

Status in Early Modern and Modern World Politics

Competition or Conflict?

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A high status is often considered to be a desirable and scarce good. Competition for status, therefore, is regarded as a universal condition of social life and a driving force in international relations—not only in contemporary world politics, but also in Greek-Roman antiquity, in ancient China, the ancient Orient, ancient Mesoamerica and even in hunter-gatherer societies (Dafoe et al. 2014; Wohlforth 2009; Wood 2013). The following contribution questions this view. It argues instead that the very form of status competition is by no means an ahistorical or anthropological constant in international relations but is itself a historically contingent social form. It is only under specific structural and semantic conditions that competition appears as a distinct social form. Historical change in international relations has not only taken place in the sense that, for example, ceremonial status as a contested good has been replaced by quantifiable military capacities in the modern international system. This would merely mean that the same game is being played with different stakes and means. Instead, it is only under modern conditions that status competition itself appears as a genuine and distinct ‘game’ or social form. In European courtly society it was hardly distinguishable from status conflicts—both analytically, for us today, and for the historical actors themselves.

Drawing a clear distinction between conflict and competition is therefore a central task for this chapter. The second section argues that a mere typological distinction between conflict and competition is insufficient if social structures and self-descriptions of a field are not taken into account. In the third section, I compare ceremonial rankings of the early modern period with modern nation-state rankings in order to show whether and to what extent conflict and competition can be distinguished with respect to status issues. At first glance, rankings from the early 16th century to the middle of the 18th century seem to depict, create, and influence competitive relationships,

thereby confirming an ahistorical view of competition. However, if the socio-structural and semantic context of these rankings is considered, the distinction between competition and conflict becomes blurred. In early modern courtly society, status was established performatively in face-to-face interactions. Contradictory status claims were effectively fought out mostly among princes and diplomats present, which is why it was and still is hardly possible to distinguish between direct conflict and indirect competition in this historical context. Moreover, no distinct semantics of competition can be found in relevant ceremonial treatises. Instead, the assumption prevailed that there are God-given status prerogatives and thus an ideal God-given order, which was, however, considered to be threatened by mundane conflicts.

As the fourth section outlines, the situation is quite different in modern world politics, where competition is an openly expressed motive in comparative nation-state rankings. Nation-state competition for the favor of a global public is explicitly seen as an alternative to inter-state conflicts. This is structurally facilitated by the fact that, on the one hand, status competition takes place 'virtually' in rankings produced by international (non-)governmental organizations, and no longer has to be fought out in diplomatic face-to-face situations. On the other hand, the emergence of competition is facilitated by the fact that the loss of status in one policy field does not simultaneously entail the loss of status in other fields, whereas in the early modern period the loss of rank in one interaction could well have consequences for all other interactions. In the last section, I will draw some conclusions from the finding that status competition is a distinct social form only in modern world politics, whereas in early modern courtly society it is hardly distinguishable from conflicts.

Competition: Conceptual and Methodological Issues

According to Georg Simmel (2009: 258-260), competition presupposes a scarce good to be competed for. To obtain this good, however, competitors do not have to confront each other directly, but focus their ambitions on the good itself. This distinguishes competition from conflicts in which defeating the opponent is an end in itself. Furthermore, it can be very helpful to take a closer look at how the distribution of scarce goods is constructed and legitimized in specific social contexts. There are certainly contexts or social systems in which competition may occur by pure coincidence but is other-

wise excluded in principle. This applies, as Georg Simmel (2009: 266) points out, to families in which conflicts among siblings may be the rule, but not competition between them. This is because in families, the maintenance of direct personal relationships is an end in itself, which thus does not provide any structural incentive for indirect competitive relationships. A lottery represents a context in which competition is excluded or in principle pointless (ibid: 267). Certainly, a lottery is about the distribution of a scarce good that can only be obtained at the expense of others. However, the distribution is based on chance and not on the objective performance of the interested parties, which is why envy may lead to conflicts, but these do not affect the result of the lottery. In religious communities too, relationships are predominantly found to be non-competitive. There may be an atmosphere of rivalry or a competitive zeal when everybody strives for God's favor. But the latter is not a scarce good, because the divine blessing bestowed on one person does not exclude the blessing for others. Furthermore, "[a]t least according to the Christian concept there is room in God's house for all. When, nevertheless, predestination withholds this place from some and preserves it for others, the immediate senselessness of any competition is thereby enunciated" (ibid: 267). Incidentally, this is also an important point to which we will have to return when analyzing early modern rankings.

As these examples suggest, Simmel did not believe that competition is a social *a priori*. His conception of competition is not about invisible forces or about a universal struggle for existence. Instead, Simmel (ibid: 260) emphasizes the objective character of competition, by which he does not mean that it can only be observed by an objective sociologist, but rather that competition itself represents an objectified structure of social fields that is comprehensible for the involved actors. The pure form of competition is not an individual or collective feeling or an unconscious and latent relationship, but an expressive relationship directed towards specific and openly declarable goals depending on structural limitations in a given social context. Only this condition enables the emergence of a social form that functions independently of the interchangeable hidden motives of the entangled actors. And only this condition allows for an analytically clear distinction between competition and conflict. In this sense, the following considerations do not intend to 'uncover' latent motives or invisible structures by sociological means. Instead, our aim is to make generalizable statements about whether competition in Simmel's sense is a manifest, explicated, and intrinsic property of a social field or whether it is in principle senseless and only occurs by coincidence.

