

Subordinates' Quest for Recognition in Hierarchy

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Millennium: Journal of
International Studies
1–27

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DOI: 10.1177/03058298211050953

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Abstract

The scholarship on hierarchy held the promise of exposing conditions of systemic inequality in world politics. However, a significant strand of it approached the international order from above, privileging the perspective of dominant actors. I make the case for a from-below approach to hierarchical orders, recognising and accounting for understudied experiences in world politics, but also developing a more accurate understanding of hierarchy. Through a relational-sociological approach, I conceptualise hierarchy as a socially differentiated system predicated on recognition. The experience of misrecognition by way of normative and material constraints constitutes actors as subordinates. I propose a framework for subordinate actors' navigation of hierarchy in quest of social recognition. I identify three strategies that subordinates employ, depending on the misrecognising constraints they counter (normative/material) and the recognition they seek (internal/external). Subordinates may engage in norm appropriation, alternative leveraging, and salvation from victimhood. I demonstrate the applicability of the framework by examining Egypt's quest for recognition in the aftermath of the 2013 military coup.

Keywords

Hierarchy, subordination, recognition

Introduction

The emergence of a scholarship on hierarchy in International Relations (IR) held the promise of balancing the dominance of the anarchy discourse in the discipline.¹ For,

1. Jack Donnelly, 'The Discourse of Anarchy in IR', *International Theory* 7, no. 3 (2015): 393-425. See also Helen Milner, 'The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique', *Review of International Studies* 17, no. 1 (1991): 67-85; Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

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unlike anarchy, hierarchy has the potential of putting front and centre the realities of systemic inequality that govern world politics.² A significant strand of the literature on hierarchy, however, has looked at the international system ‘from above’, privileging the perspective of dominant actors. It has done so by postulating *a priori* that hierarchies are legitimate forms of domination. David Lake has made the most elaborate theoretical contributions to this scholarship.³ As he defines it, hierarchy is an authority-laden relationship in which a dominant actor provides a ‘political order’ in the form of security and economic benefits to a subordinate actor who, in return, consents to surrender some extent of their sovereignty. This understanding of hierarchy largely overlooks the subordinate experience in systems of inequality. First, a subordinate may accept subordination because they perceive that they have no other option but to do so.⁴ Absence of resistance is conflated with consent while it may well indicate unwilling acquiescence. Second, a subordinate may be keen on the social recognition of their status in hierarchy. Lake’s theory appears to imply that subordinates are solely motivated by material (security and economic) interests. While the ontology of his hierarchy is able to accommodate social recognition as far as dominant states are concerned, it falls short of accounting for subordinates’ regard for their own recognition by other actors in hierarchy.⁵

This article approaches hierarchy from below through a relational-sociological lens. It departs from consent-based understandings of hierarchy and looks at the stratified world order from the perspective of subordinate actors. Building on conceptions of hierarchy as social stratification and differentiation,⁶ it understands hierarchy as a vertically and horizontally differentiated system. Subordinates’ consent in this approach to hierarchy is not considered a theoretical issue but an empirical one. Subordinates may or may not consent to subordination, which does not change the hierarchical character of the system. Besides, hierarchy thus understood is not ‘the antonym of anarchy’,⁷ for the

2. Ayşe Zarakol, ‘Why Hierarchy?’, in *Hierarchies in World Politics*, ed. Ayşe Zarakol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 273; John M. Hobson, ‘The Twin Self-Delusions of IR: Why ‘Hierarchy’ and Not ‘Anarchy’ Is the Core Concept of IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 42, no. 3 (2014): 559.
3. David A. Lake, ‘Anarchy, Hierarchy, and the Variety of International Relations’, *International Organization* 50, no. 1 (1996): 1-33; ‘Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics’, *International Security* 32, no. 1 (2007): 47-79; *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); ‘Regional Hierarchy: Authority and Local International Order’, *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009): 35-58.
4. Vincent Pouliot, ‘Against Authority: The Heavy Weight of International Hierarchy’, in *Hierarchies in World Politics*, ed. Ayşe Zarakol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 119.
5. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, 165-73.
6. See for example, Jack Donnelly, ‘Sovereign Inequalities and Hierarchy in Anarchy: American Power and International Society’, *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 2 (2006): 139-70; Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, ‘Hierarchies in World Politics’, *International Organization* 70, no. 3 (2016): 623-54; Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
7. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, 62.

social differentiation of world politics is not conceptually incompatible with the absence of world government.⁸ Therefore, while it does not contest the latter postulate, the article takes hierarchy, not anarchy, to be the main structuring feature of the international, anarchy remaining at best a ‘supplementary analytic’.⁹

Crucially, the article argues that hierarchy is predicated on social recognition. Misrecognition dynamics to which actors are subjected in hierarchy *constitute* them as subordinates. Normative and material constraints, experienced from below as social misrecognition, stratify the social order, categorising actors as inferior and superior to one another. An actor’s position in hierarchy cannot simply be explained by their behaviour or access to power resources. Rather, it depends ultimately on other actors’ social recognition and misrecognition.

How do subordinates resist misrecognition and seek recognition in hierarchy? This article proposes a theoretical framework for the exercise of agency from below and from within hierarchy, i.e., by subordinates wishing to be recognised and integrated in the order. I identify three strategies they may employ based on the misrecognising constraints in question (normative and/or material) and the locus of the sought recognition (internal and/or external). Subordinates may engage in *norm appropriation* (against normative constraints, aiming for internal and/or external recognition), *alternative leveraging* (against material constraints, aiming for internal and/or external recognition), and *salvation from victimhood* (against normative and/or material constraints, aiming for internal recognition).

The article illustrates the three strategies identified with an empirical discussion of Egypt (2013-15), which provides an ideal case to discuss subordinates’ quest for social recognition in hierarchy. Indeed, the aftermath of the 2013 military coup in Egypt featured internal *and* external social recognition crises amidst normative *and* material constraints, which allows us to gauge the applicability of the range of identified strategies. Internally, the post-coup regime was in urgent need to secure the recognition of its people – i.e., domestic legitimacy – amidst misrecognition by a portion of the Egyptian population that rejected the military’s move. Externally, it was subjected to normative and material constraints: it was stigmatised for its violation of liberal-democratic principles and subjected by the United States (US) to military sanctions. The Egyptian regime resented and contested such social misrecognition and sought to be recognised domestically and internationally.

The next pages are organised into three sections. First, I critique the literature that has approached hierarchy from above and argue that, by masking subordinates’ agency, it has provided a distorted and flawed picture of the international system. Second, I develop my relational-sociological conception of hierarchy and theorise three strategies that subordinate actors adopt in their quest for recognition. Third, I turn to the empirical discussion of Egypt’s pursuit of domestic and international recognition amidst misrecognising normative and material constraints weighing on the post-coup regime.

8. Donnelly, ‘Sovereign Inequalities’, 141.

9. Bially Mattern and Zarakol, ‘Hierarchies in World Politics’, 631.

Hierarchy from Above

Several decades after International Relations has been described as an ‘American specialty’¹⁰ and an ‘American social science’,¹¹ the discipline is still criticised today for favouring the perspective of the powerful. Like the practice of international relations, the discipline, too, maintains systemic inequalities based on culture, civilisation, geography, race, and gender.¹² IR has been blamed for maintaining a Eurocentric view of world politics that undermines the purchase of the discipline’s theorising enterprise.¹³ Ole Wæver and Arlene Tickner observe that IR is mainly studied from a ‘specific geopolitical site’, i.e., the United States, which is the most powerful country in both world politics and the discipline of IR.¹⁴ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan argue that IR theory remains largely a mix of Western history and Western political theory.¹⁵ IR has also been castigated over the years for its US-centric parochialism in graduate schools’ reading lists¹⁶ and for US-based scholars’ dominance in journal article authorship.¹⁷

This ‘from-above’ perspective on international relations has found its way to a significant part of the literature on hierarchy. Making the most elaborate and influential contributions to this scholarship, David Lake’s works on hierarchy display such bias at the definitional level.¹⁸ Hierarchy, as he approaches it, is a relation of authority in which ‘the

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10. Alfred Grosser, ‘L’ étude des relations internationales, spécialité américaine? [The Study of International Relations, an American Specialty]’, *Revue française de science politique* 6, no. 3 (1956): 634-51.
 11. Stanley Hoffmann, ‘An American Social Science: International Relations’, *Daedalus* 106, no. 3 (1977): 41-60.
 12. See for example, Arlene Tickner, ‘Seeing IR Differently: Notes from the Third World’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (2003): 295-324; Siba N. Grovogui, ‘Come to Africa: A Hermeneutics of Race in International Theory’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 26, no. 4 (2001): 425-48; Laura Sjoberg, ‘Gender, Structure, and War: What Waltz Couldn’t See’, *International Theory* 4, no. 1 (2012): 1-38.
 13. John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Sanjay Seth, ‘Historical Sociology and Postcolonial Theory: Two Strategies for Challenging Eurocentrism’, *International Political Sociology* 3, no. 3 (2009): 334-38; Turan Kayaoglu, ‘Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory’, *International Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2010): 193-217.
 14. Ole Wæver and Arlene B. Tickner, ‘Introduction: Geocultural epistemologies’, in *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*, ed. Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Wæver (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.
 15. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at Its Centenary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 2.
 16. Hayward R. Alker and Thomas J. Biersteker, ‘The Dialectics of World Order: Notes for a Future Archeologist of International Savoir Faire’, *International Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1984): 121-42; Alfredo C. Robles, ‘How “International” Are International Relations Syllabi?’, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 26, no. 3 (1993): 526-28.
 17. Peter Marcus Kristensen, ‘Revisiting the “American Social Science” – Mapping the Geography of International Relations’, *International Studies Perspectives* 16, no. 3 (2015): 246-69.
 18. Lake, ‘Anarchy, Hierarchy’; ‘Escape from the State of Nature’; *Hierarchy in International Relations*; ‘Regional Hierarchy’.

