Socializing Status in International Politics: Have you read Onuf?

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Note to reader: this paper is half-way through a major revision so apologies for its disjointedness. Hopefully you can make some sense of it. Please do not cite!
The field of IR has in recent years built an impressive portfolio of research detailing the importance of status in world politics.¹ These scholars have shown how status concerns inform everything from weapons acquisition (Pu and Schweller 2014, Græger 2015) to humanitarian aid (e.g. Stolte 2015, Leira 2015). Indeed, in a recent review of the literature Dafoe et al (2014, p.381) suggest “If there is one feature of reputation and status on which scholars agree, it is that leaders, policy elites, and national populations are often concerned, even obsessed, with their status and reputation”. As Vincent Pouliot (2014) explains, the absence of a symbolic hegemon to allocate status in international society creates the conditions for fierce contestation over status and what constitutes status markers. While competition for status may sound more benign than security competition; several recent studies suggest otherwise: Ned Lebow (2010) has even argued that 58% of inter-state wars should be understood as motivated by standing (a close synonym of status). Meanwhile, Jonathon Renshon works from micro-foundations up to show a significant relationship between status-dissatisfied states and war initiation. It is with this sturdy warrant in hand that this paper investigates the makings and implications of the internationals’ changing social hierarchie(s)

Contemporary status scholars trace their lineage to Thucydides Hobbes, Morgenthau and Galtung before grounding their research in social psychology (Lebow 2010, Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, Renshon 2017, Larson and Shevchenko 2014, Wohlforth 2014).⁴ As a result psychological approaches have come to dominate contemporary status research, while sociological approaches have largely been neglected (Pouliot 2014). One consequence of the methodological individualism underpinning these approaches, is that contemporary status research suffers from a rather anaemic theorization of social structure. This has not stopped this research from producing insightful, eclectic, and compelling findings, however it has arguably occluded fruitful avenues for investigation. Given its relational, inter-subjective, social quality (Paul et al, 2014, de Carvalho & Neumann 2015), sociological approaches would seem to offer a potentially productive approach for getting at status and its consequences. Yet, while feminism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism, ontological security, stigma theorizing, have potentially utility to IR status research, it has yet to be realised. While, Iver Neumann (2014) Marina

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⁴ This is not status researchers’ fault. After all, WOOM chapter 8 is titled, Rationality and Resources
Duque (2016) and particularly Vincent Pouliot (2014) have begun to theorize the relational, contextual and socially contingent aspects of status, it is just that: a beginning. Specifically, status research to date have scarcely investigated how the social hierarchies within which collectives seek status, emerge, change and wither, and how these processes shape the status seeking impulses that social psychologists illuminate.

To set about this task, this paper excavates Nick Onuf’s hitherto overlooked chapter 8 in World of Our Making. The following develops his discussion of standing via several contemporary sociological IR theorists. First, Onuf’s brief discussion of the social conditions of possibility for competition over standing points to a way to address the “reification problem” found in much of the large N status research (Duque 2016), which assumes a-priori what constitutes status in world politics (inevitably some function of material power). Second, contra the social psychology, this article conceptualizes status seeking as relational process (see Jackson and Nexon 1999) and suggests this can better capture dynamics of status competition: how the competitive process feeds back and modifies the social structure, which in turn shapes the status competition. Finally, I put these ideas to work in the “gains” debate to try to generate new insights into an old problematique (Grieco, Powell, and Snidal 1993). Borrowing Mattern and Zarakol’s distinction between “narrow” and “broad” hierarchies (Mattern and Zarakol 2016), section three develops “a logic of positionality” implicit in Onuf’s discussion of global comparison. Rather than ponder how different sectors affect concern for relative gains, as realists and liberals were prone to, this article builds upon Onuf to argue to theorize how relational distance in a social hierarchy would inform an actor’s willingness to cooperate and accept relative losses or not.

Nicholas Onuf’s (1989) World of Our Making (here on, WOOM) is heavily cited but rarely discussed. As Maja Zehfuss (2002, 11)—one of the few to engage with WOOM in depth—puts it, “This ambitious and dense book was an unlikely candidate for reshaping the International Relations discipline (IR). Indeed, the significance accorded to constructivism today is surprising in view of the limited impact this first formulation had.” This might sound strange, given WOOM’s 1000+ citations, but a review reveals they often occur in the form of salutary, and by now conventional, nods to the “founding fathers” of constructivism without further discussion of WOOM’s constructivism itself. Indeed, unlike Wendt (1999), WOOM’s arguments do not revolve around Waltz (1979), nor can its substance be surmised in a pithy one liner (e.g. Wendt 1992). As Onuf himself indicates, WOOM is “relentlessly abstract” (Onuf 1989, 20), extraordinarily ambitious, and eschews conventional structure. For instance, in place of a conclusion, Onuf ends with synoptic table of the book’s 15 sets of three-way typologies – 45 (!) types in all. As the editors’ preface to WOOM notes, the “designation ‘monumental’ scarcely describe Onuf’s accomplishment” (Kegley and Puchala 1989, x). However, as Zehfuss (2002) illustrates – though somewhat disingenuously— WOOM can be difficult to put to use. This probably explains the neglect of WOOM, but as the following will suggest, it has been unfortunate for status research in IR.
1. Socializing Status Research: Problematizing the emergence of Hierarchies

In their quest for correlations between substantive entities (Renshon 2016, East 1972, Galtung 1964, Volgy and Mayhall 1995, Volgy et al. 2011, Volgy et al. 2014, Wallace 1971), most large N status research runs afoul of the contextual and historically contingent quality of status attributes (Duque 2016). The usual method operationalizes status by counting and ranking material “status attributes”. Then by linking these to the aggregated level of diplomatic recognition, calculate whether there is a status “deficit” or “inconsistency”. However, this approach defines status attributes a priori and thus reifies instead of accounting for the contextual inter-subjective, and evolving quality of valued status attributes. Indeed, while social psychology research indicates concern for status is timeless (Renshon 2017), what becomes a valued attribute and what can become a valued attribute for states’ status competition is subject to change (Pouliot, 2014, Neumann 2014). Nonetheless, even in the qualitative case study literature, the changing social structure constituting the “playing field” for status competition is almost always bracketed in analysis. Instead, this research takes the social hierarchy as semi-fixed structural stimulus that interacts with unit level attributes of states to produce particular status seeking strategies (e.g. Larson and Shevchenko 2010, Clunan 2014, Stolte 2015).

