

Introduction

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Competition is a central organizing principle of modern world politics. Rankings provided by international organizations are predicated on an idea of permanent competition between states to achieve 'excellence' in a range of policy fields: from health and education to defense, inequality and business taxation. Beyond these explicitly organized forms of competition, states are often observed to be competing for less clearly defined goods: power (of the 'soft' and the 'hard' variety), wealth, attention, influence, and status. They are frequently joined (and challenged) in this by a range of other prominent global actors, such as charities, major world religions, multinational corporations, and armed insurgencies.

The relevance of competition to contemporary literatures on (among others) neoliberalism, US-China relations, trade, technological change, energy and security is largely taken for granted. Yet competition itself is rarely problematized or explored in its own right. This volume interrogates competition from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining history, sociology, legal studies and international relations. We believe that this interdisciplinary perspective is necessary to understand the multiplicity of forms and contexts in which concepts and practices of competition structure modern world politics.

In the mainstream IR literature, 'competition' or 'competitive behavior' is handled in one of three ways. Realist and neorealist scholars make competition an explicit focus of their research, counterposing 'competition' to 'cooperation' as one of two possible poles of state behavior under conditions of anarchy, insecurity and limited knowledge. Identifying the factors or situations that might lead states to emphasize 'competition' or 'cooperation' as part of their strategic posture is a primary concern for this scholarship (Glaser 2010). In Marxian and Bourdieusian approaches to IR, meanwhile, constant competition over economic, cultural, or symbolic 'capitals' is a prior assumption that is rarely interrogated in its own right (Wallerstein 2004; Bigo 2011). Lib-

eral scholars of 'global governance' emphasize the importance of international organizations as spaces for cooperation, as well as for normative 'contestation' over underlying values (Wiener 2014).

In this volume, we seek to understand the complexes of knowledge, strategies and institutions that make it possible to conceive of world politics in terms of 'competition'. The contributions gathered here attempt to identify the concrete conditions under which competition has become a globally relevant political category. They explore the relationships between different forms of competition in past and contemporary world politics. And they analyze the responses of a range of actors to the specific forms of world-political competition generated by these shifting institutional and ideational contexts.

In the rest of this introduction, we identify and explain the main contours of this perspective on the role of competition in world politics. The next section explains the need to interrogate the concept of the competition not simply from the perspective of individual state behavior, but from that of "world politics" (Albert 2016)—understood as a historically conditioned social system—as a whole. The third section offers a short conceptual history of the term competition in European social and political theory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, culminating in the classic sociological accounts of Simmel and Weber. We find that these are particularly useful for constructing a distinction—at once analytical and normative—between 'competition' and 'conflict'.

The fourth section then elaborates on this distinction by outlining a brief outline of the structural features and normative justifications for a world politics based on the idea of 'competition'. The fifth section pivots to a consideration of the uses of 'competition' within and beyond the discipline of IR, beginning with realist, neo-realist, constructivist and Bourdieuean discussions of the term before considering recent developments in international political economy and historical sociology. The sixth section takes this discussion forward to the present day, examining contemporary foreign policy discourse on the 'new strategic competition' and highlighting, in particular, the emergent paradigm of 'weaponized interdependence' as a way of understanding the strong technological and economic focus of competitive state practices in contemporary world policies. The final section then summarizes individual contributions to the volume, establishing how each helps us to construct a new understanding of 'competition' as a central category in modern world politics.

Contextualizing ‘Competition’

Existing paradigms of international relations theory rarely address the question of ‘competition’ directly. As we discuss in further detail below, ‘competition’ is largely an assumed category for scholars who are primarily interested in predicting states’ behavior in the international system. One recent survey of current research proposes a definition in precisely these behavioral terms:

“Competition in the international realm involves the attempt to gain advantage, often relative to others believed to pose a challenge or threat, through the self-interested pursuit of contested goods such as power, security, wealth, influence, and status.” (Mazarr et al. 2018: 5)

This definition rests on a rationalist and agent-centered account, in which competition appears as one possible strategy individual states can adopt for dealing with the innate insecurity of inter-state politics. From a more interdisciplinary perspective, however, it raises more questions than it answers. Economists, economic historians and sociologists have long investigated the *conditions* of competition in markets, culture and education (White 1981; Burt 2009; Uzzi 1997; Beckert 2009; Bürkert et. al. 2019). Markets, in particular, have increasingly been understood as a “social order”, where “reciprocal expectations on the part of market actors ... have their basis in the social-structural, institutional and cultural embedding of markets” (Beckert 2009: 245). Merely focusing on individual agents and their relationship to a global balance of power forecloses, we suggest, a deeper investigation of the ‘embeddedness’ of competition in the socially and historically conditioned structures of “world politics” (Albert 2016; Buzan/Lawson 2015).

