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Rational Illusions: Everyday Theories of International Status and the Domestic Politics of Boer War

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Abstract

Existing research has documented that status-seeking abounds in world politics. Yet the status hierarchies to which states respond and compete within are notoriously ambiguous and difficult to empirically ascertain. This ambiguity has begotten considerable disagreement among scholars over the nature of international hierarchies. Making a strength out of this slipperiness, this article posits that international status can be studied via the everyday theories of status that governments and their opponents themselves produce and use to interpret their state's status. Treating these everyday theories as productive of the world they purport to describe, such an approach foregrounds the interpretative agency of domestic groups to develop and maintain "hierarchies of their own making," which need not be recognized internationally to become crucial for policy legitimation domestically. In order to study such everyday theories' systematically, the article develops a new meta-linguistic framework for identifying and mapping their use within domestic politics. Via a case study on the Boer War (1899–1902), the article shows how domestic battles over what international status is can shape domestic politics and policy outcomes.

Keywords

constructivism; discourse analysis; imperialism; status competition; status hierarchies; status seeking

1. Introduction

States do not only strive for wealth and security but international status too. Indeed, a burgeoning body of research has documented that states of all sizes spend considerable time, energy, and even blood and treasure, seeking status recognition on the world stage. From building battleships too big to float, to splashing cash upon global mega-events, a great deal of international politics makes little sense without taking into account a drive

for status. There is a hitch, however. For all scholars' success in identifying instances of status seeking, they lack agreement on the nature of the international hierarchies states are said to compete within (MacDonald & Parent, 2021). To be sure, scholars have coalesced around a common definition: "collective beliefs about rank in a given hierarchy," yet *whose* collective beliefs matter and *how* they rank states remains contentious (Paul et al., 2014, p. 7). The difficulty is twofold: International collective beliefs are unobservable, meanwhile, there are a multitude of plausible ways to assess status in any given policy field or international context (Rumelili & Towns, 2022). Thus, as Gilpin (1981) long ago lamented, states' real status may well be "imponderable" even as it is so widely sought. While status scholars have developed various workarounds to this problem—developing complicated proxies or just taking their best-educated guess—what status is and how to measure it remains the central methodological and theoretical puzzle animating IR's status research agenda (Buarque, 2023).

This article contends we can address this puzzle head-on by making a strength out of status' widely acknowledged slipperiness. Given states, statesmen, and citizens care about and pursue status *despite* its difficulty to assess, I argue we can study international status hierarchies via these actors' ponderings of the imponderable. Indeed, states and citizens must grapple with the same status ambiguity with which status scholars struggle. Rather than generating complicated proxies for unobservable and potentially unknowable international status hierarchies, this article proposes studying the everyday theories of international status (TIS) that governments and citizens produce and use to make sense of their state's position in the world. Crucially, this approach avoids the conventional assumption that states' status seeking is necessarily a response to international collective beliefs about status. Instead, the article contends governments and other domestic actors respond and act upon their TIS, which may have only a tenuous relationship to international collective beliefs but prove no less influential for it.

Expressed at its boldest, this line of reasoning implies that it is possible for states to construct, compete in, and win status competitions of their own making. Citizens can take pride and governments can generate legitimacy from topping a "status" hierarchy without international audiences being party to the hierarchy in question. Put more humbly, it suggests that states have varying degrees of leeway to develop and maintain competitive hierarchical constructions of the world that are not actively shared or recognized by international audiences, yet remain salient and have political effects domestically. As a result, governments can enjoy the benefits of status seeking in terms of legitimacy, without being beholden to international recognition. This has been overlooked, I will argue, because prior works have tended to bracket the domestic audience and thus overstate the degree of inter-subjective agreement about international status and understate the degree of interpretative agency located within domestic discourses. Addressing this blindspot, this article distills the new theoretical framework developed in Beaumont (2024) for investigating how TIS inform and sometimes even structure domestic politics and foreign policy. Hence, in the spirit of this thematic issue, this article aims to provide new directions to IR's blossoming status research agenda.

1.1. State of Art: The Domestic Politics of Ambiguous International Status

Catalyzed in the 2000s but with an impressive pedigree (Larson & Shevchenko, 2003; Wohlforth, 2009), this research agenda has set about substantiating the claim that states often undertake activities to improve their social status in international hierarchies and avoid activities that threaten their position. Here, these collective beliefs regarding international status are theorized as a social structure to which states respond, given their position and/or the nature of the hierarchy (e.g., de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014; Larson &

Shevchenko, 2003, 2019; Renshon, 2017; see also Zarakol, 2017, p. 12). While scholars diverge on whether states pursue status for the instrumental privileges perceptions of high position in a hierarchy afford or as an intrinsic goal in its own right (e.g., Barnhart, 2016; Paul et al., 2014; Wohlforth, 2009), the usual methodological procedure of both strands involves demonstrating that foreign policies that appear irrational from conventional materialist perspectives become tractable if we assume an interest in international status. Variations on this operation have succeeded in providing compelling and sophisticated explanations for war waging (Renshon, 2017; Ward, 2017a), arms racing (Murray, 2018), as well as humanitarian aid (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014), big science projects (Gilady, 2018), and even Brexiting (Freedman, 2020). In short order, this research agenda has documented how states of all sorts often spend considerable time, energy, and even blood and treasure, seeking status recognition from their peers on the world stage.

