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Beyond Binaries

Rethinking Deviance in International Politics

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1. Introduction

'Deviance is a concept with one foot in the attempt to understand and explain the institutionalization of conventionality – and consequently, deviantization as well – and one foot in the process of tolerance versus anathemization, assimilation versus subversion, centrality versus marginalization, separate-but-equal versus separate-and-despised treatment, "let a thousand flowers bloom" versus "crush the dissidents".' (Goode 2015b:4)

'Deviance' may be a term invented by mid-twentieth-century sociologists (ibid.), but historical societies and social groups have, throughout time, set standards of appropriateness and stigmatised, punished or excluded those deemed to transgress them. Although pejorative terms such as 'savages', 'barbarians', 'infidels' or 'uncivilised' and 'backward heathens' have largely disappeared from (mainstream) political lexicons today, the centrality of boundaries that mark otherness has far from waned. However, as the above quote aptly captures, there is a fine line between marking deviance and appreciating diversity because both involve notions of difference and non-conformity. Whereas abnormality can function as a source of discrimination in one context or time period, it may be respected and perhaps even celebrated in another. Who has the power to decide whether and to what extent a particular instance of non-conformity lies within the boundaries of acceptability? How are the boundaries between normal and deviant categories created, maintained, and shifted over time?

Taking these questions to the international realm, this thesis aims to study the link between normality and deviance in international society and to explore its connection to issues of power and social stratification. Investigating these dynamics is central to unpacking processes of ordering in international society, because delegitimising the Other as deviant is a means of structuring threat perceptions as well as reinforcing 'speakers' benign conceptions of the Self' and the basic notion of an international community based on shared norms and concerns (Geis & Wunderlich 2014:462–464). These demarcations, in turn, are invoked as moral hierarchies to garner domestic and international support for actions against those perceived as breaching international rules and standards (Towns 2014:612). While there is a rich body of literature analysing deviance in domestic societies, this is not, however, mirrored in the study of the international society of states (Adler-Nissen 2014:144; Wagner, Werner & Onderco 2014b:1; Smetana & Onderco 2018:517). Although the concepts of deviance, stigma, and stigmatisation have

recently gained traction in international relations (IR) scholarship as a result of the increasing incorporation of sociological theories and concepts within the discipline (Rogstad 2022), those interested in the topic will not find a clear and consistent, well-integrated field of research. References to related topics are scattered across different study areas and only seldom invoke the term 'deviance' in a manner that goes beyond its everyday meaning (for important exceptions, see Nincic 2005; eds. Wagner, Werner & Onderco 2014a; Smetana 2020b). Moreover, the literature that does exist has recently been criticised for its tendency to perpetuate simplistic dichotomies such as self/other, stigmatiser/stigmatised and insider/outsider, thereby offering an oversimplified perspective on hierarchies and boundaries (Towns & Rumelili 2017; Kurowska & Reshetnikov 2021). As Towns and Rumelili in particular point out, social hierarchies are too complex for this kind of bifurcation (Towns & Rumelili 2017). Their proposed solution revolves around a structural examination of how norms hierarchise states (ibid.:775). Taking norms as the primary analytical framework for understanding the formation of hierarchies, they emphasise that the rankings they generate depend on the degree to which states are differentiated (ibid.:768-770) and whether the norms involve relative or absolute standards of assessment (ibid.:765-787). However, while their structural approach represents a commendable step towards dismantling prevailing dichotomies, it tends to present norms in a relatively fixed way, at least within the time frame examined in the hierarchy formation process, which ultimately leads to a somewhat static perception of hierarchies. Norms are not 'unchanging melodies' (Jones 2010) that stand firm in the face of changing cords, and the fact that they adapt and evolve in line with the relations that underpin them makes them a rather unreliable starting point for inquiries into international social hierarchies.

Against this background, the overall aim of this thesis is therefore to propose an alternative way out of the current impasse characterised by the maintenance of rigid *either-normal-or-deviant* boundaries. Throughout the thesis, I argue that a more insightful starting point for inquiry is to focus on *relations* rather than norms, as this provides a clearer understanding of why states may be labelled as deviant for failing to conform to certain norms and standards in one context or time period, while escaping such judgement in another. By adopting a practice-relational perspective (McCourt 2016:478–480) rather than a strictly structural one, my aim is to present a more dynamic and contextually sensitive exploration of hierarchies – a shift that is crucial in light of the current crisis of the liberal international order and the subsequent repluralisation of the normative landscape (Cooley & Nexon 2020; Adler-Nissen & Zarakol 2021; Tourinho 2021; Rogstad 2022).