Despite the continued expansion of international political sociology and historical international relations as sub-fields in international studies, however, competition among actors in the international realm—whether for wealth, power, technological superiority, or prestige—has not been socially or historically contextualized to the same degree as other key ideas in international relations theory, such as anarchy (Keene 2001) or hierarchy (Zarakol 2017). To begin to address this gap, we propose two starting points for the investigation of competition in world politics.

The next section draws on the classic accounts of Georg Simmel and Max Weber to develop a sociological definition of ‘competition’ as a form of social interaction which can be analytically separated from conflict. We illustrate that this distinction carried a normative as well as an analytical implication

by tracing its origins in a conceptual history stretching back to the European Enlightenment. In the following section, we explore the relevance of the competition/conflict distinction for a particular model of what we call ‘world politics *as* competition’.

Conflict and Competition: from Hobbes to Simmel

IR-realists frequently claim an intellectual heritage going back to the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (Bull 1981; Malcolm 2002). For our purposes, however, what is most interesting about Hobbes’ central political text, *Leviathan* (1651), is the prominent role enjoyed by the concept—indeed the very word—competition in his account of the “natural condition”, a situation where, in the absence of coercive authority, agents must look to self-preservation as their sole legitimate imperative (Hobbes 1994: 79–88). For Hobbes, as for his subsequent interpreters, there was a simple analogy to be drawn between sovereigns in the international realm and individual subjects in the “state of nature” (Tuck 2001). Assertions about “man” were taken also to apply to “kings and person of sovereign authority” (Hobbes 1994: 78).

Both of these, he asserted, were condemned to live in a state of fundamental insecurity, defined by the constant possibility of conflict, of “war of every man against every man” (Hobbes 1994: 76). Hobbes attributed to human beings “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death”: not because of endless greed or ambition, but because it was impossible to ensure present gains without striving to deny others their relative position. Thus “competition of riches, honour, command or other power, inclineth to contention, enmity and war; because the way of one competitor to the attaining of his desire is to kill, subdue, supplant or repel the other” (Hobbes 1994: 58). Scarcity, too, implied a short and direct road to violent conflict: “if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies ... [and] endeavour to destroy one another” (Hobbes 1994: 75).

The Hobbesian equation of competition with conflict was based on a conception of human interaction in which material interdependence played little or no part in limiting possibilities for violence. Over the following two centuries, however, European thinkers concerned with the problem of ‘sociability’—the question of how and why human beings had come to be able to live together—increasingly leaned on material interdependence as a possible

explanation for how society was possible in the absence of constant divine intervention (Hont 2015; Robertson 2005). These new theories of ‘commercial society’—pioneered most influentially by the Scottish philosopher and jurist Adam Smith—were intensely concerned with the balance of fellow-feeling and acquisitive behavior that was produced by market societies based on wage labor and notionally egalitarian social relations (Phillipson 2010).

It is well-known that this line of thinking gave rise to classical political economy, with its fundamental commitment to competition on price—Richard Cobden’s “divine law of cheapness”—as the guarantor of both material abundance and social and international peace (Trentmann 2008). According to this line of thinking, material interdependence could ultimately become a complete solvent of political conflict, rendering much of the apparatus of the modern state—especially standing armies and professional diplomacy—surplus to requirements (Howe 1997). What is less appreciated, however, is that Smith, David Hume, and a range of lesser-known Enlightenment figures had their own interpretations of the relevance of ‘commercial society’ to international politics, generating novel accounts of what we might think of as ‘competitive co-existence’ among the rival empires of eighteenth-century Europe.

This perspective on the problem of competition had originated in France, where theories of political economy were profoundly influenced by the failure of Louis XIV’s campaign of military conquest at the close of the eighteenth-century. They argued that, at least within Europe, inter-state competition should no longer take the form of deliberate wars of conquest and destruction. It would instead be mediated through the arts of economic and technological “emulation”: mutual observation of economic capacity and governing innovations that would enable a balance of commercial power to be maintained (Reinert 2011). Smith and Hume took a similar perspective on the problems of Britain’s overstretched colonial empire in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The challenge this faced, they argued, was the need to build an effective fiscal state and a productive manufacturing base capable of paying for an effective navy, rather than to hold onto distant territories that cost more to govern than they brought in revenue (Hont 2005).

The normative ideal that underpinned this Enlightened critique of violent conflict was not that of cosmopolitanism—in contemporary language, “universal benevolence”. Instead, it urged the positive benefits of peaceful forms of international competition, motivated by the mutual desire of “improvement” and “emulation”, over the vices of envy and “jealousy” (Hume 1994).