From a methodological point of view, the mere fact that a single actor may experience or describe a relationship in terms of competition is certainly not a sufficient condition for generalizable conclusions about a social field. Even if in a given situation several actors may feel or describe their relationship to each other in this way, this does not yet give us a methodologically adequate basis, since it can be assumed that this too can depend on chance and context. Moreover, everyday language does not distinguish very clearly between conflict and competition. Instead, it can be assumed that competition and/or conflict should also be reflected in more elaborate and sophisticated semantics of a social field, if they are typical and distinctive aspects of its structure. By semantics, however, we do not refer to the theoretical avant-garde, as represented by authors such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke or Immanuel Kant, who are usually ahead of their time and whose texts therefore offer little information about the common sense of their contemporaries. For the same reason, Norbert Elias used conduct manuals rather than high-flown philosophy as empirical material for his theory of civilization, because they “transmit not the great or the extraordinary but the typical aspects of society” and are therefore “corresponding to the structure of this society” (Elias 2000: 54). Similarly, Niklas Luhmann (1982) based his analysis on transformations of romantic love on rather mediocre love literature of the early modern period.

We are thus now in a position not only to distinguish typologically between conflict and competition, but also to indicate the manifest conditions under which competition can be expected in a given context. Competition is thus not an essence of the social *per se*. It is rather a specific social form that occurs under certain conditions in certain social systems but not in others, or if so, then only by coincidence. In summary, it can be said that a social system makes competition structurally possible:

- a) by producing a scarce good that can only be obtained at the expense of others.
- b) if the distribution of the goods is neither random nor prescribed but is dependent on the objective performance of competitors.
- c) by providing opportunities to avoid direct confrontation.
- d) if it is an explicable part of the semantics in the given system or field.

In this sense, early modern ceremonial rankings and modern nation-state rankings will now be compared here to clarify whether and under what conditions one can speak of status competition in very different world-politi-

cal contexts. In the early modern context, we are essentially dealing with a courtly society in which international politics is one of many problems of an aristocratic elite and can hardly be separated from dynastic affairs. The other context is the modern system of world politics, which is differentiated and specialized for its function. In both contexts, one finds very similar rankings, which essentially depict and/or performatively produce status. Both pre-modern ceremonial rankings (Stollberg-Rilinger 2002) and modern nation-state rankings are discussed in the relevant literature against the background of an assumed competition between the ranked units (Osborne 2007; Geevers 2012; Sittig 2010; Shore/Wright 2015; Cooley/Snyder 2015). However, both kinds of rankings refer to very different semantics and worldviews, which at one point make competition for status seem plausible and at another point implausible.

Ceremonial Rankings in Early Modern Diplomacy: Competition or Conflict?

Early modern (world) politics was not differentiated as a specialized system—it was one aspect of aristocratic communication, among others. The function of the aristocracy was to engage in significant and far-reaching communication concerning all societal functions and thereby to integrate and represent the entire society (cf. Luhmann 2013b: 50–52). In contrast to the lower class, whose contacts remained locally limited, the aristocracy had far-reaching and privileged opportunities for contact. High status obtained by noble birth and origin ensured the chance of participation in exclusively aristocratic interactions, from which members of the lower class remained largely excluded. Instead, they had to turn to their aristocratic advocates and patrons if they wanted to obtain favors in political, economic, religious or other respects and had to reciprocate these favors with personal allegiance to their patrons (Eisenstadt/Roninger 1984).

The members of the aristocracy were expected to be superior and privileged in every respect. Particularly royal sovereigns were not only to be extraordinarily powerful but also wealthy and educated, and in addition, they were to have a superior taste in art that dictated the fashion of the time. It was even considered plausible that a king could heal the sick better than a doctor by the laying on of hands. Even though this may have not always been realistic in individual cases, it was important to know these expectations and to act accordingly. One particular problem with the status of a king or queen, how-

ever, was that, at least in theory, s/he was superior to her/his followers and subjects, but her/his formal relationship to other kings and queens was by no means clear (Stollberg-Rilinger 2002). This caused considerable problems for diplomatic interactions such as royal receptions of legations, meetings of envoys or direct encounters between sovereigns.

In the early modern period, world politics was an aspect of courtly communication in which face-to-face interactions played an indispensable role in decision making (Albert 2016: 98-100). Of course, there was writing and printing. But these forms of communication played a subordinate role to face-to-face interactions. Written contracts in the context of world politics were only put into effect through rituals, while a public sphere that could be reached through published writings played by no means same role as a courtly public sphere composed of aristocratic representatives present in ceremonial interactions (Schlögl 2019). Those who wanted to observe world politics “in the making” therefore had to participate in face-to-face negotiations between princes or their representatives. The presentation, assertion, and, if necessary, defense, of one’s rank and status in ceremonial interactions is crucial in premodern world politics.