The pioneering works within IR's status agenda overwhelmingly strive to deduce status motivations from the absence of compelling "material" alternatives. This procedure works best when identifying egregious instances of status seeking: acquiring aircraft carriers only to leave them rust at the docks, spending billions hosting mega-events (Gilady, 2018), or understanding Norway's expensively expansive foreign policy agenda (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014). Yet, this procedure has an Achilles heel: given motivations of people and states are unobservable and that status research often relies on *the absence* of conventional explanations to make its claims stick (e.g., de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014.p. 5; Larson & Shevchenko, 2019, p. 15; see also Lin, 2024), this approach is vulnerable to lurking alternative non-conventional explanations. This problem is particularly pronounced when parsing status motivations when studying policy outcomes that seem readily explainable by existing theories. To be sure, when no plausible alternatives are available, a standard status approach might suffice for understanding why a country spends billions on hosting mega-events. Yet, in many messier cases—for instance, nuclear arms racing—there are plausible non-status-related motivations why states may be motivated to pursue top positions in a hierarchy.

A second limitation of the leading approaches to studying international status includes the challenge involved in empirically identifying and assessing the international status hierarchy to which states are said to be responding (Buarque, 2023). This is important because early status works require that international status hierarchies are sufficiently well-understood and valued that they prompt states to throw blood and treasure protecting their position or striving to improve it. Yet status is famously slippery. As Wohlforth (2009, p. 38) noted in his seminal article back in 2009, "its expression appears endlessly varied," and those working on it are "more struck by its variability and diversity than by its susceptibility to generalization." While the status discrepancy wing of the agenda has sought to meet this challenge by developing complex—some have suggested convoluted (MacDonald & Parent, 2021)—proxies for measuring general status, even advocates admit this approach presents a crude picture (Duque, 2018; Røren & Beaumont, 2019, pp. 433–434). Those that avoid this measure, however, run into a different issue. As Mercer (2017) has noted, status researchers have tended to assume that actors and observers agree about the nature of international status hierarchies, before taking an educated guess prior to analysis and deducting outcomes that would be consistent with status seeking. Yet recent research suggests that different states and/or the same state in different contexts, may hold different understandings of the rules of the game: what merits recognition and what merits disdain (Freedman, 2016; Røren, 2023, 2024). As MacDonald and Parent's (2021, p. 375) recent review complains, status research lacks agreement around whether "valued attributes refer primarily to the impressive means states possess or to the virtuous ends they pursue," nor "who decides which attributes are prized and how." Notably, by either relying on highly contested proxies or making an a priori assessment, conventional status

research misses the possibility of identifying variance in interpretation or how contestation over what status is, affects how status is sought.

This problem of identifying the nature of the status hierarchy that states respond to becomes even more pronounced when we consider recent developments in status research that highlight the significance of the domestic audience. Critiquing the tendency of early status works to treat states as unitary actors and thereby gloss over the mechanisms through which status motivations among individuals manifested in state behavior (Ward, 2017b), these works provide a much sturdier basis for why governments would expend such resources pursuing status (Beaumont, 2024; Lin & Katada, 2022; Ward, 2017a). Working with a hybrid of instrumental and intrinsic logics, these works argue that if domestic audiences place a value on their state's international status, then a rational government and leader would have incentives to pay attention to the status implications of their policies independent from whether they were personally motivated by status (Clunan, 2009; Powers & Renshon, 2023).

Yet, if status scholars struggle to reach a consensus on what constitutes status in a given context, we might reasonably ask whether the domestic publics can be expected to do so. Indeed, Jonathan Mercer has documented how Britain's victory in the Boer War (1899–1902) generated contradictory assessments of the status implications within domestic politics: some of Britain's political elites considered the successful long-distance projection of power to be a clear boon to Britain's status, others considered the resort to "uncivilized" tactics as diminishing Britain's status. As Powers and Renshon (2023, p. 18) note, even if unfavorable events do tend to generate status concerns and presidential disapproval, "in the real world" such events are discursively mediated (open to "reframing") and different publics will likely vary in how they value and assess the status implications. At a minimum, while there are strong grounds to incorporate domestic publics into analyses of how status informs foreign policy, analysts should be wary before assuming that the status implications of an event are clear, unidirectional, or not open to manipulation by governments or opponents.

Ultimately, status research to date has provided overwhelming evidence that governments and citizens place a value on international status—for varying reasons—and often use considerable resources chasing it. However, at the same time, the literature also suggests that international status hierarchies are ambiguous, and different audiences may interpret international status differently. In other words, the status riddle closely resembles that which afflicted security studies at the turn of the 1990s: the observation that even if security scholars might agree about what objectively constituted a security threat, states' threat perceptions in practice vary enormously. Thus, security scholars' attempts at general theorizing of security policy appeared esoteric and at times only tangential to what states actually act upon. Buzan et al. (1998) seminal intervention in this debate called for security scholars to spend less time speculating on the reality of threats, and instead systematically study how threats become successfully framed as threats within a given community and the political consequences of these processes (securitization processes). Similarly, rather than trying to accurately gauge international status, this article suggests we can study the discursive processes through which a state activity becomes constructed as a status competition and how and with what consequences do interpretations of status change and become contested as the policy proceeds.

1.2. Theorizing Theories of Status

To address the riddle outlined above, this article develops what I call a TIS framework. This approach takes seriously Mercer's (2017) criticism of contemporary IR status scholarship: that the leading status works inadequately address how actors themselves interpret and evaluate their status. To render empirically tractable the riddle outlined, the premise and promise of a TIS approach is simple: Given that by the conventional definition (see Section 1.1), status is unobservable and often ambiguous to both scholars and practitioners, we can study status via the competing theories that governments (and their opponents) use to interpret a given status hierarchy and the status implications of their state's actions.

