different dimensions of the social structure contribute to that determination in different ways. A social structure's legitimate ends and means serve to determine the revisionist character of a particular act and offer the basis for a theoretically anchored typology. A social structure's patterns of stratification and social mobility, however, serve mainly to determine the choice for a particular form of revisionism. With respect to the former two dimensions, the relation of the social structure to revisionism is constitutive. With respect to the latter two dimensions, the complication notwithstanding, the relation between social structure and revisionism is a causal one.

Status Quo Conduct

Before we turn to the three forms of revisionism we identify (see table 2), we focus on the character of status quo conduct. One could say that a status quo orientation finds

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[5] Structural-functionalist theory has regularly been chided for being incapable to account for social change. However, while it may be the case that many structural functionalists were inclined to emphasize the process through which the social order is maintained (i.e., behavior in conformity with the rules and norms that define social roles), this does not mean that they did not understand that actors could deviate from rules and norms. As a matter of fact, a structural functionalist such as Robert Merton put the emphasis on this kind of deviant behavior and saw in it the main motor for social change (Joas and Knöbl 2009, 66).

[6] We do not aim to settle the debate among social theorists about how to best conceptualize social structures here. However, we do believe that our framework is a useful one, which helps to illuminate the concept of revisionism.

[7] It may be useful to clarify how we see the relationship between social facts and moral facts. In our understanding, moral facts are a subcategory of the broader category of social facts. This means that all moral facts are social facts, but that not all social facts are moral facts. Statistical patterns are a good example of social facts that are not, by themselves, moral facts.

Table 2. Forms of status quo and revisionist conduct

| | | Legitimate means | |
		Transgress	Accept
	Accept	*Competitive revisionism* Actions (and prescriptions) considered *transgressive* of legitimate *means*	*Status quo conduct* Actions in accordance with legitimate means and legitimate ends (including sovereign play)
Legitimate ends	Transgress	*Revolutionary revisionism* Actions (and prescriptions) considered *transgressive* of both legitimate *means* and *ends*	*Creative revisionism* Actions (and prescriptions) considered *transgressive* of legitimate *ends*

expression in acts of foreign policy that are in conformity with the rules and norms that specify the legitimate ends and means of international society. By way of a metaphor, we could say that states with a predominant status quo orientation "play the game" of international politics in a manner that their peers (and other "participants" in international society [Lechner and Frost 2018, 22]) consider acceptable, with the acceptability of their conduct being a function of it being considered in line with how the game is expected to be played. They accept the rules and play by them—if not always to the letter, then at least in spirit.

However, a first thing to note is that "rules" come in a variety of forms (Onuf 2013, 291), and not all rules put an equally strong claim on those that are subject to them. Some rules put a very strong claim on people: they are rules that prohibit and rules that enjoin. They are rules that command (do! don't!). To disregard those rules is already considered a transgression. However, other rules put a milder claim on people: they are rules that warn and rules that encourage. Take "multilateral cooperation" as a legitimate means of pursuing a state's foreign policy goals. While there may be certain issue areas in which multilateral cooperation has been codified as an obligation (in international trade, for instance, at least for members of the World Trade Organization), this obligation does not apply across the board. This is the case even as post-1945 international society has been argued to have put a premium on multilateral cooperation (Reus-Smit 1999, 131–51). It strongly endorses multilateral cooperation without making it a general or absolute obligation. As a result, depending on the type of rule that they are confronted with, also status quo–oriented states have some leeway to abide by or disregard the rules that define the legitimate ends and means (that define their role as members) of international society.

A second thing to note is that "play" can and often will be playful. Play is governed by rules (those that define the game), but it is not determined by them. If a game is a structure, play is agency, and mastery of a game not infrequently involves bending its rules without however breaking them. It involves "well-tempered transgressions" (Bourdieu 2005, 118). Playing by the rules, that is, does not have to entail absolute compliance. Games can be played in a variety of ways. Play can be fair or foul, but play can also be sovereign. Fair play demands strict adherence to the rules and is typically expected of novices to a game. Foul play involves deliberate cheating and blunt transgressions. In principle, it disqualifies players from a game. Sovereign play, meanwhile, presupposes a lenient at-