“In 1661, the year in which Louis XIV came to exercise royal authority in person, a dispute over precedence between the Count of Estrades and the Baron of Batteville, the French and Spanish envoys in London, erupted into a serious clash, with the Spaniards forcing their way ahead of the coach of the French envoy at the celebration of the arrival of a new Swedish envoy. Two servants were killed. Louis at once convened an extraordinary council. It unanimously advised moderation, but Louis, instead, decided to push the issue. He expelled the Spanish envoy and obliged Philip IV of Spain, his father-in-law, to recall Batteville and to have his new envoy in France declare publicly before Louis in a formal audience that all Spanish diplomats had been instructed not to contest precedence with their French counterparts, a key expression of the use of the diplomatic world to establish status. The thirty other diplomats accredited to Louis were present at the audience and, to underline his triumph, Louis issued a medallion depicting the audience to celebrate his victory“ (Black 2010: 77).

In early modern Europe, rank and precedence in interactions reflected the social strata of the wider society (Collins/Sanderson 2009: 115-117). Status differences were effective across various situations and had to be taken into account in every interaction regardless of its topics. Interactions were thus

characterized by the fact that the distribution of rank and precedence did not vary (Collins 2000: 36-37): Those with a higher status have to insist, without embarrassing themselves, that their interpretation of a given situation should be given priority. They can set topics largely ruthlessly, take initiatives on their own authority, speak out to others, and occupy the most prominent place without further questions. Those who renounce their status privileges in a particular interaction run the risk of being subordinated in other interactions and relationships as well. Status issues were critical in early modern diplomatic interactions, because the loss of status in a diplomatic interaction was not limited to a “diplomatic” status alone but could affect the status of the person as a whole and thus also: in any other relationship and situation the person may be involved. It was therefore essential for diplomatic interactions that differences in status should also be made visible by symbolic means. These included the right to enter a room first, to take a certain place at a table, or to wear a hat in the presence of others. However, it was by no means the case that in these interactions status merely had to be represented. Rather, it was also a matter of establishing status in ceremonial interactions performatively and of defending it against opponents (Roosen 1980; Youssef 2020).

Once established, rank simplifies the situation for everyone. In reality, however, decisions on the distribution of rank among princes proved to be extremely difficult. It was assumed that there was a natural, God-given order of precedence, which also encompassed the relations between princes (Stollberg-Rilinger 2014b). That the hierarchical social structure was rooted in a cosmological order did not rule out corrections within this worldview. The hierarchy itself was sacrosanct but not the position of individuals within this hierarchy, who might just as well have attained their position by error or by usurpation. Changes in status were treated as if one were previously not aware that the person concerned was always meant to be in this new position. Ennoblements, the elevation of the status of a royal title or the ascent to an exclusive club of kings were therefore not attributed to human decisions or merits but had to be stylized as a correction of an erroneous interpretation of an already given and divinely determined order (Luhmann 2013b: 61). The status and title of the Holy Roman emperor, for example, were justified historically and, above all, in terms of salvation history in that the title maintains the continuity of the Roman Empire, which, according to biblical tradition, is the last of four world empires and whose demise and fall also heralds the Last Judgement (Goetz 1958: 4-6). Whoever may bear this desired title may, according to the *translatio imperii*-theory, consider himself to be a successor

of Roman Emperors. It was therefore the subject of both theological debates and diplomatic conflicts because it was also associated with a secular authority and a special legal status in relation to the church (ibid: 93ff.). However, if there is any sophisticated but also practice-oriented reflection on international (or inter-dynastic) status problems in the early modern period, it is in treatises dealing with the question of ceremonial precedence.

The order of precedence among European princes was as well subject of much controversy about particular status criteria and their operationalization (Stollberg-Rilinger 1997; 2002; 2014b). The seniority of a royal title was probably the most important aspect. However, one finds quite subtle arguments in this respect. James Howell (1664: 93), for example, argued that immediately after the Roman emperor the English king could claim precedence over French and Spanish kings, since it was an English king who first freed himself from the “Roman yoke” and gained sovereignty. But he also brings other criteria into play, for example the salubriousness of London’s air, which according to Howell could not be compared with the air in Paris or Madrid (ibid: 87). Conversely, in his *Cosmographia*, Stefan Münster considered the Spanish precedence against England and France to be justified and underlines this in an illustration in which Spain appears as the head and crown of Europe by aligning a map of Europe to the west—a solution which must have also been appropriate, since the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, to whom the *Cosmographia* was dedicated, then also ruled over Spain (McLean 2007: 178).¹ Against the background of an even more complex hierarchy within the Holy Roman Empire, a ceremonial discourse emerged around the idea to identify uniform criteria for the distribution of precedence (Vec 1998).