Ultimately, in both large N and case study social-psychology literature, the social hierarchy is treated as the independent rather than the dependent variable.

In contrast, this article suggests flipping this around to ask, how and why did particular attributes and practices become symbolically significant for status? Onuf’s chapter 8 provides the conceptual tools for answering these questions. Indeed, as the following will outline Onuf points towards historicizing inter-state competition for standing and in so

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6 Status is likely to constitute an interest for both 17th century sovereigns and 21st century presidents, but competition over particular attributes would have been circumscribed by technology and discourse of the period (e.g. Neumann 2014). Lacking the technology to reliably exchange information on others’ military or the requisite discursive to even to imagine comparing gender equality like today (e.g. Towns 2012, 2010), in the 17th century status competition might have been limited to immediately visible marks of status like palace building and banquet throwing (e.g. Ringmar 2002, 121)

7 Pouliot (2014) and Neumann (2014) are notable exceptions to this trend, however their analysis has relatively limited goal of documenting the change rather than explaining how or why it changed. For example, Pouliot documents the changing status claims of those states seeking to reform the UN security council.
doing, can address the “reification problem” inherent in contemporary large N status research.

Social and Technological Conditions for the Emergence of Status Hierarchies

Onuf theorizes that concern for standing must always be founded upon global comparison. By “global” Onuf means comparing how one compares to more than one other, rather than global in the geographic sense. This mode of rationality can be understood as analogous to an Olympics: one seeks to do better than the other(s) at a given game with the ultimate goal of being best. Like binary comparison this mode of rationality is necessarily relational: one cannot aim to be better or best at something without reference to other participant(s). However, unlike binary comparison, this mode of rationality requires the construction of ranking system: “The set, or whole, then consists of a series of positions occupying a complete and transitive ordering: first place, second place … last place. Furthermore, the places in such an ordering come with cardinal values (…). Only now can she say: I want to be best.” (Onuf 1989, 267) While also relational, unlike binary comparison, global comparison does not involve wanting what the other has in a zero sum game, but to want to do better than others in some socially valuable thing(s).

8 Drawing on an eclectic array of classic and contemporary social theory, Onuf then argues that there are only three possible grounds of comparison: internal, binary, and global comparison. The first is intrapersonal comparison, which will be immediately familiar to IR scholars as the liberal preference for absolute gains. Onuf names this as an interest in wealth. However, by “wealth” Onuf does not mean just money, but anything of value one can desire more of: whether money, love, knowledge or something else. Internal comparison involves comparing “any state of affairs in which other people’s attributes, preferences, choices count only as a resource for or obstacle to choice” (Onuf 1989, 266). Onuf’s second ground of comparison is binary, which is labelled interest in security. Here, the grounds for comparison are associated with the realist understanding of relative gains and the security dilemma: “Any gain to either one must come at the expense of the other. The preferred situation for either chooser could well involve a lower aggregate of welfare for both”. But again, this is social (and constructed) because it involves constructing a whole and the two actors’ relative parts before the assessment of incompatible preferences can be made. Once done, the actor chooses “among alternatives to achieve a state of affairs that gains her the best possible position relative to the other. Now she says: I want more, so the other has less.” (Onuf 1989, 266) Unlike many latter day constructivists, Onuf does not juxtapose his theory of social construction in opposition to rationalists (Roberts 2017, 111, Barkin 2010, 3). Instead, in chapter 8 of WOOM, Onuf seeks to demonstrate the social construction of rationality. In order to do this, Onuf begins from a deliberately conventional definition of rational action: “choosing (what is or at least what one thinks to be): the best means to achieving a given end, goal, or objective” (Harsanyi 1983, 231 cited in Onuf 1989, 259). Then, drawing on economic micro-theory, Onuf describes how faced with diverse ends, humans need to order preferences. So far so normal. Yet, as Onuf points out, “What people compare are [possible] states of affairs that must already have been constructed to allow comparison” (Onuf 1989, 266– my emphasis). This demand for comparison offers the opening for theorizing the social content of interests Onuf wishes to illuminate. For Onuf, comparison between one preference over another requires language, which implies rules: socially produced but individually-interpreted guides to rational action. Therefore, as Roberts (2017) suggests, this means WOOM’s discussion of rationality in chapter 8 can reconcile constructivism with rational choice.
WOOM’s chapter 8 illuminates several historical processes that have enabled global comparison between states and thus points towards investigating the emergence of particular status markers and status hierarchies. For global comparison to engender mutual competition, the rules must be publicly known, and the participants must value the game (see Johnston 2001, 501-503). Extrapolating from WOOM, it seems clear that Onuf suggests the construction of rationality based upon global comparison requires more demanding technological and social conditions to be met before competition over standing can become possible than for the other grounds for comparison (internal and binary). Although one can compete with another without them realizing it, it would not constitute a competitive dynamic where awareness of the others’ performance generates specific action the part of the other and vice versa. In domestic society, these conditions are met relatively easily for individuals on multiple fields. Most modern societies have multiple, highly institutionalized ranking; whether in school, work or play, public ranking schema are ubiquitous (Pouliot 2014, 193). International society has lagged far behind domestic society in terms of publicly valued and accepted rankings, but it is catching up (Young 2002, 8). Indeed, for Onuf, social and technological changes have gradually made competition for standing among states 1) possible and 2) likely in a growing range of activities, qualities and attributes.