titude to the rules of the game. When players indulge in sovereign play, they seek to minimize the constraints that rules (of any kind) inevitably impose on them. It is premised on a liberal interpretation of those rules, which leaves as much room for an actor's agency as possible. The conceptual centrality of sovereignty in IR appears to acknowledge the historical prevalence and international–societal acceptance of sovereign play, notwithstanding the many attempts in recent decades to domesticate—in other words, to impose fair play on—the sovereign state (Chowdhury and Duvall 2014). Sovereign play, we suggest here, is not revisionism. It falls within the scope of status quo conduct. Having said that, as a matter of empirical fact, not all states are alike in this regard. Some states are more powerful than other states (clearly so) and some states are more privileged than other states (clearly so, even when not formally). It is typically the powerful that are also the more privileged. They arrogate the right to sovereign play for themselves, even when they deny it to other less powerful states. And curiously, other participants in the game of international politics—diplomats from other countries, commentators—often appear to accept that distribution of privilege (Simpson 2004; Pouliot 2016, 71–79). It is in this way that a mere social fact of stratification becomes a moral fact of rule (Kustermans 2023), and the merely powerful become the *great powers* with special rights and responsibilities. Sovereign play thus finds justification in its supposed contribution to the maintenance of international order (Cui and Buzan 2016).

Three Types of Revisionism

By proposing that "sovereign play" falls within the bounds of status quo conduct in international society, we do not mean to argue that the concept of revisionism has no applicability there. We wish simply to highlight that not any deviation from the rules can (and will) be considered as such. In order to count as an instance of revisionism, acts of foreign policy need to deviate from legitimate means or ends (or both) and be considered as a transgression threatening international order. These instances can also—and often do—involve explicit advocacy of an alternative conception of the rules of the game. This will increase the likelihood that they will be considered revisionist. What is more, insistence on the legitimacy of what others perceive as illegitimate behavior, even without corresponding conduct, may also instill a similar sense of threat.

As we mentioned earlier, there are two principal types of rules that define actors' roles within social structures and endow them with normativity. The first concerns those rules that define the "legitimate ends" that actors may pursue given the role that they occupy. The second concerns those rules that define the "legitimate means" that actors may employ to pursue their legitimate ends. It follows that there are three types of revisionism. Revisionism can be transgressive of the legitimate means, the legitimate ends, or both. We propose to call these forms of revisionism, respectively, *competitive revisionism, creative revisionism*, and *revolutionary revisionism.*

COMPETITIVE REVISIONISM

Competitive revisionism refers to policies aimed at pursuing ends consistent with the rules, but with little regard for how these ends are obtained, that is, considered transgressive of legitimate means. We rely on Larson and Shevchenko's (2010) notion of "social competition" in labeling this type of revisionism, as it bears similarity to that category.[8] They observe that this type of revisionism often takes the form of geopolitical rivalry. Among others, they give the example of Japan turning imperialist in the 1930s and of India acquiring nuclear capabilities and demonstrating them by means of a nuclear test in 1998. Japan and India were joining the competition for status and power that more prominent countries were also involved in, but they did so by taking recourse to "means" that many in the international community had come to consider and had codified as illegitimate. In the case of Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931, it sidestepped the obligation not to initiate war that it had incurred by signing the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928. In the case of India, it violated the core stipulation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that nonnuclear weapon states ought not to acquire nuclear weapons. Admittedly, both cases are ambiguous as Japan did not formally declare war when it invaded Manchuria and India had never signed the NPT. But nonetheless, both acts registered with their peers as acts of transgression. They perceived both countries to seek to advance in the game of international politics by means of foul play, without however questioning the telos of that game. They transgressed the "legitimate means" of international society but did not as obviously transgress its "legitimate ends"—unless, in the case of Japan, one assumes the ambition to be an imperial power to have been decisively invalidated by that time.

It may sound as though we are hedging our claims. However, there are sound theoretical reasons for doing so. To identify a transgression, it is necessary not only to identify a rule or norm, but likewise to establish that a particular act is considered to be a transgression of the rule or norm. All steps in the process—identifying the relevant rules, establishing the meaning of the rules, and assessing a particular act in light of the rule—entail the exercise of judgment and are bound to invoke contestation.