Where, for Hobbes, the psychological foundations of competition were such that they could *only* lead to violence, eighteenth-century thinkers saw far more potential for varieties of competition that could be held within normative and institutional boundaries. This not only made market competition possible at the domestic or global level: it also made it possible to think of an international politics in which national units, conceived in primarily economic terms, could compete with one another on productivity and state capacity without engaging in direct military conflict. The stage was set by a nineteenth century in which the European powers engaged in constant practices of “competitive comparisons” (Steinmetz 2019), before an increasingly internationalized public (Werron 2015).

The eighteenth-century imagination of ‘improvement’ through competition remained associated with the idea of a dynamic balance which was restored by competing forces. Migrating easily between natural philosophy, political theory and political economy, the metaphor of balancing forces implied an endless movement around a perfect state (Wise/Smith 1989a). In the words of a British geologist and member of parliament George Scrope,

“Competition is, indeed, the soul of industry, the animating spirit” of production, the ever-present, all-pervading elastic principle, which, like the power of gravitation on the atmosphere and ocean, fills every vacuum in the market of exchanges—equalizes the quantity of every commodity to the necessity for it—and preserves their relative values at the mean level of their comparative estimation in the regard of the great body of consumers” (Scrope 1833: 200).

The massive economic changes of the nineteenth century, however, dispelled the belief in harmony through competition. The economy could no longer be symbolized by “the balance with its natural limits but the steam engine with its capacity for change.” The economy meant evolution, not balance (Wise/Smith 1989b: 382), transforming the future into an open, insecure, and changeable horizon (Koselleck 2010).

In face of rapid technological changes, states began to compete for the *capacity* to compete in the form of a maximization of labor power—an early form of competitiveness. Since the French physiocrats, work—understood as human self-reproduction—depended on both the riches of nature and its realization among the free competition of producers. This implied a possible inability to compete and sustain oneself through work, which became the blunt reality of factory workers in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth cen-

tury political economists highlight work, not soil, as the ultimate source of wealth: Capital, labor, and soil are productive only insofar as they are put to work (Frambach 2002; Rabinbach 1990). With international trade and conditions of production changing rapidly, there was now a constant risk of labor, soil and capital lying idle because they could not realize themselves in the competition with production in other places. As William Whewell explained in 1843, “the productive power of nations must be compared by comparing the moving forces plus the whole quantity of working mechanism” (Wise/Smith 1989b: 419). In competing for productive power—be it human, animal, or mechanical—states compete for agents of change.

Nineteenth century thinkers increasingly challenged the idea and practice of a civil society between citizens or states in which material interdependence and the competition of private interests foster the common good. For Georg Friedrich Hegel writing in the early nineteenth century, bourgeois society was not the transcendence, but the realization of the Hobbesian state of nature, an arena for the struggle of private interests *omnium contra omnes* (Hegel 1821: §289). Where liberal political economists had envisioned an international civilized society based on free trade among equal nations, the German ‘national economist’ Friedrich List pointed to the devastating consequences this had for the economically “weaker” nations (List 1841).

Later in the nineteenth century, the rise of powerful monopolies, trusts, and combinations whose financial power could exceed that of states, posed the question of whether private capitalist competition could be straightforwardly transmuted into a political competition between states. The British liberal John A. Hobson put forth an economic explanation of the cycle of imperial expansion that took place in the final decades of the nineteenth century: “Overproduction (...) and access capital which could not find sound investments within the country, forced [countries] to place larger and larger portions of their economic resources outside the area of their present political domain, and then stimulate a policy of political expansion so as to take in the new areas” (Hobson 1902: 80).

While Hobson based his argument on a concrete study of (mainly) British and American imperialism, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg transformed it into an argument describing imperialism as the latest stage of capitalism (Lenin 2010; Luxemburg 1951; Brewer 1990). The ability of large corporations to avoid competition—already acknowledged by Smith in his *Wealth of Nations*—gave rise to the idea that, as Marx put it, “the sole defense against capitalists is competition.” (Marx/Engels 2009: 41) This tension between the critique of compe-

tition, and the demand for the overthrow of monopolies, is echoed in the anti-imperialist writings of the end of the nineteenth century (Cain 2002: 166).