Joining a small but growing body status scholarship that conceives of status as a discursive phenomenon (e.g., Beaumont & Røren, in press; Bilgic, 2024; Røren, 2023), a TIS approach offers a systematic inductive framework for studying how (re)presentations of international status (de)legitimates practice (Bettiza, 2014; Jackson, 2006). This gestalt switch remains broadly consistent with the core definition of status as collective beliefs about a state's position in a hierarchy. The key difference but also link between a TIS approach and conventional status approaches is that a TIS approach conceptualizes the words actors use to make sense of their status as theories of status rather than as potential evidence of collective beliefs about and/or motivation for status. Hence, it is one step removed from status as it is conventionally defined but remains tightly analytically connected to it. The concept of theorizing here is inspired by Zalewski's (1996, p. 347) famous observation that "theorising is a way of life, a form of life, something we all do, every day, all the time," rather than something only "theorists do." From theorizing how to beat the traffic to theorizing how the use of concentration camps will affect Britain's status in the world, from this perspective, humans are constantly theorizing their life worlds and acting upon those theories (see Beaumont & Glaab, 2023). While thick constructivists provide several plausible alternative ways of conceiving of the unreliable link between "real status" and actors' depictions of status (see Bettiza, 2014)—notably narratives and representations—the concept of theorizing embraces the uncertainty, speculation, and agency involved in assessing status that has hitherto been considered a problem by most prior status research. It is important to note that while theorizing implies agency and creativity, to the extent that theory of status can serve as legitimation for an actor to act, this agency is limited by whether the audience finds it plausible and compelling. Hence, theories of status are discursively bounded and structured similarly to all political communication. This conceptualization begs two important questions: How can we recognize a theory of status and how can these theories affect policy outcomes?

On the latter, TIS are identifiable by its specific grammar: three types of representation that when invoked embody the logic of status competition, and simultaneously define the rules of a hierarchy. First, the basic unit of the grammar of status is representations in which *relative comparisons* with other, ostensibly similar, entities are invoked. Any statement that represents X to be better than Y at Z necessarily invokes a status hierarchy. Given that for something to be better than something else, it requires some principle of comparison by which to evaluate performance (Onuf, 1989; Towns & Rumelili, 2017), it is impossible to make such comparisons without some sort of rule. Thus, any such comparison also establishes the rules of the status hierarchy. The second grammatical unit that invokes a TIS is *competitive positional identity* constructions, for instance, superpower and great power necessarily invoke a hierarchy: it is not just who one is, but the position one is located. For this to embody a theory of status competition, the positional identity must be constituted by relative performance in a changeable quality or attribute otherwise it implies

a fixed hierarchical system (e.g., caste). Although not as explicit as great power discourse, civilization narratives also have a potential competitive aspect, whereby states may strive to meet the standards of civilization but to become the most civilized (see Yanik & Subotić, 2021). The archetypal positional identity that invokes status competition is that of the "leader/laggard." The third grammatical unit is *sports metaphors*: when international relations is constructed as a competitive game it constitutes the value of an activity in relative, relational terms, and constitutes states as rival players with positional identities—winners and losers, laggards and leaders. As such, it also theorizes status hierarchy and instantiates a theory of status.

When any of these grammatical units is invoked, I argue that an actor is in that instant theorizing and instantiating a status hierarchy, defining the rules of the game and thus implying and legitimating how to compete. For instance, when the UK government claimed to be a "leader of nuclear disarmament" during the process of acquiring a new nuclear weapons system in the 2000s, it simultaneously defined the rules and invoked a competitive disarmament hierarchy within which some countries are leading and others are lagging. Although the UK's theorization of the disarmament hierarchy had little international recognition, it nonetheless helped legitimize its new nuclear weapon system to the anti-nuclearists among its domestic supporters (Beaumont, 2021). Indeed, even if a "real" status competition—in which all actors share the same understanding of the rules—is seldom realized, such theories of status competition that do not resonate internationally can still inform political practice as a mode of legitimation.

The grammar of status thus operates as a heuristic for identifying TIS as they manifest in a particular discourse. It thereby enables the systematic exploration of whether and how TIS is featured in the legitimation of a particular policy. The meta-linguistic quality of TIS—which defines TIS by their relations rather than their content, in turn, allows the researcher to identify change in TIS over time. However, the mere existence of TIS' within a policy debate is not proof of its significance: it is up to the researcher to induct whether and how these TIS were significant for understanding political outcomes.

Crucially, a TIS approach does not require the analyst to assess the domestic audience or a government's motivations. While major status works often tie status-seeking to a distinct motivation for status on behalf of the state, leader, or domestic audience, it is not a necessary assumption, and several major works study status dynamics without attempting to infer motivations (Pouliot, 2014; Røren, 2023). Indeed, recalling the core definition of status in the literature—"collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes" (Paul et al., 2014, p. 7)—an actor that wants to prioritize status need not be motivated themselves by status nor know precisely why the domestic audiences value status, to formulate a policy taking this into account. From a TIS perspective, once an actor publicly mobilizes position in a hierarchy as an explicit rationale to prioritize a policy, it becomes a theory of status. Hence, a TIS approach would thus be consistent with audiences that value position in a hierarchy because they believe the position affords instrumental utility (Gilpin, 1981), the intrinsic value they attach to the position (Larson & Shevchenko, 2003), or a mixture of reasons.

