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Reflections on Endogenous Crises Explanations in a World of Liberal Orders

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One major contribution of this special forum is to develop the potential of endogenous explanations further. In doing so, most contributions focus on institutional dynamics and temporal sequences instead of “comparative statics.” In this commentary, I want to delve deeper into the logic of endogenous explanations of contestations and crises. Based on a general understanding of the concept of endogenous explanation, the article distinguishes different endogenous accounts and locates the contributions to this forum within such a map.

L'une des principales contributions de ce numéro spécial se situe dans l'approfondissement du potentiel des explications endogènes. Ce faisant, la plupart des contributions se concentrent sur la dynamique institutionnelle et des séquences temporelles, et non des « statiques comparatives ». Dans ce commentaire, je souhaite approfondir la logique des explications endogènes des contestations et crises. En se fondant sur une interprétation générale du concept d'explication endogène, l'article fait la distinction entre différents récits endogènes et resitue les contributions de ce numéro spécial au sein d'une telle configuration.

Este número especial realiza una contribución importante, consistente en desarrollar en mayor medida el potencial que tienen las explicaciones endógenas. Al intentar hacer esto, la mayoría de las contribuciones existentes se centran en la dinámica institucional y en las secuencias temporales en lugar de centrarse en la « estática comparativa ». En este comentario, queremos profundizar en la lógica de las explicaciones endógenas de las impugnaciones y de las crisis. Partiendo de la base de una comprensión general del concepto de explicación endógena, el artículo distingue diferentes explicaciones endógenas y ubica las contribuciones a este número especial dentro de dicho mapa.

Introduction

The contributions to this special forum, “Contestation in a World of Liberal Orders,” forcefully develop three important claims. The Introduction to this forum first suggests that the liberal international order (LIO) “is a world of orders, not a monolithic order” (Goddard et al., p. 1). They distinguish four liberal sub-orders (LISOs) by asking about the degree of liberal imprint a sub-order has. This is a crucial analytical move since the so-called LIO strongly deviates from an ideal-typical liberal script.¹ The LIO is, at least partially, a compromise between different visions about the organization of international society, while, for instance, the American constitution largely followed a liberal design. Therefore, it is no surprise that LISOs vary significantly in terms of their liberal imprint. Capturing the sectoral differences between different parts of the overall LIO thus makes a lot of sense, and the chapters in the SI demonstrate its fruitfulness. The forum remains, however, silent on how the LISOs are aggregated to an LIO, which is more than the sum of its sub-orders. It is still necessary to grasp the global governance system as a whole since it is the target of some contestants.

The second significant contribution is the hypothesis that different LISOs produce different contestations. Goddard et al. argue that the combination of a higher level of liberal intrusiveness (see Börzel and Zürn 2021) and legalized institutionalization (Abbott et al. 2000) leads to more vigorous, more fundamental contestation. Some chapters qualify the

legalization part of the hypothesis (e.g., the contributions by Lesch et al. and Hofmann), although most of the contributions align with the expectations.

The third major contribution of this forum is to further develop the potential of endogenous explanations. In doing so, most contributions focus on institutional dynamics and temporal sequences instead of “comparative statics.” In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on the third issue: endogenous explanations of contestations and crises. In the next section, I will clarify what an endogenous explanation entails. Based on these reflections, I will then distinguish different endogenous accounts and locate the contributions to this forum within such a map.

Endogenous Explanations

The meteorite theory explaining the extinction of the dinosaurs is a prime example of an exogenous explanation. Accordingly, the meteorite impact caused widespread devastation, including fires, earthquakes, tsunamis, and a dramatic cooling effect that led to a long-term decline in global temperatures. The cause functions here as a “force.” In contrast, an endogenous explanation for the extinction of the dinosaurs might focus on developments caused by this species itself, such as changes in food availability. An endogenous explanation, thus, seeks to explain the decline by looking inside the declining phenomenon itself rather than searching for external factors (Gerschewski 2022). The underlying understanding of causes is closer to the notion of a “process that continuously embodies itself in constraining

¹For different definitions of the LIO, see Ikenberry (2018) and Lake et al. (2021). For a reconstruction of the liberal script, see Zürn and Gerschewski (2021).

structures.”² This forum develops explanations not of the extinction but of the current crisis³ of the LIO and its sub-orders by looking at features or dynamics that are part of or arise from the order(s).

