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Morality and progress: IR narratives on international revisionism and the status quo

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Abstract *Scholars debate the ambitions and policies of today's 'rising powers' and the extent to which they are revising or upholding the international status quo. While elements of the relevant literature provide valuable insight, this article argues that the concepts of revisionism and the status quo within mainstream International Relations (IR) have always constituted deeply rooted, autobiographical narratives of a traditionally Western-dominated discipline. As 'ordering narratives' of morality and progress, they constrain and organize debate so that revisionism is typically conceived not merely as disruption, but as disruption from the non-West amidst a fundamentally moral Western order that represents civilizational progress. This often makes them inherently problematic and unreliable descriptors of the actors and behaviours they are designed to explain. After exploring the formations and development of these concepts throughout the IR tradition, the analysis is directed towards narratives around the contemporary 'rise' of China. Both scholarly and wider political narratives typically tell the story of revisionist challenges China presents to a US/Western-led status quo, promoting unduly binary divisions between the West and non-West, and tensions and suspicions in the international realm. The aim must be to develop a new language and logic that recognize the contingent, autobiographical nature of 'revisionist' and 'status quo' actors and behaviours.*

Introduction

Scholarly debates over 'rising powers' have intensified as China, India and others have become increasingly prominent, and as the United States (US) is said to be in decline. Often, these debates are framed by the language of 'revisionism' and the 'status quo'. Historically, states have been identified as revisionist or status quo actors based, respectively, on either dissatisfaction or satisfaction with their place in international affairs. Recently, authors have sought to advance the debate by distinguishing between thick and thin revisionism (Behravesh 2018) and different ideal types (Goddard 2018). Davidson (2006, 14) argues that revisionist states 'seek change in the distribution of

[global] goods', highlighting 'territory, status, markets, expansion of ideology, and the creation or change of international law and institutions' as crucial arenas of revisionist ambition. States quo actors, in contrast, seek to maintain the distribution of these goods.

'Rising' China attracts notable attention within the relevant international relations (IR) literature today, and among those who directly examine whether it is a revisionist or status quo actor, most agree that it more closely resembles the latter (for example, Johnston 2003; Davidson 2006; Ding 2010; Ikenberry 2011; Xiao 2015; Wilson 2017). Zhao (2018, 2) rejects the 'status quo' designation, but still argues that 'it is not a revolutionary power discontented with and ready to replace the order'. Some scholars also critique IR theory for being overly deterministic and materialistic, taking for granted that rising powers will challenge the status quo (Thies and Nieman 2017, 2; Ward 2017, 281; Gries and Jing 2019). Often overlooked, they argue, is how 'ideational factors', such as socialization (Thies and Nieman 2017, 3, 15) and perceptions of status (Ward 2017) affect behaviour. Despite this emerging critique, however, the spotlight of scholarly and popular attention continues to fall upon China—and other 'rising powers'—as a real or potential source of international revisionism. China, in short, is regarded as guilty until proven innocent (Turner 2014, 154) regardless of stated evidence to the contrary by scholars such as those identified above. Meanwhile, attention to Western revisionism in particular remains more limited, despite scholars of the US and Europe outlining the actions and ambitions of these actors towards revising and reshaping the structures of global affairs.

Consider for example the European Union (EU), a core strength of which is said to lie in its designs 'to reshape the contours of the international system' (Rosecrance 1998, 15). Ian Manners (2002, 239) notes Brussels's 'willingness to disregard Westphalian conventions' in its efforts 'to shape conceptions of "normal" in international relations'. Indeed, the EU fulfils most of the criteria for revisionism suggested by Davidson (2006), for example by significantly expanding its territorial reach from six member states in 1951 to 28 today;¹ transforming Europe's markets and acting as a global 'market power' that 'actively and consequentially influences today's international system' (Damro 2012, 697); and exporting its ideology via particular understandings of democracy, human rights and so on, acting as a 'normative power' (Merlingen 2007) or a 'norm entrepreneur' (Vadura 2015). In line with earlier definitions of revisionist powers, which centred around power accumulation, the EU has also elevated itself to 'the status of emerging global power' (Piening 1997) or even 'superpower' (Moravcsik 2014). Despite all this the EU has rarely, if ever, been labelled revisionist.

The US today is deemed revisionist by some, though primarily as resulting from the policies and worldviews of the administration of Donald Trump (for example, Ikenberry 2017). The same has been argued of the US under the administration of George W. Bush (see Xiang 2001; Hurd 2007). Such allowances for the role of isolated, 'rogue' administrations or individuals, as deviations from imagined national norms, are rarely, if ever, extended to China and other 'rising powers'. The notion of a hegemon or 'established power' on its own terms representing a primary disruptive force within the system it dominates

¹ Reducing to 27 if the UK leaves the EU as currently planned.

is far less frequently considered (for example, Bukovansky 2016; Schweller 2015; Chan et al. 2018).

Newer frameworks designed to better conceptualize ‘revisionist’ and ‘status quo’ actors are productive in correcting definitional deficiencies and providing more nuance to previously under-theorized terms. Yet, no matter how sophisticated the concepts become, their inherent performativity remains neglected when they are deployed throughout the discipline of IR and the wider policy realm. This presents a need to interrogate the discursive logics that underpin these concepts and give them meaning. A primary concern of this article is thus to investigate the scholar as narrator, and to reveal how prevailing understandings of ‘revisionism’ and the ‘status quo’ emerged and established themselves, for what purposes, and with what effects.

