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Hierarchy and Endogenous Contestation in the Liberal International Order

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A previous generation of influential scholarship treated international institutions as instruments of cooperation built by self-interested states to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Recent scholarship, including this special forum, suggests that the rational design of institutions does not guarantee their durability and that liberal institutions are intrinsically prone to contestation. This essay takes a step back and posits that the hierarchical nature of international order itself creates conditions for contestation, but not for the reasons typically identified in the literature. Institutionalized disagreement over distributional outcomes, values, and hypocrisy is ultimately about the politics of status between differently ranked states. While these differences are due to the hierarchical nature of order, it is the same hierarchy that can contribute to their resolution when leading states engage in institutional reforms—for example, by making institutional membership and leadership more inclusive. The essay closes with some reflections on a prominent source of hierarchy in the liberal international order (LIO): the legacy of Eurocentrism and colonialism in world politics. While countries in the Global South have typically engaged in order-consistent contestation, it is the LIO's leading states that have engaged in order-challenging contestation. The present sense of crisis in the LIO might therefore have more to do with Western anxieties about security competition with China, Russian aggression, and domestic crises of liberalism than the "rise of the rest."

Une génération précédente de travaux de recherche influents traitait les institutions internationales comme des instruments de coopération conçus par des États intéressés afin de parvenir à des résultats mutuellement bénéfiques. Des travaux de recherche récents, notamment ce forum spécial, suggèrent que la conception rationnelle des institutions ne garantit pas leur durabilité et que les institutions libérales sont intrinsèquement sujettes à la contestation. Cet article prend du recul pour postuler que la nature hiérarchique de l'ordre international lui-même crée les conditions de la contestation, mais pas pour les raisons généralement avancées par la littérature. Le désaccord institutionnalisé quant aux résultats de distribution, aux valeurs et à l'hypocrisie a finalement trait à la politique du statut entre États de classement différent. Bien que ces différences s'expliquent par la nature hiérarchique de l'ordre, c'est cette même hiérarchie qui peut contribuer à leur résolution quand les États leaders lancent des réformes institutionnelles; par exemple, en rendant l'adhésion et le leadership institutionnels plus inclusifs. Cet article se conclut sur des réflexions relatives à la source dominante de hiérarchie dans l'OLI : l'héritage de l'eurocentrisme et du colonialisme en politique mondiale. Bien que les pays de l'hémisphère sud aient généralement pris part à des contestations cohérentes avec l'ordre, ce sont les États leaders de l'OLI qui ont lancé les contestations remettant en cause l'ordre. Le sentiment actuel de crise au sein de l'OLI a donc peut-être davantage rapport avec les anxiétés occidentales quant à la concurrence sécuritaire avec la Chine, à l'agression russe et aux crises nationales du libéralisme que la ≪ montée du repos ≫.

Una generación anterior de académicos influyentes trató a las instituciones internacionales como si fueran instrumentos de cooperación creados por Estados interesados en sí mismos para lograr resultados mutuamente beneficiosos. Existen estudios recientes, incluyendo este foro especial, que sugieren que el diseño racional de las instituciones no garantiza su durabilidad y que las instituciones liberales son intrínsecamente propensas a la impugnación. Este artículo da un paso atrás y postula que es la naturaleza jerárquica del orden internacional en sí misma la que crea las condiciones para la impugnación, pero no por las razones típicamente identificadas en la literatura. El desacuerdo institucionalizado existente en materia de resultados distributivos, de valores y de hipocresía se relaciona, en última instancia, con la política en materia de estatus entre aquellos estados clasificados de manera diferente. Si bien estas diferencias se deben a la naturaleza jerárquica del orden, es esta misma jerarquía la que puede contribuir a su resolución cuando los Estados líderes se involucran en reformas institucionales, por ejemplo, haciendo que la membresía y el liderazgo institucionales sean más inclusivos. El artículo se cierra con algunas reflexiones sobre una fuente prominente de jerarquía en el LIO (Orden Liberal Internacional, LIO por sus siglas en inglés): el legado del eurocentrismo y el colonialismo en la política mundial. Si bien los países del Sur Global se han involucrado típicamente en una impugnación consistente de este orden, son los principales estados del LIO los que se han involucrado en la impugnación que pretende desafiar este orden. Por lo tanto, la actual sensación de crisis existente en el LIO podría tener más relación con las ansiedades occidentales sobre la competencia en materia de seguridad con China, la agresión rusa y las crisis internas del liberalismo que con el ≪ascenso del resto≫.