ruler' has 'the *right*' to command 'the ruled' to change their behaviour, and the ruled has in turn the 'duty' to comply with the ruler's orders.¹⁹ The relation between the ruler and the ruled is authoritative and legitimate. It is rooted in a contract whereby the ruled consent to give up a measure of their sovereignty in exchange for a 'political order' (i.e., security and economic benefits).²⁰ Several other authors have approached hierarchy as a consensual form of relationship.²¹ This narrow conception of hierarchy is, however, biased toward superordinate actors in hierarchical orders.²² I take issue with both the 'extension' (coverage) and 'intension' (internal properties) of such a conceptualisation.²³ The extension of authoritative hierarchy is too narrow it excludes *ipso facto* many theoretical possibilities and empirical manifestations of non-consensual subordination and systemic inequality. Colonisation, slave trade, and economic sanctions, for example, have nothing to do with the notion of hierarchy according to this literature, *unless* the colonised, enslaved, and sanctioned consent each to their situation of subordination. As for the concept's intension, it does not take subordinates' experience of hierarchy seriously. First, by positing *a priori* that subordinates consent to subordination, it overlooks the possibility that they may acquiesce unwillingly for want of alternative.²⁴ Second, while Lake's conception of hierarchy accommodates dominant actors' social recognition, it neglects subordinates' regard for their own recognition in hierarchy.²⁵

In addition, while pundit narratives tend to reduce the establishment and maintenance of hierarchical orders to from-above dynamics, such an understanding of hierarchy-building can be found in IR literature, too. Patrick McDonald argues in a critique of democratic peace theory that the international order is 'built and managed by great powers'.²⁶ Through a relational network perspective on hierarchy, Paul MacDonald does pay heed to subordinate actors, yet only in their capacity as brokers that can legitimate the order and superordinates' domination locally.²⁷ I do acknowledge that the power

19. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, 18.

20. *Ibid.*, 8-10, 28-30.

21. See for example, John M. Hobson and J. C. Sharman, 'The Enduring Place of Hierarchy in World Politics: Tracing the Social Logics of Hierarchy and Political Change', *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 1 (2005): 69-70; Ian Clark, 'How Hierarchical Can International Society Be?', *International Relations* 23, no. 3 (2009): 468-69; William Clapton and Shahar Hameiri, 'The Domestic Politics of International Hierarchy: Risk Management and the Reconstitution of International Society', *International Politics* 49, no. 1 (2012): 63; Ahsan I. Butt, 'Anarchy and Hierarchy in International Relations: Examining South America's War-Prone Decade, 1932-41', *International Organization* 67, no. 3 (2013): 579.

22. Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders*, 259-63.

23. Giovanni Sartori, 'Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics', *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (1970): 1041.

24. Pouliot, 'Against Authority', 119.

25. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, 165-73.

26. Patrick J. McDonald, 'Great Powers, Hierarchy, and Endogenous Regimes: Rethinking the Domestic Causes of Peace', *International Organization* 69, no. 3 (2015): 585.

27. Paul K. MacDonald, 'Embedded Authority: a Relational Network Approach to Hierarchy in World Politics', *Review of International Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 144-45.

asymmetries inherent in hierarchy's systemic inequality mean that dominant powers have a larger say in the definition of the order than subordinate actors. However, as I shall argue below, the picture remains fundamentally flawed if one does not take into account subordinates' navigation of hierarchy.

It is true that the empirical scope of discussions of hierarchy has not been exclusively restricted to the West as the interest in China, and its historic 'tributary system', has been on the rise. Yet some of this literature has reproduced the same problematic aspects of the already mentioned scholarship on three levels. First, analytically, the interest has been mostly focused on China – the most powerful state in its region – thus adopting the same from-above standpoint. This has led to calls for eschewing Sinocentrism and focusing on the East Asian region as a whole.²⁸ Second, politically, the rising interest in China cannot be dissociated from the growing interest of American and, more generally, Western policymakers in China as a very serious rival to the United States in world politics. Third, theoretically, this top-down perspective replicates the postulate that hierarchy is constructed unidirectionally from above. Such an understanding of hierarchical orders mirrors Eurocentric IR theory and echoes neorealist accounts of the one-way imposition of hegemony by a dominant power using its material resources.²⁹

This article contributes to reversing the perspective on hierarchy by looking at it from below, i.e., by giving subordinate states their due share in the study of the stratified world order. Putting subordinate actors at the centre of our study of hierarchy is, in the words of Jason Sharman, 'an essential but generally neglected task'.³⁰ Few scholars have taken it on.³¹ By challenging dominant perspectives on world politics, this article may echo critical IR theory's attempts to uncover the discipline's own biases and inequalities. Critical scholarship – including poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and feminism – has indeed long deconstructed hierarchies lying at the heart of the discipline and practice of international relations.³² This article's contribution is, however, distinct, in that it takes subordinate actors' agency as its central focus, whereas critical literature has often neglected it both by

28. David C. Kang, 'International Order in Historical East Asia: Tribute and Hierarchy Beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism', *International Organization* 74, no. 1 (2020): 65-93.

29. Ji-Young Lee, 'Hegemonic Authority and Domestic Legitimation: Japan and Korea under Chinese Hegemonic Order in Early Modern East Asia', *Security Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016): 320-52.

30. J. C. Sharman, 'International Hierarchies and Contemporary Imperial Governance: A Tale of Three Kingdoms', *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2011): 204.

31. Ibid., 204; Feng Zhang, 'How Hierarchic Was the Historical East Asian System?', *International Politics* 51, no. 1 (2014): 1-22. Lee, 'Hegemonic Authority'; *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Joseph MacKay, 'Rethinking Hierarchies in East Asian Historical IR', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 4 (2018): 598-611.

32. See for example, Tickner, 'Seeing IR Differently: Notes from the Third World'; Grovogui, 'Come to Africa: A Hermeneutics of Race in International Theory'; Sanjay Seth, 'Postcolonial Theory and the Critique of International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 40, no. 1 (2011): 167-83; Arlene B. Tickner, 'Core, Periphery and (Neo)imperialist International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013): 627-46.

leaving it undertheorised and reifying the West's 'hyper-agency'.³³ Some critical voices have warned against the insistence on 'non-European agency', arguing that this would absolve Europe of its criminal deeds.³⁴ I argue that such deflection of focus away from subordinate actors reproduces and perpetuates from-above perspectives on hierarchy.

Concentrating on subordinate actors in international hierarchies is not merely about adding 'diversity' to the scholarship on hierarchy and, beyond, to IR. It is about recognising, accounting for, and understanding different experiences in a stratified world order. This allows us to comprehend hierarchy more thoroughly, as one cannot account for social structures by only looking at those elements occupying higher positions within them. Jack Donnelly draws eloquent parallels highlighting the theoretical inappropriateness of neglecting subordinates. 'An army's structure', he writes, 'is not a matter of the number of generals and their relations to one another. We cannot discern the structure of a slave system by attending solely to the large slave-owner'.³⁵ The behaviour of subordinates in international hierarchies may indeed be indicative of the broader evolution of the international system. Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon show that 'weaker' states' exiting from the rules and institutions of the American-led international order contribute to undermining the United States' hegemonic system and liberal ordering.³⁶

There is a considerable body of literature on 'small' and 'weak' states in IR.³⁷ My account of subordinates' navigation of hierarchy presents three principal points of distinction from several strands of this scholarship. First, I depart from those works that adopt a substantialist perspective defining small or weak states by some essential qualities that they are said to have (e.g., population size, defence expenditure, or economic capability).³⁸ As I shall show in the next section, I approach subordinate actors relationally.³⁹ Second, unlike many authors contributing to small or weak state scholarship, I do

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33. Bially Mattern and Zarakol, 'Hierarchies in World Politics': 646; John M. Hobson and Alina Sajed, 'Navigating Beyond the Eurofetishist Frontier of Critical IR Theory: Exploring the Complex Landscapes of Non-Western Agency', *International Studies Review* 19, no. 4 (2017): 547-72.
 34. Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Eurocentrism and Its Avatars: The Dilemmas of Social Science', *Sociological Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1997): 33.
 35. Jack Donnelly, 'Rethinking Political Structures: from 'Ordering Principles' to 'Vertical Differentiation' – and Beyond', *International Theory* 1, no. 1 (2009): 56.
 36. Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 110-36.
 37. For an overview, see Matthias Maass, 'The Elusive Definition of the Small State', *International Politics* 46, no. 1 (2009): 65-83; Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel, 'Introduction', in *Small States in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*, eds. Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 4-9.
 38. David Vital, *Inequality of States: A Study of Small Power in International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 8. Kenneth Waltz also ranks states according to such variables as 'size of population and territory', 'resource endowment', and 'military strength', among others; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 131.
 39. On relationalism, see Mustafa Emirbayer, 'Manifesto for a Relational Sociology', *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (1997): 281-317; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel

not look at how subordinates pursue power, survival, security, or influence nor do I assess whether they make an impact on the international system as such.⁴⁰ My focus is, rather, on how they seek social recognition in hierarchy. Third, my explicit aim is to advance the theoretical scholarship on hierarchy, a crucial concept for our understanding of the international – if subordinates are not neglected as they have routinely been in this literature. Studying hierarchy from below does not imply that superordinate actors should be overlooked. Rather, it is about taking subordinates as the entry point into hierarchy: their navigation of constraints, their quest for opportunities, their perceptions, their motivations – all in relation to other actors within hierarchy.