This article posits that the concepts of revisionism and the status quo reflect and reproduce ‘ordering narratives’ of morality and progress which sustain selective logics about the world and the actors within it. They organize debate so that revisionism is most typically—though not exclusively—conceived as disruption from the non-West amidst a fundamentally moral Western order that represents civilizational progress.² Narratives of international revisionism and the status quo have long worked to construct and legitimize understandings of a (principally Western-led) global status quo and the universal advances it brings, in the apparent face of challenges from global peripheries. International relations understandings of revisionism and the status quo are thus less products or outcomes of enquiry than modes or methods of enquiry that operate as autobiographical narratives. Only by uncovering such a ‘wider logical dimension’ (Somers and Gibson 1994, 44) of these frequently recurring terms can their underlying intelligibility be revealed. This enables a demonstration of the consequences—in both the academy and beyond—for the world and its actors which these concepts describe.

We do not argue that modern-day ‘rising’ China should escape examination as a source of global change. Beijing has created international organizations such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and launched continental-scale projects like the Belt and Road Initiative while aggressively asserting territorial claims in the South China Sea. Yet, the overriding attention that China and other ‘rising powers’ receive as potential sources of revisionism, despite such actors as the EU and US conforming to the criteria for revisionism provided by IR scholars themselves, is illustrative of the extent to which the terms ‘revisionist’ and ‘status quo’ are problematic descriptors of actors and behaviours they are routinely used to explain.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section outlines the nature and role of narratives in the study of global affairs. The second section unpacks traditional IR wisdom on revisionism and the status quo, tracing its evolution across two overlapping waves of twentieth-century debate. We then focus on a contemporary third wave of debate, which centres around a ‘rising’ China in particular. Finally, we outline resistance, or counter-narratives, to these traditionally dominant IR stories of international revisionism and the status quo,

² The terms ‘(non-)West’ and ‘Western’ are to some degree problematic because of their lack of specificity, but we consider them useful for the purposes of this article. We address the inherent malleability of their constructions on page 11.

and how they nevertheless penetrate wider public and policy arenas. The article concludes by looking to how a new language and logic (Somers and Gibson 1994, 44, 62) of 'revisionist' and 'status quo' actors and behaviours might be formulated.

The nature, role and power of narratives

Narratives are a central feature of social and political life. As discursive tools they construct stories about the world that are crafted and selective, omitting certain parts while emphasizing others (Subotić 2016; Hagström and Gustafsson 2019). As Patterson and Monroe (1998, 316) explain, they also require agency and characters. They are thus at least partly autobiographical, providing comforting and compelling stories about who 'we' are, where 'we' came from and 'our' collective purpose. They speak to the relationship between Self and Other, giving us 'a sense of space and a sense of place' (Subotić 2016, 612), or 'a sense of speakers' cognitive maps' of themselves and others (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 316). Narratives therefore contain the perspective of the narrator(s), and their understanding of what is right or 'canonical'. They also contain sequences of events which may or may not be 'real', but which are organized in ways that give them meaning. Indeed, 'the narrator uses the past self to point to and explain the present and the future' (Patterson and Monroe 1998).

Somers and Gibson (1994) describe four different but interlinked narrative dimensions. *Conceptual narratives* are those with which this article is primarily concerned. Used by scholars in particular, conceptual, or scholarly, narratives give meaning to such terms as 'society', the 'actor', 'culture' and so on which, for 'social science purposes', are intentionally abstracted from their historicity and relationality (Somers and Gibson 1994, 62). Like each of the dimensions Somers and Gibson describe, conceptual narratives 'have drama, plot, explanation, and selective appropriation' (Somers and Gibson 1994, 61). *Ontological narratives* are used by individual actors in a broader sense to comprehend their existence, to know who they are and how to act. 'Agents', Somers and Gibson explain, 'adjust stories to fit their own identities, and, conversely, tailor "reality" to fit their stories'. Most importantly for this analysis, the social or interpersonal nature of these narratives means they can form wider collectives or 'webs' of narrativity. These *public narratives* are those attached to larger cultural and institutional formations, including the family or church, but also the government and the nation. Narratives, indeed, are an important component in the policy-making process, promoting certain practices while restricting the possibility of others (Subotić 2016).

Metanarratives are grand or universal narratives in which we are embedded as social actors and as social scientists. They can include the 'epic dramas of our time', such as barbarism/order versus civilization/chaos, as well as progression/advancement and the envisioned triumph of international liberalism. By usually operating at the 'presuppositional level', beyond our immediate awareness (Somers and Gibson 1994, 63), metanarratives can become so ingrained as to be difficult to recognize as organizing concepts. Finally, certain narratives may become dominant by latching on to pre-existing narratives, achieving resonance. However, even dominant narratives remain contested by

alternative stories (Autesserre 2012, 207–208), and we address these as counter-narratives later in the article. In spite of an ongoing contestation, narrative changes usually occur slowly and incrementally (Autesserre 2012, 209). This is evident in the spotlight continuing to fall on China as potentially revisionist, despite the majority of empirical studies concluding that it is not.

As examined throughout the remainder of the article, the dominant story of a historically Western-centric IR has been that of an essentially moral and progressive world order formulated and sustained by the West (or, before then, an Anglo-American world), on the one hand, and that of a non-West that jeopardizes the stability and advancements the West has enabled, on the other. These ‘ordering narratives’ of morality and progress are forms of metanarratives which encompass social actors including IR scholars, having become ‘lodged in the theoretical core of social theory’ (Somers and Gibson 1994, 63). Ingrained and largely unchallenged, they offer a story of international revisionism and the status quo which comes with a dual logic. Like all narratives, they bring order by steering and regulating debate around the rise and fall of great powers. However, as metanarratives, they also establish truths about international order itself—about what it is, how it came about, the condition it is in and where it is going. Notions of international order bind and give meaning to the concepts of revisionism and the status quo and, as shown in due course, must be central to the process of extricating those concepts from the narrative constraints that have been imposed.