Rather than motivating policies, TIS are conceived of as (potential) modes of *legitimation*. Following Goddard and Krebs (2015, p. 9), a TIS approach defines legitimation as "the public claim, rooted in publicly acceptable reasons, that particular policy positions and concrete actions are justified." This approach assumes that the range of reasons available to an actor in a social setting are bound by the shared meanings and normative context of those they are legitimating their actions to. To be sure, if states or people had perfect flexibility to legitimate anything they pleased by whatever means they preferred, studying legitimation would not provide

any analytical purchase upon state actions. Yet, most democratic governments or officials in a bureaucracy do not have such flexibility (Goddard & Krebs, 2015, p. 9). For instance, a general may very well have a powerful motivation to expand their budget, but they will need a legitimate rationale for this dream to become realized. Thus, the boundaries of what is considered (il)legitimate structures the possible outcomes and we can study those outcomes through the processes through which policies become legitimate or illegitimate in given social settings. A TIS approach thus examines whether, how, and to what extent TIS are involved in legitimating or delegitimating particular policies.

Crucially, a TIS approach—along with most frameworks that treat legitimation as the locus of action—does not imply that the social context dictates the outcome from the outset. Instead, actors have the agency to improvise, alter, and combine in imaginative new ways, the intersubjective materials at their disposal to render a policy legitimate (Jackson, 2006, pp. 27–29, 39–41). In the process, individual acts of representation and legitimation contribute to the social resources available to future legitimation efforts. In this way, my TIS approach can accommodate contestation and change in how actors interpret the status implications of a given policy. The job of the analyst becomes to longitudinally trace how and why certain strategies of legitimation—including but not limited to TIS—triumphed over others making certain policies possible while eliminating others from consideration.

A TIS approach is designed to enable researchers to empirically come to terms with status ambiguity and its consequences but sacrifices conventional status theories' grand theoretical aspirations. A TIS approach is necessarily humbler than prior status theories because it refuses to assume a relatively stable shared international hierarchy and instead zooms in upon the interpretative agency located at the domestic level to produce TIS' that are implicated in the legitimation of policies. Thus, a TIS approach generates case-specific explanations, rather than global or general claims. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, switching from trying to directly investigate the consequences of "real" status hierarchies to investigating people's theories about those hierarchies puts status research on a firmer empirical footing. As we saw, studying collective beliefs and motivations in practice has tended to involve developing noisy proxies for collective beliefs and trying to infer unobservable and arguably "unknowable" motivations (Krebs & Lobasz, 2007, p. 411). In contrast, studying TIS involves studying observable phenomena: the justifications employed to legitimate policy outcomes.

Furthermore, this approach enables studying how TIS may change with the process of competing. Rather than assuming a relatively stable understanding of a given status hierarchy, a TIS approach expects that the inherent ambiguity around status may lead to the "rules of the game" being reinterpreted as the competition unfolds. Indeed, even within domestic contexts, actors may lack inter-subjective agreement over the nature of the status competition and thus theorize the need to compete according to different rules: for instance, racing to Mars rather than the moon, competing in submarines rather than battleships. Thus, the TIS framework necessitates paying close attention to how the rules of the game emerged and were contested and how particular criteria for evaluating the competition marginalized alternatives.

The next section provides an empirical illustration—drawn from an in-depth case study (Beaumont, 2024)—that elaborates how the TIS framework can shine a light on three puzzles left by existing status research: (a) how states gain from seeking status even when the international benefits in terms of recognition and deference appear ephemeral and even imaginary; (b) how to identify change in the nature of

the international hierarchies that governments and citizens imagine their states are competing in, and (c) how to study status dynamics without worrying about either inferring motivations or measuring precisely "real" international status. Ultimately, the examples illustrate the value of paying attention to how the rules of status competition are theorized and contested within domestic politics over time, and how those processes can and do inform foreign policies.

2. The Boer War: Rational Illusions and the Domestic Politics of International Status

This section reconsiders the Boer War (1899–1902) case that was used by Jonathon Mercer to draw attention to the shortcomings of the dominant status theories in IR. The Boer War offers a stark illustration of both the human tragedy and economic folly of British imperialism. In a war lasting less than three years, Britain and its colonies sent 400,000 thousand men, spent more than £200 million, and suffered at least 22,000 casualties (Pakenham, 1979). The long-term accounting looks no better. The victory was short-lived: When the liberal government replaced the conservative government responsible for the war in 1905, they soon granted the Afrikaner colonies self-government under the British Crown in 1907. Thus, less than a decade after Britain had sent hundreds of thousands of men to fight in a bloody, costly, and brutal war to assert dominance over their South African colonies, on May 31, 1910, The Union of South Africa was born, led by the same Boer leaders Britain had spent so much blood and treasure fighting. Indeed, the Boer War looks like an open-and-shut case of a status-motivated policy leading a country to economically and strategically irrational policies inimical to the public good. Acquiring an empire was just what "Great Powers" did, and their international status was judged by the size of that empire (Barnhart, 2016, p. 386; Naylor, 2018, pp. 99–100). Hence, a conventional status approach would seem to offer a straightforward and compelling explanation: Britain as the leading imperial power annexed the Transvaal at great cost, to buttress its great power status.