Sociological accounts of competition of the early twentieth century similarly reflect this ambivalence. In their endeavour to establish sociology as an independent discipline, sociologists abstracted competition from its nineteenth-century contexts in political economy. Georg Simmel and Max Weber wrote at a time in which finance, trusts and imperial wars made headlines; their abstractions—competition as “social form” (Simmel) or “type of social action” (Weber)—sought to transcend these historical conditions. As a social form or type of social action, competition could be distinguished from rivalry or conflict, and compared across different social fields. The *Nationalökonom* Weber conceived of competition as a peaceful struggle (*Kampf*) “insofar as it consists in a formally peaceful attempt to attain control over opportunities and advantages which are also desired by others” (Weber 1956: §8). As such, he argued, competition for power and capital has long been part of the interaction between states (Weber 1956: §31). Simmel also discusses competition in relation to conflict, and, more specifically, to jealousy—“that social phenomenon in which the construction of antagonism by way of unity achieves its [...] most radical form” (Simmel 2009: 258). He conceived of competition as a triadic constellation, in which two actors are opposed to each other and at the same time united in their relation to the third object or person they compete for. For both Weber and Simmel, competition is a specific kind of struggle, which is “formally peaceful”.

‘World Politics as Competition’: Norms and Structures

This short conceptual history of competition as both a normative ideal and an analytical category shows that there is a much richer tradition of thinking about competition than the conventional IR literature assumes. Drawing on this brief account, we now turn to a more extended definition of what we understand to be a configuration of world politics in which competition is central. This, we argue, will possess both normative and structural features.

A configuration of world politics in which competition is viewed to be central is in the first instance a world of *notionally equal, sovereign states*—even if, in practice, the key participants in international competition are a select group of “great powers” (Müller 2020). These share a *common set of cultural expectations*, and means of communication, that enable mutual observation and compari-

son according to a shared goal on a sustained basis (Heintz/Werron 2011). As Simmel pointed out, competition is the manifestation of an *antagonism* not despite but *through* this mutual recognition and unity deriving from a shared object of desire. This structure of communications and expectation compels them to engage in an *open-ended, dynamic competition* for power, wealth and status: there is no stable state to be reached, but the continuing need to adapt to changing forms of competition—a capacity that comes to be discussed under the term ‘competitiveness’. This also implies a change in the objects states compete for, or rather, a change of what constitutes power, wealth, and status as *scarce objects* at different times.

A strong sense of mutual recognition among a group of competing states is necessary in order to set limits to the possibilities for violence. All who compete are recognized as legitimate ‘players’ in the international arena. This legitimacy can be additionally conferred through diplomatic practices, or membership of international organizations. As our historical discussion of ideas of competition in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe indicates, the idea of international competition is also strongly bound up with the history of European colonialism. It was the binding glue of an idea of European ‘civilization’, culturally and racially superior to non-European societies, that enabled eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europeans to conceive of one another as legitimate participants in the international.

A conception of world politics based on competition is likely to assign a greater weight to the economic, cultural and technological attributes of states than it will to their raw military capacity. Because these ‘softer’ attributes are often validated by expert opinion, international media systems and (in the modern era) international organisations may become central arenas for competitive behavior. These “rationalized third-parties” (Werron 2013: 66; 2015) supply and collate the information—whether on military expenditure, public health preparedness, or cultural achievement—that makes “competitive comparisons” (Steinmetz 2019) possible.

Yet competition is only ‘formally peaceful’: when world politics are organized in this way, existential threats and violent conflict is not eliminated. The modernization race of the mid-twentieth century and the neoliberal reforms of competitiveness since the 1980s had devastating consequences for significant parts of the global population. What is more, violence has frequently been visited on racialized others who are not viewed as legitimate participants in “the international” (Pitts 2018), through the competitive acquisition of colonies that characterized both the European imperialisms of the eigh-

teenth and nineteenth centuries, and the ‘proxy wars’ that shaped US-Soviet confrontation of the twentieth (Westad 2005).

The usefulness of this outline of ‘world politics as competition’ is twofold. It allows us to see, firstly, that competition is not simply to be viewed as a problem for international order. It is also an idea that is normatively attractive to many participants, past and present, in world politics; an alternative to violent conflict that is actively designed into central institutions of international order. Secondly—as Heidi Tworek argues forcefully in her contribution—it allows us to identify and problematize the blind spots and exclusions of a conception of world politics as based on competition between nation states. Thirdly, it allows us to analytically separate competition from conflict; not from any deep conviction that these are always separable in practice, but in line with a pragmatic determination to study competition in world politics as an open-ended phenomenon, that is not predetermined to produce a descent into warfare. This, we argue in the following section, is a perspective that is missing from established schools of international relations, although it is present in the fields of international political economy and the emergent sociology of competition.