Let us clarify this problem with reference to the first step in the process: identifying the relevant rules. What are the rules and norms that define the legitimate ends and the legitimate means (and thus define the roles) of members of international society? The answer to this question will vary depending on one's conception of the international order. Compare, for instance, a conception of the international order as a "pluralist international society," in the way that Hedley Bull (1977) portrayed it, with a conception of the international order as "Liberal International Order 2.0," in the way that John Ikenberry (2010) presented it. In pluralist international society, let us say, the means that a state can legitimately employ are circumscribed by codified or positive international law and by a commitment to diplomacy—except in situations of self-defense or when the international community sanctions the use of force. In Liberal International Order 2.0, however, a different—not completely, but still meaningfully different—set of rules define the legitimate means. Here, it is still the case that a sincere commitment to international law and diplomacy define the parameters of legitimate conduct, but there is a shift in interpretation of the meaning and entailments of these two institutions of international society, with international law being reinfused with ideas from natural law (so that its moral spirit rather than its legal letter defines the limits of permissible conduct; cf. Hall 2001) and with (good, desirable) diplomacy increasingly assuming the form of multilateral diplomacy. In Liberal International Order 2.0, the threshold for what counts as transgression lies lower than in pluralist international society. Rules have thickened; more constraints are imposed. Within such context, more acts of foreign policy will count as foul play or competitive revisionism.

CREATIVE REVISIONISM

Creative revisionism represents the mirror image of competitive revisionism. Whereas competitive revisionism is considered to be a deviation from the legitimate means (but acceptance of the legitimate ends), creative revisionism is considered to deviate from the legitimate ends (but acceptance of the legitimate means). Creative revisionism is analogous to what Larson and Shevchenko (2010) call "social creativity," from which we derive our label. which they define as the "reframing of a negative attribute as positive or stressing achievement in a different domain" (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 67). As they further explain, this involves states trying to "achiev[e] preeminence outside the arena of geopolitical competition" (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 67) However, as mentioned above, we are skeptical about their treatment of geopolitical competition as the foremost form of international competition and therefore conceptualize creative revisionism as the attempt to achieve preeminence in a *different arena than the one typically assumed to constitute the main field of competition.* To the extent that states seek to turn the achievement of preeminence in a different domain into a novel conception of the legitimate ends, they turn a strategy of sheer status-seeking into a revisionist strategy, proposing a change not only in how they themselves are to be judged but also in how all states are to be appraised.

In order to clarify what it means to deviate from the legitimate ends of international society, consider the historical redefinition of the "moral purpose" of the state (Reus-Smit 1999). In a pluralist international society, the moral purpose of the state is defined thinly. States are expected to foster a commitment to peace and to develop their domestic structures and societal projects as they see fit. They are sovereign states indeed. In liberal international order, on the contrary, states are (or were) expected to develop democratic domestic structures (Clark 2009). This entails a shift in the definition of the legitimate ends that members of international society may pursue.[9]

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[8] We should note that Larson and Shevchenko imply that this has historically been undertaken in what they consider "geopolitical" domains (military competition). Although they do not make the transgressive nature (and rule-related) nature of this explicit, we think that it is implied with their examples. We would also underline that by our account, competitive revisionism can also take place in other domains than "geopolitics."

[9] The current emphasis on the importance of also becoming environmental stewards, as Falkner and Buzan (2018) have pointed out, is a further development in this direction.

There are two ways to read the significance of this shift for our argument. A first way is to point out again how the thickening of the rules that defines the shift from pluralist international society to liberal international order lowers the threshold for identifying a particular behavior as deviant and potentially revisionist. The second way is to point out that the very insistence on democracy (or of environmental stewardship) as a crucial element of the moral purpose of the state makes for—or can at least be argued to make for—an act of creative revisionism. That determination is contextual, to be sure. In pluralist international society, advocacy for democracy as defining the moral purpose made for a creative revisionist move indeed. It made for transgression of the legitimate ends. This is suggested by the reluctance on the part of the United States, in its earliest engagement with international society, to set up their own experience as a model to follow. The aim of that stance was to make sure that their deviation from the rule would not be interpreted as a revisionist transgression, so as to avoid a negative response by the other members of international society (Hobson 2015). In contrast, in liberal international order, democracy promotion would not as obviously be considered an act of revisionism, although there is a clear trend, among states who never quite accepted the legitimacy of the liberal international order and who favor a return to a pluralist conception of international order, to do precisely that. They brand states who continue to champion the (re)definition of the legitimate ends of international society in the direction of "democracy" and "environmental stewardship" as transgressors of the international order. This is especially true when it comes to questions concerned with sovereignty and the rules governing state prerogatives. Take as an example the debates surrounding the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Where many states saw no problems in backing policies aimed at an ever more "moral" international community—in fact, many would not even recognize it as a type of revisionism—others considered R2P a revisionist provocation and an attempt to shift the rules of the game away from accepted "pluralist" norms and toward a new type of liberal order (see the discussion in de Carvalho 2020). From a Chinese and Russian perspective, let us say, countries such as Norway and Canada are the true revisionist actors, creative revisionists.