Yet as Mercer (2017) has argued, the conventional status explanation leaves a puzzle in its wake. He shows how despite winning the war and expanding the empire, Britain did not benefit from either increased international recognition or deference. Therefore, Mercer argues that the British proclamations of its greatness following victory betrayed feelings rather than analysis and are better thought of as "psychological illusions" rather than accurate reflections of international status. Lacking recognition and/or additional deference for one's feats, Mercer contends that Britain's status seeking dissolves into "vanity" (Mercer, 2017, p. 168). Explicitly laying down a "provocation" and challenge to status researchers, Mercer uses the case to theorize that Britain is unlikely to be uniquely delusional: given the incentives for states to poo poo their rivals' successes, a great deal of status seeking is likely irrational on its own terms and the quest for status is prone to prove futile. Against this, by tracing how the government, opposition, and press wielded evolving theories of status within Britain's domestic politics as the war proceeded, I provide an alternative explanation that does not require the government to suffer from psychological illusions. In the process, the analysis highlights both the agency of the government to retheorize status for domestic consumption but also the limits upon the government's theorizing.

What follows is a condensed account—drawn from an extended in-depth analysis (Beaumont, 2024)—that illustrates how the TIS were used, changed, and contested in three analytically distinct but empirically linked periods of the war. The analysis is based upon a systematic reading of key parliamentary debates, the reporting during key periods in the war in *The Times*, contemporary literature, and secondary sources (see Beaumont, 2024, pp. 223–226). First, the lead—up to the war and its legitimation from 1898 to 1899. Second, the first

nine months of fighting in which the Boers inflicted several battlefield defeats before British reinforcements arrived and the tide turned. Third, the final 18 months of the war, when the Boers fought using guerrilla tactics and Britain forced thousands into concentration camps. In each episode, the grammar of status heuristic was used to identify salient TIS in circulation in British domestic politics, how the pro-war TIS was used, adapted, and contested, and ultimately explore the role of TIS in the (de)legitimation of the government's actions at each episode.

Although Mercer treats the lack of additional deference shown to Britain after the war as a problem for status theory, a closer reading of the debate that preceded the war suggests that those involved did not enter the war expecting a boost in status or additional deference. Instead, reviewing how TIS were used to legitimate the onset of the war, reveals how the government did not present the war as a means to seek status but in order to preserve Britain's status as a great power and avoid humiliation at the hands of a tiny foe. The government's theory of status is well illustrated by Chamberlain's speech to parliament following the ultimatum. Legitimating the decision to go to war, he argued that "the man on the street":

> Knows perfectly well that we are going to war in defence of principles—the principles upon which this Empire has been founded and upon which alone it can exist. What are those principles? I do not think that anyone—however extreme a view he may take of this particular war, and however much he may condemn and criticise the policy of her Majesty's Government—will dispute what I am going to say. The first principle is this—that *if we are to maintain our position in regard to other nations*, if we are to maintain our existence as a great Power in South Africa, we are bound to show that we are both willing and able to protect British subjects everywhere when they are made to suffer from oppression and injustice (…)That is the first principle. It is a principle which prevails always and everywhere, and in every difference which we may have with another country. (Chamberlain, 1899, emphasis added by the author)

Clearly, for Chamberlain, the moral and material hierarchies were intermingled in legitimation: it was because Britain was a great power and could intervene that it had the moral obligation to do so, lest it forfeit its great power status. Chamberlain's argument encapsulates neatly the dominant line of reasoning by pro-war MPs on the conservative side.

Key to this pro-war TIS was an emphasis on the size-differential and social distance between Britain and the Boers that made backing down to the ultimatum issued by the Boers unthinkable. Akin to Liverpool playing Doncaster at football, the Boers were considered so far beneath the British in terms of status that there was little glory to be gained from defeating them. Crucially, reviewing the entirety of the Commons and Lords debates there is not a single member who legitimates the war in terms of a positive quest for status. As one Irish MP put it in parliament, "it is a war without one single redeeming feature, a Giant against a Dwarf, a war which, no matter what its ending may be, will bring neither credit nor glory nor prestige to this great British Empire" (Davitt, 1899). Hence, at the outset of the war following the Boers' ultimatum to Britain, the Boers were depicted as a "wretched little population" by the prime minister that had to be dealt with lest Britain be seen to be caving into the demands of an inferior (Salisbury, 1899, as cited in Steele, 2000, p. 19). As one MP put it, although "we will succeed [in winning the war]…we do not expect any glory from it" (Stanhope, 1899). The prospects of glory looked even worse when Britain suffered a series of humiliating defeats on the battlefield in the opening months of the war.

Yet nine months later, the British prime minister ended up celebrating victory on the battlefield as a "wonderful achievement" and "established" in the "eyes of foreigners" the "the value of the colonial connexion" (Salisbury, 1900, as cited in Mercer, 2017, p. 154). Similar views were echoed in the British press. Given the asymmetry in opponents, the embarrassing battlefield defeats, and the government's initial prophecy that the war should prove easy, the puzzle is not that international recognition was not forthcoming upon victory, but how Britain could plausibly expect that victory against the Boer would impress international audiences. Indeed, Mercer argues that British assessments of the status implications of the war were based upon pride rather than analysis and, as such, should be treated as psychological illusions.