Competition and International Relations Theory

‘Competition’ became a central concept in international theory in the late 1940s, when Hans Morgenthau distinguished two constellations of the balance of power—the “pattern of direct opposition” and the “pattern of competition”—in his first version of *Politics Among Nations* (Morgenthau 1948: 131–133). The Simmel-style “pattern of competition” describes a triadic structure, in which two imperialist powers compete in their domination of a third, smaller power. In the face of the Korean war, Morgenthau dedicated in subsequent editions an entire subsection to it, thus enhancing its status as a theoretical concept (Morgenthau 1954: 162–165). From this point on, students of international relations could relate the balance of power to competition by merely glimpsing at a classic’s table of contents. However, Morgenthau’s concept of competition and opposition are not as structuralist as his famous metaphor of billiard balls suggest. In fact, the “patterns” are a way to systemize the ways in which the balance of power can be sustained or disturbed; within these constellations, there can as well *not* be competition (Wendt 1992: 395–396; Little 2007: 93).

Only the neorealists turn competition into a structure underlying all international politics. Likening the anarchical system of self-help to the coordination on a market, Kenneth Waltz conceives of the international system as a “competitive realm”. Competition is the order that emerges between uncoordinated units emulating each other and socializing themselves to their system (Waltz 1979: 127-128). Just like in an oligopolistic market, competition does not necessarily serve the greater good: “states compete, but not by contributing their individual efforts to the joint production of goods for their mutual benefit” (Waltz 1979: 107). Waltz’s structural reformulation of realism not only understates the possibility of cooperation (for which it has often been attacked) but eclipses the distinction between conflict and competition which Morgenthau had articulated.

The constructivist critique leveled against neorealism argues that anarchy should not be treated as structure, but the absence of it. In the absence of structure, international politics fundamentally depends on “what states make of it” (Wendt 1992). While not explicitly targeting the concept of competition, constructivism does enable us to start to think of competition as a historically developed institution within world politics. What is more, the argument that the identity and interests of states both emerge in and shape the institutions of international politics has opened up a new way to think across the lines of neorealism and neoliberalism. This is most notable when Wendt points out that “institutions may be cooperative or conflictual, a point sometimes lost in scholarship on international regimes, which tends to equate institutions with cooperation” (Wendt 1992: 399). Despite this observation, Wendt’s work has sparked critical analyses of the concept of power (Guzzini 2005) and of how states even know their interests (Haas 1992) within IR—but not of competitive institutions.

In his later works, Wendt articulates an agent-structure-problem in IR by drawing on social theory (Wendt 1999). Over the last two decades, some IR scholars have begun to reconceptualize the realm of international politics in line with Bourdieu’s field theory, in order to overcome the opposition of structure and agency.¹ Like constructivism the Bourdieusian approach pays

1 Bourdieu emphasizes that there is no “field theory” apart from empirical studies of concrete fields. While Bourdieu has recently been popularized through the “relational sociology” of english-speaking scholars (Julian Go, Monika Krause, Rebecca Adler-Nissen), there has been a (mostly) french-speaking discourse on Bourdieu’s value to IR since at least the 2000s (Yves Chouala, Frédéric Mérand, Vincent Pouliot).

attention to both the symbolic and material dimensions of domination and struggle within world politics (Mérand/Pouliot 2008: 609). According to Bourdieu, fields are configurations of objective relations between positions (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 97). These relations are always changing: “As a space of potential and active forces, the field is also a field of struggles aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of these forces” (ibid: 101). The field concept conceives of international politics as a “competitive realm” as Waltz had done, but without making it into an ahistorical structure: the positions, borders, capitals and rules of the field are subject to the field’s struggle (ibid: 99–100).

Political scientists and sociologists began to diagnose “competition states” in the globalized world economy of the 1990s. In contrast to the early Marxist theories which treated the state as a vehicle for economic interests, this scholarship develops a theory of both the state and international relations. Since the 1980s, there has been a discussion about the crisis of the welfare states and their growing inability to enable and limit the domestic capitalist economy (Offe 1983). The new state form forged by international economic competition—the “competition state”—“prioritizes the pursuit of strategies intended to create, restructure, or reinforce (...) the competitive advantages of its territory, population, built environment, social institutions and economic agents” (Jessop 2002: 86; cf. Cerny 1997: 297; Hirsch 1995). According to Jessop, competitive advantage no longer refers to a Ricardian static comparative (e.g. lower costs of resource exploitation) but to a Schumpeterian dynamic of competitive advantages (e.g. the capacity to succeed in competition) (Jessop 2002: 119–122). Spurred by international organizations such as the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank, competition states reduce taxes on capital, increase the flexibility of their labor markets, and cut welfare spending. This change is accompanied by a “new spirit of capitalism”, which tenders the “possibilities of self-realization and room for freedom of action” to anyone adopting the competitive logic as their own (Boltanski/Chiapello 2005: 16; Davies 2015).