Introduction

Brimming with theoretical innovation and empirical richness, this special forum makes a significant contribution by focusing on endogenous sources of contestation in the liberal international order (LIO). More so because it disaggregates the LIO into issue-based suborders, or functionally differentiated parts of the LIO, finding that not all are in crisis. This is an important lesson at a time when public and political anxieties around the future of the LIO tend to eclipse any meaningful discussion of the actual challenges of the order itself. Equally important is the forum's counterintuitive claim that responsiveness to demands for greater inclusivity

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in the LIO contains the seeds of further contestation and even institutional decline. In effect, a *less* (institutionally) liberal order would contribute to the long-term health of the LIO.

While broadly in agreement with the arguments around institutional design in the special forum's articles, this essay aims to reintroduce considerations of hierarchy into the discussion. A previous generation of influential scholarship treated international institutions as instruments of cooperation built by self-interested states to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001). Recent scholarship, including this special forum, suggests that the rational design of institutions does not guarantee their durability (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021) and that liberal institutions are intrinsically prone to contestation over time (Mearsheimer 2019). This essay takes a step back and posits that the hierarchical nature of international order itself creates conditions for contestation, but not for the reasons typically identified in the literature. Rather, order contestation between states is a function of differences in status or social position. While these differences are due to the hierarchical nature of order, it is the same hierarchy that can contribute to their resolution when leading states engage in institutional reforms, including inclusion. The essay closes with some reflections on a prominent source of hierarchy in the LIO: the legacy of Eurocentrism and colonialism in world politics.

Sources of Contestation

International order is hierarchical by nature (Organski 1958; Bull 1977; Gilpin 1981; Lake 2009). Rather than a functional system where differently endowed actors bargain to achieve their own goals, it is a stratified system where states are ranked in terms of both their privileges and their responsibilities with regard to international conflict and cooperation. The formal and informal rules of the game vary by rank. Leading states at the top of the global hierarchy enjoy privileges that others do not. This includes the privilege of hypocrisy, which is a necessary aspect of making and enforcing rules in a system whose guardians are the only check against themselves. The LIO is no exception. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), for example, allows its permanent members to exempt themselves from anything they might inflict on other states in the name of international peace and security. Similarly, the nuclear nonproliferation regime places far fewer burdens on nuclear weapon states—the same powers who are permanent members of the UNSC—than it does on nonnuclear weapon states.

Hierarchy is always subject to contestation, which the forum defines as "a social practice [that] entails objection to specific issues that matter to people" (Wiener 2014, 3). The forum argues that liberal international orders are particularly susceptible to contestation over the distribution of benefits, the privileging of certain liberal values over others, and the hypocrisy of espousing "aspirational principles that clash with the concrete political practices of creating and sustaining order" (Goddard et al. 2024). However, discord over distribution, values, and hypocrisy is prevalent in orders of varying types. The Soviet empire during the Cold War, for example, was prone to contestation along all these lines, as was the conservative order of the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century. While liberal institutions may certainly contain the seeds of contestation, a deeper cause of contestation lies in the unequal nature of hierarchy itself.

Social groups—be they soccer clubs, ethnic groups, or nation-states—exhibit certain fundamental traits rooted in the psychological need for self-esteem (Lemain 1974). In hierarchical settings, lower-ranked groups engage in various strategies to enhance their self-esteem in the face of inequality (Tajfel and Turner 1979). While material differences do exist across stratified groups, the key difference here is social. Existing rules, norms, and institutions accord higher status to some groups, who seek to maintain their social position, while others seek ways to narrow the gap. For the latter, amassing material capabilities is inadequate because wealth does not guarantee social rank (Duque 2018, 580). Instead, lower-status groups seek *symbolic* equality with higher-status groups, which is instantiated in the rules and institutions that govern a hierarchy, while higher-status groups are invested in perpetuating some degree of symbolic *inequality* to maintain their privileges. Alongside distributional conflict, the symbolic politics of status is one of the most persistent causes of contestation in international orders (Mukherjee 2022).