For instance, Onuf argues the institution of state sovereignty has made comparison between communities possible. It is ironic that sovereign equality between states provides the “conditions necessary for global comparison” and thus hierarchical differentiation along different measures (Onuf, 1989, p. 280).\(^\text{10}\) Or as Paolucci caustically puts it in a different context, “an equal opportunity to become unequal” (Paolucci 2011: 4). This does not imply that all states in the system necessarily constitutes the whole of a singular global ranking schema, but sovereignty enables competition over standing between states. Without the emergence of relatively isomorphic sovereign state system as a social fact and if actors did not share a common collective identity (state), comparing actors would be difficult (for related discussion see Desrosières and Naish 2002) and social

\(^{10}\) To clarify, I use hierarchy here in the “broad” sense: as “an intersubjectively constituted (or maintained) structure of inequality” that include but are not limited to “systems of gendered, racial, geographical, and civilizational inequalities” (Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 631). I should clarify that this is different from WOOM, which uses hierarchy to mean in the formal narrow, Weberian sense. Onuf distinguishes between hierarchy heteronomy and hegemony. This is a useful typology in its own right, but for my purposes here it would unnecessarily complicate matters.
competition would be akin to comparing pineapples and potatoes. For Onuf, as international society has developed, it has enabled “resources previously understood as providing the means for security become measures of states’ standing. Chief among these measures are land area, population, national wealth, industrial capacity, technological achievements and, of course, military capability.”

In a move that may surprise those who associate Onuf with the linguistic turn, he suggests that technological improvements in mass media have enabled global competition over standing. Pointing to the growing ease with which information about other states is circulated, Onuf suggests that a growing number of attributes have become a publicly verifiable and thus potentially available for global comparison. Onuf was writing in pre-internet era; the material capacity to share information he observed has only accelerated since. This acceleration has also developed in symbiosis with the governmental will to categorize, monitor, and rank states on an expanding array of socio-economic criteria. Twenty first century international organizations have quite literally begun “ranking the world” on hitherto hidden qualities: from gender equality to corruption (Cooley and Snyder 2015). Since the 1990s, the number of organizations that rank and rate countries has exploded: 83 of the 96 in total have appeared since 1990, 66 of those since 2001 (Cooley and Snyder 2015).

In short, Onuf points us towards investigating the social and material conditions that need to be met before an attribute or activity can become salient for an actor’s status: they must attach a value to their position, and have requisite information to make global comparisons. Onuf’s forgotten chapter provides a brief illustration of how one might problematize and investigate shifts towards an interest in standing in different spatial and historical contexts. For instance, In WOOM chapter eight, Onuf argues that changes in military and information technology have led to states having more interest in maintaining standing in military power. In short, his argument is that as war has become increasingly destructive, it ceases to be a means to security because its use undermines that very security. Thus, Onuf argues, a rational state would likely seek to maintain a high ranking

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11 As De Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson (2011) put it, the “ontological big bang” of the birth of the state system at Westphalia is a myth. The rise of the sovereign state is an ongoing and messy process, in which the sovereign ideal has never been realized in practice (Krasner 1999)

12 Indeed, WOOM’s constructivism resists ideational pigeon holing, as Onuf makes clear: “the material and the social contaminate each other, but variably (...) To say that people and societies construct each other is not to imply that this is done wholly out of mind.” (1999, 36)
in military power and the potent public threat it implies, but avoid actually using their arsenal. Instead, “military capability…should not be treated as an asset, to be expended in the pursuit of some other interest like security, because its depletion will adversely affect one’s standing.” Onuf (1989, 282). Critically, this pattern only gets more pronounced the more destructive the weaponry. Unusually for WOOM, Onuf makes a substantive first order claim about international relations—the cold war arms race:

“In the post-war standings, the position of the United States and the Soviet Union confirm the paradox of power as ubiquitous measure and useless asset. The destructiveness of nuclear weapons ensures they provide security only if they are not used for security. Thus freed for use as a measure of standing, these weapons accumulate in stockpiles far larger than required by the logic of deterrence. (Onuf, 1989, p 282 – my emphasis).

While there is insufficient space here to examine this claim empirically, at first glance, it would appear to offer a plausible answer to the defensive realist puzzle of the cold war arms race. Furthermore, suggesting that states seek security by seeking to maintain a high position in publicly known military rankings is congruent with more nuanced strains of realism: Several theorists point to the important difference between being powerful, and being recognized as such in a given context (Guzzini 1993, 453-453, Gilpin 1983, Glaser 1994).

13 The fact that the Soviet Union and the US raced to 40,000 operative nuclear weapons by 1980s weapons constitutes a significant puzzle to defensive realists (Waltz 1981, Jervis 1993, Glaser 1994). Indeed, Waltz supports the claim that the superpower’s stockpiles of nuclear weapons were by the 1970s much larger than required by the logic of deterrence. Waltz (1981) argues the spread of nuclear weapons would help rather than hinder world peace. The central plank of the argument rests on how nuclear weapons immense destructive capacity, deliverability, and invulnerability of modern nuclear weapons means that they remove pressure to arms race once invulnerable second strike capability is acquired. Unlike, conventional weapons where one must keep pace lest the enemy can overwhelm, once the second strike capability is sufficiently destructive, a state need not match their opponents force levels to deter, and thus guarantee their security. Thus, Waltz states with characteristic certainty, “The logic of deterrence eliminates incentives for strategic arms racing”, before glossing over the puzzling disjuncture between theory and practice this claim produces: “This should be easier for lesser nuclear states to understand than it has been for the US and the USSR.” Waltz’s logic is impeccable, yet reality, as is its wont, did not live up to theory. Echoing Waltz 15 years later, Glaser states realism’s puzzle even more explicitly (1994, p. 87)