Apart from critical theorists studying the neoliberal mode of governance, there is a more recent research strand in sociology, which follows Simmel’s classical account of competition as a triadic social form. Tobias Werron has recently revived this tradition and elaborated on the social form of competition with regard to the role of the object of competition, the construction of its scarcity and its evaluation by a third party (Werron 2014; Werron 2019: 31–36). While critical theorists and sociologists of the social form differ in the status they assign to competition—a universal social form or a symptom of

a historically specific form of capitalism—they come together in their studies of contemporary management methods, such as rankings, indices, and performance-based measures (Jessop 2015; Werron 2015).

In recent years, attention has shifted to the role of third parties—such as international law, the global media system, or non-governmental organizations—in mediating state competition. Distinguishing between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ competition, rules-based international institutions such as the World Trade Organization can both limit and prescribe state competition (Davies 2013; Slobodian 2018). Scholarship on a “global public” has pointed out how the global media system is a source of legitimation and attention, for which states compete to make their interests heard. Not only states but think tanks, NGOs and epistemic communities compete for the authority “to define what is to be governed, how, and why” (Sending 2015: 4). In doing this, these actors in world politics seek to change the policies states pursue, and the purposes they compete for.

New Challenges: ‘Great Power Competition’ and ‘Weaponized Independence’

Even if these new approaches to the sociology and political economy of competition disagree about its distinctive importance in an era of neoliberalism, they share a common interest in its uses as an ordering device in distinct and identifiable institutional settings, in which rankings and metrics can exercise a disciplinary function. Where states are subject to these disciplines by international organizations and other ‘universalized third parties’, it is primarily to compare them against a common and notionally objective standard, within relatively discrete areas of policy.

In recent years, however, world politics has witnessed the return of traditional ‘great power’ rivalry between a range of global and regional powers, including the US, China, Iran, the EU, and Russia. Institutionalized competition, mediated by identifiable third parties and productive of metrics and rankings, now co-exists uneasily with a less clearly structured competition between nation-states for power and prestige in an increasingly unstable global order.

The growing instability of contemporary world politics creates problems for both the neo-realist and sociological accounts of international competition discussed in the previous section. The role and significance of rankings,

metrics and international organization is likely to change where states are engaged in sustained strategic competition with one another. The return of this form of competition, however, cannot be abstracted from the underlying institutional and economic architecture of a complex and heavily interdependent global political economy and media system. In the new era of inter-state competition, the “dominant measure of standing” is not “military”, but “economic, informational, and geopolitical” (Mazarr et. al. 2018).

Over the course of the 2010s, the ‘return of great power competition’ has become a constant refrain of the US foreign policy community, with growing hostility to China a rare area of bipartisan consensus between Republicans and Democrats (Small 2018). The Trump administration stated bluntly in its 2017 national security strategy that “we face an era of increased strategic competition, global challenges, and erosion of the U.S. comparative military advantage” (White House 2017). The European Union similarly took the uncharacteristic step of describing China both as an “economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” (European Commission 2019).

The highly organized and interconnected character of modern world politics was once held to be a solvent of this kind of direct power competition. According to varieties of ‘neoliberal’ international relations theory prominent in the 1990s and 2000s, the proliferation of multilateral organizations covering trade, the environment and human rights—could act to contain competition to distinct “issue areas”.² On this understanding, conflict and disagreement over economic, social, health or environmental policy would not be subsumed into broader conflicts between states or alliance systems. In a world of “complex interdependence”, the “structure of the issue area, rather than the global balance of traditional military or economic power”, was said to shape “who the main actors are and what kinds of resources they can use to realize their goals” (Milner 2009: 25).

This conception of world order was always challenged by IR theorists in realist and Marxian traditions (Mearsheimer 1990; Gowan 2003). These focused on the ultimate dominance of the United States in liberal institutions of global governance, whether by virtue of its military power or its centrality to global (financialized) capitalism. The latter was amply demonstrated during

2 “Neoliberalism” as a position in the discipline of International Relations (IR) will be referred to as “IR-neoliberalism”, to distinguish it from “neoliberalism” as a broader political ideology.

the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–8, when the US Federal Reserve unilaterally acted to backstop large parts of the global financial system through the provision of dollar financing to chosen allies (Tooze 2018). The Federal Reserve acted with similar decisiveness during the ‘Covid Crash’ of 2020 (Tooze 2020).

The current intensification of competition in world politics has taken a form, however, that is specific to an era in which capitalist globalization has advanced further and deeper than ever before (Milanovic 2019). In a 2016 essay collection, the European Council on Foreign Relations argued that, in a globalized world, interdependence “has turned into a currency of power, as countries try to exploit the asymmetries in their relations”. Here, migration, energy, technical regulation and investment controls are listed as new battlegrounds for a multipolar world, in which enhanced geopolitical competition takes place in a context of unprecedented economic openness (Leonard 2016).