By reinterpreting the concepts of revisionism and the status quo as narratives, we show how they bring a particular way of sense making, with inherently performative, rather than merely descriptive, functions. The power of narratives lies in their effects, and the aim here is to reveal the formations and consequences of the narratives we explore. We examine the scholar as narrator operating through the creation and deployment of powerful conceptual IR narratives that not only represent, but also select and restrain, our knowledges of the world and the identities and motivations of the actors within it. We further show how these narratives transcend the discipline, connecting to and permeating political practice (see Winkler 2019; Gustafsson et al. 2019).

The following section details how scholarly debate on revisionism and the status quo has been historically organized by conceptual narratives, enabling IR theorists to advance and sustain stories of international revisionism principally as a form of non-Western disruption of a Western status quo that has benevolent and moral foundations and represents civilizational progress.

Morality and progress: narrating revisionism and the status quo in the IR tradition

Revisionism and the status quo as designators of (im)morality

Scholarly—or conceptual—narratives on international revisionism and the status quo have extensive roots, broadly evolving in three distinctive but interconnected waves. Each also shares the critical commonality of being framed at least in part by the language of international (im)morality.

The first wave emerged among classical realists of the mid twentieth century. Hans Morgenthau (1962, 39) distinguished status quo from imperialist powers, arguing,

A nation whose foreign policy tends toward keeping power and not toward changing the distribution of power in its favour pursues a policy of the status quo. A nation whose foreign policy aims at acquiring more power ... [and] seeks a favourable change in power status, pursues a policy of imperialism.

Other post-war realists spoke of 'satiated' and 'insatiated' (Schuman 1948), 'status quo' and 'revolutionary' (Kissinger 1957) and 'status quo' and 'revisionist' (Wolfers 1962, 18) states. Randall Schweller argues that, in contrast to Wilsonian liberals, who saw the world through a moral lens as a global conflict between good (democratic) and bad (non-democratic), classical realists saw 'a natural power struggle between the established, satisfied powers and the rising, dissatisfied ones—often the victors and vanquished in the last major power war'. In this view, realists were concerned only with how 'the concept of power politics applied equally to both "haves" and "have nots", sated and hungry states' (Schweller 1999, 18).

Yet this interpretation misses what John Hobson (2012, 185–187) calls the 'subliminal Eurocentric institutionalism' of realism and IR theory more widely, and, ultimately, the subtle presumptions of (im)morality which underpin the discipline's revisionism–status-quo debates. At this stage, revisionism and the status quo remained broadly under-theorized concepts, their Eurocentrism being manifest in subtle ways. Specifically, studies tended to concentrate upon conflicts between 'expansionist' and 'unsatisfied' Germany and the Axis powers of non-Western Europe, which challenged the 'pacific' and 'satisfied' Anglo-American/Western European powers and their visions of international order. Thus, '[t]he alliance treaties that France concluded with the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Rumania [sic] in the period between the two world wars were intended to maintain the status quo, mainly in view of possible German attempts to change it' (Morgenthau 1962, 41). Morgenthau's understanding of imperialism as virtually any expansionist behaviour freed colonial Western nations of responsibility by naturalizing violent imperialist projects, particularly throughout the non-Western world. Western colonizers that maintained the size of their empires are also seen by classical realism as status quo actors (Hobson 2012, 188–189).

In this first, formative wave of debate around revisionism and the status quo, we perhaps inevitably find uncertainties and complexities in the narrative being constructed. EH Carr, for example, identified Britain as a "'pacific" and "satisfied" Power, finding her highest good in the maintenance of the status quo and defending herself against the imperialism and expansionism of others' (Carr 1939a, 26–27). Equally, and exhibiting 'a multiple series of intellectual identities' including a belief 'in the essential beneficence of British governing power' (Cox 2000, 213), Carr (1939, 136) also questioned Western moral claims to global leadership, arguing that '[i]nternational morality, as expounded by most contemporary Anglo-Saxon writers, became little more than a convenient weapon for belabouring those who assailed the status quo'.

A second wave of revisionist/status quo scholarship came with realism's structural turn of the 1970s. This brought some refinement to the IR narrative and its developing story of international revisionism and the status quo, but also a continuation of Hobson's subliminal Eurocentrism. The hegemonic stability theory (HST) of the 1970s/1980s, for example, tells us that as new states 'rise' the established order is disrupted. Moreover, it is 'open and liberal' economic orders that are particularly vulnerable to fragmentations of power and that require a hegemonic power to thrive (Gilpin 1987, 72). Such orders, Gilpin explains, have emerged twice: during so-called Pax Britannica of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Pax Americana since 1945. Organski and Kugler's power transition theory (PTT) posits that, as the capabilities of a 'rising power' approach those of a dominant power, the former will try to seize control of the international environment, increasing the likelihood of conflict. Thus, 'the source of war is to be found in the differences in size and rates of growth of the members of the international system' (Organski and Kugler 1980, 20). Also crucial are levels of satisfaction with the rules and norms of the order maintained by the dominant power; 'If the newly rising country ... is dissatisfied with the international status quo, it will demand changes which will likely be resisted by the dominant state.' This combination of approaching power parity and dissatisfaction with the prevailing order 'provides the necessary condition for war' (Lemke 1997, 24).