Hierarchy is thus a deeper cause of the endogenous sources of order contestation highlighted above. In an international order, institutions shape the distribution of status by deciding who counts and for how much. Institutional disagreement over who gets how much, whose values are prioritized, and who gets away with not living up to their values is ultimately about how differently ranked states seek to either improve or maintain their social position. Empirically, the most common agents of contestation are lower-ranked states seeking greater symbolic equality with higher-ranked states. Yet even when dominant states subvert an order—as in the case of refugee protection in the LIO (Lavenex 2024)—they are often motivated by a fear of losing status or a dominant group within their polity losing status. Ironically, hierarchy is both a constitutive feature of international order and the greatest source of contestation within it.

If distributional effects, value conflicts, and hypocrisy are a function of hierarchy and commonly found in other types of orders as well, what remains of the "liberal" in liberal international order? Three features stand out as uniquely impacting contestation in a liberal order. First, as the forum's introduction notes, a liberal order relies primarily on liberal means to resolve contestation. These include measures such as institutional inclusion, appeals to higher principles, and collective problem-solving. All of these can increase contestation in a liberal order compared to an illiberal order that resolves conflict primarily through coercion (though the latter order may be costlier to manage). Second, the principle of sovereign equality enshrined in a liberal order militates against the hierarchy required to maintain that order. If all states are juridically equal, it becomes harder for leading states to manage an order in ways that might require imposing costs on some and not others (and certainly not themselves). Third, and finally, the leading states of the LIO at least are all liberal democracies and therefore more prone than illiberal states to domestic constituencies successfully blocking policies such as side payments that might preempt sources of contestation such as distributional inequality. Nonstate actors across suborders—firms, nuclear abolitionists, NGOs, and courts—also exert greater influence through domestic politics in an order managed by liberal democracies, thus increasing potential contestation compared to an order dominated by illiberal states.

Responses to Contestation

According to the forum's introductory article, defenders or leaders of a liberal order resist contestation in three ways: by stigmatizing those who demand change, by using exist-

ing institutions to block change, and by appealing to higher principles to support the status quo. Defenders of the LIO can also be responsive to calls for change in two ways: by doubling down on legalization, or the precision and clarity of rules, and by making institutions more inclusive. As with the sources of contestation discussed in the previous section, none of these five responses is uniquely liberal. Nonetheless, one can examine their viability as responses. While the three strategies of resistance outlined here are plausible and empirically identifiable, the two strategies of responsiveness deserve further discussion.

Although legalization is a possible response to contestation, it is not a logically necessary response. If legalization involves the more precise definition and application of rules, then it makes sense as a response to calls for greater precision and clarity in an institution. However, contestation rarely emerges from a lack of clarity in the rules of an order. Rather, as noted above, it emerges from formal and informal rules that create or exacerbate symbolic inequality between differently ranked actors. This is a matter of institutional inclusivity and fairness rather than legalization per se. Theoretically, there is no determinate relationship between the precision of rules and the degree of symbolic equality between differently ranked states. Conversely, ambiguity may certainly allow actors to pursue divergent preferences (Hofmann 2024), but it does not necessarily diminish contestation arising from status competition. Empirically, the only instance of legalization as a response to contestation in the special forum appears in the suborder of refugee protection. Importantly, the expansion and legalization of the international refugee regime in the 1950s and 1960s was driven by nonstate actors such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, national and international courts, and human rights lawyers (Lavenex 2024). Future research can therefore examine whether legalization is a commonly found *state* response to contestation in the LIO.

A more customary response to contestation is institutional inclusion. However, while seemingly a logical response to demands for inclusivity, the forum's introductory article convincingly argues that inclusion can be counterproductive by *increasing* future contestation or even bringing about institutional decline. Inclusion leads to too many cooks in the kitchen: The range of interests being negotiated broadens, coalitions become more fragile, compromises less stable, and institutions also become vulnerable to illiberal subversion. Over time, as an institution is paralyzed by these changes, even well-meaning states might withdraw from it and seek cooperation elsewhere. Heinkelmann et al. (2024) illustrate this dynamic in the domain of international trade, where they argue that the inclusion of non-Western states such as China, India, and Brazil caused the breakdown of multilateral negotiations and contributed to the fragmentation of the global trading regime.