14 Neo-realism provides good reason for why states would value their standing on nuclear weapons or other indices that serve as a proxy for military power Certainly, the simplest means of achieving security is to acquire the military power to fight off or conquer adversaries: self-help in its simplest. Yet, as Glaser (Glaser 1994) points out, relational power to influence, deter, and win wars against others is hard to calculate, for statesmen and scholars alike. If a state wishes to avoid costly and unnecessary wars, maximizing security implies maximizing recognized standing in the hierarchies of whatever serves as a public proxy for relational power (usually assumed to be modern military weaponry, but not only this). Thus, sticking within neorealist assumption of maximizing security, a states’ interest in security collapses into an interest in gaining and maintaining recognition for high standing in the relational power ranking of states (Onuf, 1989, p. 269-284).
I would add at least two more historical developments that make a shift towards global comparison possible and increasingly likely in a growing range of attributes and policy fields. First, the UN and the spread of human rights discourse has led to more societies sharing a similar scientific ontology for comprehending international issues (Pouliot 2011) and arguably moving towards valuing the same things. Further, I would venture that over the last two centuries a discursive shift has taken place, in which ranking schema based upon “ascribed” status attributes have been supplanted by ranking based upon “achieved” status attributes (Linton 1936, Parsons 1949). In the 19th century European states ranked the world according to racial hierarchies, while grounds for comparison, participants could not compete within the game to change their position. Thus, while this static ranking schema was consequential for legitimizing colonialization (Zarakol 2010, Doty 1996) it could not be said to engender competition for standing in the manner that hierarchies based upon changeable status attributes can: for example, military capabilities, Trafficking (Kelley and Simmons 2015), or Ease of Doing Business (see Towns and Rumelili 2017). Indeed, measures of achieved attributes form by far the majority of the 90+ new global ranking organizations that have emerged since the 1990s (Cooley and Snyder 2015).

Ultimately, Onuf directs us to look for at the historical contingency and social conditions that enable and engender status competition over particular attributes or actions. This is compatible with most social-psychology Large N status research, even if the historical contingency is usually conjured away in the empirical analysis. As Renshon (2017, 52-53) indicates in his suggestions for further research: “Another question concerning status is where it originates; that is, where does status come from? There may be multiple hierarchies in international politics, each one based upon different valued attributes.” To a certain extent this has begun, O’Neil draws a distinction between “public” and “private” state qualities, arguing that highly public events (e.g. nuclear tests) were well suited to generating prestige contra for example, social welfare provision. Yet, as Onuf indicates, what attributes are public and which are private is not fixed; the qualities O’Neill (2006) considered private have increasingly become publicized in global rankings. Thus, following Onuf’s lead, it might be helpful to study how attributes move along the continuum between private and public with view to understanding how these shifts may engender competition for standing and thus shape policy. Such a move would also follow
Alex Cooley (2015) and Morten Jerven’s (2016) call for broadening research into global rankings from methodological questions of accuracy, to an agenda that incorporates the social consequences of global rankings.

2. Status Competition as a Relational Process & Change within Hierarchies

By far the most common social-psychology theory underpinning contemporary status research is Social Identity Theory\(^{15}\) (SIT). SIT posits that individuals stake emotion and value upon their memberships in social groups and seek to make favorable comparisons between their group and rival groups. Translated into international relations, SIT based-status researchers suggest that states create foreign policy strategies designed to facilitate favourable comparisons to their peer group and thus generate self-esteem. Larson and Shevchenko (2004, 2011, 2014) provide the most developed and widely used theorization of SIT. They theorize that whether a state seeks status via competition, social creativity or emulation depends upon a combination of their unit characteristics and the “legitimacy and stability” of the social hierarchies of the system (Shevchenko and Larson, 2014, p. 38). For instance, Shevchenko and Larson (2014) argue Brazil and India pursued socially creative foreign policies in response to a relatively stable and legitimate international order and because their respective domestic cultures made social emulation of the West politically unpalatable. While there are several critiques one could make of this analysis, what is important for our purposes here is that social structure (hierarchy) is theorized but only as broad environmental conditions that stimulate a discrete status seeking strategy of individual states. The rival *Others* in the status seeking equation are left indistinct and in the background

A second important strand of status research concerns those that seek to find a statistical correlation between some form of “status discrepancy” and some type of discrete foreign policy action (almost always war). Renshon (2016) provides the most sophisticated large N status research and can be considered exemplary of quantitative status research. In short, Renshon develops *status dissatisfaction* theory which posits that states that lack the social recognition their attributes warrant may use war as a rational corrective measure to

\(^{15}\) Tajfel (1978) is considered the founding text of SIT in social psychology, meanwhile (Mercer 1995) instigated its importation into International Relations.
address this status discrepancy. To operationalize status dissatisfaction theory, “status attributes” are counted and ranked using the proxy of military capabilities (using the Composite Index of National Capability). Then by relating the ranking of status attributes to a ranking of “ascribed status” – diplomatic recognition measured by embassies received—it is calculated whether there is a “status deficit”. States’ deficits and surpluses are then translated into independent variables and tested for statistical relationship to war initiation. Renshon finds strong a statistically significant correlation between status dissatisfied states and war initiation across all periods between 1817 and 2010. Moreover, he finds that fighting for status is rational because states diplomatic recognition (ascribed status) usually increases regardless of the outcome of the war.