Models such as the PTT and HST extolled the virtues of objective enquiry. Yet their conceptual narratives of revisionism and the status quo were always those of a discipline that remained a fundamentally Western enterprise. Almost all IR theory, note Acharya and Buzan (2007, 288), 'is produced by and for the West, and rests on an assumption that Western history *is* world history'. Traditional IR theories, they argue,

... speak for the status quo great powers and the maintenance of their dominant role in the international system/society. Though they are presented as universal theories ... [they] can be seen as speaking for the West and in the interest of sustaining its power, prosperity and influence. (Acharya and Buzan 2007, 3).

For instance, when Gilpin identifies just two historical eras of 'liberal' stability and order, provided once by the United Kingdom (UK) and then the US, the familiar moral foundations of the HST are revealed.

The argument could be that these IR narratives of revisionism and the status quo simply represent the reality of a world only ever truly 'ordered' by the West. Largely absent, however, is a serious consideration of how the global manufacturing of 'order' by European colonial powers and, later, the US, in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere, constituted radical and widespread revisionism. Discriminatory and autobiographical, these narratives rarely accommodate concern for the disruptive, violent and arguably immoral processes that brought the 'Western order' about. The concern is instead only about its potential demise and of who and what may follow.

Revisionism and the status quo as civilizational progress

The concept of an international order, or 'status quo', as it commonly appears throughout the two historic waves of (Western-dominated) IR literature

outlined above, is not imagined to be a static or unmoving condition. Instead, it has always been used within scholarly or conceptual narratives as code for advancement and progress. Robert Gilpin (1987, 72) insists that ‘the international economic order ... could not flourish and reach its full development’ without a liberal hegemonic power such as the US or UK. Potential hegemons such as the Soviet Union, he explains, would undo such progress through ‘the imposition of political and economic restrictions’. EH Carr’s criticisms of Western claims to international order intersected with assertions of how it advanced, rather than merely sustained, the global condition. Aside from ‘equal security to all’, he noted, British ascendancy gave rise to a universal currency, acceptance of free trade and a common language. The fate of each of these developments, and by extension the cultivation of ‘a world society’, he argued, was threatened by new challengers (Carr 1939, 213).

Progress has been most commonly understood in the West as a product of Enlightenment thought, manifest in material advances in science and technology as a ‘standard of civilization’.³ This enabled a division of the world into a ‘civilized’ West and ‘barbarian and savage’ non-West (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 22–98). As progress became an explanation of how history itself unfolds, a storyline emerged describing a linear trajectory from ancient Greece to modern Europe in which progress was understood as self-generating through characteristics internal to the West (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 36–98), including those of liberal capitalism. The West was seen as ‘a distinctive political order—a “civic union”’ and as having ‘a distinctive political logic’ (Deudney and Ikenberry 1993, 18), in line with portraying the ‘democratic world [as] America’s greatest accomplishment’ (Deudney and Ikenberry 2012, 1). Though not necessarily directly visible, the underlying ‘wisdom’ or logical dimension of this narrative persists today through notions of ‘modernization’ and ‘development’ (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 123). More explicitly, when referring to post-1945 history, the growth of US global influence is depicted as having ‘helped usher in a new period of modernization and progress for many parts of the world’ (Deudney and Ikenberry 2012, 4).

While comparisons between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ are less acceptable in modern parlance, the ‘status quo’ is still narrated as a route towards progress and development. The goal of wealth creation in particular is set within a framework of global governance defined by Western conceptions of democracy, human rights and capitalist reforms. ‘As in the past’, observe Bowden and Seabrooke (2006, 3f), ‘the workings of markets continue to be thought of as having a “civilising” effect on society; both internally amongst its members and in external relations with other societies’. In this ‘socialization-to-liberal-order-view’ (Bukovansky 2016, 96), emerging markets are paternalistically depicted as moving towards a brighter future, via the ideal of economic convergence with the more developed West. For example, Mandelbaum (1997) suggests that a ‘useful way to think of Russia and China is as analogous to unruly adolescents’ in the context of their post-Cold-War development. This is coupled with expectations of political convergence and thinking in terms of the ‘liberal theory of history’ (Nymalm 2013) and understandings of the

³ For discussion of Enlightenment (counter-)narratives on progress, which lies beyond the scope of this article, see Pitts (2009).

relationship between capitalism and modernity which have arguably become a Western-centric hegemonic view. Argues Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2008, 1), 'ideas of convergence upon the model of Anglo-American capitalism and liberal democracy are continuously rehearsed in mainstream media, as if the "rise of the rest" is supposed to follow in the footsteps of the rise of the West'. Failed expectations on convergence may in turn intensify a threat discourse of the 'rising other' (Nymalm 2017) and 'revisionism' they bring.⁴ For instance, Jaschob et al. (2017) deny any normative connotation in their conceptualization of revisionism, as 'not all rules and norms are just, and not all existing international orders are better than potential alternatives'. Yet, they motivate their studies with 'the problem of dissatisfied great powers and the question of why rising powers should want to challenge an established international order that facilitated their extraordinary growth' (Jaschob et al. 2017, 10). In other words, the order is 'good' because it enabled the rise of new powers.

Historical IR debates over revisionist and status quo actors and behaviours have evolved over time, but within the controlled and restrictive parameters of conceptual IR narratives. As a result, the concepts themselves have operated not as neutral descriptors, but as powerful narratives of morality and progress with particular characters and plotlines. The effect has been to leave these scholarly concepts devoid of much analytical value, operating more as rhetorical tools to reinforce misleadingly binary conceptions of a Western Self versus a non-Western Other, within unduly selective and essentially predetermined stories of world order and the sources of its vulnerabilities. More than this, by endorsing divisions of a 'civilized' West and 'barbarian' rest, they have worked to promote suspicions and tensions in the international realm. As John Hobson (2012, 185–187) puts it, models like the HST 'explicitly justif[y] Western imperialism in the past, as well as in effect advocating a neo-civilizing mission in the present'.