I develop my argument in three steps. First, I seek to bring together discussions of the topic by introducing deviance as a cohesive organising principle that links IR scholarship on 'rogue states', 'stigmatisation', and the 'standard of civilisation' within a single tripartite conceptual framework: Self-action, inter-action, and trans-action. In doing so, I aim to capture the variations in how deviance is understood across these fields in a more structured manner, which also allows for more targeted critique. In this regard, I will argue that the prevalence of these Self/Other dichotomies can be traced back to a tendency to locate deviance in the entity, i.e., the state (self-action) or the audience (inter-action). A self-actional understanding of deviance suggests that an entity somehow *is* deviant, thereby rendering deviance an inherent attribute of that entity's behaviour or character. This view is adopted by a significant section of the policy-oriented literature on 'rogue states' (Wagner *et al.* 2014b:5). However, its tendency to conceptualise deviance through the attribution of essentialist qualities downplays the power relations underlying the construction of normative orders. Treating deviance from an inter-actional perspective thus implies that a Self cannot *be* deviant without some relation to an Other, since the Self is to some extent dependent on the Other to witness its non-conformity and brand it as deviant (Selg 2018:541).[1] In other words, we require both a stigmatiser and a stigmatised. This approach is reflected in more recent contributions to the debate, which draw on interactionist theory to highlight the socially constructed nature of deviance and its centrality in clarifying the boundaries of international society (Adler-Nissen 2014; Smetana & Onderco 2018; Smetana 2020b). Non-conformity, in this context, is not perceived as 'an *a priory* pathological element in society but rather a natural part of all social orders' (Smetana & Onderco 2018:517, emphasis in the original). Importantly, those deemed to transgress the boundaries of acceptable behaviour are not seen as passive recipients of shame but as active agents responding to and engaging with this 'deviantization process' (Dotter 2015). Grounded in post-structuralist reasoning on the 'radical interdependence' between Self and Other (Campbell 1993:96), this line of research has brought considerations of power in the construction of deviance to the forefront, albeit in a manner that presupposes a binary juxtaposition of the stigmatiser and the stigmatised (Kurowska & Reshetnikov 2021), thereby 'overlooking other types of social hierarchies that establish more complex gradations' (Towns & Rumelili 2017:762).

In a second step, I will then develop an alternative perspective on deviance based on this critique. Drawing on sociological studies of deviance in a theoretically eclectic manner, I propose

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[1] To familiarise readers with relational sociology, Selg approaches it through the concept of 'a sense of humour'. In citing him throughout this introduction, I am thus decontextualising and repurposing his original statements (Selg 2018).

a transactional (i.e. relational) approach that posits perceptions of 'the deviant' as historically and situationally unstable figurations[2] due to their inherently relational nature. This argument builds on Kurowska and Reshetnikov's call for a greater appreciation of plural logics that transcend simplistic binary distinctions between normality and deviance (Kurowska & Reshetnikov 2021).[3] After all, just because one person calls you deviant neither means that you consider yourself deviant nor that you generally are. Deviance is not reducible only to a relation between two entities; it is not something that is negotiated only between the Self and the Other because '[…] no any *other* is equally adequate to perform the attribution of [deviance] to a *self*', considering that '[…] it is also up to the *self* to position the *other*' as the legitimate speaker (Selg 2018:541, emphasis in the original). As highlighted by Suzuki, recent studies on the role of status in IR display a tendency to treat the international community as a monolithic whole, thus positioning the deviant as the Other of the Western 'liberal core' (Suzuki 2017:223). This not only exaggerates the level of agreement within this core on whether and how a state should be deviantised (Wagner *et al.* 2014b:7), but it also disregards the 'other Others' that can serve as alternative reference points and whose importance steadily increases in line with the repluralisation of the international normative order (Suzuki 2017; Rogstad 2022). Moreover, it leaves no room for figures such as the 'in-group deviant' (Goffman 1991 [1963]:150) or the 'trickster' (Kurowska & Reshetnikov 2021) whose liminal positions defy clear Self-Other, stigmatiser-stigmatised or insider-outsider binaries.