In the context of this and similar discourses on ceremonial precedence, the first ranking lists were created to help clarify and standardize ranking issues. Rankings that take the form of a list have the decisive advantage that they do not only depict status differences spatially, i.e. vertically, but are more abstract and can imply temporal sequences as well. It seems reasonable that in early modern ceremonial discourses, orders of precedence were established as lists, since it was not only the distribution of social positions in space that was important here but also temporal precedence (Stollberg-Rilinger 2014b: 206). Who is allowed to enter a room first, who is allowed to speak first or who

1 A digitized version of this map is accessible online: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmographia_\(Sebastian_M%C3%BCnster\)#/media/Datei:Europe_As_A_Queen_Sebastian_Munster_1570.jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmographia_(Sebastian_M%C3%BCnster)#/media/Datei:Europe_As_A_Queen_Sebastian_Munster_1570.jpg) (February 2, 2021).

is allowed to stand up or sit down first? All these are questions that imply a temporal dimension. In the early modern context of courtly diplomacy, these were important issues as soon as the presence of a diplomatic corps at a particular court had to be reckoned with (Roosen 1980). In Renaissance diplomacy it was especially the papal court in Rome where one can speak of the emergence of a pre-modern diplomatic corps (Fletcher 2015). And it is precisely in this context that perhaps the most known and widespread ceremonial ranking of European royal titles was established: The *Ordo regum christianorum*, a ranking table set up in 1504 in the ceremonial diary of the Papal master of ceremonies, Paris de Grassi (Stenzig 2013).

At first sight, it is a simple list of royal titles written down one after the other, beginning with the title of the Roman Emperor which is followed by the Roman king, the king of France, the king of Spain etc.² In this form, it could also be a “messy” list, itemizing things like an inventory without any visible priorities. However, the ceremonial context tells us that the list includes the most important elements of a ranking, since it illustrates “a general prestige divide from top to bottom, which is a continuous one” as well as “a correspondingly asymmetrical communication structure with precedence at the top and subordination at the bottom; and finally [...] a permanency of corresponding status [...] which enables not only an occasionally effective orientation but also an expectable one” (Luhmann 1987a: 169). The history of the creation and reception of this ranking is, however, rather complicated (Stenzig 2013). Its basic form and order were taken up again and again well into the 18th century in order to legitimise or challenge claims to precedence. Some later reproductions of this list in the early 18th century already show a difference: the listing of royal titles is supplemented by a numeration (Lünig 1719: 8-10). The numbering, however, does not actually add any further explanation for the order of the ranking but seems above all to highlight transitivity or, respectively, sequentiality. Apart from the numbering, most ceremonial rankings do not contain any further explanations for the distribution of positions, as is the case in modern rankings e.g. in the form of simple numerical indicators. Nor did contemporaries seem to have had any particular need to emphasize changes in position in a particular way. However, this is a logical consequence when a preordained and stable order of precedence is assumed, and changes are regarded as problematic. Remarks on controversial ranking

2 A digitized version of this list is accessible online: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.I.at.4739/0014 (February 2, 2021).

positions, such as those made by Paris de Grassi indicating conflicts between Scottish and Hungarian priority claims (“inter se discordes”), should also be understood in this sense.

Only in a ranking by Johann Christian Lünig (1719: 10-11) does one find references to earlier authors which justify a ranking that deviates in a remarkable way from the papal model: For example, the Ottoman sultan (as the “Türkische [...] Kayser”) is ranked third after the Roman emperor and king—while the title of Roman king was in practice held by the designated heir to the throne of the current emperor. At the bottom of the list, i.e. in thirty-second place, there are the Asian and African powers (“puissancen”) following the free imperial knights in the order of precedence. Thus, the list exceeds already the boundaries of previous rankings, which were mainly limited to Christian titles. All in all, Lünig’s ranking presents itself as a compromise, as the list does not show how the contradictory positions of different authors on ceremonial precedence were weighed against each other. The titles that are ranked one after the other are not further qualified with regard to certain criteria. Indeed, Lünig (*ibid.*: 9) even takes the trouble to summarize how earlier authors tried to identify and systematize hierarchies and weightings between certain status indicators. The main focus was on seniority, but also on reputation, power or the number of titles held by a king. But it remains totally unclear how Lünig operationalizes these indicators for his own ranking and how he finally arrives at his results. If the Ottoman Sultan ranks third, why are other African and Asian rulers at the absolute bottom of the list? One can only speculate whether it may have been due to the fact that only occasional diplomatic contacts were maintained with these regions, but this is not explicitly shown as an indicator.

In any case, the distribution of rank among European royals was a delicate issue, which was only becoming more complicated with the reformation. The delicacy of this issue is also evident from the fact that ceremonial precedence was not considered as a decision-making problem. After all, who could have made a decision on this? Rather, arguments were first made on the basis of those “naturally grown” rankings which emerged in repeated meetings of royal envoys at the papal court. Even the first systematic ranking by Paris de Grassi did not claim to make a final decision on the distribution of rank but merely tried to infer an order from previous cases (Stenzig 2013: 548-550). After the Reformation, the ceremonial practice at the papal court could hardly serve as a standard for all European princely courts. In addition, de Grassi’s papal order included titles of rulers that were no longer held by anyone, while, on the

other hand, new European powers were missing on it. Moreover, ceremonial practice had to take into account not only the rank of their principals but also the social status of the envoys themselves. There was also a barely codified differentiation in diplomatic status, which could depend, for instance, on the extent of an envoy's mandate (Mattingly 1988).