While superficially similar, Jackson and Nexon’s (1999) distinction between “substantialism” and “processual relationalism” illuminates how Onuf’s theorization of global comparison and standing posits a radically different ontological starting point to most other status research. While the extant status literature cited above have huge differences in method and empirical focus, both the large N literature and the SIT research are almost all united by their “substantialist” ontology. A substantialist ontology takes entities logically prior to their interactions, which seeks to explain how differences in structural or actor level variables lead to discrete events or outcomes (Jackson and Nexon 1999). The result is that entities (individuals, groups, states) are treated as “billiard balls” bouncing off one another in different directions, at varying forces, but remaining fundamentally unchanged as units (they are still billiard balls). As Jackson and Nexon (1999, 299) point out, “substantialist accounts require a moment of rupture and an either/or choice”: a discrete action on behalf of self-motivated monad responding to environmental factors or unit qualities constituted as independent variables.

Renshon (2016) provides a good illustration of the limitations of putting status dynamics into a substantialist framework. In short, Renshon (2016) turns the difference between ranking in CINC and ranking in embassies to produce an independent variable possessed

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16 The limitations of using diplomatic embassies as a proxy for status recognition and the broader methodological issues with large N status research have been discussed in some depth elsewhere (Beaumont and Røren 2016). There is little need (nor space to go over this again here) but it is worth noting that in his forthcoming monograph *Fighting for Status* (2017), the multi-method-research design addresses several of these criticisms by conducting qualitative case studies.

17 Notable exceptions include Pouliot (2014) Neumann (2014) and De Carvalho and Neumann (2015a)
by the state (status deficit), felt by the individual leaders (status dissatisfaction), that prompts a discrete action (war initiation.) In practice, what this means is that he collapses a longer, relational process of arms acquisition and diplomatic recognition into a unit level variable (status deficit). This means that Renshon cannot help but misses much of the status seeking action: the interactive process through which actors may have been striving to “be best” by seeking to improve their standing by reference to what their rivals are doing. Thus, Renshon ends up capturing the rare events in which states seek status via the drastic measure of war, but misses the process that led to it, not to mention all the competition for standing in military power that did not lead to war.\(^{18}\) The SIT status-research suffers from a similar problem. The absence of The Other(s) in their conception of hierarchy means that the foreign policy strategy becomes a discrete choice apparently unrelated to the specific actions of rival peer group members. Thus, what both branches of status research miss is the dynamic element of status competition shaped by the position and policies of rivals in the hierarchy.

In contrast, WOOM sits squarely in what Jackson and Nexon call processional relational theorizing where theorists assume “social interaction as logically prior to the entities doing the interacting” (1999, 296). This is well illustrated by how Onuf conceives of the dynamic, relational process of status competition.\(^{19}\) According to Onuf, to derive an interest in standing, one must make a global comparison by constructing a ranking, which is relational for everyone (because every move up or down a ranking can have ripple effects), but is distinct from the individual wishes of the participants (Onuf 1989, 267-268). Assuming several actors are invested in a competition for standing in a particular hierarchy, a policy that sought standing in a given metric would have to be informed by consideration of how that policy would improve their relational position in the ranking. Whether ranking in military power or human rights adherence, the policies of the others would provide the guide for what policies would need to be pursued in order to move up the ranking. If accepting a large number of refugees became the barometer of standing, then one would need to know how many refugees the rivals took to know how to

\(^{18}\) In Renshon’s defence, his intent was to explain the incidence of war – what he calls the “gold standard” of IR research – but regardless of discrete action a researcher uses this approach to explain, it will suffer from a similar handicap. But perhaps there was no process of status competition that led to war? This is theoretically possible, but also unlikely: while Renshon compellingly argues war is one rational option to address a status deficit, it is reasonable to assume that it would not be the first choice of means.

\(^{19}\) In contrast, Onuf does proceed from individual entities or their attributes, but in the middle, with the deed (Onuf 1989, 36)
compete. If ranking in battleships is prized, then knowing how big one’s rivals are shapes the policy requirements to pursue high standing.

Critically, it is the relation between the competitors the ranking that shapes the policy, not the attribute of the unit itself (e.g. Renshon), nor the qualities of the hierarchical structure as a whole (e.g. Larson & Shevchenko). Competition for standing conceived this way would engender a continuous process of competition informed by effects the other rivals’ policies had on position in rankings: it may even end up resembling Lewis Carroll’s Red Queen’s Race where it takes “all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.” (Caroll 1872, 145) Crucially, a competition for standing embodies Jackson and Nexon’s very definition of how processual relationalism conceptualizes change: “like reverberations along a web of interdependencies” (1999, 299). Although, Onuf does not explicitly state it, it is clear that he envisions this as a competitive process by how he uses Cold War competition as an illustration. He argues the “superpower” competition over standing produced “climate of contest and spectacle-an unending tournament, rounds of play in many arenas, all of us a captive audience.” (Onuf 1989, 283- my emphasis).

Jackson and Nexon also argue that processual relational approaches better account for changes in the entities themselves. By building on Onuf’s metaphor of an Olympic competition for standing we can do just that. First, it is worth noting that “position” in a ranking does indeed change with the process of a competition for standing. However, this is a little socially thin, and by distinguishing between status in a social hierarchy and standing in a ranking we can develop it further. I suggest conceiving of status as a subset of relationally formed identity20 (De Carvalho and Neumann 2015a, 5) that constitutes a higher or lower position in social hierarchy. In contrast to standing, a status in a social hierarchy can be named: superpower/great power, master/slave, etc. For example, one can be a great power; one cannot be high standing, but only have it, seek it, or lose it. Talcott Parson’s (1949, 81) distinction here between “general status” its relationship to “secondary criteria” is useful here. For Parsons, secondary criteria (attributes, qualities, actions etc.) stand in symbolic relation to general society-wide status hierarchy. Tweaking this conception, I suggest treating status position in a social hierarchy as analogous to Parson’s