Inclusion may be counterproductive, but there are four considerations that should qualify this claim. First, a full accounting of inclusion would need to compare the effects of inclusion with the counterfactual case of a suborder that resists inclusion. The impact of longstanding members abandoning a reformed (i.e., more inclusive) institution or creating new exclusive institutions—as the United States did in the case of international trade—must be weighed against the impact of excluded states undermining or abandoning an unreformed institution. Theoretically, it is not immediately obvious from this calculus that inclusion creates a net loss. Empirically, the special forum suggests that resistance to reform is more common than inclusion and is more destabilizing, as it often leads to counter-institutionalization and illiberal reordering on the part of those who are denied—for example, in the cases of nuclear nonproliferation and the duty to prosecute.

Second, any account of liberal responsiveness should also consider the impact of inclusion on the included. States seeking inclusion may be willing to follow institutional rules so long as the rules recognize them as symbolically equal with higher-ranked states—wanting a seat at the table is a preference in itself. Over time, new entrants may also consciously or unconsciously adopt various institutional practices. As Pouliot and Patterson (2024) show in the context of the global economic regime, inclusion can "tame" contestation. The G-77 brought their counter-institutionalizing New International Economic Order (NIEO) agenda to the most inclusive of international institutions, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), and yet this objective was gradually contained and transformed into an order-consistent economic ideology. In a similar vein, Iain Johnston's (2008) work on China in the LIO shows the role that repeated diplomatic interaction can play in socializing an "outsider" into order-consistent behavior. The same can be said of China joining the WTO, which required foundational changes to China's domestic political economy and resulted in Beijing becoming increasingly adept at achieving its economic interests within the parameters of the WTO (Zhang and Li 2014).

Third, and relatedly, the inclusion of powerful spoilers has worked in the past. The formation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the early 1950s offers an example. The United States (US) initially began negotiations with a small group of eight Western countries, who were also slated to form the new institution's permanent Board of Governors. However, Third World countries contested this exclusivity at the UNGA. US leaders, keen to avoid the "political suicide" of creating a board that would "have the appearance of a NATO uranium cartel" (quoted in Mukherjee 2022, 209), relented and invited the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, India, and Brazil to join negotiations. Although this made negotiations more complex, they were ultimately successful, and the IAEA was formed with a much larger board, with de facto permanent membership for several non-Western countries. Contrary to what we might expect, the IAEA has not experienced much contestation after its founding moment. The UNSC similarly underwent an expansion in 1965 of its elected membership that increased the Council's total membership from eleven to fifteen. Yet, contestation at the UNSC has historically not been a result of this expansion but rather due to the divergent preferences of its five permanent members. Given that inclusion does not always lead to contestation, future research can shed light on the conditions under which inclusion produces different outcomes.

Fourth, and finally, the evidence from international trade, the only suborder in the special forum where LIO leaders undertook institutional inclusion, suggests that inclusion may not be the primary cause of the WTO's fragmentation. Heinkelmann et al. (2024) show that while including more states may have complicated negotiations, it was the loss of hegemonic control that drove the United States to seek alternative exclusive institutions. This mechanism is distinct from one where institutional inclusion leads to decision-making paralysis and liberal counter-institutionalization, just as an executive chef needing to maintain control is a different mechanism with similar results as too many cooks in the kitchen. Moreover, the WTO's core negotiating group was only very minimally expanded, as the Quad (the United

States, EU, Japan, and Canada) was replaced by the Five Interested Parties (the United States, EU, India, Brazil, and Australia) in the early 2000s, i.e., two states exited the core group while three joined. Inclusion may be a cause of the WTO's paralysis, but it may not be the most important cause.