Revolutionary Revisionism

The third type of revisionism is different from the two preceding ones in that it does not entail any form of acceptance of agreed-upon rules. Revolutionary revisionism involves the deviation from both legitimate ends and legitimate means. Still, one imagines a situation wherein a state rejects the legitimate ends and means of international society without this being perceived as a serious threat to international order and thus without the country being considered a revisionist state. Myanmar, during the time that it all but "retreated" from the world stage, may count as an example. However, when a state deviates from both the legitimate ends and the legitimate means, and when others consider this to be a serious threat to the international order, which is likely to happen when the comprehensive rejection of the existing rules is married to the advocacy of an equally comprehensive set of alternative rules, these states can be considered revolutionary revisionists. Status quo states are certainly likely to experience them as such, and neither is it unlikely that a state that simultaneously transgresses the legitimate ends and means, and couples this behavior with advocacy, will identify itself as a revolutionary actor.

Larson and Shevchenko (2019), it bears noting, do not identify this category. They do not recognize "social revolution" as a distinct form of status-seeking. Rather, we adopt our label from Steven Ward's work, although we give it a somewhat different meaning. Whereas Ward (2017, 10–11) defined revolutionary revisionism as the twin ambition to undo the current distribution of power and to rearticulate the rules, norms, and institutions that organize international coexistence, we understand it as the simultaneous transgression of the legitimate means and ends of international society.

Consider as a first example Napoleonic France. The foreign policy of Napoleonic France (and before that of revolutionary France) was clearly experienced as a revisionist endeavor by contemporaries. It was experienced as a threat to the European order and for that reason invited a firm response. If we are to understand the revisionist character of Napoleonic France's foreign policy, it is important not only to point at its willingness to have recourse to the use of force—the illegitimacy of which is less than fully clear in its own historical context, although Napoleon's choice for "total war" did in fact render the enterprise transgressive of the legitimate means of international society—but one must also pay attention to Revolutionary and Napoleonic France's challenge to the monarchical principle and the *ancien régime,* and thus to the moral purpose of the state as their peers interpreted it (Hobson 2015, 106–39). Their challenge to the international order proved comprehensive. Admittedly, it also included a challenge to the then current distribution of power, but that challenge was especially threatening because it expressed a refusal of the *principle* of the balance of power. It expressed a refusal of the then current pattern of stratification *as a moral fact* and sought to substitute, as a matter of principle, Empire for Balance of Power.

Another example is the foreign policy of Nehru's India, Mao's China, and Suharto's Indonesia when they organized the Bandung Conference in 1955. This was a gathering of twenty-nine Asian and African states and aspirant states, which gave way to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (Kustermans and Horemans 2022). Many of the delegations insisted that the world that they had recently become—or hoped soon to become—*independent* in would have to become a very different world from the world that they had been *subjected* in. True peace demanded true justice. True emancipation demanded a new international order. "[Attendees at the Bandung conference consistently expressed] rhetorical appeals to transcend Western-imposed visions of political order, with the hope of establishing a more peaceful, inclusive and cosmopolitan order in their place" (Philips 2016, 336). In the context of our argument, it is crucial to observe that Western states (and to a lesser extent the Soviet Union) responded with a sense of alarm. They experienced the Bandung Conference as a threat to the international order and as dangerously revisionist. Also crucial to observe is that the revisionist character of the Bandung Conference was seen to pertain to both the "legitimate ends" and the "legitimate means" of international society. Not only did participants in the Bandung Conference seek to delegitimize the "colonial state" (a refusal of what was then still considered a legitimate end, at least for high-ranking members of international society) and, an equal source of concern, the "capitalist state" (similarly a refusal of a legitimate end of international society), but they also appropriated diplomatic means—a multilateral conference, from which they excluded the dominant powers—in a way that was considered transgressive, not in the least because it had the representatives of still-colonized states

participate. As such, the example offers another illustration that transgression of the legitimate means need not imply taking recourse to the use of force. The transgressive appropriation of otherwise legitimate means fits the category too.