These structural contradictions prevented the emergence of a permanent order of precedence between European kings and their emissaries for centuries. Every diplomatic interaction was faced with the alternative of either being a conflict or suppressing conflicts, since interactions in general can hardly isolate open conflicts and let them run alongside other issues (Luhmann 2015: 24-26). Especially ceremonial and ritual interactions of courtly society were based on the premise that everyone knew his place and played his role, which is why at least a "fiction of consensus" was necessary and conflicts could not be ignored (Luebke 2010). At the same time, conflicts had to be tolerated to a certain extent in order to find out whose claims to rank were justified and what was, so to speak, the current state of world politics that was to be represented in ceremonial interactions. The dilemma seemed insoluble: Whoever renounced his prescribed status violated a God-given order. Those who defended their status with all means against challengers also put order at risk when conflicts broke out.

Initially, procedures were developed to clarify the question of precedence in particular interactions. Conflicts were sometimes settled by lot (Stollberg-Rilinger 2014a). In other cases, appearing "incognito" was an acceptable ceremonial exception (Barth 2013). Where interactions seemed impossible due to irreconcilable status conflicts, written communication was used. The dispatch of low-ranking envoys was a way to save face and rank, as a potential renunciation of precedence could be attributed to the low rank of the envoy rather than to the principal's rank (Krischer 2009). Sometimes, diplomatically negotiated compromises in preliminary stages of ceremonial interactions were an important means of settling conflicts. However, no permanent order of precedence could be established by these practical and often improvised fixes.

These procedures were not sufficient, as stable expectations could only be formed on the basis of codified norms. In order to conduct a reasonable dispute about precedence at all, both criteria and observables had to be defined in a predictable way—a problem which was also the subject of a whole discourse on ceremonial law (Vec 1998). But here again the problem arose that nobody dared to make rules for kings. Of course, legal claims to ceremonial precedence were not legitimized in the sense of positive law that could be

decided and changed by human beings. Rather, the problem was seen in interpreting an always given natural or divine order and in deriving criteria for the distribution of ceremonial prerogatives based on legal reasoning and the exegesis of canonical texts (Stollberg-Rilinger 2014b).

The consequence, however, was not so much a legal solution to questions of rank as the expansion of a princely vocabulary of motives with which claims to rank could now be formulated in a legal terminology (Krischer 2009). A position in a ranking was considered not only a matter of custom, but a God-given right. In order to understand the interaction problems that arose from the participants' point of view, a somewhat daring metaphor may be helpful: One is invited to dinner by an invisible host who put place cards on the dining table for each guest—only the names on these place cards are written quite indecipherably. What happens then is not a competition for a seat in the sense of a “musical chair” game but a dispute that breaks out over what is written on the place cards and who has to sit in which chair. In this sense, there are conflicting but not competing views about what seating arrangement is in God's mind. And those for whose recognition one could have competed were themselves competitors with their own stakes in the game. There was therefore no plausible “disinterested” third party for whose favor one could compete.

Furthermore, there was no discourse on competition as a social model that could turn enemies into competitors and in this sense represent a distinct alternative to conflict. In German ceremonial treatises of that period, words like “concurriren” and “competiren” were used rather unsystematically to describe ceremonial occasions from which conflicts could arise. Whenever kings or their envoys “concurriren,” this did not mean “Konkurrenz” (competition) in modern German terms but rather an encounter, a gathering or a meeting (Nehring/Friedrich 1710: 111). In a figurative sense, “competiren” also meant the collision of several claims for precedence. Furthermore, according to the legitimate vocabulary of motives in this society, it would have been selfish to compete for God's favor because one should not act to receive certain privileges (and ultimately: salvation), but on the condition that one is loved by God (Elster 1991: 282; Simmel 2009: 267). And that meant acknowledging one's place in God's order and not striving for something higher. Therefore, the struggle for higher social status was “by no means regarded as positive social norm, but on the contrary as a violation of the norm, as *turbatio ordinis*” (Stollberg-Rilinger 2014b: 198). Against this background, the idea of an open-ended competition for the right of precedence would have been tantamount to blasphemy. Finally, even the emulation of higher-ranking role models was

not encouraged but rather limited by social structures and semantics. “[S]ociety supported the *interdits* that limited competition in imitation. And however much emulation of the models valid for one’s own status was recommended and the corresponding ‘mirrors’ held up, it made an inappropriate and ludicrous impression if one sought to overstep the applicable limits” (Luhmann 2013b: 213).

Nor can one speak of royal competition for the favor of a courtly public because favor could only be granted top-down and not in the opposite direction. In principle, even friendly relations that kings and envoys maintained with foreign courts were interpreted as asymmetrical patron-client relationships in which favor was exchanged for allegiance. If this were to lead to something like competition for loyalty (or social capital), this view would have been discouraged by the social structures and semantics of the time (Bauer 1995; Thiessen 2011): Royal patrons were not expected to compete for clients but rather required them to act according to their ascribed status as clients and to show loyalty for favors received. The client was not to be courted by competitors but eventually had to deal with conflicting loyalties when he owed allegiance to opposing patrons. Both patrons and clients had to reckon with semantics for the legitimation of their actions, which were hardly concerned with the idea of selection by competition but rather with normative obligations that arose from generation-spanning patron-client relationships. It was not superior competitiveness but trust in seniority and historically rooted relationships between families that provided the rhetorical framework for these relationships, which clients could not easily compromise without jeopardizing their own reputation. This applied particularly to the relationships between ceremonial scholars and the aristocratic patrons on whose goodwill they were dependent at least until the end of the 18th century (Bauer 1995). Therefore, a royal competition for the favor of scholars engaging in a ceremonial discourse would have probably seemed quite alienating to those involved. Here too, there were no plausible “disinterested” third parties for whose favor one could compete. The situation is quite different with IGOs and NGOs, whose rankings can be so influential that nation states also compete for the favor of experts.