The emergent scholarship on ‘weaponized interdependence’ suggests that economic interdependence is not a recipe for international stability. Interstate rivalries—far from dissolving into the structural logics of discrete ‘issue areas’—overlay interaction across a whole range of policy areas. Across all of these, the vital issue is the control of ‘central nodes in the international networked structures through which money, goods and information travel’ (Farrell/Newman 2019: 45). States are powerful actors, but they are one among many. Corporate actors—especially in the tech, finance and security sectors—are themselves significant players in this ‘geo-economic’ form of competition, characterized by ‘securitization of economic policy and economization of strategic policy’ (Roberts et al. 2019).

In this new configuration of competition, different major powers enjoy contrasting abilities to influence world politics. While the United States enjoys an outsized ability to use a global reserve currency to achieve its geopolitical goals, the European regulatory state (Bradford 2020), Russian energy politics (Siddi 2019), and Chinese overseas investment initiatives (Nordin/Weissmann 2018) offer comparable examples of the increasingly close relationship between economics, technology and power-politics in the 21st century.

Lineages and Varieties of Competition

The new literature on ‘weaponized interdependence’ is a powerful provocation to rethink the nature of world politics and world society in the 21st century, beyond the easy ‘realist-idealist’, ‘competition versus cooperation’ opposition

that still structures much public and popular commentary on the world political situation (Ashworth 2002). Contemporary world politics are often said to be departing from a 'liberal international order' based on a combination of US hegemony and robust international institutions (Ikenberry 2018). Yet international organizations remain vital political arenas, and world politics is to a large extent 'performed' before a global public and an integrated media system based on the internet. Economic interdependence remains significant, and (some) non-state actors remain geopolitically relevant. Indeed, in the age of "financialization" (Thomson/Dutta 2018) and "platform capitalism" (Srnicek 2017; Zuboff 2019), the relative autonomy of globally relevant financial and technology firms is arguably greater than ever before.

The complex and intensely mediated character of competition in contemporary world politics calls for a more sophisticated and varied approach to analyzing its origins and character. The chapters gathered here open a new interdisciplinary perspective on the emergence and persistence of 'competition' as a central organizing category in modern world politics. They share an interest in the ways in which competition is observed and mediated, recognizing that, while there are structural reasons for states and other actors to compete over 'scarce goods' like power, wealth or prestige, the form and nature of international competition is highly sensitive to institutional contexts, the generation of relevant knowledge, and the identity of political actors. They also bring new research on emergent policy fields to the table, examining dynamics of competition within the formally 'cooperative' spaces created by international organizations. Finally, they place competition in a historical perspective, identifying the close linkages between evolving concepts of competition and the historical emergence of 'world politics' itself.

The volume is separated into three sections, each of which explores a distinct thematic focus that grows out of this overall approach to the problem of competition in world politics. The first section analyses the dynamics of status competition within international organizations. Ramy Youssef's comparison of early modern ceremonial rankings and modern nation-state rankings invites a radical historicization of competition as a 'social form'. Far from being a transhistorical condition of human interaction, status competition is a distinctively modern phenomenon, qualitatively different from the fixed status hierarchies that defined early modern diplomacy. Thomas Müller and Katja Freistein offer a Bourdieusian analysis of the politics of "capital conversion", focusing on the efforts of Brazil, Russia, India and China to convert their economic clout into greater political influence and status. They argue for

the continued importance of international organizations as arenas for status competition, and the contested nature of status in itself under a configuration of world politics that “is today much more institutionalized and polycentric than it was in previous phases of world history.” As Anatoly Boyashov argues in his analysis of the European Union’s participation in “network competition” at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), navigating this institutionalized and polycentric environment requires political actors to compete for dominant structural positions in complex networks constituted by states, international organizations, and civil society organizations. As an international organization confined to a formal “observer” role at the UNHCR, the EU is nonetheless able to play a significant role as a coordinator of nation-state coalitions behind its preferred human rights initiatives.