Robert Gilpin's theory of hegemonic stability (later adapted by others), underpinned by Pax Britannica and Pax Americana narratives, depicts the UK and US as architects of the only two true historical world orders. Yet global history reveals earlier 'orders' and constant interchange between East and West (Stuenkel 2016, 34–47; Hobson 2004). This calls into question the traditionally narrated sequence of events, by challenging the understanding that world order is fundamentally Western and the first of its kind in terms of scope and reach (see Suzuki et al. 2013). As an essentially autobiographical account of world order, from a traditionally Western-centric IR discipline, the HST thus obscures others from the plotline, writing them out of history. This second-wave logic, moreover, is inexorably drawn from the original, first-wave disciplinary stories of how 'pacific' and 'satisfied' powers, notably the UK and US, defended against imperialism and expansionism that threatened the stability and civilizational achievements of the Anglo-American order. These narrativized truths went largely unchallenged, becoming common sense to the extent that they still reside at the heart of mainstream IR theory.

⁴ See, for example, Friedberg (2018, 8–9) and Wright (2017, preface) on 'the end of convergence'.

To better explore the contemporary manifestations and effects of these narratives, we turn now to examine the latest wave of IR debate around international revisionism and the status quo, which centres primarily upon the modern-day 'rise' of China.

Narrating the modern-day 'rise' of China in IR and beyond

A third wave of revisionist/status quo literature came with post-Cold-War debates over the US-led world order and emergence of 'rising powers'. Authors in this wave utilize the logic of the PTT to interrogate the contemporary 'rise' of China in particular (see for example Lim 2015; Goldstein 2007). As Lemke (1997, 32) explains, threats to the post-war 'Long Peace' have now seemingly emerged, notably from 'Chinese growth unaccompanied by a change in attitude toward the status quo'. To assuage these threats, 'the United States and other leading satisfied Great Powers should continue patient cooperation with [China, and others such as Russia] ... to encourage democratization and liberalization'. For Gerald Segal (1996, 108), 'China is a powerful, unstable non-status quo power.' China is also now argued to be demonstrating 'significant revisionist objectives' in the South China Sea (Lim et al. 2017) as well as by creating the AIIB (Wilson 2017, 150). Graham Allison writes that 'war between the U.S. and China is more likely than recognized at the moment', as his interpretation of the historical record stipulates that, in the majority of cases 'in which a rising power has confronted a ruling power, the result has been bloodshed' (Allison 2015).⁵ Beyond the PTT, a significant sub-literature explores whether rising powers in general, and especially a rapidly rising China, represent revisionist or status quo powers (see for example Ding 2010; Feng 2009; Kastner and Saunders 2012). We return to the role of these narratives in the policy realm in the next sub-section on public narratives.

Third-wave IR debates around rising powers, then, quietly sustain the logics of the ordering narratives of morality and civilizational progress central to the first and second waves, perpetuating largely unquestioned understandings that international revisionism must inevitably emanate from beyond the Western core of international order. To begin with, the term 'rising power' is not neutral, bringing powerful connotations of instability and danger absent in such alternatives as 'modernizing' or 'developing'. Crucially, the term 'rising', like 'revisionist', powers has most typically been used to refer only to non-Western states (see Turner 2014, 152–154). As noted earlier, the EU is rarely labelled 'revisionist' despite revisionism forming part of its self-identity. Explorations of the US as revisionist are also relatively absent, though counter-narratives exist, as examined shortly. The selective formations and constraining boundaries of mainstream conceptual IR narratives prevent the inclusion of the US and EU because the term does not logically fit the known character or plotline.

The assumption here is not of an unproblematic separation between the 'West' and 'non-West', or of timeless challenges the latter poses to the former. Fears over a 'rising' India, for instance, rarely enter US security discourse as

⁵ On critiques of Allison's case selection see, for example, Chan et al. (2018).

do those of a 'rising' China, despite numerous material similarities and both typically being identified as residing beyond the West. Moreover, and as already shown, earlier waves of IR revisionism–status-quo debate interrogated the vulnerabilities of the Anglo-American/Western order to Imperial and Nazi Germany. That Germany is now routinely located within the West, alongside members of the 'Anglo-American world', demonstrates the fluidity of such imagined geographies. Indeed, India's broad absence from US threat discourses is explained partly by its (re)construction as a pseudo-member of the Western world (Turner 2016). Similarly, while post-1945 Japan quickly became seen as part of the Western Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) world, by the 1970s and 1980s it was 'orientalized' because its economic growth generated concerns of a challenge to US economic hegemony (Nymalm 2017). Today, it is those actors commonly labelled 'non-Western', in particular China, that have in many ways been seamlessly manoeuvred into spaces of IR debate once occupied by Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany. Members of 'the West' escape such interrogation, while China, like others before it, is now ideationally tied to well-rehearsed discourses of the enemy because its imagined Otherness makes it seemingly logical to do so (see Rousseau 2006).