What we can say is that competition plays almost no significant role in pre-modern rankings. Neither textual and pictorial semantics nor the social structure make it plausible to assume that kings competed for the favor of third parties in order to raise their status. One cannot even say that these rankings represent an attempt to suppress competition. In fact, competition

in particular could have been a solution to the problem that rank conflicts constantly erupted in diplomatic interactions. However, a very clear motive is the attempt to contain conflicts by making a divinely ordained order visible. Even this, to be sure, was only modestly successful. Lünig's *Theatrum Cere-moniale* (1719) provides the best proof of this, for only the first ten pages are attempts to systematize a hierarchy, followed by hundreds of pages in which a myriad of individual ceremonial events are presented which all more or less contradict Lünig's systematic approach. What was actually achieved by the intellectual discourse on ceremonial rankings, however, was the explication of status criteria and an increase in the ability to initiate and endure conflict. Legal arguments made it easier to articulate and challenge claims to status and precedence, since they could not simply be attributed to the personal preferences of those affected, as long as assumedly objective rules of interpretation were observed. It was easier to distinguish legitimate from unjustified claims and, in the latter case, to reject them. What could not be prevented was that conflicts over precedence remained morally problematic. The idea of a status order depending on the outcome of human struggles seemed downright dangerous, especially since antagonistic relationships among royals had cascade-like implications for the rest of society, which could be called upon to wage war at any time when status issues were at stake (Geever 2012).

It has been shown that pre-modern rankings have similarities with modern rankings in many respects. Nevertheless, premodern rankings neither represent, assume or induce competition. They are based on completely different understandings of a world in which modern notions of political competition between European kings must have seemed outlandish. It must have been difficult to imagine for whose favor kings could actually have competed. Neither God nor an aristocratic audience, neither masters of ceremony nor the populace would have been plausible as relevant third parties in this sense. Suggesting that competition is taking place in this context misjudges the view of historical actors and leads to anachronistic interpretations. But what conditions must be met to be able to speak of competition in the context of world politics without reifying analytical concepts? The following considerations will show that world political status became the object of competition to the extent that communication was decoupled from the logics of face-to-face interaction. Another factor is the functional differentiation of world society and the emergence of a world political system observed by mass media and a global public.

Status Rankings in Modern World Politics: Competition beyond Interaction

In contrast to the stratified aristocratic society of early modern times, modern world society is primarily functionally differentiated. In functional systems of modern world society (politics, law, economy, art, religion, etc.), scarce goods such as power, money or knowledge are distributed according to the system's distinct logics. This makes a single transitive ranking order of society impossible (Luhmann 2013b: 87-89): wealth is expected to be acquired legitimately only through market competition, power is expected to be acquired legitimately only through legal procedures and scientific facts are expected to be acquired legitimately only through adherence to scientific standards. A high status in one field does not automatically mean a high status in other fields. This applies not only to persons occupying multiple incongruent roles but also to states, who may be strong military but weak economic powers (Meyer/Hammond 1971; Meyer/Jepperson 2000; Larson et al. 2014: 9). States hold very different and often incongruent statuses depending on the field (see Freistein/Müller in this volume).

In general, the chance of a nation state to impose its own perspectives on other states varies depending on the respective field. Given the norm of formally equal, sovereign states, it is often considered quite problematic that there is a global super-elite that can occupy superior positions in all social fields because they illegitimately take advantages from one field to another (Phillips 2018), just as it could equally seem suspicious if a state were superior in every respect, because this could suggest that, for example, economic success is not based on fair competition in a global market economy but on military power (Go 2011). The global critique of imperialism is therefore a good example of the fact that actual cases of status congruence collide with the structures and semantics of a functionally differentiated world society. What was previously considered the ideal case of perfection because a universal monarchy was the model to be aspired to (Pagden 1995), is now suspected of corruption.

The status differences of formally equal states are also negotiated in the practice of international organizations or diplomacy (see Boyashov in this volume; Pouliot 2011, Youssef 2020). In diplomatic interactions, several field-specific status orders overlap and become relevant: "a German diplomat will use the country's reputation for fiscal discipline as an asset in a budgetary negotiation in Brussels; a Brazilian delegate will build off the country's developmen-

tal success story to gain some leverage in a debate over poverty eradication; and a Japanese representative will find, in the country's anti-military policies of the last sixty years, some credibility to make the case for disarmament" (Pouliot 2016: 84). The ambivalence that comes with such different and not always clearly distributed statuses is also expressed in the fact that diplomats can hardly, on request, explain the criteria they use to ascribe status to one another. They have to rely on their implicit "sense of one's place" in their interactions because there is no longer the expectation of a clear predefined status order in society (ibid: 51-53, 72-74). Furthermore, the diplomatic protocol is now basically decoupled from the power or prestige of diplomatic principals. The rules of protocol concerning precedence in diplomatic interactions depend primarily on the rank or seniority of the diplomat and are supplemented by an alphabetical order of nation states, which, for example, structure seating arrangements (French 2010: 7-9). Interaction parameters such as seating arrangements, speaking times or precedence when entering a room are therefore largely decoupled from other international status inequalities.