The distinction between endogenous and exogenous explanations is not externally given—it entirely depends on one’s conception of the institution or order under question. If a conception of the liberal international trade order is based on the theory of comparative advantage, then the economic rise of new states and the subsequent power transformation are endogenous; if your conception focuses on unequal terms of trade, then power transformation must come from the outside. Surprisingly, some chapters seem to assume that the rise of some economies and the subsequent power transformation are prime candidates for an exogenous explanation. In contrast, others see rising inequalities within and between societies as an endogenous explanation. Either may be true, but the categorization depends on the conception of the LIO that is at work.

Not all endogenous accounts are the same. Endogenous explanations vary on at least three counts. First, they may differ regarding their *genealogical depth*. Some depth seems necessary for any endogenous account. In these cases, the explanation of an outcome does not consider only X1 but also X2, which causes X1, etc. The exogenous meteorite theory for the extinction of dinosaurs looks like a complete explanation. Few people would ask further why the meteorite hit the Earth in Pannonia. In contrast, if someone saws off the branch she is sitting on, it almost necessarily raises the question of why she is doing so. The whole notion of endogenous explanation moves us to some extent beyond the framework of (bivariate) comparative statics. Endogenous explanations display an elective affinity to dynamic explanations that contain sequential developments over time. Most consist of sequences that model “a dynamical process whose evolution is governed by its own history” (David 2007, 92). Yet these sequences can be short or long. For instance, an order that produces unjustified inequalities may directly lead to attempts to overhaul it. Longer sequences with more genealogical depth may contain a back-and-forth between the order’s institutions and the affected actors. For instance, a soft contestation rejected by the authority holders may lead to a radicalization of the contestation and a crisis as the next steps. Second, sequences may be reactive or not. *Reactive sequences* can be defined as “mechanisms that contain a change in opportunities, beliefs, or desires” of all members of an order (Zürn 2018, 94).⁴ Reactive sequences thus include agency and allow for choice. A reactive sequence runs through the whole of Coleman’s (1990) bathtub or boat and does not structurally determine the micro-level completely. If the social structure corresponds to a repeated prisoner’s dilemma game, actor strategies remain in the realm of choice (Axelrod 1984). In contrast, *deterministic sequences* create intense structural pressures on actors to act in a certain way so that no choice is left. If twenty horses are in a smallish paddock, the overgrazing of the land is the determined outcome (Harding 1968). In the case of a reactive

sequence, a crisis is an option; in the case of a structurally fully determined sequence, it becomes a necessity.

Finally, reactive and deterministic sequences may involve changing opportunities, beliefs, or desires. A sequence may lead via power transformation to a shift in the opportunity structure so that contestants may, over time, get more resources and/or fewer constraints to change the given order without changing their beliefs or preferences. In other cases, disappointment about exercising authority may lead to actors changing their beliefs and/or preferences. While China’s current contestation of some LISOs has a lot to do with power transformation, Russia’s contestations of the LIO seem to be mainly due to changed political preferences by the country’s leadership.

Different Endogeneities

In the remainder, I discuss and analyze different endogenous crisis explanations by applying these distinctions. It allows for mapping the contributions to this forum along different degrees of endogeneity. The discussion about different architectures of explanations is based on the assumption that two empirically valid explanations may still be of varying quality. Take, for instance, the sudden death of someone. One explanation points to the dysfunctions of the organisms that caused death; another explains that the person was born and everyone has to die. Both accounts may be correct, but one is much more what we want to get when we ask for a good explanation. This means there may be many right explanations of social outcomes that differ in quality (Huck et al. forthcoming). For this reason, the remainder contains an M&M (mapping and mulling) approach.⁵

The mulling stops, however, short of evaluating the different explanations. Which criteria are the best ones depends to some extent on the cases. A certain level of genealogical depth is a feature of good endogenous explanations, but it should not end up in an endless regress. In a stochastic world, reactive sequences that include changing preferences, opportunities, and beliefs look superior, but sometimes structures (including social rules) may determine behavior completely. While I incline to reactive sequences with genealogical depth that considers many agentic changes allowing for contingencies, I cannot provide generalized proof that this inclination is always justified.