A relational or trans-actional view, therefore, goes beyond reducing relations to dyads towards acknowledging deviance as 'a dynamic process in which various actors are inextricably linked to each other and constituted as elements of the very dynamic relations of which they are part' (Selg 2018:541). Deviance is not located in the entity (self-action) or the audience (inter-action) but in the wider network of relations (trans-action). This injects a certain dynamism and fluidity into the ways by which the boundaries between normality and deviance are negotiated over time and across space. This dynamism does not, however, negate the continuing influence of 'new standards of civilisation' based on Western values and norms (Zhang 2014) or related structural factors such as race, gender, and class (Freeman, Kim & Lake 2022). As outlined by Barry Buzan, the near-universal spread of international society has prompted a process of in-group differentiation, in which modern forms of 'the standard of civilisation' delineate different layers of belonging (Buzan 2014:585–592). The question thus becomes how to make sense of

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[2] The term 'figurations' was coined by Norbert Elias to refer to the interdependent social networks or relationships formed among individuals and groups in a society; it represents a web of interdependencies 'characterized by socially and historically specific forms of habitus […]' (van Krieken 1998:52–53).

[3] For a similar take on plural logics that is rooted in feminist/queer approaches to IR, see Weber (2016).

this process of in-group differentiation and the role deviantisation plays in it. Although social relations are deeply imbued with power, they do not unfold in rigid, top-down or predetermined structures of differentiation, particularly since power is multi-dimensional (Keene 2014:653; Mcconaughey, Musgrave & Nexon 2018:185–187). Thus, by adopting a practice-relational perspective, I aim to develop a link between deviance and social stratification that accounts for the salience of differential power dynamics but leaves sufficient conceptual space for actor, audience, and situational relativity. Positioning theory, which explores how different agents use discourse to establish their place and the place of those around them in relation to particular notions of order, serves as the bridge to operationalise this approach, as it echoes my epistemological emphasis on the study of relations and is sensitive to the sociolinguistic construction of reality (Harré & van Langenhove 1991:395) – a feature necessitated by the fact that sociologists measure deviance in terms of negative reactions (Goode 2015b:13).

In a third and final step, I will then illustrate the key arguments by using Myanmar/Burma as a case study to show how relational dynamics, rather than norms alone, underlie constructions of deviance in international politics. Myanmar is one of the first countries that comes to mind when thinking about international deviancy, at least from a European point of view. However, an analysis of the positioning discourses of the EU, the US, and ASEAN between 1988 and 2016[4] reveals that Myanmar's international standing has been shaped by the simultaneous performance of several, at times seemingly contradictory logics (both/and, in-between, here-and-now, in-motion[5]) that challenge simplistic notions of being *either* deviant *or* normal. Understanding Myanmar's social status therefore requires a practical, performative understanding of social stratification that recognises that actors can occupy multiple positions and perform different roles depending on the context. In short, status hierarchies require us to think in relational ontologies and plural logics.

Against the backdrop provided, the structure of the thesis unfolds as follows: Chapter 2 lays the groundwork by exploring the nature of deviance, clarifying its scope, and distinguishing the analytical term from closely related concepts such as 'deviantisation' and 'stigmatisation'. As

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[4] The timeframe was chosen for both its relevance and feasibility. The starting point, 1988, marks the first time Burma/Myanmar was placed under comprehensive EU and US sanctions in response to the military's crackdown on pro-democracy protests. The end point, 2016, coincides with the lifting of almost all remaining US sanctions in early October. Significant events beyond this point, such as the renewed violence against and persecution of the Rohingyas from October onwards and the 2021 coup that ended a decade-long experiment with democracy, fall outside the scope of this paper.