20 Although Wendt (1999) popularized in IR the idea (Hansen 2006, 21-22, Rumelili 2004, 31-32) that identities can be pre-social, I rely here upon the assumption that all identities are socially formed through juxtaposition to some other (see Neumann 1996 for a discussion of the academic lineage of this understanding of identity)
general status, and suggest standing in particular rankings contributes to that status. Thus, status is the meaning imbued, inter-subjectively recognized, identity position that might be constituted via standing in various socially significant, publicly known rankings. For instance, high standing in security indicators, membership in the P5, or a relatively large GDP might each be partially symbolic or constitutive of “great power” status. As Neumann (2014) and Pouliot (2014) have shown, gaining recognition of great powerhood has rarely been a function of just one criteria (i.e military power) but an amalgam of qualities, which are contested and change with practice over time. Finally, it is worth noting how this makes status different from identity: identity constitute who one is, not necessarily where one stands in a hierarchy. One cannot have a “high identity” for instance, or “seek identity”. Although most relational identity theorists invoke a hierarchy, they usually leave it undertheorized (Mattern and Zarakol 2016).

With this in mind, we can return to the Olympic metaphor to illustrate how position in rankings might translate into changes in status and changes to the hierarchy. A competitor in a sailing race has a position in the ranking, but she also has a socially significant status that changes as the competition proceeds. While the participants begin equal, the process of the race soon generates a socially consequential status hierarchy. The first placed participant gets recognized as having the status of “winner” of the first race and the status of the “leader” going into the next. Meanwhile, the second placed contestant becomes “the challenger”, and depending on the scoring system the rest of the competitors might be identified as “laggards”. The rules of the game stipulate performance in a series of sailing races means players accumulate points that carry over

21 Onuf (2017, 159) suggests “status assignments account for a significant proportion of the ‘identity labels’” found in international relations.

22 One important exception is Ann Towns (2012, 2010) who has foregrounded hierarchy in developing a theory of norm emergence. However, she still sticks with “identity” as her means of conceiving of the actors’ place in the hierarchy, which seems an awkward fit. Indeed, Like Rumelili (2004), McCourt (2014) and indeed Onuf (2017), I consider the term identity an underspecified and sometimes vacuous concept; status is my attempt at a solution. One cannot seek a “high identity” or “improve identity”, but one can improve one’s status and achieve recognition for high status. Moreover, the logic of action (appropriateness) for thin constructivists, cannot incorporate the notion of excelling, or performing norms well or badly, in the manner status permits. Second, thin constructivist theorizing is ambivalent about hierarchies (Towns 2010, e.g. Wendt 1999). In contrast, with the concept status, hierarchies are explicit and unavoidable. Given that almost all relations and interactions in the international are structured by some kind of hierarchy (Renshon 2017, 7, Mattern and Zarakol 2016, Towns 2010), the concept of status better facilitates focus on these social power structures that inform the jostling for position within them. Finally, while “thick” constructivists do better, they tend to emphases crude self/radical other hierarchies. This focus has precluded theorizing how less pernicious constructions of difference also constitute subjects and produce different self/other relations (Rumelili 2004). Given that most states international relations are characterized by non-violent rivalry, this has left a big empirical and theoretical gap in thick/post constructivist research (Rumelili 2004)
into the next race. These points imply different positions and status’ that emerge and change as the races proceed. Usually, by the latter races, the behavior of the sailors seems odd because the leader in the final round ceases trying to win the race itself, but sacrifices winning that round to block off the challenger. In short, the mutual awareness of their relational position in the rankings as the game proceeds changes the status of the participants. which in turn informs their behavior to one another. The key takeaway point is that “players” statuses are formed, maintained and lost through the process of competition, contra the usual rationalist conceptualization of interaction whereby “players” compete in “context free games” in which they “enter with preferences formed and leave with identities unchanged.”  

Returning to international relations, the superpowers nuclear arms race can be used to illustrate how the process of competition produces a new and socially significant status positions for the participants. The process of security competition during the 1950s manifested in nuclear arms race rapidly put considerable quantitative and qualitative distance in nuclear arms between the “superpowers” and the rest of the world. Analogous to how status of the leader and the challenger sailing emerges during the process of a sailing race, so the growing gap between the US and the Soviet Union and the rest, engendered the emergence of a new status category: the superpower. While willingness to pursue global ends and fight proxy wars also constituted the status of superpower (Buzan 2011), as Ringmar (2002, 128) notes, “nuclear armaments were what defined a superpower as such”. Yet, given U.K, China, France joined the nuclear club, but not the superpower club, it is more accurate to say it was the ability and willingness to compete in the nuclear arms race that became an implicit status marker for superpowerhood. Indeed, this seems well illustrated by the connection between the U.S and the Soviet’s arms build-up and emergence and growth in the use of the word “superpower”  

23 Indeed, McCourt (2014) also takes a processional relational approach but draws on Meadian symbolic interactionism to theorize roles in foreign policy. It is worth noting here that McCourt does not foreground social structure or hierarchy as I am trying to here, nor does he seek to explain status (or role) competition.

24 This should not be taken to imply simple causation, the rise in nuclear weapons caused the superpower category. Rather, I suggest that the rise in nuclear weapons initially led to the superpower category emerge but soon afterwards the two become co-constitutive: the need to be discursively constituted as a superpower itself becomes imbricated with the demand for nuclear weapons.
The argument here is that superpower status was not an absolute degree of power to be reached, but relationally contingent on being able to compete with *the Other* on various rankings of social significance, most importantly, nuclear weapons. Similar to how maintaining leader status in a race requires running, maintaining superpower status required constant strong performance in the nuclear arms race. While ineffective at limiting strategic nuclear arms (Miller 1984), Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties I & II (SALT I & II) served as a key site where superpower status was practiced and the *boundary* with the rest of the world maintained. SALT I & II were highly public (Miller
1984) but exclusionary spectacles: while they embodied apocalyptical significance for the fate of the world, all but the superpowers had to watch from outside. Here, I would argue that superpower status was publicized, institutionalized, and arguably ritualized. If one side had followed Jervis (1979) and Waltz’s (1981) advice and maintained a minimum second strike capability it would have made arms control moot, and for the Soviet Union, this would have implied losing one of the only sites where the United states recognized it as an equal (Ringmar 2002, Neumann 1996). From this perspective, there was social value placed on staying in the arms race beyond fears about physical security.