Strong Endogeneity

I start with two versions of strongly endogenous explanations that tend to be deterministic. The architecture of these strongly endogenous crisis explanations is famous in social science theorizing. The Marxist theory of crisis due to the falling rate of profit comes probably closest to an ideal-type structuralist extreme of an endogenous explanation. According to Elster (1985, 154), a proper Marxian account of the capitalist crises should be system-immanent and irreversible, in the sense of not being amenable to political regulation from within the capitalist system.

The basic argument of the law of the falling rate of profit is that, as capitalists invest more and more in machinery and other capital goods to increase productivity, the proportion of labor to capital decreases. Subsequently, less and less labor is needed relative to the amount of capital being invested. Because labor is the source of surplus value (profit), this leads to a decline in the rate of profit over

²For these different understandings of causality, see Abbott (1998).

³Half of the contributions start with a first sentence stating that the LIO is “in crisis,” “under stress,” “under fire,” and the like.

⁴Mahoney (2000) has introduced the term in order to point to self-reinforcing or self-undermining processes. Hanrieder and Zürn (2017) have used the term to highlight different dynamics via which orders and institutions produce contestations and contestants. Importantly, institutional pathways do not only work as self-reinforcement over time (path dependency) but may also cause self-undermining dynamics (endogenous crisis explanation).

⁵I owe the M&M terminology to Peter Katzenstein, who is used to seeing chocolate on my desk.

time. The search for profits is system-immanent. And it leads irreversibly to a fall in the rate of profit since politicians cannot reform capitalism to prevent this dynamic, nor can capitalists avoid profit-seeking unless they stop to be capitalists. In Marxian theory, the falling profit rate leads to crises. Though capitalism ends via revolution. It thus requires action, via which the crisis turns into a change of order (Elster 1985). Only at this stage does the Marxian sequence become reactive, and political choice enters the picture. Yet the crises start before: It is structurally determined, based on a short and non-reactive sequence that runs via changed opportunities.

Paradoxically, conservative crises theories of liberal orders mirror the deterministic bend of Marxian thinking. According to Bell (1976), twentieth-century liberal orders fail to adequately address the challenges of modernity because they place too much emphasis on individualism and consumerism and thus neglect the importance of community and tradition. The focus leads to the erosion of traditional institutions and values that underlie liberal orders. The German constitutional lawyer Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde has reduced the argument to its core with his famous dictum: “The liberal, secular state lives on preconditions that it cannot guarantee itself” (1967 translation by M.Z.). It means the liberal democratic state depends on certain communal values and principles, which it cannot create or guarantee. It all amounts to an eating-up crisis theory of liberal orders. Thus, the sequence is non-reactive and short. In contrast to Marxian theory, the crisis involves a change in beliefs and desires, more than just a change in opportunities.

Most of the contributions to the forum avoid deterministic reasoning. On the contrary, there is an emphasis on agency choice by pointing to reactive sequences instead of deterministic sequences and, as the introduction highlights, even to several rounds of them. A strong endogenous explanation would radicalize the existing endogenous explanation of the LIO’s crisis by replacing reactive sequences with a more deterministic sequence. In such an account, the endogenously produced problem directly translates into a crisis of the existing order. The argument according to which the liberal economic order produces unavoidably climate change with catastrophic consequences comes close to such an account.

The Middle Ground

Middle-ground endogenous explanations leave room for agency choices that are circumscribed by tensions built into the existing order. A well-known case is Kennedy’s (1987) theory of hegemonic overextension, also known as the “imperial overstretch” of hegemonic orders. It argues that a hegemonic power that seeks to dominate the international system and maintain a large military presence around the world tends to eventually become overextended. Due to rising costs, the power’s ability to maintain its global dominance will decline. Kennedy argues that this dynamic has played out repeatedly throughout history since the Roman Empire.