Yet, a close reading of the British domestic political discourse over the course of the nine-month conventional war suggests an alternative explanation. If we look at the *temporal* development of the British discourse, we can see that these different theories of the status implications were not merely elicited upon victory, as Mercer (2017, p. 154) claims. Indeed, the government and pro-war press *retheorized* the rules of the competition prior to victory, such that it became possible to present the war to the domestic audience as a boon to Britain's status. As the war dragged on, the government began presenting their once lowly opponent as having assembled a "vast military machine," armed "with the most perfect weapons ever used in warfare" (Pretyman, 1900). Others began emphasizing "their value as fighting men," in particular their "tenacity and mobility" (Petty-Fitzmaurice, 1900). Supporters also began emphasizing the logistical challenge of waging war on another continent. For instance, one conservative MP called upon his colleagues in the House of Commons to:

> Remember that this war is being carried on at a distance of 6,000 miles from the base, and is in that respect *unprecedented* in the history of the world. It is not an easy matter to send troops to fight 6,000 miles away and to keep up an adequate commissariat supply. (Cecil, 1900, emphasis added by the author)

While the precise representations differed, all embodied the grammar of status and a relative comparison that implicitly or explicitly conjured a competitive international hierarchy. Importantly, with the scale of the operation and their newly recognized fighting capacities taken into account, it enabled the government to claim that beating the Boer displayed a power projection capacity befitting a great power. This drew upon extant discourses about how being a "world power" required global power projection, but at the same time, this theory of why the war should impress, de-emphasized the relative size of the enemy, which the government had hitherto used as a reason for why the victory should have been straightforward and thus why status could not be gained but only saved.

The British press also contributed to salvaging Britain's status through their habitual reporting of the war through a sports metaphor. In tandem with the press's focus on micro-battlefield dynamics and individual narratives of heroics, the sporting metaphor helped background the asymmetry between the Boers and the British and constitute the war as a competition among equals. The reporting of the battle of Mafeking aptly illustrates how sports metaphors worked to flatten the power difference between Britain and the Boers, and thus constitute the war as a competition Britain could take pride in winning. Indeed, zooming in on the tactical predicament—the Brits were outnumbered—rather than the strategic balance of power, the British general charged with the defense of Mafeking, Robert Baden-Powell, could be presented as a plucky hero: fighting against the odds, displaying British virtues of ingenuity, good humor, and bravery in the face of adversity.

In the midst of the siege, explicitly utilizing a sports metaphor, Colonel Baden-Powell released a dispatch to the press relaying his response to the Boers general who had challenged his men to a cricket match:

> Sir, I beg to thank you for your letter of yesterday....I should like nothing better—after the match in which we are at present engaged is over. But just now we are having our innings and have so far scored 200 days, not out, against the bowling of Cronje, Snijman, Botha...and we are having a very enjoyable game. I remain, yours truly R. S. S. Baden-Powell. (Baden-Powell, 1899, as cited in Ferguson, 2012, p. 277)

The press had a "field day" with the story: "[It] was portrayed back in Britain as the war's most glorious episode. . . . Indeed the press treated the siege as a kind of big imperial game, a seven-month test match between England and the Transvaal" (Ferguson, 2012, p. 195). Mafeking was far from the exception: besides cricket, boxing also featured, and even the government joined in (Donaldson, 2018, p. 23). The practice of using sports metaphors in reporting was so widespread that it even fomented a backlash. For instance, one letter to the *Manchester Guardian* was described as "repellent" depicting "the war in the language of sport when the issue is the making of widows and orphans" (Donaldson, 2018, p. 21).

These few examples illustrate a broader trend: as the war unfolded, the government and the press developed a new theory of the war's status value; one that contradicted their own earlier depiction. In short, generating new criteria by which the war's implications for status could be judged, and reframing the Boers as worthy opponents made it plausible to claim that victory was a "wonderful achievement" that would impress the international onlookers and thereby boost Britain's status. Indeed, although the war was frequently constructed as a status competition, unlike the Olympics, the rules by which comparisons were made and status assigned were contested and revised as the war unfolded. Notably, this re-theorization *pre-dated* the celebrations of victory. Tracing this process thus allows the inversion of Mercer's claim: rather than pride informing analyses of Britain's status, this new theory of status made expressions of pride possible. Indeed, when the domestic audience and the landslide election that followed the conclusion of the conventional war (1899–1900) are taken into account, Mercer's puzzle dissolves. From the government's perspective, despite the huge economic cost and lack of international recognition, the Boer War helped legitimate the government and secure a second term in office at the Khaki Election in October 1900 (which received its nickname because of the salience of the war in the campaign).

Thus, the onset and initial waging of the Boer War illuminates how governments (and domestic actors) may possess a hitherto under-acknowledged agency to re-theorize international status hierarchies for domestic consumption. This in turn provides a plausible explanation for why and how states compete for "status," even when international rewards are ephemeral. Rather than a psychological illusion—as Mercer would have it—that governments will eventually learn to ignore, the illusion of status would be better treated as a sociological construction, one that governments actively seek to protect and maintain. Indeed, the Boer War highlights how contradictory theories about status can exist, persist, and have effects simultaneously. This is neatly illuminated by Mercer's account of the allies' apparently contradictory self-understanding of their role in the war. Mercer (2017, pp. 158—160) shows how the British, New Zealanders, and Canadians all simultaneously contended that the Boer War demonstrated their superior fighting prowess. In other words, akin to the world's many "above average" drivers, multiple countries could simultaneously make the same claim to superior status—in an imagined international hierarchy of fighting prowess—and "win" according to

their own theories of the same competition. Meanwhile, the relative insulation from one another's discourses enabled these interpretations to endure without their logical contradictions needing to be settled.