Consider, finally, Putin's Russia, about which many observers have noted the radicalization of its revisionist ambitions and actions. One reason for that reevaluation is certainly that Russia has decided to put its money where its mouth is. It has recourse to the use of force without obvious reasons of self-defense and without authorization of the United Nations Security Council. Doing so, it is considered as deviating from the rules that define the legitimate means that members of international society may employ to pursue their goals. A second reason, however, is that Putin's Russia appears to reject the rules that define the ends that members of international society may legitimately pursue. There is a clear refusal, on the part of Russian leaders, of the idea of liberal democracy (which defines the moral purpose of the state in the liberal international order) and even of the idea of sovereign equality (which imposes a socially sanctioned limit on the ends legitimately pursued in pluralist international society). With regard to the former, Putin's Russia can be seen to promote a conservative revolution, seeking to substitute "traditional" for liberal values. As to the latter, it is widely seen as trying to reintroduce the idea of spheres of influence and have other states accept the legitimacy of regional great powers, such as Russia, exercising authority within such a sphere of influence (Suslov 2018). It is the combination of these two dimensions of revisionism—transgression of the legitimate means and transgression of the legitimate ends—that appears to qualify Putin's Russia as a revolutionary revisionist. That it furthermore questions the reification of the current distribution of power—that it questions the treatment of the current distribution of power as a *moral fact*, as though it were desirable and therefore necessary—only adds to people's perceptions of its revolutionary character.

Codicil: The Politics of Revisionisms

We understand that our argument, by drawing systematic attention to the context-dependent nature of the determination and characterization of revisionist conduct, opens up to the charge that it promotes (unhelpful) relativism. That is, if different actors consider different behaviors revisionist according to their own definition of legitimate ends and means, then are we not abstaining from analysis, turning revisionism instead into a purely subjective phenomenon? While there may be some merit to such a critique, we believe that there is, in constructivist research, a well-established way out of this generic predicament that makes a strength out of the weakness (e.g., Jackson 2006; Adler-Nissen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008; Bettiza 2014). These approaches use what Jackson (2010, 185) terms "participant"-specified ontologies, as opposed to scholarly specified ones (see also Guzzini 2000). Here, rather than imposing a coherent meaning upon their object of analysis (whether it be sovereignty, civilization, or the international order), this approach explores how these concepts are wielded, contested, and adapted in practice, and with what consequence in specific political contexts. As Bettiza (2014, 9–11) outlines in the context of civilizational studies, this approach opens up for a systematic analysis of how these concepts are instrumentally adapted by actors for particular ends and can generate an empirically grounded picture of the intersubjective constitution of the phenomenon in question.[10]

Such an approach implies using *revisionist talk* to generate a window into the contextual understandings of and disagreements about the existing international order. It thus generates the following kinds of questions: (1) *What* conceptions of revisionism are in circulation and what are their constituent rules pertaining to legitimate ends and means? (2) *Where* are these depictions of revisionism located and *who* is articulating them? (3) How do these revisionists' discourse render certain activities (il)legitimate?

In concrete terms, this has significant downstream consequences for conducting empirical analysis with our typology, which would provide a heuristic for the analysis of such discourses.[11] For instance, rather than (or in addition to) observing Russian behavior and then pondering which box in our typology it fits within, the systematic consideration of what is "illegitimate" requires that we first pay attention to how actors of world politics depict Russia's behavior. Indeed, we may note that NATO countries systematically depict Russia in revolutionary revisionist terms: striving to reintroduce its "sphere of influence" as a legitimate end via the hitherto forbidden means: military force. Such a depiction necessarily rests upon a conception of how the current international order is (e.g., Stoltenberg 2021; see Sperling and Webber 2017) Yet, the extent to which this conception of Russian behavior is considered transgressive remains an empirical question. Moreover, it is a pertinent question who shares this view and where they are situated within international order. Of course, Russia proclaims a quite different account of its actions in terms of legitimate ends and means than the West, but even a cursory analysis of the international, and especially non-western, discourse about Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows that Russia is not universally depicted as a revolutionary revisionist. In other words, claims Russia itself and other actors make regarding Russian policies are precisely where we can locate the politics of revisionism. Competing claims to legitimacy eventually contribute to normative change and are constitutive not only of existing international social structures, but also of their future form and strength.