[5] I am indebted to Trownsell *et al.* for identifying these four logics, among others, as characteristic of relational ontologies. With just one sentence, they inspired me to use them as the guiding theme of my analysis (cf. Trownsell *et al.* 2019:5).

a first step, Chapter 3 then familiarises readers with relational ontology. In this context, I will demonstrate that this ontology is particularly suited to the study of entity formation and change in world politics because it sheds light on the intricate link between statehood, difference, and deviance (3.1.). In a second step, I will contrast relationalism with two varieties of substantialism by introducing the conceptual framework of self-action, inter-action, and trans-action advanced by prominent proponents of relational thinking (3.2.). Chapter 4 will then argue that existing work on deviance is predominantly aligned with self-actional (4.1.) and inter-actional (4.2.) paradigms, building on three areas of study in particular: the literature on 'rogue states', 'stigmatisation', and 'the standard of civilisation' in IR. I will then develop a trans-actional approach to how deviancy is constructed (4.3.), before spelling out the connection between deviance and social stratification by identifying positioning theory as a suitable bridge for operationalising a practice-relational approach to hierarchies (4.4.). Chapters 5 and 6 then move the analysis from the abstract to the concrete. Chapter 5 discusses the methodological approach of my thesis and identifies key limitations. I then explore the normative and ethical dimensions of my relational approach to deviance and defend it against charges of moral relativism in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 then applies the theoretical insights to a study of Myanmar's international positioning between 1988 and 2016. My aim here is not to provide a comprehensive relational analysis but to illustrate how a relational perspective enriches our understanding of the dynamic interplay between deviance and social stratification. The thesis concludes in Chapter 8 with a summary of the main findings, an indication of future avenues of research, and a brief look at what the repluralisation of the normative order might mean for the way in which the boundaries between normality and deviance will be constructed in the international sphere in the future.

2. The Scope of Deviance

Before delving into the thesis, let us first define the scope of the analysis. What is deviance, and how far does its application stretch? Miroslav Nincic, one of the first scholars to extrapolate sociological studies of deviance to the international realm, defined the term as 'a flouting of key norms of conduct espoused by the global community, or at least by those who have asserted a credible right to speak for it' (Nincic 2005:2). He builds on an understanding of deviance as involving a two-stage process, the initial act of transgression and the subsequent negative reaction by the global community (ibid.:26-27). However, in taking the existence of the transgression for granted, he does not sufficiently acknowledge that 'deviance is a property conferred

on, rather than inherent in, the actor' (Lauderdale 2015:522).[6] Moreover, 'flouting' indicates an intentional violation stemming from a dismissive and scornful attitude. This negates other markers of deviance rooted in, for example, cultural and racial differences, as well as involuntarily acquired traits and 'abominations of the body' (Goffman 1991 [1963]:11). It thus fails to capture the complexity driving stigmatisations and norm rejections in the post-colonial world (cf. Zarakol 2014). In one of the more recent volumes on deviance in IR, Wagner *et al.* advance a definition of deviant states as 'those states that have been effectively *labeled* as persistent and/or grave violators of core norms of the international community' (Wagner *et al.* 2014b:4; emphasis added). This constructivist account does not presuppose an objectively discernible transgression – or, as a matter of fact, 'any objective quality of rogueness' (ibid.) – and is thus better suited for the interpretivist research approach adopted in this thesis. Having said that, this definition is simply not precise enough.

I will, therefore, work with a definition of deviance as '*acts, beliefs, and characteristics that violate major social norms and attract, or are likely to attract, condemnation, stigma, social isolation, censure, and/or punishment by relevant audiences*' (Goode 2015b:4; emphasis in the original). From this definition, we can derive four observations that lay out the scope of the thesis. First, the study of deviance is intrinsically connected to the study of social norms, since deviance denotes a negatively judged deviation from promulgated norms. However, departing from a conventional structural approach that tends to reify norms into abstract units with an independent generative capacity, I adopt a relational definition that conceives of norms as acquiring meaning through interactive processes of negotiation (Wiener 2007:58; Pratt 2020:64–65; for a similar approach, see Wunderlich 2014). Second, deviance is located not only in the failure to abide by certain standards of behaviour but extends to beliefs and characteristics or traits as well. This is unsurprising, given that norms ascribe not only certain behavioural rules but also appropriate standards of believing and being. Together, acts, beliefs, and characteristics constitute the 'ABCs of deviance' (Curra 2015:122). Third, 'audiences' are a key component in the study of deviance. A behaviour, trait or belief is only 'deviant *to the extent* that it generates actual or potential *negative reactions* among one or more audiences or social circles' (Goode 2015b:13, emphasis added). In other words, a particular audience must react to a violation *as* a case of deviance rather than celebrating it as an act of entrepreneurship or resistance,