The theory contains choice on the side of the hegemon, or it can at least be interpreted this way (see Florig 2010). Making smart and modest policy choices can prevent overextension and cost explosion. Yet the theory does not include a complete reactive sequence because the behavior on the side of the controlled territories is given—they are expected to exercise a certain amount of resistance that increases with distance. The crisis of hegemonic order includes changes in opportunities and desires on the side of

the hegemon. Resources shrink over time, and desires for withdrawal grow.

The theoretical argument in the contribution by Heinkelmann-Wild et al. has a similar architecture. The dominant actors in a liberal order must coopt contestants to maintain order. “When engaging in cooptation, rulers make other actors through their inclusion co-rulers in order to give them a stake in supporting the order that underpins their own rule” (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., p. 4). While existing rulers always try to balance the desire to coopt only a few others and the need to include more, there is a tendency to coopt more over time in a long sequence with different rounds. As a result, control diffuses, which alienates the original ruler and breeds counter-institutionalization. This type of endogenous explanation includes choice (only) by the rulers and works mainly via a change of opportunities and desires on the side of the hegemon.

The explanation, which the authors apply to the liberal trade order, is fascinating, yet it still has a determinist bend. There is a choice but little chance to manage the underlying dilemma. Too much cooptation over time has an element of necessity. The theory also has a realist bend. The wish to rule is stronger than the liberal idea of inclusion; otherwise, there would be no frustration with an increasingly inclusive order.

Going further down the ladder from strong to weak endogeneity, arguments that focus on tensions within the liberal orders are next. In this view, orders are based on ideational scripts containing complex guidelines and injunctions. A concrete order always includes practices of interpretations of these scripts that highlight the potential tensions between different script elements. In the liberal script, for instance, tensions exist between individual and collective self-determination, cosmopolitanism and communitarianism, and free markets and solidarity.

Since the tensions are endogenous to liberal thinking, an utterly one-sided resolution falls outside the liberal script. A script that dissolves markets entirely in favor of a fully equal distribution of goods falls outside the liberal script as well as radical libertarianism in which the individual freedom of the strong trumps all solidarity concerns. Social tensions are thus different from outright contradictions. Tensions describe a relationship between two or more items that do not have a zero-sum relationship. They instead describe a relationship between two or more forces that compete with but also balance each other. Tensions can be socially productive by allowing the creation of new equilibriums that improve both components in parallel. Thus, they refer to variable-sum games. A one-sided resolution of a tension built into a script leads us beyond its borders since it is a necessary part of the script (see Zürn and Gerschewski 2021).

The focus on tensions leads to endogenous explanations since they are a necessary part of the liberal script, yet they leave the choice for both actors: rulers and contestants. Rulers can aim to balance the tension to minimize contestations, and potential contestants can evaluate these balancing attempts. Moreover, different contexts may require a different handling of the tensions. It may include a trial and error process on both sides, including reactive sequences that can be very long. The tension theory mainly runs via opportunities based on stable beliefs and preferences. It can take into account changes in the belief systems but does not explain them.

The contribution by Lavenex is a case of studying contestation in terms of tensions of the liberal order. “The two core norms of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the state’s right to grant asylum, and the individual’s protection against

refoulement—that is, the forceful return to a place where his or her life and liberty would be threatened—address squarely a fundamental tension in the modern international system—without, however, resolving it. This is the tension between the particularism of the Sovereign Territorial Order (STO) and the universalism of the [LIO]” (Lavenex, p. 1). This tension between humanitarian aspiration and state sovereignty unleashes an extended reactive sequence of contestation and adaptation whereby liberal norm entrepreneurs push authority-holders to legal commitments toward refugees, whereas domestic constituencies often resist open borders. Lavenex’s contribution, therefore, works with a high level of genealogical depth that consists of two reactive subsequences: the strengthening of legal commitments to refugees as a response to NGO pressures and the hollowing out of protection as a response to communitarian reactions.