Diplomatic interactions are thus largely relieved of the task of establishing world-political status, which becomes a function of an abstract global system in which nations compete for abstract goods such as power, diplomatic recognition and global attention. Competition is now facilitated under the condition that indirect social relations are made possible, which was hardly the case in early modern face-to-face encounters. In early modern times, the only way to compete would have been to win the favor of those royal peers who were themselves competitors. For various reasons, God and the members of the lower classes were not third parties for whose favor one could have reasonably competed. This has changed with the emergence of both modern mass media and a global public sphere, for whose favor it is all the easier to compete if it does not consist of potential competitors. It is part of the logic of the political system of world society to assume a 'world opinion', i.e. a public that does not directly participate in interactions but observes world politics from a distance and plays a significant role in legitimizing it (Jaeger 2004). In this sense, the global public functions as a 'rationalized other', that is the fiction of anonymous third parties 'out there' whose interpretation of international politics must be taken into account in most decisions (Meyer et al. 1997). Therefore, it is precisely the favor of this absent audience that can be constructed and experienced as a scarce good for which it is worth competing. This public, of course, is not directly addressable as in an agora, and on the level of world politics, unlike in democratic nation states, it cannot di-

rectly contribute to legitimation through elections. It is, however, on the one hand constructed by mass media and on the other hand represented by advocates who observe, interpret and comment on world political events on behalf of the global civil society. These may be international organizations as well as mass media, NGOs and professional communities of experts in specific policy areas (Meyer 1994).

Unlike early modern authors of ceremonial literature, however, the modern advocates of civil society find it easier to claim impartiality to the extent that their accounts are derived from expertise based on evidence and adherence to journalistic and scientific standards rather than personal loyalties. To a certain extent, they act as neutral referees in many policy areas and contribute to making national performance in certain policy areas objectively comparable in terms of whether they achieve universalized welfare goals (Meyer 2000). Depending on the policy field and welfare objective, the international comparison of welfare indicators can be used to justify status differences that have been achieved in an open performance-based competition. This fulfils another condition for competition that we derived from Simmel, namely that the distribution of a scarce good (in this case: status) depends on a performance-based procedure.

The status of nation states is now determined by their perceived performance in various fields, a performance that varies over time and can be observed in terms of comparable “careers” (Dorn/Tacke 2018). “The spatial metaphor of fixed positions that can be occupied and appropriated,” noted Luhmann (2013b: 261) “is replaced by a time metaphor in which the danger of displacement is succeeded by the risk of landing in unfavorable positions owing to decisions.” This focus on the performance of formally equal states stands in stark contrast to fixed statuses in other fields. The permanent members of the UN Security Council, for example, are still the victorious powers of World War II. Their status is to a certain extent “set in stone” by the membership rules of the United Nations, although much has changed in the meantime with decolonisation and the rise or fall of supposed great powers (Pouliot 2014). Such one-dimensional and invariable status orders are particularly prone to conflict, while open competition in different policy fields can help to ease tensions in international relations. Indeed, if there are multiple dynamic and performance-based status orders, this increases the chances of achieving a good position in at least one ranking. For these reasons, as Amitai Etzioni (1962) argues, competition can be explicitly propagated as a non-violent alternative to open conflict that can reduce conflict potentials to the

extent that it transforms status and prestige into subjects of a fair and regulated procedure with an open outcome. Furthermore, the idea often prevails that competition can lead to improved performance, innovation and rationalisation of political decisions and performances (Cerny 1997).

Under these conditions, rankings seem to have gained in importance over the past two or three decades as a virtual arena for international competition. They are not only aimed at measuring and improving nation state performance but also at providing a stage on which the distribution of status is on the one hand made more dynamic and on the other hand achieved by less conflict-prone means (Cooley/Snyder 2015; Davis et al. 2012a, 2012b; Youssef 2018). In this way, social structures and semantics of competition also become manifest and have an impact on the production and presentation of these rankings.

Rankings can be used to substantiate status claims in a policy field. States leading a ranking on the basis of their supposedly successful policies may find it easier to fend off criticism and demands for reform, whereas this is much more difficult at lower positions in a ranking (van der Vleuten/Verloo 2012). In certain policy areas they have superior chances of asserting their view of a given situation and can present their own policies as best practice.