The second section of the volume considers the historical evolution of ideologies of competition, and of the forms of knowledge that have enabled and advanced them. The focus here is on political economy, and on the complicated relationships between ideas of national power and cosmopolitan progress that run through its modern intellectual history. James Stafford’s examination of British trade policy in the later eighteenth century re-examines the ‘rise of free trade’ as a mutation, rather than a rejection, of a mercantilist logic of national power competition. Examining the writings of the Anglo-Dutch merchant Matthew Decker alongside those of the better-known Scottish philosopher Adam Smith, Stafford’s chapter identifies a switch from a competition over trade balances in precious metals, to an all-pervasive struggle for labor discipline and productivity, applying not just to princes and rulers but entire ‘nations’. While Stafford’s contribution emphasizes the nationalist potentialities of liberal political economy, Tobias Werron and Johannes Nagel’s chapter moves in the opposite direction, highlighting the cosmopolitan *telos* of US-American ideologies of economic nationalism and naval power in the nineteenth century. US-American theorists, Werron and Nagel argue, were able to simultaneously stake a place for the United States as entitled to struggle for a share of the ‘scarce goods’ of wealth and power, while “also claiming for the US the role of a standard-bearer of cosmopolitan values and global progress”—albeit at an undefined point in the future.

As Daniela Russ and Thomas Turnbull’s chapter demonstrates, this kind of conjoined nationalist-cosmopolitan reasoning was also in evidence in the new form of “materialist” and “energetic” economics pioneered by Edwardian “technocrats” and Soviet energy planners in the early decades of the twentieth century. What Russ and Turnbull term “energetic productivism” created a

new form of competition over the expansion of energetic resources and productivity, mediated through a new body of official statistics dedicated to the measurement of “energetic capacities”. Dieter Plehwe’s chapter offers a contrasting examination of the politics of measurement and its relevance to state competition, recounting the intellectual and organizational origins of neoliberal measures of “economic freedom” designed to encourage states to compete against one another in providing a “business-friendly” environment for international capital. Against accounts that identify ranking and economic measurement with a general logic of Eurocentric, capitalist modernity, Plehwe urges us to consider the concrete agents and intellectual agendas behind the specific forms of knowledge that have informed competing paradigms of political economy.

The third section of the book extends Russ, Turnbull and Plehwe’s interest in the emergence of new technological arenas and new standards of comparison, offering a series of case studies exploring how artificial intelligence and cybersecurity are opening new vistas of global political competition, in the 2020s and beyond. Didzis Kļaviņš examines the promise and peril of artificial intelligence for traditional understandings of diplomacy. Particularly in smaller countries such as Latvia and other Baltic states, ministries of foreign affairs are being pressured to draw on new forms of expertise, and new public-private partnerships, to equip themselves with the tools necessary to secure positions of autonomy—and even leadership—in a global AI landscape shaped by the power ambitions of China and the United States. Madeleine Myatt’s contribution explores how the new terrain of cybersecurity offers opportunities for small states to exercise new forms of power on the world stage, assuming agenda-setting positions in international organizations such as NATO and positioning themselves as model hosts for new institutions of cyberwarfare. Yuliya Miadyvetskaya’s chapter considers emergent efforts to regulate this new landscape of cyberwarfare, arguing for the potential of the European Union’s new cyber-sanctions regime to initiate a global dialogue about the need to extend principles of international law governing state behavior in other domains to the new terrain of cyberspace. Cyber-sanctions emerge as simultaneously a strategy pursued by a major actor in global power competition; *and* a potential means of establishing new norms, and new standards of comparison, that will structure and mediate this new terrain of competition as it develops in the 21st century.

Competition in the Age of Covid-19

All intellectual production is the product of its historical moment, alongside its social and its natural environment. The present volume is no exception. Conceived during face-to-face workshops at Bielefeld University in 2018 and 2019 and completed under the conditions of lockdown in the spring and autumn of 2020, the present introduction was written with one eye on the unfolding drama of a new international competition in both public health and macroeconomic policy. Daily statistics brought home the relative successes (and failures) of different states in containing the spread of the novel coronavirus; alongside measures of the size and duration of the collapses in national Gross Domestic Products (GDP) brought on by regional and national lockdowns.

It was with new vista of global public health competition in mind—at once familiar and totally novel—that we decided to approach Professor Heidi Tworek, a historian of both global competition and public health policy, to offer some closing reflections on how the Covid-19 crisis should affect our understandings of the role of competition in world politics. Tworek's afterword to this collection joins a brief historical survey of the origins of modern health statistics in the League of Nations Health Office of the 1920s to a pointed critique of the uses and abuses of national rankings and comparisons in the current crisis. She powerfully reminds us that historicizing, relativizing and questioning the assumption that world politics should be understood as competition between nation states is not merely an analytical or academic exercise. The distorting imaginaries of competition and rankings, Tworek argues, have handicapped governments in their response to the Covid-19 epidemic, obscuring the importance of social and racial equity to public health, and rendering invisible the sufferings of the countless individuals who make up blunt, and often incommensurable, bodies of national case statistics. At least in some instances, it seems, competition is an imaginary that has been chosen and manipulated for political ends. Only with this awareness can we begin to transcend its more damaging consequences for contemporary world politics.

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