The substantive content and relative presence of these debates within international discourses provide an empirical window into how widely shared conceptions of international social structure(s) are. They also show how claims about what the rules are should be treated as (disputable) moral facts (within particular contexts). After all, whether a state is or is not revisionist depends upon the observer's conception of the existing order and how far they think states can push the limits of "sovereign play" before others consider it transgressive. Indeed, when NATO condemns Russian efforts to revise the rules-based order, they are both assuming (1) the existence of that rules-based order and (2) that it enjoys legitimacy among its members. Conversely, depictions of Russia as pursuing a *legitimate* self-help strategy (1) rest upon a thin notion of the rules of the order and (2) assume that no other thicker normative rules ought to apply. Hence, while our typology can illuminate the stakes of these debates over the legitimacy of international order, it also contributes

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[10] Indeed, given the consensus that orders (international or otherwise) are intersubjectively constituted, it follows that invocations of revisionism (which nec-

essarily imply an invocation of an order to be revised or defended) are implicated in the constitution or contestation of the existing order. We think that those utilizing a scholar-specified ontology are too hasty in assuming agreement around the nature of the order as it currently exists, and we can instead fruitfully use revisionist talk as means of turning the degree of agreement and quality of disagreement into an empirical question.

[11] Notwithstanding Jackson's prioritization of participant-specified ontologies, we consider it valuable to utilize theoretically grounded categories of analysis that can facilitate systematic discursive inquiry (e.g., Hansen 2006). It should be noted that we also hope the framework and supporting discussion can have intrinsic value in terms of encouraging scholars of revisionism to see their subject matter in new ways, even if they do not wish to "apply" it themselves.

to not overstating the degree to which beliefs about the legitimacy of international order are shared. While the political conclusions of this may not always be comfortable to us, it does provide a more empirically grounded basis from which to both (1) analyze revisionism and (2) lodge political claims about the desirability of future kinds of international order.

Finally, this approach has significant implications for the practice of revisionist research. One need not be in thrall to continental philosophy to agree that IR scholars' categories of analysis frequently become categories of practice and vice versa (Brubaker 2013). It is not a coincidence that both Bull's "international society" and Ikenberry's "liberal order" are widely in use by both scholars and practitioners alike. Hence, the question of *whose order*, then, becomes crucial for identifying whether actions or actors are revisionist. This also foregrounds the extent to which we as scholars of IR contribute to how patterns of stratification and social mobility are legitimated and delegitimated, to the muddling of *is* and *ought*.

Our imbrication with the world we study thus foregrounds the importance of reflecting upon the political consequences of our labeling different behaviors as revisionist. Designations of revisionism are not innocent but by necessity political with potential consequences for those labeled as such. At least as far as the history of the modern order goes, revisionism is at best a normatively ambiguous term, in most cases pejorative, and in many others a securitizing move in aid of the status quo (see Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998). The term "legitimate revisionism" is borderline oxymoronic. We can seek to atone for this by systematically studying the phenomenon but cannot fully escape the political consequences of our labeling. This forces us to reckon with two sets of reflexive questions regarding our position vis-à-vis our subject matter in order to "fracture" our own "orbs, crack them open, shake them" (Ashley 1984, 286) a *little bit.*

First, if all revisionism is considered transgressive (of a rule), then any description of revisionism (either tacitly or explicitly) rests upon the belief in the objective existence of the legitimate rules being transgressed. As such, these descriptions also (implicitly or explicitly) render transgressive the behavior we analyze. Hence, our works on revisionism are more than mere analysis, as they also form part of the practices that potentially legitimize the status quo. Yet, as we have discussed above, the normative relationship between theories of revisionism and the order(s) they analyze is seldom rendered explicit. Given the highly contested nature of revisionism, we believe that future work on revisionism would benefit greatly from a more explicit discussion of the underlying conception of the international order presupposed and reproduced by their analysis.