2.1. The Limits of Status Retheorization

Yet, as victory in the conventional war morphed into a brutal 18th-month-long counter-insurgency campaign, the limits upon the agency of the British government to re-theorize the rules of the game for domestic consumption became apparent. In particular, the government's deployment of concentration camps to detain the women and children of Boer fighters fatally undermined its self-serving theory of the status implications of the war. In the words of one of the liberal MPs who tabled a parliamentary amendment against the use of camps, the tactics employed by Britain besmirched "the reputation and the honour of the whole nation" (Channing, 1902). Hence, it was "the interests of the Government, and also in those higher interests of humanity, and *for the good name of this Empire*, to let everything be done that is possible to bring about a better condition of things" (Channing, 1902, emphasis added by the author). Indeed, seldom did those who spoke against the camps not buttress their critique by raising how the camps would reflect upon Britain's status as a civilized nation. For instance, the leader of the liberal opposition, Campbell-Bannerman, attacked the camps on the same basis: "It is the whole system which they have to carry out that I consider, to use a word which I have already applied to it, barbarous" (Campbell-Bannerman, 1901). Notably, the standards of civilization were invoked by both the government and the opposition to debate the legitimacy of the British's use of concentration camps.

The fact that it was women and children who suffered in the camps prompted particular consternation among the opposition. As Lloyd George emphasized: "We are fighting them, but we are bound to fight them according to the rules of civilized nations, and by every rule of every civilized nation it is recognized that women and children are non-combatants" (Lloyd George, 1901). It was an Irish nationalist MP that expressed the civilizational argument against the camps most sharply, arguing that Britain's "conduct in South Africa in connection with these women and children is conduct which would bring shame to the cheeks of the most savage and most barbarous people in existence"(Redmond, 1901). However, several British MPs also explicitly theorized how the treatment of women and children in the camps would affect Britain's status in the world: For instance, one MP belied a patriotic concern for Britain's standing when he argued that the camps were "a disgrace, and if children die and women fall ill it is upon us that the responsibility lies, and upon the fair fame of this country lies the discredit" (Scott, 1901).

In an audacious, if doomed attempt to legitimate the camps Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, attempted to theorize the size and scale of the camps as a symbol of Britain's status as a civilized nation. Again using relative comparisons to frame their argument, Chamberlain argued that:

> Never in the whole history of the world, so far as we know it, have there been such gigantic efforts made by any nation to minimise the horrors of war(…)taking it as a whole, I repeat what I said at the beginning—no more gigantic task has ever been undertaken by a nation in time of war, no more humane task has ever been so well fulfilled. (Chamberlain, 1902)

However, given the camps were required as the result of the farm-burning strategy, that the government had been forced to admit that inmates of the camps were not free to leave and that it had become known that the

camps were at least partly a strategy of war, the government's attempts to legitimate and even celebrate the camps rang hollow. Indeed, while the government contested several aspects of their critics' narrative, they could not escape the fact that Britain had been responsible for forcing over a hundred thousand women and children into camps and that tens of thousands had died as a direct result of their actions.

Regardless of the government's rhetorical gymnastics, it proved difficult to square the concentration camp policy with the earlier construction of the war as a sporting contest in which Britain prevailed in a fair competition. Ultimately, once Britain's battles with the Boers ceased being undertaken on the battlefields, and because the rules of "the gentleman's war" were clearly being broken, it fatally undermined the ideal of the war as a "fair fight." Similar to how if one castles with a queen, you are no longer playing chess, so it was that once Britain began to use "methods of barbarism," the war became difficult to present as a rule-governed status competition they could take pride in winning. As Williams (2013, p. 494) notes:

> [It] was one thing to celebrate the steadfastness of the defenders of Mafeking, or the battlefield heroism displayed at Paardeberg, but quite another to remain comfortable with the burning of Boer farms and the herding of Boer civilians into squalid and disease-ridden "concentration camps." Public enthusiasm waned, opposition grew more confident, and the newspaper press played its part in articulating a mounting reaction against the war. Few celebrated the actual victory…quite the opposite, the guerrilla war was looked upon with growing disquiet and almost outright shame.

3. Conclusion

Zooming out, a useful way of thinking about the utility of the TIS approach is as a systematic means of identifying how status dynamics depart from the baseline of conventional status research. At its most abstract, conventional status theories depict a process whereby states' status seeking responds to real international collective beliefs in an iterative feedback process: (a) states assess the international status, (b) respond with a status seeking strategy designed to improve their status, (c) assess the results of this process in terms of international recognition, before beginning the process anew. The Boer War case illustrates how this process can be short-circuited by the interpretative agency of governments whose status theories need only appear plausible to domestic (rather than international) audiences to generate pride and legitimacy. Put more theoretically, the ambiguity of international hierarchy and the difficulty of knowing international collective beliefs enables a government leeway to produce and benefit from theories of their states' international status that are not shared internationally but resonate domestically. At the same time, the analysis of the latter stages of the Boer War highlighted how this agency is not infinite—although the government attempted to frame the status implications of the concentration camps in a positive light, the camps broke so egregiously the prevailing norms of civilization, that the government's theory of status failed to rebut the critics' contention that they harmed Britain's standing and undermined any prospect of glory from victory.