Hierarchy from Below and Social (Mis-)Recognition

I adopt a relational-sociological lens in my approach to hierarchy building on various contributions to the literature on the stratification and differentiation of social orders in IR.⁴¹ I understand hierarchy as a vertically and horizontally differentiated system, where vertical differentiation establishes status rank and horizontal differentiation determines actors' extent of agency. As a *system*, hierarchy is essentially constituted of relations between actors, who are connected in such a way that changes in relations between two of them may well involve changes in other relations within the system.⁴²

Hierarchy is predicated on social recognition. It is therefore fundamentally relational. I distinguish the sociological conception of recognition from formal-legal and political-philosophical ones. Legal recognition is a formal act that grants an actor a legal status. In the legal constitutive theory of statehood, a state is sovereign insofar as it is formally and legally recognised as such by other sovereign states.⁴³ Political-philosophical recognition stems from Hegel's master-slave relationship.⁴⁴ It is an existential human desire to be affirmed and acknowledged for who we are.⁴⁵ Departing from these two approaches,

H. Nexon, 'Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (1999): 291-332. For a relational approach to small states, see Tom Long, 'It's Not the Size, It's the Relationship: from "Small States" to Asymmetry', *International Politics* 54, no. 2 (2017): 144-60.

40. Michael I. Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London: Frank Cass, 1981); Christos Kassimeris, 'The Foreign Policy of Small Powers', *International Politics* 46, no. 1 (2009): 84-101; Steven E. Lobell, Neal G. Jesse, and Kristen P. Williams, 'Why Do Secondary States Choose to Support, Follow or Challenge?', *International Politics* 52, no. 2 (2015): 146-62; Robert O. Keohane, 'Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics', *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (1969): 291-310.

41. See for example, Donnelly, 'Sovereign Inequalities'; Bially Mattern and Zarakol, 'Hierarchies in World Politics'; Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders*.

42. This echoes Robert Jervis' definition of a system. See Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6.

43. Jens Bartelson, 'Three Concepts of Recognition', *International Theory* 5, no. 1 (2013): 114-17.

44. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018 [1807]).

45. Ayşe Zarakol, 'Sovereign Equality as Misrecognition', *Review of International Studies* 44, no. 5 (2018): 849.

I understand recognition sociologically as the acknowledgment of an actor's sought position within hierarchy entailing an agency and a status that correspond to their own sense of identity and worth. The labelling of political actors – whether as 'sovereign state', 'backward nation', or 'axis of evil', for instance – follows the same social logic, that of attributing a status to an actor who may experience it as recognition (if it corresponds to the position they seek in hierarchy) or misrecognition (if it does not).⁴⁶ Power resources, be they ideational or material, and patterns of behaviour may be employed to seek social recognition but are not *per se* sufficient to occupy a certain position in hierarchy.⁴⁷ Howard Becker makes this point in his seminal work on the sociology of deviance; he defines deviance as 'not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender"'.⁴⁸ In world politics, the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction may in one case boost a state's status; in another, it may be a stigma, relegating an actor to the club of 'rogue states' or terrorist organisations. In hierarchy, an actor's position therefore rests ultimately on other actors' recognition or misrecognition. It follows that 'subordinate' and 'superordinate' are relational categories. They are not synonyms for 'small state/power' and 'great power', respectively, which are often understood from a substantialist perspective. A subordinate actor is, by definition, one that occupies an inferior position within hierarchy *in relation to* a superordinate actor in a given situation. Positionality is relative, allowing for the possibility that one actor may be the superordinate party in one situation (in relation to some actors) and the subordinate in another (in relation to some other actors).⁴⁹

In hierarchy, political actors grapple with normative and material constraints. I understand constraint as a downward pressure on an actor's position in hierarchy, weighing on their status and agency. Constraints may stem from the structure of hierarchy itself in that it has a performative power,⁵⁰ or may originate in the agency of another actor in hierarchy. Constraints are an integral part of the ontology of hierarchy: the misrecognition dynamics involved in normative and material constraints *constitute* actors as subordinate and superordinate. Normative constraints stratify the social order, categorise actors as inferior and superior to each other with regard to norm adherence, and are often used to

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46. *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society', *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (2014): 143-76; Soraya Sidani, *Intégration et déviance au sein du système international* [Integration and Deviance in the International System] (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2014); Marina G. Duque, 'Recognizing International Status: A Relational Approach', *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2018): 577-92; Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents', *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2020): 611-34.
47. Christian Reus-Smit, *Individual Rights and the Making of the International System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 16.
48. Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 9.
49. Donnelly, 'Rethinking Political Structures', 56; Long, 'It's Not the Size', 146.
50. Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders*, 265-69.

stigmatise non-complying actors.⁵¹ Material constraints, too, stratify the order, attribute different positions to actors by virtue of their access to material resources, and can be instrumentally used to sanction an actor and drive them to change their behaviour. Importantly, access to material resources entails *social* stratification, too. Being rich is not only about being able to buy more things, but also about the social status that goes with it. Normative and material constraints are experienced from below as misrecognition: they erode the subordinate's status, hamper their agency, and therefore deprive them of others' recognition of the position they deem to be duly theirs within the social order.

I propose a theoretical framework for subordinate actors' navigation of hierarchical constraints. By navigation, I mean the exercise of agency *from within* the order, i.e., without rejecting its structural normative and material premises. My focus is therefore explicitly not on 'revolutionary' subordinates who wish to overturn the norms, rules, and distribution of capital within the international order.⁵² It is, instead, on those subordinates who resent and oppose their misrecognition by way of normative and/or material constraints and wish to be recognised and integrated in the order. Their pursuit of recognition unfolds in, and across, domestic and international hierarchies. Internal recognition is not different from domestic legitimacy; it is sought by the state/regime and is ultimately granted by the population. External recognition is sought in regional and global hierarchies; for an actor to be recognised, they must be acknowledged by relevant regional and/or global actors who are themselves highly recognised.⁵³ Subordinates' navigation of hierarchy is akin to walking a tightrope. While they seek recognition, their posture of contestation risks exposing them to more constraints and further misrecognition. Also, their quest for recognition in domestic and international hierarchical orders may draw on incompatible recognition resources, which may breed further misrecognition at home or abroad.

Table 1 delineates three strategies that subordinates employ in their navigation of hierarchy. It contains new and existing concepts that I develop and reinterpret as strategies to seek social recognition in hierarchy. First, subordinates may engage in *norm appropriation* when faced with normative constraints, championing hierarchy's dominant norms to secure external and/or internal recognition. Second, they may seek *alternative leveraging* when subjected to material constraints, signalling that they are endowed with an autonomous agency capable of mobilising alternative good providers with an eye to external and/or internal recognition. Third, subordinates may perform *salvation from victimhood* in response to normative and/or material constraints in hierarchy, advancing victimhood and salvation narratives with the objective of eliciting internal recognition.

51. Ann E. Towns, *Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Zarakol, *After Defeat*; Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma Management'.

52. Alexander Cooley, Daniel Nexon, and Steven Ward, 'Revising Order or Challenging the Balance of Military Power? An alternative Typology of Revisionist and Status-quo States', *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 4 (2019): 696-98.

53. Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 45.

Table 1. Strategies employed by subordinates in quest of social recognition in hierarchy.