The explanation has a solid endogenous element; it develops a long sequence and contains the possibility of choice at different points in the sequence. This explanation includes an additional essential insight. The tension is not only part of the constitutive order but also constitutive to it. The reactive sequence of order, contestation, and adaption can also be described as a permanent ordering process. These qualities come with one weakness: It remains an *ex post* explanation. Outcomes cannot be predicted because the micro-responses in the reactive sequence are not structurally determined by the liberal order.

The argumentative structure in the contribution by Hofmann is very similar. It points to ambiguities in the LISO of “conflict management built around the use of force” (Hofmann, p. 1). The ambiguity that this contribution points to, however, is not inherent in the liberal script as the colliding principles stem from different scripts—a liberal one and one based on sovereignty. Since not both poles of the tension can be described as liberal, the distinction between endogenous and exogenous dynamics of ordering becomes hard to draw. The described dynamics, however, are similar to the contribution by Lavenex. None of the principles in tension can dominate the other, and the development of ambiguity depends on it. The order is in flux, and it changes permanently. In this view, contestations and responses to contestations can be seen as part of a permanent ordering process.

Weak Endogeneity

Weak endogeneity occurs when the crisis is triggered by features not distinctive for the order under question. The contributions by Tannenwald and Lesch et al. mainly employ the concept of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the practice of claiming to hold beliefs or virtues that one’s behavior does not reflect. It is the art of saying one thing but doing another. Hypocrisy thus can be seen as a form of deception, as it involves presenting oneself or something in a certain way while acting in a contradictory manner. Some emphasize the civilizing force of hypocrisy, according to which even purely self-interested speakers may still be forced or induced “to substitute the language of impartial argument for the language of self-interest” (Elster 2000). Hypocritical actors, thus, are, to some extent, constrained by the norms they preach publicly. Without question, hypocrisy can also erode trust in social institutions, create a double standard that reinforces social inequality, and contribute to social cynicism and disillusionment. Therefore, it can only be of little surprise that a strongly hypocritical order provokes contestations.

The comparison between the international torture prohibition and the duty to prosecute (Lesch et al.) develops a reactive sequence of (i) hypocritical application of rules via (ii) contestation and (iii) ignorance, or, at best, rhetorical concessions to (iv) radicalized contestation that plays out in both instances. The endogeneity in this explanation is displayed in a long sequence with genealogical depth. A long sequence opens up different moments of choice. Therefore, the explanation is far away from structuralist reductionism. It goes further than other papers by explicitly theorizing the contestants’ choices.⁶ In contrast to the framework chapter, the degree of legal institutionalization does not play a key role in affecting the choices of contestants, but powers at the center of the order contest in a less radical way than more peripheral actors (see also Börzel and Zürn 2021).

The paper stands for a weakly endogenous explanation because hypocrisy and double standards that produce contestation are not specific to the LIO or LISOs. Any normative order containing high levels of hypocrisy on the side of the power-holders invites contestations—be it liberal, Islamic, or socialist orders. Moreover, these orders do not differ much in terms of hypocritical inclinations. Hypocrisy, thus, is hardly a distinctive practice of liberal orders—at least not more than other orders. The explanatory burden shifts to the authority- and power-holders in a given order and to those who decide to contest (given that hypocrisy is to some extent ubiquitous).

The contribution by Tannenwald explains the dynamics of the nuclear non-proliferation regime in terms of “unequal distributional effects” and “charges of hypocrisy” (Tannenwald, p. 7). I focus here on charges of hypocrisy. In this concrete case, hypocrisy means that the nuclear incumbents preach the regime’s norms but ignore an essential part of it: nuclear disarmament. On this basis, the paper identifies two reactive sequences. The first one contains contestation on the side of the non-nuclear states that is met with little behavioral adaptation; the second then points to a shift towards liberal counter-institutionalization. Yet the hypocrisy concerns the most illiberal part of the non-proliferation regime: the status inequality between the nuclear and non-nuclear states, whereas the contestants ask for regime liberalization by reducing the status inequality. It is, therefore, the sticking to the non-liberal part of the regimes that produces contestation. Moreover, in contrast to the contribution by Lesch et al., Tannenwald does little to explain the choices of the states. It pretends that it is endogenously given, but does not deeply engage with the concepts of endogeneity and reactive sequences.