This little vignette has sought to highlight the theoretical potential of an Onufian processional relational conception of standing competition. Security scholars have often used the prisoner dilemma to model the security dilemma, but given excess of the nuclear arms race it might be understood as a status dilemma too. Put differently, once second strike capability was guaranteed in the Cold War, being the sucker in the prisoner dilemma ceases to imply annihilation but public humiliation (from loss of superpower status). Moreover, with an audience of alliance partners, relying on one’s military standing to deter, the non-aligned to woo watching on, and domestic audiences to please, being publicly known to be the sucker in the standings was something neither side’s leaders could (rationalistically) afford to accept. Further, it sought to show how the process of arms racing itself led to the emergence of socially valuable status position within a new social hierarchy: superpower at the top, mere normals below.

3. Broad Hierarchies within Anarchy

Neither realists nor liberals accept that one can suggest a-priori that absolute gains matter in economics and relative gains matter in the security (see Mearsheimer 1994, Keohane and Martin 1995) However, instead of asking “what sector?” following Onuf’s lead, it is perhaps more pertinent: how are the actors related to each other in global hierarchies? Onuf’s theorization of interest in global standing implies that position in global rankings offers could provide useful hierarchical context for understanding when relative gains

25 Their importance for constituting high status in global politics is well illustrated by the UK’s chagrin at being relegated to the side-lines of SALT negotiations: their exclusion was widely received as confirmation for domestic commentators that the UK had lost its “seat at the top table” (Freedman 1980, McCawire 2006)
may become a sticking point. As noted in the above discussion of global comparison, states near the top and bottom can change places without affecting each-others standing. Therefore, one would expect that the ordinal distance (counted in places in the rankings and the absolute distance (counted in attribute) from a rival, matter. The closer together states are in a ranking competition they are invested in, the more likely they will be sensitive relative gains. Conversely, the further the distance in position, the less likely concern for relative gains will become a sticking point.

Translated into practice, this makes intuitive sense. It would be absurd to assume that the US would worry about Tonga acquiring relative gains lest they accumulate over time and become a security threat; yet this is exactly the argument realists make to argue why concern for relative gains would matter in economic issues (Mearsheimer 1994). To take a historical example from the security sector, in 1962 the US struck a generous nuclear deal (the Nassau Agreement) that provided the UK with its latest nuclear weapons system at far less cost than the UK could have managed itself, and at a technological level that would have been beyond its means (Freedman 1980). In relative gains terms, this was a huge victory for the UK. It would be very difficult to argue that the US could have been concerned about the UK’s relative gains in this instance. Thus, even in the high politics of nuclear weapons, relative gains do not appear always salient. But why? I would suggest distance in the ranking can make cooperation on poor terms more likely. The US could strike such a deal because the UK was far from being able to seek superpower status, and moreover, one could argue that maintaining a large and strong alliance network also part of a wider competition for standing with the Soviet Union.

Counter-intuitively, introducing hierarchical context to neo-neo scholarship need not imply as radical departure as it might first appear. Although neo-neo-scholars work through the implications of formal anarchy, they tacitly invoke a broad structural hierarchy to do a great deal of the explanatory work. Indeed, neorealism provides an ideal example of why it is useful—in general and for this essay—to distinguish between “narrow hierarchy” and “broad hierarchy”, to borrow Zarakol & Bially Mattern’s (2016) terms. When “Neo-Neo” scholars refer to anarchy they refer to the narrow conception: the absence of hierarchy defined as a monopoly over legitimate authority. In contrast, the “broad” conception hierarchy includes structures of stratification and inequality—
whether moral, ideational, material— that engender dynamics that (may) cut across narrow or formally defined hierarchies.26

Returning to neorealism, using this narrow/broad optic reveals how neorealism invokes both conceptions of hierarchy. Neorealists and neoliberals explicitly invoke the narrow conception to define the system as anarchic, but then implicitly invoke a broad conception of hierarchy in their analysis. Yet, as Bially-Mattern and Zarakol (2016, 16-17) point out, it is the vertical position of states within the material hierarchy that stimulates different kinds of interests. If a state is high enough in the material hierarchy to be a “great power”, a rational state will strive for regional hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001). If a state is low on the material power ranking (and rational) it will bandwagon or balance (and keep its fingers crossed). In other words, the dictates of anarchy create systemic pressure that forces states to pursue self-help, but it is a state’s position in the material hierarchy that explains the specifics of their response. It is perhaps because the broad hierarchy has remained implicit that neorealists have not fully developed the “logic of positionality” implicit in their theorizing (Mattern and Zarakol 2016).