Strategy	Description	Constraints Countered	Recognition Sought
Norm appropriation	Championing the order's prevailing norms	Normative	External/Internal
Alternative leveraging	Signalling that one is well able to mobilise alternative good providers	Material	External/Internal
Salvation from victimhood	Promoting victimhood and salvation narratives	Normative/ Material	Internal

Norm Appropriation

An actor subordinated normatively may instrumentalise the normative constraints to which they are subjected by appropriating the norms in question. Norms draw boundaries of acceptability that involve dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the social order. Those actors wishing to be included in the order – that is, to secure recognition by virtue of norm adherence – may signal that they fall inside those normative boundaries. They are indeed more likely to appropriate and champion the norms that they have allegedly violated than they are to reject them, as the latter would accentuate the rationale for their misrecognition through stigmatisation and exclusion. The appropriation of norms can take different empirical manifestations. There is indeed a literature in sociology, which has been imported into IR, that studies reactions to stigmatisation. Becker identifies two broad ways an actor can specifically reject others' labelling them as deviant: they can either 'not accept the rule by which he is being judged' or 'not regard those who judge him as either competent or legitimately entitled to do so'.⁵⁴ However, as far as social recognition is concerned, rejecting the deviant label is not necessary. One may accept the label (or stigma) *and* appropriate the norm (by paying lip service to it or actually changing behaviour) in order to affirm that they fall inside the normative boundaries of the order. Such has prominently been the case of Germany which acknowledged the stigma of its Nazi history and embraced the norms of the post-war order.⁵⁵

The latter configuration is accommodated by Rebecca Adler-Nissen's typology of responses to stigmatisation.⁵⁶ Drawing on Erving Goffman's work on the sociology of stigma,⁵⁷ she argues that a normatively subordinated actor can cope with stigma in three ways: they can recognise the stigma and start to abide by the social rules; they can reject the stigma by accepting the substance of normality while rejecting the claim that they fall outside of it; or they can counter-stigmatise, accepting the stigma *and* taking pride in it.

54. Becker, *Outsiders*, 1-2.

55. A. Dirk Moses, 'Stigma and Sacrifice in the Federal Republic of Germany', *History and Memory* 19, no. 2 (2007): 139-80; Thomas U. Berger, 'The Past in the Present: Historical Memory and German National Security Policy', *German Politics* 6, no. 1 (1997): 39-59.

56. Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma Management'.

57. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

Actors seeking international social recognition in their navigation of hierarchy's normative constraints are less likely to resort to the latter strategy relative to the two former ones in which the stigmatised actor accepts the norms in question (while differing on whether they accept the stigma).

None of these typologies is exhaustive and this article's aim is not to propose a more comprehensive one.⁵⁸ The juxtaposition of existing ones is useful to identify the grounds on which a subordinate actor may contest stigmatisation while seeking recognition from within the normative confines of hierarchy. Together, Becker's and Adler-Nissen's Goffman-inspired categories point to three dimensions in responses to stigmatisation. The stigmatised may accept or reject: (a) the norm *per se*; (b) the stigma, i.e., whether the stigmatised has indeed deviated from the norm; and (c) the stigmatiser's authority, i.e., whether they are legitimate to enforce the norm.

The dimension that matters preponderantly for a subordinate's quest for recognition is the acceptance of the enforced norm. In norm appropriation, recognition-seeking actors do just that: they accept the norm in question, regardless of whether they accept the stigma and the stigmatiser's authority. The two latter dimensions may even have opposite effects on internal and external recognition. The acknowledgment of the stigma or the stigmatiser's authority may well nurture external recognition while undermining internal recognition. Turkey's relationship with an episode of its Ottoman past is a case in point. While it fully acknowledges the norm censuring genocides as a morally, politically, and legally unacceptable kind of behaviour,⁵⁹ Turkey does *not* accept the stigma of the Armenian Genocide nor the authority of those who call on it to recognise it. If it were to accept the stigma and the authority of its enforcers, the Turkish regime may well lose on the internal recognition front. Ultimately, the extent to which an actor goes in their management of stigma – by only accepting and appropriating the norm or going as far as acknowledging the stigma and the stigmatiser's authority – remains an empirical question. Norm appropriation captures only that which is necessary in theoretical terms for a subordinate seeking social recognition from below.

Alternative Leveraging

Where an actor is subordinated by another using material constraints such as economic or military sanctions, the subordinate party may attempt to leverage alternatives in pursuit of recognition. By so doing, the subordinate counters their misrecognition by resorting to third-party actors in hierarchy, thus projecting a social image of autonomy and undisturbed agency. The mechanism underlying alternative leveraging is built in the structure of hierarchy understood as a system. Hierarchy *stricto sensu* does not obtain in bilateral relationships and is not a synonym for 'relation of inequality'.⁶⁰ Rather,

58. For still another typology, See for example, Jennifer M. Dixon, 'Rhetorical Adaptation and Resistance to International Norms', *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 1 (2017): 83-99.

59. Turkey was one the first 20 signatories to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. See 'Norms, Narratives, and Scholarship on the Armenian Genocide', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 4 (2015): 796.

60. Donnelly, 'Beyond Hierarchy', 250-52.

hierarchy is a *system* of inequality. Georg Simmel's sociological account of 'triads' encapsulates the workings of a system: 'Where three elements, A, B, C, constitute a group, there is, in addition to the direct relationship between A and B, for instance, their indirect one, which is derived from their common relation to C'.⁶¹ In relations of super- and subordination, he argues, 'the sociological situation between the superordinate and the subordinate is completely changed as soon as a third element is added'.⁶² Simmel identifies different social historical triadic configurations and different roles for the third element of a triad. For the purpose of this article, I develop the triadic configuration whereby the subordinate's relationship with the third-party actor serves for the former as a venue to *socially perform* their agency – or sovereign agency, if the actor happens to be a state – thus conveying indirect signals to the misrecognising superordinate.

Alternative leveraging may lead to social recognition internally and externally by virtue of the performance itself *and* its material result. First, the process of leveraging an alternative good provider signals that the subordinate is not dependent, at least not completely, on the superordinate actor. It presents them, instead, as an actor endowed with agency, capable of seeking alternatives, and recognised by other high-status actors in hierarchy.⁶³ Second, the value of material goods obtained by alternative leveraging extends beyond their economic and/or military utility, which may often be hard to rationalise given the goods' cost. They constitute a 'symbolic capital' mobilised to garner recognition.⁶⁴

In this sense, alternative leveraging is distinct from realist accounts of alliance politics. The purpose of the strategy of alternative leveraging in hierarchy understood as a system of social recognition is not to offset the loss of material goods by procuring similar goods from another provider. Hans Morgenthau did argue that the 'desire for prestige' and the 'desire for social recognition' were potent in both domestic and international politics.⁶⁵ However, he regarded them as secondary to the ultimate aim of material power. They are, he contended, 'at most the pleasant by-product of policies whose ultimate objectives are not the reputation for power but the substance of power'.⁶⁶ In alternative leveraging, the subordinate's material transaction with a third party aims, externally, to foster recognition by the misrecognising superordinate and, internally, to secure legitimacy. For this reason, I distinguish alternative leveraging from soft balancing, too. As

61. Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt Heinrich Wolff (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1950), 135.

62. *Ibid.*, 141.

63. Murray, *Struggle for Recognition*, 45.

64. Paul Musgrave and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Defending Hierarchy from the Moon to the Indian Ocean: Symbolic Capital and Political Dominance in Early Modern China and the Cold War', *International Organization* 72, no. 3 (2018): 591-626. See also Dana P. Eyre and Mark C. Suchman, 'Status, Norms, and the Proliferation of Conventional Weapons: An Institutional Theory Approach', in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 79-113.

65. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948), 50.

66. *Ibid.*, 56.

Robert Pape defines it, soft balancing aims to ‘delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral US military policies’.⁶⁷ T.V. Paul similarly argues that soft balancing seeks to ‘constrain US power’.⁶⁸ The purpose of alternative leveraging is not to constrain a superordinate power, but is rather an act of self-affirmation seeking social recognition. While Stephen Walt argues that soft balancing may be adopted as a diplomatic ‘shot across the bow’ demonstrating that other options are available,⁶⁹ I choose a different terminology to emphasise the two strategies’ opposite primary objectives. In soft balancing the main goal is ontologically material, whereas in alternative leveraging it is social.⁷⁰

Salvation from Victimhood

Subordinates may instrumentalise external misrecognition in order to elicit domestic legitimacy.⁷¹ Discourses of victimhood and salvation have been often employed together to that end, portraying the subordinate’s regime as the saviour of the political community from grave perils. Such narratives, operating as political myths, claim to give an explanatory account of collective political experiences.⁷² They serve a dual function – ‘cognitive’ and ‘integrative’.⁷³ Not only do they offer a lens through which one can associate meanings with political events,⁷⁴ they also cultivate a sense of community by producing and reproducing collective political identities.⁷⁵ They unite people around a shared and politically motivated understanding of events and can therefore be used as tools of legitimation.⁷⁶

Victimhood narratives often (and increasingly) comprise a conspiratorial element. They are employed to project an image of common suffering and socialise the population into a discursive environment enjoining them to unite behind the regime. The two bodies of literature on conspiracism and victimhood have pointed to their instrumental

67. Robert A. Pape, ‘Soft Balancing against the United States’, *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 10.

68. T.V. Paul, ‘Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy’, *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 58.

69. Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to US Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 128.

70. I do not discount the possibility that subordinates may well pursue material aims. However, this falls beyond the scope of this article which explicitly focuses on their quest for social recognition.

71. They are subordinate in international hierarchies but superordinate domestically. I maintain the usage of ‘subordinate’ for the sake of clarity.

72. Christopher Flood, *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

73. Xander Kirke, ‘Violence and Political Myth: Radicalizing Believers in the Pages of Inspire Magazine’, *International Political Sociology* 9, no. 4 (2015): 283-98.

74. Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

75. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

76. Kirke, ‘Violence and Political Myth’.

functions. Conspiratorial narratives equip their believers with the knowledge they think is necessary to defeat their enemy and are, therefore, ‘an antidote to powerlessness’.⁷⁷ They allow individuals and social groups to recover from their status dissatisfaction as they offer ‘a way for groups falling in the pecking order to revamp and recoup from losses’.⁷⁸ The literature on victimhood has shown how collective trauma may be productive of legitimacy. As a source for representations of the national community as a ‘victim’, trauma may instil a sense of victimhood and entitlement that shapes and legitimates foreign policy behaviours.⁷⁹ ‘Victimhood nationalism’, it has been argued, uses perceptions of collective trauma to legitimate actions against third-party actors uninvolved in the original trauma.⁸⁰

Narratives of victimhood used concurrently with ones of *salvation* may be used, in my contention, to garner domestic legitimacy. By presenting itself as the saviour of the political community and the guarantor that past trauma will never happen again, a regime may be able to successfully claim legitimacy. An element of salvation is essential for the legitimisation transaction: the regime saves the population from a fateful threat; in turn, the population is grateful to the regime which it recognises and legitimates. Victimhood without salvation may hardly yield domestic legitimacy. It would, instead, suggest humiliation and self-relegation in hierarchy. Since Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, China has adopted victimhood narratives to legitimate the Chinese Communist Party’s rule.⁸¹ Crucially, national salvation was used as ‘the discursive twin’ of national humiliation.⁸² Conspiratorial victimhood narratives, therefore, while associated with ‘weakness’, may serve as a platform from which to project an image of emancipation and power and seek social recognition.

It has been suggested that conspiratorial victimhood narratives are associated with ‘weak’ groups and states,⁸³ and yet they are increasingly used among actors traditionally labelled as ‘powerful’ – not least the United States under President Donald Trump.⁸⁴

77. Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 240.

78. Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 132.

79. Manjari Chatterjee Miller, *Wronged by Empire: Post-Imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

80. Adam B. Lerner, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Victimhood Nationalism in International Politics’, *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 1 (2019): 62-87.

81. Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions after Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 223-25; Neil Renwick and Qing Cao, ‘China’s Political Discourse Towards the 21st Century: Victimhood, Identity, and Political Power’, *East Asia* 17, no. 4 (1999): 111-43.

82. William A. Callahan, ‘National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism’, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): 205.

83. Scott Radnitz, ‘Why the Powerful (in Weak States) Prefer Conspiracy Theories’, in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 347-57.

84. Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, ‘The New Conspiracists’, *Dissent* 65, no. 1 (2018): 51-60.; Omar Al-Ghazzi, ‘We Will Be Great Again: Historical Victimhood in

Political science literature has indeed argued that conspiracism is ‘the preferred style only of *minority* movements’⁸⁵ and that ‘conspiracy theories are for losers’.⁸⁶ Scholarship in political psychology has associated conspiratorial thinking with social groups experiencing ‘existential and status-related problems’ and feeling alienation, powerlessness, and anomie.⁸⁷ The seeming incongruity stems not so much from a novelty in the social function and mechanisms of conspiratorial victimhood narratives, as from a (sometimes misattributed) substantialist understanding of the social groups resorting to such narratives. They are not for ‘the weak’ but rather, confirming the purchase of a relational approach, for actors experiencing social misrecognition. Subordinate actors are indeed not predefined, as everyone may perceive themselves to be subjected to misrecognising constraints. Such is the case, according to Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, of ‘illiberal’ regimes in the semiperiphery of the international system but also of ‘populist’ political actors (and their voters) in its Western core, as both ‘now feel *misrecognized particularly because of a loss of stature*’.⁸⁸ Conspiratorial victimhood narratives are hence used by those actors in hierarchy experiencing and resenting social misrecognition, which they exploit for internal legitimization purposes.

Egypt’s Quest for Social Recognition in Hierarchy (2013-15)

From-above scholarship premised on the legitimacy of hierarchy fails to account for subordinates’ quest for social recognition and, as far as this section is concerned, for Egypt’s navigation of hierarchy between 2013 and 2015. David Lake identifies Egypt as a subordinate that accepts the United States’ legitimate authority within a hierarchical relationship.⁸⁹ Lake’s hierarchy obeys a contractual logic, whereby the subordinate cedes a measure of their sovereignty to the superordinate in exchange, primarily, for material benefits.⁹⁰ Subordination in security hierarchies reduces the subordinate’s defence spending as the superordinate provides protection, allowing the former to divert their scant resources to other ends.⁹¹ Subordination in both security and economic hierarchies encourages trade openness by promoting dependence between subordinates and compliance with liberal economic policies.⁹²

Populist Discourse’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (2021): 45-59; Paul Elliott Johnson, ‘The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump’s Demagoguery’, *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 229-50.

85. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008 [1964]), 3, 7.

86. Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*, 131.

87. Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 129-30; Ted Goertzel, ‘Belief in Conspiracy Theories’, *Political Psychology* 15, no. 4 (1994): 731-42; Marina Abalakina-Paap et al., ‘Beliefs in Conspiracies’, *Political Psychology* 20, no. 3 (1999): 637-47.

88. Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, ‘Struggles for Recognition’, 5.

89. David A. Lake, ‘Legitimizing Power: The Domestic Politics of US International Hierarchy’, *International Security* 38, no. 2 (2013): 103.

90. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, 8-10, 28-30.

91. *Ibid.*, 139-51.

92. *Ibid.*, 151-64.

In the case of Egypt (2013-15), the United States' sanctions against the regime born out of the 2013 military coup deprived the latter of some security benefits as military aid deliveries were suspended. Lake's theory accommodates the possibility for superordinates to 'discipline' defiant subordinates as a way to enforce rules and ensure compliance.⁹³ Yet the loss of material benefits did not incentivise Egypt to recognise the United States' legitimate authority and comply with its preferences. Quite the contrary, Egypt contested the United States' policy towards it and engaged in military trade with other countries. More importantly, Egypt's military procurement from non-American partners was conspicuously not intended to make up for the lost material benefits of subordination. It was, indeed, vastly incommensurate both with Egypt's usual annual military imports and with the United States' partial halt on military assistance. The Egyptian regime was motivated, I argue, by a desire for social recognition. Not only is Lake's contractual logic absent in this case as neither security hierarchy nor disciplining fostered compliance, it also fails to account for the subordinate's pursuit of social recognition. It is worth noting that Lake's theory does allude to social recognition; yet, faithful to a from-above perspective, it does so only with regards to superordinate actors. Lake argues that subordinates display 'symbolic obeisance', which he understands as materially costly behaviours not directly responding to commands from above but intended to perform and display recognition for the superordinate actor so as to acknowledge their legitimate authority.⁹⁴ His theory, however, does not pay heed to subordinates' own aspiration to being recognised in hierarchy.

The empirical focus on Egypt (2013-15) is justified by the fact that the post-military coup regime faced internal *and* external social recognition crises amidst normative *and* material constraints. This case proves therefore ideal to assess the applicability of the three identified strategies that subordinates employ in quest of social recognition. Internally, the regime was contested by a portion of its population who rejected the military's intervention in politics by overthrowing a democratically elected president. Externally, it was stigmatised for its violations of democracy and human rights and was subjected to military sanctions by the United States. On 14 August 2013, the Egyptian security forces evacuated two sit-ins in Cairo protesting against the coup and calling for the restoration of the ousted president Mohamed Morsi, killing around one thousand of his supporters.⁹⁵ US President Barack Obama declared a few hours later that 'our traditional cooperation cannot continue as usual when civilians are being killed in the streets and rights are being rolled back'.⁹⁶ While the Obama administration was divided on the stance to take vis-à-vis Egypt, it announced in October that it would suspend the delivery of military equipment as part of an annual military aid package to Egypt, 'pending

93. Ibid., 112-21.

94. Ibid., 165-73.

95. Human Rights Watch, 'All According to Plan: The Massacre of Rab'a and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt', 12 August 2014. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/egypt0814web_0.pdf. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

96. White House, 'Remarks by the President on the Situation in Egypt', 15 August 2013. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/15/remarks-president-situation-egypt>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government'.⁹⁷ The suspension of aid was partial, yet Egypt perceived it as curtailing its sovereignty, not least because it touched the military backbone of the new regime and was explicitly tied by the United States to Egyptian domestic politics. Navigating these normative and material constraints, the regime sought social recognition domestically and internationally by adopting all three strategies that I have identified: norm appropriation, alternative leveraging, and salvation from victimhood. The regime did not contest the normative and material structures of the international system. Rather, it sought recognition from within the order by instrumentalising the constraints it faced.

Norm Appropriation

The Egyptian regime managed stigmatisation by appropriating the norms by virtue of which it was held to account. While international media, human rights organisations, and the Obama administration condemned Egypt's violations of liberal-democratic norms, the regime rejected the stigma and instrumentally maintained that it was acting precisely on the basis of those norms.⁹⁸ In standing up to normative constraints, Egypt balanced between contestation and integration, entailing its recognition as a 'normal' member of the international social order. It displayed respect for international norms in both content and form. In content, the regime justified the military coup as a democratic realisation of the will of the people, yet it made a case for cultural and political relativism in relation to human rights; in content, also, it championed the norm of sovereign equality of states. In form, its official discourse did not deviate from the diplomatic language and did not slip into the contestation rhetoric adopted by the likes of Hugo Chávez and Rodrigo Duterte.