The contribution by Thompson on the climate regime shows similarities with Tannenwald’s contribution by also looking at the distributional effects of a given LISO. The paper shows convincingly that the distributional effects of the climate regime obligations play a key role in the ongoing struggle to develop it (further). In this sense, it draws on one of the major insights of modernization theory, according to which frustrated losers with hindered upward mobility may produce crises and revolutions (Gurr 1970). Social change has losers, and the losers of change may cause instability and concerns, even when the aggregate welfare increases. Without question, distributional outcomes and inequality are features of order and thus can be described as endogenous effects. At the same time, distributional effects and groups that

⁶It should be added that very long reactive sequences with many moments of agency choices run the danger of little predictive quality. If each of, say, four chains in the sequence is associated at the 0.6 level, the final likelihood of the outcome goes down to roughly 20 percent.

Table 1. Types of endogenous explanations of crises

	<i>Reactive sequence</i> (<i>vs. deterministic</i>)	<i>Genealogical depth</i> (<i>vs. short</i>)	<i>Beliefs/desires (vs.</i> <i>opportunities/constraints)</i>
Falling rate of profit	N	N	N
Eating up of community	N	N	Y
Hegemonic overextension (Heinkelmann-Wild et al.)	N	Y	Y
Liberal tensions (Lavenex and Hofmann)	Y	Y	N
The force of hypocrisy (Tannenwald and Lesch et al.)	Y	Y	Y
Rebellion of losers (Thompson, Patterson, and Pouliot)	Y	Y	Y

Source: This table was constructed by the author (Michael Zürn).

Notes: The common weakness of most endogenous explanations is the mechanism that connects the macro-logic of the order with the micro-logic of contestants and defenders of a given order. Strongly determinist accounts make the explanation fully endogenous, but they often fail to account for variations and agency. Weakly endogenous accounts put most of the explanatory weight on theories of action. The middle way may be the golden one.

consider themselves distributional losers are part of any order. The production of relative losers thus is not a specific feature of a LISO but a feature of any order. This makes it a weakly endogenous explanation. Since it immediately looks at the effects of contestations showing that the regime has proven resilient, Thompson displays full awareness of that.

The same applies to the contribution by Patterson and Pouliot, which spells out a sophisticated and empirically rich story with a long sequence, including both reactive sequences developed in the Introduction to this forum. The fact that the economic LISO did not lead to a decline in wealth inequality led to demands for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) from the Global South. The North responded with two competing narratives of “domestication” that let the demands for an NIEO fall silent. One response was the reformist Brandt Commission narrative; the other was the neoliberal Reagan narrative. That these responses successfully diluted the demand for an NIEO again shows that unequal distributional effects are a case of weak endogeneity. They require additional conditions before it leads to a crisis. The contribution by Patterson and Pouliot, however, thoughtfully points out that the more recent rise of inequality and the rise of a class of superrich may lead to a new round of contestation.

In general, weakly endogenous explanations shift the focus to agency. Weak features of endogeneity, such as hypocrisy and the losers of change, may provide a starting point for contestations and crises, but they come with considerable variations in outcome.

Conclusion

Endogenous explanations of crises have features that make for good explanations. They may provide reactive sequences that go through the whole way of the bathtub model and, simultaneously, come with genealogical depth. They may bring in both structural constraints and agency choices. Moreover, outcomes are explained by social dynamics, not by (externally determined) destiny. All of this is valuable. Yet endogenous explanations can show significant differences along a set of dimensions: Do they contain room for agency choice in reactive sequences, or are they deterministic? Does it contain genealogical depth? Is the micro-foundation of the sequence based on opportunities/constraints, beliefs, or desires? By making these three dimensions for simplification binary, one may distinguish the below types of endogenous explanations (some of them with famous examples in social theory). A closer look at the papers in this forum shows that

different chapters use different types of endogenous explanations (see Table 1). It turns out that the middle ground version seems to be most useful in explaining contestations of the LIO and its LISOs.

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