Mainstream scholarly/conceptual narratives of a 'rising' China are thus in important ways autobiographical narratives of Western authorship, with their meanings contingent on the worldview of a particular, prevailing (Western) disciplinary tradition.⁶ The 'cognitive map' of this tradition locates uncertainty and disorder, and an unravelling of gains made by the so-called liberal world order, as coming not from the central characters within it but from the global peripheries. China has become locked within narrativized understandings of what constitutes international order, on the one hand, and disorder (or chaos/backwardness/barbarism), on the other, and not only within academic circles. For centuries within wider US politics and society, China has been represented as lacking the essential standards of civilization and as a corresponding threat to US security and its enlightened, progressive values (Turner 2013). Chengxin Pan points to self-reflecting Western narrations of the 'China threat' when he argues that the 'threat' derives at least partly from the American self. 'Thus, to fully understand the U.S. "China threat" argument, it is essential to recognize its autobiographical nature' (Pan 2004, 313). This equally applies to expectations of China developing according to the Western model of liberal democratic capitalism. This kind of convergence thinking has been a recurrent theme in US China policy (Nymalm 2013).

As highlighted earlier, among those who directly interrogate the question of whether 'rising' China exists as a revisionist or a status quo actor, most agree that it more closely resembles the latter. Despite this, it is China and other 'rising powers' that are routinely interrogated as potential sources of instability. This apparent contradiction is enabled by the power of narratives

⁶ To an extent every concept is contingent on author worldviews and disciplinary tradition. We do not deny, therefore, that if the IR discipline had been authored primarily beyond the West then the concepts of revisionism and the status quo might have become understood in terms that privilege another cultural region. In this article, however, we interrogate the dominance of narratives that happen to be of largely Western design. Equally, this does not mean 'non-Western' perspectives are devoid of problems. See, for example, Callahan (2008).

to steer and select our knowledges of the world and its constituent actors. First- and second-wave IR debates around international revisionism and the status quo cemented the disciplinary (conceptual) narrative of an imperial/unsatisfied non-Western threat to a stable Anglo-American/Western world order. Third-wave debates over China's 'rise' align with, and reinforce, this story by retaining its authors as the central protagonists, most notably the US, before introducing China as the latest outsider to a functioning system, which it necessarily threatens to destabilize. The findings of the recent sub-literature within these debates on the explicit question of China as a revisionist or a status quo actor have not disrupted the more ingrained, overarching 'truth' that China should remain the principal object of study.

Counter narratives and public narratives: the reach of revisionist–status-quo wisdom

Resistance to the dominant narratives of non-Western revisionism of a US/Western-led status quo exists. Xiang (2001, 9) points to a 'determined American assault on the status quo' by the (2000–2009) Bush administration. Ian Hurd (2007) similarly posits that the Bush-era US displayed revisionist tendencies around international norms. Andrew Hurrell (2005, 164) goes further: 'the United States has always been a revisionist state, whether this has been reflected in crusading or in exemplarism'. Randall Schweller (2015, 13) similarly argues that the US is 'the True Revisionist Power', and that 'it is hegemon ... that are best positioned and most motivated to be revisionist powers' (see also Schweller 2018). Maximilian Terhalle (2015, 198) also criticizes the IR tendency to portray the US as a status quo power; 'the United States has never hesitated to employ its more revisionist foreign policy traditions'. More broadly, Terhalle questions IR's Western-centrism and its 'narrative according to which the United States and the United Kingdom have successfully led the international order for the last 200 years'. By privileging this false notion of historical Western order, we overlook 'the prevalence of collective hegemonies for most of the time' (Terhalle 2015, 22, 109). Counter-narratives are also evident among those who consider a non-Western or global IR theory (for example, Acharya and Buzan 2007; Eun 2018). Authors here challenge the underpinning theoretical knowledges that have enabled the enduring Euro/Western-centrism of concepts such as revisionism and the status quo. We return to the significance of these counter-narratives for more productive IR debates in the conclusion.

These counter-narratives challenge the discipline's dominant conceptual narrative to the extent that they identify revisionism as equally likely to emanate from the West, particularly the US, as from the non-West. For those like Xiang and Hurd, however—and as explained in the introduction—the US is represented as a revisionist actor only within a particular moment and with the mitigating circumstances of a peculiarly disruptive governing elite, that is, the Bush (see also Shambaugh 2001; Lind 2017) or, more recently, the Trump (Ikenberry 2017), administration.

Schweller's (2018, 40) argument that the US transformed from a status quo to a revisionist power after the Cold War when it achieved 'unchecked power' is a useful critique of IR's dominant conceptual narratives as outlined above (see also Chan et al. 2018). However, his structural realist explanation, framed

by the understanding that states' revisionist/status-quo tendencies are primarily determined by their relative material power, is not equipped to show how the traditional theoretical assumptions he addresses—which 'invariably posit rising powers as spoilers, hell-bent on revising the international order' (Schweller 2015, 3)—have endured for so long, or why the disciplinary trend has been to interrogate the intentions and behaviours of 'spoilers' from the non-West, and with what effects. Thus, his explanation is not designed to show how the IR concepts of revisionism and the status quo have expressed the worldviews of particular (especially Western) narrators, constraining the limits of the debate itself. Terhalle, meanwhile, criticizes both the neglect of the revisionist character of US politics (for example, Terhalle 2015, 32–33, 84, 198) and the Western/Anglo-centrism of IR theory in its account of history (for example, Terhalle 2015, 110ff). With an alternative focus, however, he does not explicitly relate this critique to how the notions of 'revisionism' and 'status quo' in IR are applied. Nor does he trace or unpack the terms as narratives that convey a story on their own, or connect them to the study of China (and other rising powers) as revisionist.