The regime repeatedly embraced liberal-democratic norms in its international discourse. Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy (2013-14) explained, for example, in an interview on an American television channel that Egypt and the United States shared the same 'values'.⁹⁹ His successor, Sameh Shoukry (2014-), used similar rhetoric, asserting that 'Egypt is certainly on its way to a full democratization'.¹⁰⁰ Going the extra mile in appropriating the norms in question, the regime argued that, whereas it was abiding by the rules of democracy, the United States was the party disregarding them in the Egyptian context. Minister of Defence and *de facto* leader of Egypt Abdel Fattah al-Sisi conveyed this message most clearly:

97. US Department of State, 'US Assistance to Egypt', 9 October 2013. Available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/10/215258.htm>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

98. To be clear, such stigmatisation represented social misrecognition not because the Egyptian regime perceived itself to be genuinely abiding by liberal-democratic norms. Rather, the application of such stigma represented in itself an affront to the regime's own sense of identity and worth and, therefore, amounted to misrecognition of its desired position within hierarchy.

99. Charlie Rose, 'Nabil Fahmy', 1 May 2014. Available at: <https://charlirose.com/videos/28136>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

100. NPR, 'Egypt's Foreign Minister: Egypt Has a "Very High Degree of Security"', 10 February 2016. Available at: <http://n.pr/2F9waCW>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

Are the values of freedom and democracy exclusively exercised in your countries but other countries do not have the right to exercise the same values and enjoy the same environment? Have you seen the scores of millions of Egyptians calling for change in Tahrir? What is your response to that? You left the Egyptians, you turned your back on the Egyptians and they won't forget that.¹⁰¹

The Sisi regime did not acknowledge the stigmatisers' authority to enforce norms. After leaving the Foreign Ministry, Fahmy told me in an interview, targeting the United States: 'I don't like the lecture, I don't like the judgment of it. I don't like arrogance'.¹⁰² The regime resented the United States' (and others') assuming the role of a 'moral entrepreneur'.¹⁰³ It went so far in norm appropriation as to invert roles and subject Washington, if rhetorically, to normative constraints similar to the ones Cairo faced. In August 2014, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry stated that it was 'closely following the escalation of protests' in Ferguson, Missouri, and urged the security forces to show 'restraint and respect for the right of assembly'.¹⁰⁴ This statement epitomised Egypt's balancing between contestation and integration. The role inversion was clearly oppositional, yet it was performed from within the normative boundaries of the international order by appropriating and weaponising liberal-democratic norms.

Alternative Leveraging

The post-coup regime also grappled with social misrecognition by way of material constraints as the Obama administration partially suspended military aid. In reaction, the regime resorted to other actors and markets. It did not do so primarily to counterbalance the undelivered material goods (F-16 aircraft, Apache helicopters, M1A1 tank kits, and Harpoon missiles). Rather, it sought to leverage alternatives as an act of self-affirmation, signalling to the United States that Egypt was endowed with sovereign agency and was not dependent on American assistance. Such signalling can be understood by building on Georg Simmel's account of triads.¹⁰⁵ In addition to the direct relationship between Egypt and the United States, the two states have a set of indirect relationships derived from their common relations with third-party actors – chiefly, in this case, Russia, France, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Sisi regime endeavoured to diversify its relations in a world that it presented as multipolar. Mohamed Hasanein Haykal, who was a confidant of President Gamal Abdel Nasser and an advisor of Sisi during the last years of his life,¹⁰⁶ considered multipolarity to be an essential feature of the contemporary international system. He argued that the fall

101. Lally Weymouth, 'Excerpts from Washington Post Interview with Egyptian Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi', *The Washington Post*, 5 August 2013. Available at: <https://wapo.st/3CmhCwq>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

102. Interview with author, 20 February 2017, Cairo.

103. Becker, *Outsiders*, 147.

104. Elias Groll, 'Egypt Trolls Uncle Sam with Advice on How Best to Police Ferguson', *Foreign Policy*, 19 August 2014.

105. Simmel, *Sociology*, 135.

106. Tewfik Aclimandos, 'Abdel Fattah al-Sisi', in *Egypt's Revolutions: Politics, Religion, and Social Movements*, eds. Bernard Rougier and Stéphane Lacroix (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 293; Hazem Kandil, 'Sisi's Egypt', *New Left Review* 102 (2016): 37.

Table 2. Egypt's known military procurement agreements with France and Russia between 2013 and 2015.

Date of Agreement	Provider	Military Equipment	Value
Nov. 2013–Sept 2014	Russia	46 MiG-29 aircraft	\$2-3.5 billion
Jun. 2014	France	4 Gowind-class corvettes	€1 billion
Feb. 2015	France	24 Rafale aircraft 1 FREMM frigate Mica and Scalp missiles Flare system for Rafale aircraft	€5.2 billion
Mar. 2015	Russia	Antey-2500 air defence system	\$1+ billion
Oct. 2015	France	2 Mistral-class helicopter carriers	€910-950 million

of the Berlin Wall inaugurated a brief unipolar moment, which was halted by the United States' incapacity to dominate the world amid the emergence of other poles of power.¹⁰⁷ Foreign Minister Fahmy, too, contended that Egypt lived in 'an increasingly multipolar world' in which it must be 'seeking new directions'.¹⁰⁸ This widespread understanding of the world as multipolar offered Egypt an opportunity to resist material constraints from above by diversifying its relations, thus investing in its ties with other actors.

Egypt was able to mobilise alternative good providers in its quest to counter the United States' military sanctions. Where Russia and France were Egypt's main weaponry providers, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were its cash suppliers. The two Gulf monarchies, leading the reactionary regional movement against democratisation after the Arab uprisings, shared the Egyptian government's perception that the Muslim Brotherhood represented a 'threat' against their regimes. Saudi and Emirati money enabled Egypt to conclude massive military procurement deals with France and Russia. Table 2 summarises known deals that Egypt reportedly reached with France and Russia between the July 2013 coup and June 2015.¹⁰⁹ Egypt's agreement with Russia to import 46 MiG-29

107. CBC Egypt, 'Haykal: hal lanā dawr fī al-nizām al-ʿālamī al-jadīd? [Haykal: Do We Have a Role in the New International Order?]', 26 September 2014. Available at: <https://youtu.be/oR1JJ9xU0g>; 'Haykal: man yaqūd al-ʿālam al'ān? [Haykal: Who Leads the World Now?]', Available at: <https://youtu.be/94frdO7ElsA>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

108. Nabil Fahmy, 'Egypt in the World: A Foreign Policy for the Twenty-First Century', *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 6 (2012): 101-5.

109. In view of the sensitive character of such agreements, some information might be missing, especially concerning agreements with Russia on which the press has in some instances reported contradictory information. Nonetheless, the elements included in the table are accurate to the best of my knowledge. UPI, 'Russia, Egypt sign \$3 billion aircraft, weapons deal', 14 February 2015. Available at: <https://upi.com/2668925>; Reuters, 'Russia, Egypt Seal Preliminary Arms Deal Worth \$3.5 Billion: Agency', 17 September 2014. Available at: <https://reut.rs/3AcFli9>; Michel Cabirol, 'Armement: DCNS décroche un contrat de 1 milliard d'euros en Egypte [Weaponry: DCNS Wins a One-Billion-Euro Contract with Egypt]', *La Tribune*, 3 June 2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3lyGYjV>; 'Armement: la France va signer de nouveaux contrats en Egypte [Weaponry: France Will Sign New Contracts with Egypt]', *La Tribune*, 15 April 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hEGFMZ>; Bastien Bonnefous, 'Au Caire, Manuel Valls finalise la vente des navires Mistral à l'Egypte [In Cairo, Manuel Valls Finalises the Sale of Mistral Ships to Egypt]', *Le Monde*, 10 October 2015. Available at:

aircraft worth \$2 to \$3.5 billion was ‘mostly’ financed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.¹¹⁰ The purchase of Gowind-class corvettes for €1 billion was likewise funded by ‘a Gulf state’.¹¹¹ As for the Rafale aircraft, FREMM frigate, and related missiles, Egypt borrowed about half of the deal’s value from a pool of French banks and benefitted from a French-government financial guarantee, while the remaining share of the deal was financed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.¹¹² In addition, it has been reported that Saudi funding would cover the Mistral-class helicopter carriers’ deal.¹¹³

The scale of Egypt’s military agreements with states other than the US (chiefly, France and Russia) between 2013 and 2015 relative to (a) its annual military procurement over previous decades and (b) the size of US sanctions strongly suggests that they were intended for symbolic aims. For the first time since Cairo’s alignment with Washington in the 1970s, Egypt imported fewer weapons from the United States than from other countries in the few years after the coup. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the new tendency. As shown in Figure 1,¹¹⁴ between 2012 and 2015, Egypt imported only six percent of its

<https://bit.ly/2Z3deV0>; Dominique Gallois, ‘Comment la vente de Rafale à l’Égypte a-t-elle été organisée? [How Was the Sale of Rafale to Egypt Organised?]', *Le Monde*, 16 February 2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tTZFmc>; Reuters, ‘Egypt Signs 5.2 Billion-euro Deal for French Jets, Ships and Missiles’, 16 February 2015. Available at: <https://reut.rs/3AjCljV>; Sputnik, ‘Russia’s Landmark \$2Bln Deal With Egypt for MiG Fighter Jets’, 25 May 2015. Available at: <https://sptnkne.ws/qWfM>; TASS, ‘Russia to supply Antey-2500 missile system to Egypt by end of 2016 — source’, 6 March 2015. Available at: <http://tass.com/russia/781433>; TASS, ‘Russia Clinches Bid to Supply Deck Helicopters Ka-52K to Egypt’, 19 June 2017. Available at: <http://tass.com/defense/952151>. Last accessed September 16, 2021; Yiftah S. Shapir and Kashish Parpiani, ‘Egypt Rearms’, *Strategic Assessment* 19, no. 3 (2016): 59-68; Hicham Mourad, ‘France-Egypte: les raisons d’un réchauffement [France-Egypt: The Reasons for Warming Relations]’, *Confluences Méditerranée* 96, no. 1 (2016): 85-93.