Legalization and inclusion are not the only responses to contestation. Procedural fairness is a powerful instrument of institutional reform that can make even unjust outcomes tolerable (Hollander-Blumoff and Tyler 2008). Fair procedures are consultative, unbiased, and consistent—they promote symbolic equality between differently ranked actors. To trust an institution and thereby cooperate with its rules, its members need to know that the institution will not exploit them and treat them as subordinate actors. Fair treatment is a sign of one's standing in a group, and fair treatment by recognized authorities in a hierarchical setting is a sign of being valued and respected (van Prooijen, Bos, and Wilke 2002; Lind 2020). Scholars have found procedural justice (or fairness) to be a decisive factor in the success and durability of agreements for ending civil wars, regulating international environmental hazards, and negotiating multilateral trade agreements (Albin 1995; Kapstein 2008; Albin and Druckman 2012). In 2020, a survey of elites in rising and established powers found their assessments of the legitimacy of international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and UNSC to be correlated not with perceptions of their own country's influence in the institutions but with perceptions of good governance, of which fairness was the most important component across institutions (Tallberg and Verhaegen 2020). Indeed, the most successful reforms at an otherwise highly exclusive institution such as the UNSC have been in making its working methods more transparent and consultative to nonmembers and the UNGA (Patrick 2023). Although some aspects of fairness seem to overlap with inclusivity in the forum's introductory article, there is much to gain by treating procedural fairness as a distinct theoretical category.

Thanks to the ground-breaking work of the special forum's contributors, the stage is certainly set for more research into the types of institutional reform that might increase or decrease contestation in the LIO. What the contributions also make clear is that more hierarchical suborders tend to be more resilient and more effective. For example, the suborders in international trade, nuclear nonproliferation, conflict management, and the global economy are all hierarchical in terms of being subject to the decision-making powers of a relatively small group of leading states. These suborders have been resilient despite various exogenous and endogenous changes. The liberal counter-institutionalization underway in international trade and nuclear nonproliferation is order-consistent, if not order-reinforcing; the conflict management suborder has withstood decades of illiberal subversion; and the economic order has successfully contained the challenge of the NIEO. These suborders have also been successful in achieving their overarching objectives: increasing global trade (Larch et al. 2019), limiting the number of nuclear powers (Fuhrmann and Lupu 2016), reducing violence in conflicts (Walter, Howard, and Fortna 2021), and preserving the neoliberal model of global capitalism (Pouliot and Patterson 2024).

The evidence suggests, therefore, that hierarchy may not only be the principal cause of order contestation but also the most effective bulwark against extreme contestation—when tempered by a due concern for status. Leading states in hierarchical settings possess the power and rank necessary to address endogenous problems in the order. This includes both containing contestation and reforming institutions enough to address contestation. As discussed above, reform often requires including powerful spoilers for the sake of institutional durability. Contestation in this sense may serve as an intimation of malaise that leading states can act upon in various ways to maintain institutional health. The empirical exception to this pattern appears to be the duty to prosecute, where the hierarchical dominance of the UNSC has over time led to attempts at illiberal reordering among African states (Lesch et al. 2024). Here too, one might argue that because no major powers are involved in order-challenging contestation, the LIO's responsiveness has been less than forthcoming.

Endogenous Challenges and Exogenous Change

If hierarchy produces contestation, then how does hierarchy originate, and is it endogenous or exogenous to international order? One answer is that powerful states create international orders and therefore institutionalize hierarchical relationships between themselves and subordinate states (Ikenberry 2001). Another is that hierarchy is a deep structure of international politics and "produces *both* the actors (or at least their worldview) and the space of world politics in which they act" (Zarakol 2017, 7, emphasis in original). In the first view, hierarchy is subject to manipulation and therefore endogenous to an order. In the second view, questions of endogeneity and exogeneity are less meaningful than understanding how world politics is produced by hierarchy. The discussion so far has presumed that hierarchy is endogenous to order and that it can be manipulated, typically by leading states. There are, however, "deep structures of organized inequality" (Zarakol 2017) in which the LIO itself is embedded, and these both produce and constrain states and their relations.