Ultimately, the counter-narratives that exist have not yet significantly challenged the discipline's dominant conceptual narratives. Ordering narratives of morality and progress have created a binary of positive/benevolent and negative/threatening, brands of international revisionist motivations and behaviours towards an imagined status quo. Positive and/or benevolent revisionism is within the rules, taken for granted and rarely labelled as such. It is typified by the 'normative power' of the EU and a similar (though, as indicated above, less extreme) comparative lack of interest in a revisionist US. As in-house revisionism by the principally Western architects of the system, such revisionism's purpose is narrated as benign and aimed at fine-tuning an inherently progressive order from which, while not flawless, the world is understood to profit and advance. Negative/threatening revisionism is considered disruptive not merely to a stable system but to the progress and advancement that system is designed to bring. Negative revisionism means instability, regression and a real or potential reversal of gains. Attached to actors like China, it is deemed worthy of interrogation, generating the need for debate about world peace (Buzan 2010) and the survival of the international system (Ikenberry 2008). Neither has resistance prevented conceptual narratives of revisionism and the status quo from disseminating into wider public (especially governmental) narratives.

The Trump administration labels China (and Russia) a 'revisionist power' in both its 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) (White House 2017a) and its 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) (Department of Defense 2018). This label is justified on the basis that China aims 'to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests ... displace the US in the Indo-Pacific region and reorder the region in its favour' (White House 2017a, 25). When the NDS speaks of '*a resilient, but weakening, post-WWII international order*' undermined by China and Russia, it points to potential global regression and a dismantling of 'the long-standing rules-based international order' (Department of Defense 2018, 1–2, emphasis in original; see Breuer and Johnston 2019). 'In short, they are contesting our geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favour' (White House 2017a, 27).

To support its claims of China as nefariously revisionist with designs to reshape the global landscape, the NSS cites China's attempts to export its state-centric economic model and enhance its military capabilities, and its use of data and surveillance. Yet, throughout the same document, comparably 'revisionist' motivations and behaviours are presented as essential elements of a benevolent US policy programme. The theme of 'advancing American influence' recurs. To do this, it is argued, the US should 'play a catalytic role in promoting private-sector-led economic growth', build and deploy 'the most effective military in the world' and 'continuously pursue strategic intelligence'. The American aim of 'advancing religious freedom' is also promoted (White House 2017a, 4, 3, 32, 41).

To reiterate an earlier point, narratives are prescriptive, bringing understandings of how the world should be as an inextricable component of the policy-making process, their 'truths' and logic enabling certain practices while precluding others. 'Narratives do not cause action. Instead, they ... authorize, enable, and justify specific practices and policies ... Over time, the narratives and the practices they authorize come to be taken as natural, granted, and the only conceivable ones.' Importantly, narratives also resonate more, with greater potential to become dominant or commonsensical, when they can latch on to pre-existing narratives (Autesserre 2012, 207). The aim here, then, is not to draw a causal link between conceptual or ordering narratives, on the one hand, and public/government narratives or foreign policy decisions on the other. It is to show where the narrativized worldviews of the Trump administration connect, or 'latch on', to those of the scholarly IR literature, and to examine the political practices they enable.

In 2017, US National Security Advisor HR McMaster argued that revisionist powers like China seek to 'subvert the global order that undergirds our common ... economic prosperity' (White House 2017b). At least in part on the basis of this type of understanding of negative revisionism, or subversion, towards a system that has brought wealth and prosperity, from July 2018 Washington began applying wide-ranging tariffs on Chinese imports (*The Economist* 2018). These public narratives worked also to preclude a continuation of what the NSS refers to as Washington's post-Cold-War 'strategic complacency' in global affairs. 'Given the new features of the geopolitical environment the United States must renew key capabilities to address the challenges we face' (White House 2017a, 26, 28). In March 2018 the US Congress approved Trump's military spending bill which proposed a US\$61 billion increase to the national defense budget (Myre 2018). US Pacific Command was also rebranded the Indo-Pacific Command, to better encapsulate the view not only that China's 'rise' brings the need for material support from key partners such as India, but also that the US-India partnership is one of 'responsible stewards' of international 'peace and stability' (Ministry of External Affairs 2017; see also Turner 2016).

Whatever one's normative position on US/Western liberalism versus Chinese state-centrism, the tensions within the 2017 NSS around China as an explicitly negatively revisionist actor and the US as implicitly positively revisionist demonstrate the 'successful' operations of public narratives. Comparable behaviours in one actor can be morally promoted in the name of upholding the status quo and ensuring global progress, while in others can be

portrayed as immoral and regressive. These apparent contradictions are reconciled by the overarching power of largely unquestioned ordering, or meta-, narratives in which the sources of (Western) order and potential (non-Western) chaos are already 'known'. China's ambitions to expand its capabilities and influence, moreover, constitute negative revisionism not simply because they emanate from the non-West, but because China's so-called state-driven project runs counter to beliefs in democratic-capitalist American ideals. China is thus not 'converging' as expected; the perceived threat from authoritarianism is referenced heavily throughout both the NSS and NDS. While the US is cast as a benevolent guide for China's inclusion in the post-war liberal international order, it is China that is frustrating these attempts: 'For decades, U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China's rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China. Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others' (White House 2017a, 25).