Second, unless we examine the substantive content of our theories and the extent to which they open up for a *legitimate* and *unthreatening* rise in status and power, we run the risk of identifying and stigmatizing unassuming actors' attempts to prosper. Just as neorealism stands accused of implicitly legitimating the pursuit of relative gains, overly broad theories of revisionism run the risk of (inadvertently) stigmatizing rising powers. Circumventing this demands that we reflect about whether *all* types of transgressions must be labeled revisionist, or whether they could be described in a more benign vocabulary (e.g., reformists) Furthermore, it places a high premium on providing a strong and explicit defense of any conception advancing instead a broad conception of revisionism that leaves little room for legitimate change.

Conclusion

In this article, we have leveled a constructivist critique against major works on revisionism in IR and made the case for a new framework for future research. We have proceeded in three moves. First, we showed the extent to which revisionism is—however tacitly—often assumed to be of a timeless character, its meaning unduly reified. We argued that such a view of revisionism cannot fully capture the spectrum of possible revisionist conduct, also often conflating status quo behavior with revisionism and vice versa. To remedy this, we insisted that analyses of revisionism would benefit from explicitly adding "*illegitimate*" to their descriptions of revisionist behavior. Only then can we shed light on the transgressive quality of revisionism and highlight the extent to which it relies on acts of judgment about its legitimate character.

Second, building on an understanding of international orders as social structures, we suggested that a typology resting on legitimate ends and legitimate means provides a useful analytical basis for identifying different brands of revisionism in the existing literature. Our typology of three types of revisionisms not only helps historicize revisionism, but also contributes to a better conceptual understanding of it. Differentiating between legitimate ends and means helps clarify contrasts between different takes on revisionism and different labels. It also foregrounds the necessity to take into account how the normative constitution of international order (legitimate ends and means) relates in intricate ways to the social facts of social stratification and mobility. Ultimately, the framework advanced here enables a systematic problem-shift away from studying revisionism at the level of the observer to studying revisionism from the level of action: to a focus on *whose* account of international order forms the basis for determining revisionist behavior and *where* does this battle over the nature of international order take place. Crucially, this problem-shift enables us to account not only for how these contests shape the way *potentially* revisionist behavior is understood by different actors, but also how these contests shape that very same behavior. Alongside our typology, this enables us to systematically relate discursive contests over the nature of the international order to what *some* may call revisionism. Finally, we argued that given our imbrication with our object of study, a healthy dose of reflexivity about the productive–political consequences of the research agenda on revisionism is warranted.

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viant behavior is added as it was an early source of inspiration for our own thinking on the subject. We have organized the table in accordance with our own theoretical framework.

Overall, the table affords a quick overview of how existing typologies relate to each other. The table also shows apparent inconsistencies in existing typologies. The table further suggests an over-identification of revisionist behavior. Certain types of revisionist behavior identified in the literature can equally be categorized as status-quo conduct.

Appendix. A Systematic Overview of Typologies of Revisionism

This table gives an overview of the typologies of revisionism in key contributions. Robert Merton's typology of de-

[Authors]	Conduct acceptant of legitimate ends and means		Revisionism transgressive of legitimate means	Revisionism transgressive of legitimate ends	Revisionism transgressive of legitimate ends and means
	Status-quo conduct		**Competitive revisionism**	**Creative revisionism**	**Revolutionary revisionism**
Schweller	Lions & Lambs		Wolves & Jackals		
Ward	Positional revisionists, non-violent		Positional revisionists, violent	Reformists Revolutionists, non-violent	Revolutionists, violent
Goddard	Integrated revisionists	Isolated revisionists	Rogue revisionists (?)	Bridging revisionists	Rogue revisionists (?)
He et al.		Soft revisionism: exit	Hard revisionism Soft revisionism: reform		Soft revisionism: competition Soft revisionism: obstruction
Larson & Shevchenko	Social mobility		Social competition	Social creativity	
Merton	Conformism	Retreatism	Innovation	Ritualism	Rebellion