In terms of contributing to the "new directions for status research" that this thematic issue aims to elaborate, a TIS framework enables the analyst to illuminate how *rival* discourses of international status circulate, change, become contested, and ultimately inform policy debates. This is important because IR's leading theories of status competition all assume that states already know how to compete for status: they agree upon the rules of the game. In other words, the outcome that is said to indicate status competition is tied to

a specific understanding of the rules of the international status hierarchy (i.e., more arms = more status). While this does not stop these scholars from providing important insights, if the indicator of status competition is tied to the *substantive* notion of the international hierarchy, there is no way of analyzing any disagreement or changes in the rules of the game, or status competitions that do not conform to the analysts a priori assessment of the international hierarchy. As the Boer War case shows, a TIS framework can illuminate both the re-theorization of status by the government and its supporters, some of the consequences of that re-theorization, and also how status theories can be contested from below. Indeed, the British government's theory of status was not only contested by the opposition party but also by civil society groups.

Counter-intuitively, studying TIS instead of "real" status places status research on firmer methodological footing and expands the range of phenomenon status that can plausibly be used to account for. On the one hand, a TIS approach is humbler about the ontological status of international hierarchies: theories of international hierarchies extend their influence only as far as the discourse within which they are manifested. In this sense, my TIS approach parochializes status research but renders status dynamics more empirically tractable. On the other hand, restricting the analyst's gaze to discourse broadens the range of domains that a status lens can plausibly be used to account for because it does not require international inter-state agreements to have effects. A TIS approach only requires that the audience a particular theory of status is aimed at finds it credible and adequate to (de)legitimate a given activity. Crucially, parochializing status research (limiting it to its discursive manifestations), enables empirical investigation of the *spread* of status theories among groups within states, across borders, and potentially to regions. Thus, a TIS approach can allow the analyst to map and attempt to account for the *travel* of TIS' and their effects.

There are a number of critiques that could be raised against the TIS framework. The first is conceptual and almost semantic: *Is it really status that TIS refers to*? I would respond that while TIS does not have any *necessary* relationship to international collective beliefs about rank, neither does the rest of status research. For instance, the status discrepancy research agenda uses the rather convoluted method of ranking countries according to how many embassies they host to generate a proxy for status. While this approach can be justified theoretically, as MacDonald and Parent (2021, p. 10) warn, it is "less plausible" that policymakers use this "baroque" technique themselves for assessing international status. Meanwhile, embassies can be stationed in countries for several reasons that have little to do with status (Mercer, 2017; Røren & Beaumont, 2019). Thus, whatever correlations status discrepancy researchers uncover, it is questionable whether it is really status that is doing the work. Similarly, scholarship that reduces status to club memberships suffer from a related problem: "States join clubs for a variety of reasons, too, only some of which may be tied to status aspirations" (MacDonald & Parent, 2021, p. 8). Ultimately then, even conventional approaches struggle to operationalize status by their own definition. While my TIS approach does not solve all these problems it does provide advantages over conventional approaches: first it restricts inquiries *only* to international hierarchies that are represented and used by actors in international politics, thus overcoming the proxy problem. Additionally, calling them *theories*, the TIS builds in a helpful scientific humility (see Beaumont & de Coning, 2022) about these representations' relationship to real status, which I agree with Gilpin (1981, p. 33), will always remain a significant extent imponderable.

If this is a robust defense, there is also a more conciliatory and constructive means of reconciling TIS with prior status works, especially first-wave research. My TIS approach and first-wave status research can be

understood as analyzing different aspects of the same phenomenon: (a) the study of the effects of social facts and (b) the study of the construction and contestation of social facts. The first approach is analogous to what IR scholars post-Wendt call "thin constructivism"; taking their cue from Durkheim, they recognize that the state, international law, and status are social constructions but suggest that their meaning is sufficiently reified that they can be treated as if they are "things" that have independent effects. This concern with the effects of social facts animates most status scholarship. For instance, when they recognize that a military weapon's status value is a social construction but hold that this symbolic value is *sufficiently* stable and shared that it can produce systematic effects: a similar kind of status seeking among states (e.g., Gilady, 2018). Indeed, one could tell a "big picture" status story related to the Boer War about how *relatively* stable symbolic hierarchies associated with empires and war informed Britain's strategy. This would not necessarily be wrong, but as my case suggested, they would also overlook crucial parts of the story of how status dynamics affected the policy outcomes. In contrast, my approach follows the path trodden by thicker constructivist scholarship, which points out that these social facts' stability are illusions brought about through continuous discursive labor (Hansen, 2006). Hence, the analysis zoomed in and showed how status hierarchies that look like "social facts" from a distance and in retrospect, were more contested and malleable in practice. Only by paying attention to these processes of contestation and re-interpretation could we get a fuller picture of how status concerns informed domestic policy processes.

Ultimately, I would contend that my TIS approach and conventional status frameworks stand in a productive tension with one another that can help further the IR status research agenda. A TIS approach offers a useful empirical check upon the universal theoretical ambitions of early status research. Where this research tends to jump quickly to assuming that status hierarchies are widely shared among states, a TIS approach enables the empirical analysis of where, to what extent, and among whom these status hierarchies are actually shared. In short, a TIS approach's focus on discursive manifestations of status can help *bound* conventional analysis in time and space. While this will certainly humble the more grandiose claims of status scholars, it will also strengthen their empirical basis. In so doing, it aims to kick start a new wave of status research that takes discourse seriously by pioneering the systematic study of TIS within specific social contexts: how and why particular theories of status emerge, solidify, travel, as well as how they become contested and sometimes wither away.

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