Modern nation-state rankings are embedded in a semantics of competition. They claim to reflect a temporally and variable social status of nation-states with regard to certain policy issues (Cooley/Snyder 2015; Shore/Wright 2015). Status in general is derived less from a divinely predetermined order and is also based less on the ascription of seniority or temporally stable qualities but is considered legitimate above all when it is acquired through temporally variable and competing achievements of various kinds (Parsons 1970; Corvellec 2017). Rankings apply this general idea in the context of international relations by constructing nation states as comparable actors competing for the favor of a public, even if the compared nation states do not otherwise perceive each other as competitors and behave accordingly. They do so by means of comparing performances, by quantification, visualization, and repeated publication. They make the distribution of status and reputation appear as a zero-sum game and transform a previously given and stable status order into a dynamic one (Brankovic et al. 2018). The semantics of competition, therefore, have an immediate impact on the production and design of these rankings.

To aggregate a variety of dimensions into one ranking position, rankings translate qualities into quantities (ibid: 274-275). Formalization and quantifi-

cation are among the most important means of claiming objectivity and a formally equal measurement of the listed countries. In this sense, international organizations also use rankings to make their decision-making structures more flexible and to adapt them to a constantly changing world (Youssef 2018). Typically, measurements are also repeated over and over again, and rankings are updated accordingly (Brankovic et al. 2018: 275-276). Changes in position are emphasized by symbolic markers such as up and down arrows, curve diagrams or numerical indications of the position gain.

Another important connection between rankings and competition is that there are not only several indicators that form the basis for a single ranking, but that there are also several rankings in the same policy area. Both factors increase the probability that nation states will take leading positions at least for one indicator or at least in one ranking and thus not be completely discouraged from participating in the competition (Etzioni 1962: 29-31). If, however, these ranking procedures cannot always contribute to higher mobility in a status system because certain states repeatedly occupy the last places in all the rankings, then a decision can also be made, which, despite the statistical evidence, may lead to an increase in formal status, as was the case with Angola's rise from a "least" to a "less developed country" (United Nations 2016). And, last but not least, the temporal structure of modern society makes it possible to settle for a lower ranking position under the condition that an open future offers the plausible chance to improve one's own status. This face-saving interpretation is, so to speak, the functional equivalent of the assumption that one's own status is divinely predetermined and that one has to come to terms with it. Ambition is thus not necessarily a sin under modern conditions but the precarious promise of a better future. This view gains plausibility in a world society that is not only able to establish competition but also to evaluate it positively—regardless of whether competition actually contributes to a better world or just keeps the players in the game.

Conclusion

Competition is by no means a universal, but rather a structurally quite demanding social form that differs substantially from conflict. There are social systems that make competition in certain respects possible and others that exclude it or make it appear pointless. Analyzing the semantics of a social field is a possible way to arrive at generalizable conclusions about whether

status competition is a structural factor that is part of shared convictions and reflexive expectations. Rankings and the literature accompanying them are relevant sources in this case because they form a medium in which status issues are communicated in a sophisticated but not too philosophical way. However, the selected rankings only say something about status competition in the context of world politics. They say nothing about the significance of competition and conflict in societies per se or in other social contexts such as sport, love, or commerce. It cannot be ruled out, for example, that in the early modern period there was competition in the search for marriage partners—provided that it was not prescribed by legal claims, ideas of predestination or strict marriage and kinship rules in a very small upper class. Nor can it be assumed that modern rankings do play a significant role in world politics. However, they provided sufficient evidence to raise doubts about the assumption of a universality of competition. On the one hand, the similarities between premodern and modern rankings are striking and initially speak in favor of the assumption of universal status competition. On the other hand, these rankings are embedded in structural and semantic contexts that suggest a more differentiated diagnosis. The case is quite clear in modern world politics, where competition is structurally facilitated and can even be advocated as an alternative model to conflict—at least when it comes to achieving universalistic welfare goals. In contrast, there are no manifest indications of status competition in pre-modern courtly society, where, however, diplomatic interactions were notoriously characterized by status conflicts. Neither social structures nor semantics offered favorable conditions for competition in this context. This raises the question of whether and to what extent one can actually speak of international (or inter-dynastic) status competition in early modern court society.

It is in any case appropriate to speak of competition if it can be proved in specific historical situations. However, this does not necessarily say something about the structural characteristics of a system. It is also acceptable to speak of “struggles” in a more general sense if the difference between conflict and competition is unclear. However, this also means a loss of analytical clarity.

From a theoretical point of view, the question also arises of whether competition is an appropriate model for theories of social change. This particularly concerns theories of state formation, which often assume geopolitical competition to be a driving force in the evolution of international systems (Teschke 2003: 117-119). On the one hand, they predominantly analyze the dynamics of

direct (military) conflicts about territories rather than indirect competition. On the other hand, every serious theory of evolution considers randomness, rather than a “survival of the fittest”, as a decisive principle (Bonner 2013). As with the lottery, it would be therefore misleading in this context to speak of competition, unless in a metaphorical, but analytically insufficient sense. Rather, social evolution could be understood more generally as a differentiation of mechanisms of structural variation, selection and stabilization (Luhmann 2013a: 251-253). Such a general theory of socio-cultural evolution would enable us to understand the differentiation of conflict, competition, cooperation or reciprocity as a historical variable, which also depends on the extent to which the reproduction and structural change of a society are dependent on face-to-face interactions (Luhmann 1987b). Finally, analysts may as well simply assume competition where it is structurally possible and semantically reflected. Where this is not the case, Ludwig Wittgenstein's dictum is to be recommended: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein 2001: 89).

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