A history of Eurocentrism and colonialism in the international system has contributed to the persistence of certain deep structures that construct the worldview of states in the LIO. From the perspective of nations that have experienced colonization by European powers and their offshoots, the LIO in its entirety tends to systematically privilege certain types of actors that either form the European core of the West or have adopted a Eurocentric "standard of civilization" to ascend the ranks of the LIO (Gong 1984). Embedded in this hierarchy, the LIO's suborders take on a certain interconnectedness. For example, it is difficult to explain contestation over trade or climate change without considering the international inequalities inherent in the compromise of embedded liberalism that structure the international economic order of the LIO. Similarly, contestation over refugee protection and the duty to prosecute requires an account of the inequalities ingrained in the overall enterprise of conflict management in the LIO, where African states, for example, occupy the majority of the UNSC's agenda while having no permanent representation on it (Mbete 2023).

Liberalism itself carries different meanings in postcolonial contexts compared to the West. Whereas the LIO's champions have viewed sovereignty as an illiberal norm to be overcome for the sake of individual liberty (Thompson 2024), postcolonial states have relied on sovereignty as a guarantor—albeit an imperfect one—of freedom from external domination and control (Acharya 2011). The historical experience of being subjected to the worst outward manifestations of societies that prioritize the free pursuit of self-interest also makes liberalism a complex proposition among countries of the Global South (a category that overlaps to varying extents with the erstwhile Third World, the G-

77, and the Non-Aligned Movement). If postcolonial states champion the LIO, it is not due to its liberal nature per se but to its economic benefits and the cost of falling behind (Snyder 2013).

In fact, by and large, contestation "from below" in the LIO has largely been order-consistent because the LIO does produce substantial benefits for political and economic elites in a wide range of countries. The forum's contributions show that when contestation has originated from countries of the Global South, its initial strategy is invariably one of liberal reform, seeking more inclusive and fair international rules and institutions. Postcolonial states have not challenged the LIO but instead highlighted the "inconsistent application or negative unintended consequences" of its principles (Goddard et al. 2024). Even their most ambitious initiative, the NIEO, was an order-consistent attempt at liberal reform and liberal counter-institutionalization. Suborders that have either managed to contain these demands (economic order and climate regime) or been responsive to them (trade) have generally remained stable. Suborders that have resisted (duty to prosecute) are subject to deeper contestation. The Global South at least does not repay responsiveness with further contestation. By contrast, as the suborders of refugee protection and torture prohibition show, contestation "from above" (the United States and the West more broadly) has often adopted illiberal subversion as its starting point. Under certain conditions, hypocrisy is both an endogenous feature of liberal order and a mode of order-challenging contestation.

It is ironic, therefore, that many Western scholars, journalists, and policymakers are increasingly seized of the idea that the "rise of the rest" and the concomitant decline of US hegemony are causing a crisis of liberal order. While many of the LIO's problems are endogenous, it is also puzzling that these problems are only now considered to have come to a head, despite contestation by states of the Global South being a constant feature of the LIO for decades (Sabaratnam and Laffey 2023), in some cases stretching back to the early Cold War. This puzzle is resolved if we consider the status anxieties of states at the top of the global hierarchy. The LIO's endogenous difficulties now seem increasingly urgent to Western observers due to the *exogenous* changes afoot in the international system. China's rise, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the growing geopolitical footprint of non-Western states such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey have shone a spotlight on longstanding inequalities in ways that threaten the preeminent social position of the United States and its Western allies in the LIO. In this sense, exogenous changes interact with endogenous sequences to at least create an impression of crisis.

The crisis of the LIO may indeed be just that, an impression, since the contributions to the special forum show that, while not all the LIO's suborders are as effective as they should be, most are in fact *not* in crisis. Only the suborder of the duty to prosecute is experiencing a crisis of illiberal reordering, while the suborder of refugee protection may be veering in this direction (for very different reasons). All the other suborders have either contained contestation (torture prohibition, economic order, and climate change), are experiencing order-consistent contestation (trade and nuclear nonproliferation), or are engaged in a reasonably stable process of continuous order-making through contestation (conflict management). Given these findings, perhaps the perceived crisis of the LIO has more to do with US–China security competition (Mearsheimer 2019), the crisis of liberalism within Western polities and between Western states (Ikenberry 2018), as well as Russia's large-scale violation of the fundamental tenets of the LIO in Europe itself (Fazal 2022). For the rest of the world, especially many countries of the Global South, the LIO has in fact produced great benefits and is worth preserving, which is the goal of order-consistent contestation.

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