110. UPI, ‘Russia, Egypt sign deal’.

111. Michel Cabirol, ‘Armement : nouveaux clins d’oeil de l’Égypte à la France [Weaponry: Egypt Sends Signals of Interest to France]’, *La Tribune*, 15 September 2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XpIKeN>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

112. Gallois, ‘Vente de Rafale à l’Égypte’.

113. Le Point, ‘Les deux Mistral vendus à l’Égypte pour près de 950 millions d’euros [Two Mistral Sold to Egypt for about 950 Million Euros]’, 23 September 2015. Available at <https://bit.ly/3zcfIMZ>; Rémi Sulmont and Loïc Farge, ‘Mistral: l’Égypte va-t-elle vraiment payer pour nos deux bâtiments de guerre? [Mistral: Will Egypt Really Pay For Our Two Warships?]', *RTL*, 4 January 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hEXuhk>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

114. Richard F. Grimmett, ‘Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1988-1995’. Available at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/transfers88-95.pdf>; ‘Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1992-1999’. Available at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/transfers92-99.pdf>; ‘Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1996-2003’. Available at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/RL32547.pdf>; ‘Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2000-2007’. Available at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/RL34723.pdf>; Richard F. Grimmett and Paul K. Kerr, ‘Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2004-2011’. Available at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/R42678.pdf>; Catherine A. Theohary, ‘Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2008-2015’. Available at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/R44716.pdf>.

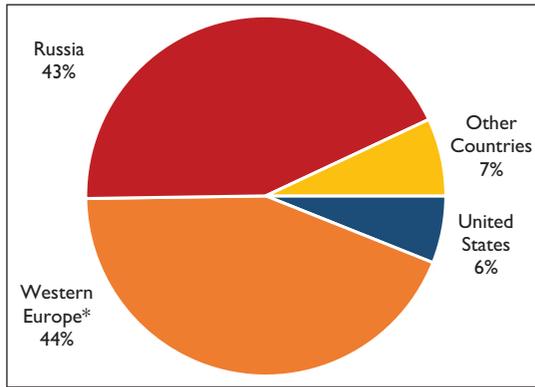


Figure 1. Egypt's spending on arms imports by origin as percentage of total (2012-15).

*France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy.

weapons from the United States – 43 percent from Russia and 44 percent from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy (the major part of this percentage corresponding to purchases from France). Part of the reason American weaponry represented such a small share in Egypt's procurement during this period was the United States' own decision to halt weapons delivery. Yet this should not mask the other part of the explanation, which lies in Egypt's active quest for alternative sources of armament. As can be seen in Figure 2,¹¹⁵ the value of contracts signed by Egypt with countries other than the United States between 2012 and 2015 was unprecedented, exceeding \$20 billion. This figure equates to more than 15 years of American military aid.

Egypt's military procurement after the military was (materially) vastly disproportionate to both its usual weaponry imports and the size of the US sanctions, indicating that it was an instance of alternative leveraging. These agreements were conspicuously not simply intended to offset the material loss that the partial suspension of American aid represented. It is also unlikely that the Egyptian military was in dire material need for all the items it procured in the few years following the coup, especially considering its existing equipment at the time: it had around 1,100 M1A1 tanks and more than 220 F-16s of which it was the world's fourth-largest operator.¹¹⁶ Egypt sought to affirm its status as a state that has its own agency, thus seeking social recognition both at home and abroad. This claim is confirmed if one looks in more detail at the items Egypt bought. While the United States withheld the delivery of 20 F-16 aircraft,¹¹⁷ Egypt signed deals for a total of 70 Russian MiG-29 and French Rafale aircraft. These may well be items that are not

115. Grimmett, 'Transfers, 1988-1995'; 'Transfers, 1992-1999'; 'Transfers, 1996-2003'; 'Transfers, 2000-2007'; Grimmett and Kerr, 'Transfers, 2004-2011'; Theohary, 'Transfers, 2008-2015'.

116. Jeremy M. Sharp, 'Egypt: Background and US Relations', (Congressional Research Service, 2015), 17.

117. Amy Hawthorne, 'What's Happening with Suspended Military Aid for Egypt? Part I', Atlantic Council, 16 October 2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tO8mOB>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

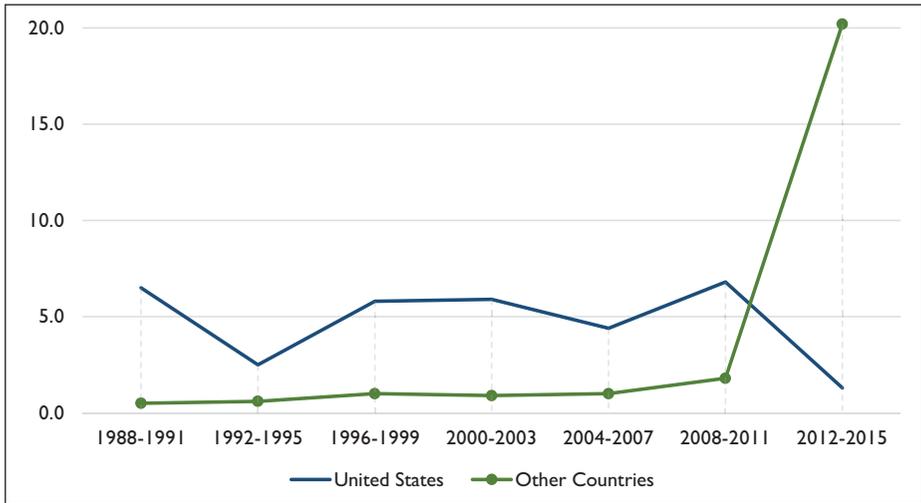


Figure 2. Egypt’s spending on arms imports by origin in billions of US dollars (1988-2015).

squarely and neatly interchangeable from a material perspective, but the relative size and unprecedented scale of these deals over the same category of military equipment (i.e., aircraft) point to the symbolic dimension of Egypt’s moves. The performance of turning away from the United States as its first (and by far) source of weaponry and the acquisition of grandiose military equipment from alternative sources constituted a symbolic capital that the regime drew on for domestic and international social recognition purposes.

Salvation from Victimhood

The Egyptian regime sought recognition domestically by portraying itself as the country’s saviour from victimhood. It promoted conspiratorial victimhood narratives in which Egypt was depicted as the target of a global American-led conspiracy. According to a parallel narrative of salvation, the regime’s agential heroism outweighed the conspiracy’s constraints. Victimhood and salvation are indeed mutually beneficial: the graver the conspiracy and the victimhood, the more heroic the saviour. In other terms, the lower Egypt was forced within hierarchy, the higher the regime could propel it.

The Egyptian media, largely controlled by the country’s intelligence services, was the regime’s chief tool to propagate an anti-American conspiracy narrative. The media’s anti-Americanism attacked the United States, to borrow Stanley Hoffmann’s distinction, not for what it was but rather for what it did¹¹⁸ – or, more precisely, for what they pretended it did. The United States, according to the narrative, colluded with the Muslim

118. Stanley Hoffmann, ‘Why Don’t They Like Us?’, *The American Prospect*, 19 December 2001. Available at: <http://prospect.org/article/why-dont-they-us>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

Brotherhood against Egypt's national interests. President Barack Obama was frequently portrayed as an ally of the Muslim Brotherhood whom, one TV journalist claimed, he supported by going as far as 'threatening' then General Sisi of instigating a civil war in Egypt.¹¹⁹ On public television, the United States' 'support' for the Brotherhood was presented as part of its waging a 'fourth-generation war' against Egypt:

Whoever thinks that the United States' support for the Muslim Brotherhood was based on democracy and the legitimacy of the ballot box is gravely mistaken. [. . .] The United States converted to Fourth-Generation Warfare, which consists in provoking states' and governments' self-destruction without the need of sacrificing any of its soldiers.¹²⁰