Onuf’s (1989, 268-271) points towards this logic of positionality, and in so doing, highlights game theory’s blind spot in understanding context and the implications of a competition for global standing. Here, Onuf recounts the famous story of how Axelrod (1984) invited leading game theorists from across academia to create programs to play an iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma tournament. To win the tournament, one had to have the highest points total after one’s “player” had played against all others: in Onufian language, they had an ultimate interest in standing based upon global comparison for total points gains accumulated. As Onuf explains, to Axelrod’s surprise, the naïve (or nicest strategy) “tit for tat” won the competition. In his write up, Axelrod accused the contestants “of being too competitive for their own good, not being forgiving enough, and being too pessimistic about the responsiveness of the other side” (1984, 40). However, Onuf provides the conceptual vocabulary Axelrod lacked to offer a more precise explanation:

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26 A famous and straightforward example of research that takes the broad conception would be Said (1979) Orientalism. Here, non-western states inferior position in western discourse legitimizes, enables and reproduces patterns of domination and discrimination against non-western peoples.
Participants need have understood that the move from isolated sequences of
games to a round-robin tournament called for a move from binary comparison to
internal comparison as the appropriate activity for achieving the end in question.
In single plays of the game, the end is "winning" that play. In repeated plays, the
end in question requires a global comparison of whatever is achieved through
internal comparison. (Onuf 1989, 269)

The upshot is that to win a competition based on global comparison may make
willingness to be the “sucker” the best strategy for winning a competition with several
others. Moreover, when an actor considers the distance in ranking positions if they are
interested in standing, there would be an additional incentive to be “nice” to those
significantly lower in the ranking. Translated into international relations this would
appear to be reflected in how the superpowers negotiations with smaller partners.
Developing countries successfully played the superpowers off against each other to strike
generous asymmetric deals with their superpower patron (Keohane and Nye 1977, 165-
218) While in a one-off-game the superpower might consistently lose relative to its
smaller opponent, but in the global standings those relative losses may constitute relative
gains made against the rival superpower (see also Snidal 1991). In the economic realm,
this might help explain the extent of EU cooperation. Perhaps the gains members of the
EU make compared to rivals outside the EU offset concern for relative gains between
members. Critically, an IR’s prisoner dilemma theorists, which generate interests based
on the assumption of formal anarchy and not position in a broader hierarchy, miss this
contextual influence of position on the potential for cooperation.

But surely Onuf offers a social theory of status and standing? How can one use a
prisoners’ dilemma tournament to illustrate the social construction of rationality? As
always for Onuf, it all comes back to rules: Comparisons are social constructions, made
by rules. When the rules change, so do grounds of comparison, choices, and results.” As
Onuf explains, had Axelrod defined the objective as to accumulate most wins in
individual games, he “would have found himself affirming the popular principle, nice
guys finish last.” (1989, 269). Axelrod made the rules for his tournament, but
international relations lacks an Axelrod; people make the rules of their world and their
competitions themselves. Those rules are a historically contingent and subject to change.
Onuf shows us why we should pay attention and offers the means to investigate how and
why they change.
Conclusion

This essay has argued that WOOM chapter 8 offers at least three novel theoretical insights for contemporary International Relations research. First, how chapter 8 points the way to problematize the emergence of status hierarchies by historicizing the conditions for competitions for standing. Perhaps surprisingly, he suggests scholars pay attention to both social conditions (i.e. the emergence of social facts like sovereignty) and “material”: technological factors that make comparisons possible. Second, this article has sought to illuminate the value added of a processional relational ontology for investigating status competition. It sought to suggest such an ontology can better capture the dynamic qualities of status competition compared to the substantialist approaches that predominate within contemporary status research. Third, that working through the implications of this, the article sought to illustrate how the “gains” debate could be fruitfully revisited by foregrounding position of players in social hierarchies. Specifically, I suggested that by foregrounding broad hierarchies that structure relations between states, we can gain considerable analytical purchase on the chances of cooperation under anarchy. Ultimately, this article has sought to elucidate how chapter eight helps us see status and standing competition between states in new and productive ways, and that to study status, one should make sure one has read Onuf.
References


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Appendices

Appendix A: Typology of Citation Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Contest</th>
<th>Objectify</th>
<th>Approve</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shallow/drive by</td>
<td>Thumb Bite</td>
<td>Nod</td>
<td>Salute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deep/engaged</td>
<td>Fight</td>
<td>Narration</td>
<td>Dance</td>
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</tbody>
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Appendix B: “Synoptic Table” of all the typologies found in World of Our Making
### Faculties of Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigms of Experience</th>
<th>The category of existence and the constitution/regulation of its meaning in space and of time</th>
<th>The category of material control and the constitution/regulation of modalities of control (ch. 1)</th>
<th>The category of discretionary endeavor, agreement and exchange coupled to the constitution/regulation of agency and opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assertive speech acts</td>
<td>Directives (ch. 2)</td>
<td>Commissives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction-rules</td>
<td>Directive rules (ch. 2)</td>
<td>Commitment-rules</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Abductive reasoning</td>
<td>Deduction (ch. 3)</td>
<td>Induction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conjuration</td>
<td>Combat (ch. 3)</td>
<td>Clue-finding</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Dread (ch. 3)</td>
<td>Guilt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitory regimes</td>
<td>Executive regimes (ch. 4)</td>
<td>Administrative regimes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Metonymy (ch. 4)</td>
<td>Synechoe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manners</td>
<td>Virtue (ch. 5)</td>
<td>Rights</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tell the truth</td>
<td>Do no harm (ch. 5)</td>
<td>Keep promises</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hegemony</td>
<td>Hierarchy (ch. 6)</td>
<td>Heteronomy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priests &amp; professors</td>
<td>Warriors &amp; diplomats (ch. 7)</td>
<td>Physicians &amp; merchants</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>Justification (ch. 7, 8)</td>
<td>Implication</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global comparison</td>
<td>Binary comparison (ch. 8)</td>
<td>Internal comparison</td>
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<td>Standing</td>
<td>Security (ch. 8)</td>
<td>Wealth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Touching</td>
<td>Seeing</td>
<td>Hearing</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Onuf (1989, 291)
Figures 1 & 2:

Figure 1. Use of the word “superpower” and “great power” in Google’s digital library
Source: Michel et al. (2010)

Figure 2. U.S. and Russia/Soviet Union Total Stockpiles of Nuclear Warheads
Source: The data for this graph is adapted from Norris and Kristensen (2006).