Conclusion: rethinking the terms of the debate

Chan et al. (2018, 23) argue that, as social and political constructions, the labels of 'revisionism' and the 'status quo' are often intended to frame discourses intended for political persuasion and mobilization, and sometimes bear little correspondence with what the pertinent states have said and done'. The ideas these labels bring, they suggest, can exert power and influence on our understandings about the world even when grounded upon questionable evidence. This article has argued that the IR concepts of revisionism and the status quo, as they are typically deployed, are constructions in the form of 'ordering narratives' of morality and progress, constituting long-established and, to a significant extent, autobiographical stories—or conceptual narratives—of a Western-dominated discipline. Through their selectivity of characters, plotlines and sequences of events in stories of an essentially benevolent and progressive Western world order, these narratives have framed and constrained debate across historical waves of study, their broadly unchallenged logic now being transposed on to a 'rising' China. As modes or methods of enquiry, these narratives have promoted understandings of world order and of the characters within it. To varying extents, Morgenthau, Gilpin and others—as both scholars and narrators—articulated conceptions of international revisionism and the status quo which (albeit often subtly) privileged the Anglo-American, and later the wider Western, world in the making of an essentially benevolent and progressive system, simultaneously entrenching stories of external others who came late to threaten its achievements. Coated in the subliminal Eurocentrism described by Hobson, the potential analytical value of these concepts has always been stifled; formulated as inherently problematic and misleading descriptors of international actors and behaviours, they have reinforced overly simplistic conceptions of a Western Self versus a non-Western Other, promoting rather than addressing suspicions and tensions in the international arena and pervading wider public narratives such as those of the current US administration.

To reiterate, the argument is not that China should be omitted from the study of structural changes to twenty-first-century global affairs, nor is it to

deny challenges associated with China's authoritarian model of governance and development. Yet, as we have seen, assessments and classifications of revisionism are contingent and narrativized and, traditionally, authored principally in the West. Those who directly examine whether 'rising' China exists as a revisionist actor broadly agree it does not. However, China remains the primary focus of study of international revisionism, while actors like the EU escape such attention despite seemingly fulfilling revisionist criteria formulated by some IR scholars themselves. Neither, then, is the argument that the terms 'revisionism' and 'status quo' should necessarily be removed from the lexicon. It is that examinations of their disciplinary formations and the conditions from which they derive meaning help us recognize them as contingent constructs and, from a position of greater self-reflection, enable efforts to resolve the problems and contradictions they bring.

The bias towards upholding conventional IR wisdom is increasingly being interrogated. Stephen Walt speaks of history as 'a set of competing, overlapping, but still distinct narratives ... The past does not reveal itself to us openly; it is interpreted, debated, and constructed for us by historians of various kinds and by society as a whole' (Walt 2018). In doing so, he emphasizes the role of narratives in the production and perpetuation of 'truths' of how the world came to be. Walt also connects the tendency of IR 'to reinforce the stale bipartisan consensus behind "liberal hegemony"' and the necessity for "U.S. leadership", or, in the words of the Trump administration, the US as a 'responsible steward' of order (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). In their explication of conceptual or scholarly narratives, Somers and Gibson (1994, 62) argue that researchers should seek to 'develop a social analytic vocabulary that can accommodate the contention that social life, social organizations, social action, and social identities are narratively, that is, temporally and relationally constructed'. The duty of IR, then, should be to work for an analytical logic and language that recognize the narrativized nature of international revisionism and the status quo, and of international order itself.⁷

Attempts at such vocabularies so far problematize either geographical/historical or conceptual boundaries and binaries. In his call for a global IR, for example, Acharya (2014) urges scholars to look beyond the Westphalian model of order to those of historical periods and regions, as well as different frameworks of relations including alternative forms of regionalism (see Ling and Nakamura 2019; Chen and Shimizu 2019). Critiquing IR for overlooking peaceful interactions and bidirectional learning between the West and non-West, Acharya points to a resulting loss of mutual respect (Acharya 2014, 656). Scholars such as Stuenkel (2016) and Hobson (2004) critique what they consider false dichotomies between the West and non-West, and their accompanying narratives of Western-derived modernity. In other words, without entrenched and historically inaccurate binaries between 'a moral and progressive West' and an 'immoral and uncivilized rest', equally established notions of revisionism and status quo would be exposed as more problematic.

Seeking to break or expand conceptual boundaries, scholars offer 'new' imaginaries or vocabularies. Womack, for example, proposes replacing 'status quo' (the situation of the present) and our understanding that it represents the

⁷ While noted elsewhere (for example, Smith 1999), this insight has not yet fully permeated IR debate on revisionism and the status quo.

norm, with 'status ad quem', 'the situation to which (we are moving in the future)'. In his understanding, discussions on whether China supports the 'status quo' or not are misplaced, as world politics is not a static or fixed condition. Accordingly, 'a "status ad quem power" would be one whose policies were appropriate and sustainable in the emerging new order' (Womack 2015, 135). Ling (2018) explores US–China relations through different theoretical, ontological and even 'spiritual' lenses, including 'Daoist trialectics', while Pan (2018) develops a 'holographic relational ontology' of China's rise. Kavalski (2018) uses the notion of *guanxi* to advance existing relational approaches by focusing on the interconnectedness of knowledge production in the West and 'non-West'. Collectively, these approaches offer more complex narratives of China's 'rise' than the 'binary scenarios of either a hegemonic challenge to the Western-dominant order or a linear integration into it' (Pan 2018, 19), in which both China and 'the West' are treated as 'self-enclosed and self-interested units of power' (Ling 2018, 5). While increased complexity is probably not in high demand with policymakers who favour simpler accounts, we find one of our central tasks as scholar-narrators in exposing what we see as problems with dominant accounts and in highlighting alternative voices. As noted by Kavalski (2018, 3): 'IR theorizing [still] needs to learn and employ different languages if it is to offer a richer and more nuanced account of the complex and heterogenous global life it seeks to comprehend.'

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