The United States was accused of promoting terrorism, of which Egypt was a victim. Following the beheading of Egyptians in Libya by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in February 2015, a TV journalist suggested that the CIA was implicated in their killing and that the US was part of 'the axis of evil' alongside Qatar and Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood's regional supporters.¹²¹ The United States was said to operate with Islamist movements on the ground. In December 2016, another TV presenter 'revealed' an Iranian-Turkish-British-American plot, reportedly uncovered by Egypt's intelligence services, aiming to break former President Mohamed Morsi out of jail in cooperation with ISIS, Hamas, Jaysh al-Islam, and Hezbollah. The operation, which was to be accompanied by a series of airstrikes, was a secret condition that President Obama added to the Iran nuclear agreement, the journalist claimed.¹²² Moreover, not only was the United States accused of aiding terrorist groups, it was also denounced for having allegedly created ISIS.¹²³ A Jewish and Israeli dimension was added to the conspiracy narrative, with another journalist affirming that ISIS was an 'American-British-Israeli product' whose acronym in English stood for 'Israeli Secret Intelligence Service'. ISIS' self-proclaimed caliph, she alleged, was in reality 'a Jew named Simon Elliot endorsed by Senator John

119. Ossama Kamal, 'Usāmah Kamāl: illī yiza^{ca}al Amrīkā yifarraḥnā [Usāmah Kamāl: Whatever Saddens America Delights Us]', 26 July 2013. Available at: <https://youtu.be/BmyOeZG6H4U>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

120. Al-jīl al-rābi' min al-ḥurūb [Fourth-Generation Warfare], 'Ḥurūb al-jīl al-rābi' [Fourth-Generation Warfare]', 10 January 2014. Available at: <https://youtu.be/gFUAQhQuPv8>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

121. MEMRI TV, 'Egyptian TV Host Ahmed Moussa: The US, Turkey, and Qatar Constitute the Axis of Evil', 16 February 2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Z3gYWY>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

122. LTC TV, 'Al-i'lāmiyyah Rānyā Yāsīn takshif tafāṣīl al-mukhaṭṭaṭ al-ṯrānī al-turkī li-muḥāwalat isqāṭ miṣr wa-tahrīb al-ma'zūl Mursī [TV Presenter Rānyā Yāsīn Reveals the Details of the Iranian-Turkish Plan to Topple the State and to Break Morsi Out of Jail]', 20 December 2016. Available at: <https://youtu.be/1dIqqj383LM>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

123. Sada Elbalad, 'Aḥmad Mūsá: Amrīkā hiya man tuḥarrik tanzīm Dā'ish wa-Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī khayāl ma'ātah [Aḥmad Mūsá: America Controls ISIS and Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī is Just a Bogeyman]', 17 October 2016. Available at: <https://youtu.be/e6iVn12ytCU>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

McCain¹²⁴ – the congressman from Arizona who, in August 2013, condemned in Cairo the military's coup d'état.¹²⁵

The Egyptian media promoted the military and the figure of Sisi as the saviours of Egypt. Raoul Girardet identifies four models of 'saviours': the old and experienced Cincinnatus, Alexander the conqueror, Solon the legislator, and Moses the prophet.¹²⁶ In the aftermath of the 2013 coup, the Egyptian military presented itself as Cincinnatus, which Girardet describes as follows:

The legendary image is [. . .] that of an old man who distinguished himself in former times in actions of peace or war. [. . .] The anguish of the whole people, suddenly confronted with misfortune, calls him, or calls him back, to the higher echelon of the state. [. . .] His task is to appease, to protect, to restore.¹²⁷

The regime used popular songs to promote that image of the military. For instance, the Armed Forces' Department of Morale Affairs funded the production and diffusion of a song celebrating the army's 'glorious' past and present. The success of the song was phenomenal. Titled '*Tislam al-ayādī*' [May your hands be thanked], it expressed the nation's gratitude to the army that 'defends our honour' and 'makes us proud'; that army 'of men' who are 'the best soldiers' on Earth (as described in a saying attributed to Prophet Muhammad) who 'rehabilitated our status'. As pointed out by Zeinab Abul-Magd, the song became so popular across all social classes that 'it was played at weddings' and 'on family occasions'.¹²⁸

Whereas the military presented itself as Cincinnatus, Sisi took on the role of Alexander. He was unknown to most Egyptians before being appointed Minister of Defence by President Mohamed Morsi, yet he accomplished what was presented as a heroic act in July 2013 by overthrowing the so-called terrorist Muslim Brothers. In the words of Girardet, describing the figure of Alexander, he has 'the impulse, the conquering boldness of young captains eager to rush into glory. [. . .] The legitimacy of his power does not proceed from the past or from reverence for a memory, but rather from the splendour of immediate action'.¹²⁹ A cult of personality of the unknown-until-not-long-ago Sisi was established soon after the coup. His pictures appeared on chocolate bars, cakes, T-shirts, billboards, necklaces, and more. Sandwiches with a special 'Sisi mix' were sold. The military's Department of Morale Affairs funded several songs in support of his

124. AlHayah TV Network, 'Īmān 'Izz al-Dīn tuthbit bi-al-adillah 'alā al-hawā' anna Dā'ish šinā'ah isrā'īliyyah amrīkiyyah bariṭāniyyah [Īmān 'Izz al-Dīn Demonstrates with Evidence that ISIS is an Israeli-American-British Construct]', n.d. Available at: <https://youtu.be/IL5B6WDAJsw>. Last accessed November 26, 2018.

125. Ahram Online, 'Egyptian Govt Rejects McCain's "Clumsy" Statements on Morsi's ouster', 7 August 2013. Available at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/78492.aspx>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

126. Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* [Political Myths and Mythologies] (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 73-80.

127. Ibid., 73-4.

128. Zeinab Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation: The Army, Business, and Revolution in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 222.

129. Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, 74-5.

prospective candidacy for president.¹³⁰ One such song gave Sisi a mandate to combat terrorism.¹³¹ Political journalists were no less enthusiastic in their support for Sisi. One journalist wrote in a respected independent newspaper, ‘if [Sisi] wishes to enjoy his right to have four wives, we are all ready. And if he wishes to take us as female slaves, then by God, we are not expensive’.¹³²

By promoting a narrative of victimhood in unison with one of salvation, the regime was able to garner domestic recognition in the tumultuous months following the military coup. Asked about US-Egyptian diplomatic engagement after the coup, a former senior American diplomat asserts that Egyptian officials never brought up conspiratorial tropes in bilateral meetings: ‘We had more respect for each other than to bring up this kind of nonsense’, adding, ‘Egyptian military officers, they have faults, but they are not stupid’.¹³³ This not only indicates that conspiratorial victimhood rhetoric was circumscribed to domestic usage (for, if used internationally, such contestation of hierarchy would contravene the regime’s desire for external recognition), it also underlines the instrumental character of the narrative.

Conclusion

This article aimed to reverse the common from-above perspective on hierarchical orders. Scholarship defining hierarchy as a consensual and legitimate form of domination is biased toward superordinate actors and largely overlooks subordinates’ experience. I attempt to give subordinates their due share in the study of the systemic inequalities that govern world politics. This not only allows us to account for understudied experiences in the discipline, but also provides for a better understanding of hierarchy itself. Indeed, one cannot properly theorise structures of inequality by focusing predominantly on those actors that occupy their higher echelons. I therefore seek to balance the picture by studying subordinates’ navigation of hierarchy through a relational-sociological lens. I conceptualise hierarchy as a socially differentiated system predicated on recognition. Normative and material constraints, functioning as social misrecognition dynamics, are built in the very ontology of hierarchy: they stratify the social order and constitute actors as subordinates.

I propose a theoretical framework for subordinates’ navigation of hierarchy in quest of social recognition. Three strategies are identified based on the misrecognising constraints that they counter (normative/material) and the locus of the recognition they seek (internal/external). Subordinates, I argue, may engage in *norm appropriation* (against normative constraints, seeking internal/external recognition), *alternative leveraging*

130. Abul-Magd, *Militarizing the Nation*, 222.

131. ElWadyMusicRecords, ‘Gharam W. Hanin – Fawadnak [Gharam W. Hanin: We Mandate You]’, 23 October 2013. Available at: <https://youtu.be/itFRgTgcPa8>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

132. Ghādah Sharīf, ‘Yā Stī.. inta tighmiz bi-‘inak bass [Sisi, You Only Need to Wink]’, *Al Masry Al Youm*, 25 July 2013. Available at: <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/198680>. Last accessed September 16, 2021.

133. Interview with author, 1 May 2019, Washington DC.

(against material constraints, seeking internal/external recognition), and *salvation from victimhood* (against normative/material constraints, seeking internal recognition). Hierarchy is about more than only constraints; it provides actors, including subordinate ones, with resources to navigate the stratified order. Subordinates indeed may instrumentalise and weaponise the very constraints underpinning their social misrecognition. The article offers an empirical discussion of Egypt's navigation of, and pursuit of recognition in, hierarchy in the aftermath of the 2013 military coup. Faced with normative and material constraints that provoked a recognition crisis, the new regime employed the three strategies identified in its quest for domestic and international social recognition.

Acknowledgements

For their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this article, I would like to thank Glen Rangwala, Ayşe Zarakol, Daniel Nexon, Jack Donnelly, Nathan Brown, Shana Marshall, William Lafi Youmans, Emma Soubrier, and Mona Atia, as well as the participants in a panel at the International Studies Association's 2019 Annual Convention in Toronto and in workshops at the University of Naples L'Orientale and The George Washington University. I am also grateful to the editors of *Millennium* and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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