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[6] Similarly, Smetana's characterisation of the deviant as 'a person (or, in the case of international politics, an actor with a distinct social identity, such as *state*) that violates the norms of the society […]' does not adequately emphasise the importance of 'audiences' in assigning the label of deviance (although he does later acknowledge their centrality) and lacks precision (2020b:4; emphasis in the original).

for example. The audience, however, is not a predetermined category of analysis; rather, it possesses an inherently emergent quality, a point to which we will return later. Moreover, 'the audience of normals' (Adler-Nissen 2014:152) is not a unitary bloc. This leads to the fourth observation, namely that deviance is a matter of degree and perspective (Goode 2015b:4–6). It should be perceived as a continuum ranging from mild to extreme: 'At its mildest, one could say, the deviance is us; at its most extreme, the deviant is widely considered society's worst enemy' (ibid.:4). Deviance is defined somewhat differently both across and within audiences or social circles since there is seldom universal agreement on what constitutes wrongfulness apart from the severest normative violations. Having said that, it is the dominant segments of society that wield enough power to define what counts as deviance across society as a whole (ibid.). Deviance is thus intrinsically linked to issues of power and social stratification. As Nincic rightly points out, 'the likelihood of being considered deviant, both within societies and at the international level, is related to position in the applicable social hierarchy' (2005:22) – a point we will explore in greater detail as the thesis unfolds.

Before moving on to the theoretical framework, a brief note on terminology is in order: Deviance is an analytical term that describes a negatively judged deviation from social norms. Deviantisation signifies the process by which certain beliefs, behaviours or traits become linked to deviantness (Dotter 2015:104). Stigmatisation, in turn, refers to a particular type of reaction to the deviation.

3. Theoretical Framework

The following chapter sets out the theoretical and conceptual framework central to understanding the arguments presented throughout the thesis. The fundamental proposition advanced here is that deviance ought to be studied from a 'relational' rather than a 'substantialist' perspective, as this wields great potential for breaking up the binary juxtapositions of the deviant/normal, the insider/outsider and stigmatiser/stigmatised prevalent in much of the contemporary literature on the subject. In order to make this claim, I will first briefly familiarise readers with the basic tenets of relational ontology and then outline the framework of self-action, inter-action and trans-action advanced by prominent proponents of relational thinking.

3.1. Relational Ontology

The term 'relational turn' already indicates one of its main characteristics, namely the centrality accorded to *relations* among entities. However, as with most 'turns' and 'waves' that have made

inroads into IR, relationalism is not a unified theory but rather an umbrella term for various theoretical approaches that foreground the processes by which entities are created and maintained through social ties, transactions, and other types of relations (Fisher 2013; McCourt 2016; Jackson & Nexon 2019; Trownsell *et al.* 2019; Querejazu 2022). Rather than treating states, empires or international organisations as the basic units of world politics, relational perspectives conceptualise these entities as being aggregations of multiple relations, however stabilised and reified they may appear (McCourt 2016:479). In other words, 'social actors and actions are what they are, at some specific time and space, only through empirical chains of trans-actions' (Dépelteau 2008:61). In this context, relational perspectives are often characterised through a comparison with their opposite: substantialism. The latter gives theoretical and analytical primacy to substances ('entities', 'beings', 'structures', 'objects', 'essences') which are considered to be 'self-subsistent' and 'preformed' (Emirbayer 1997:282–283). Two features of substantialism deserve particular attention: reification and essentialism.

Norbert Elias, one of the most prominent relational sociologists, coined the term 'process reduction' to describe the objectification of entities, which obscures their emerging, processual, and fluid nature (Elias 2012 [1978]:106–108). From this perspective, treating the state or society as an entity underplays the continuous processes and relations by which it comes into being. Reification is not an obstacle to scientific inquiry per se; in fact, it can provide a useful starting point for analysis, which is something relational perspectives, by nature of their inquiries, struggle to obtain (more on this in the methodology section). Yet, as Jackson and Nexon point out, reification is not well suited for questions concerning entity formation and change in world politics (Jackson & Nexon 1999:300–301). One difficulty, in particular, arises from studies of deviance that exhibit reificatory undertones: By taking the state's existence for granted, they fail to capture the intricate link between deviantisation and statehood. Sufficient deviation from the factual or normative definitions of statehood may lead to a political entity being denied recognition as a sovereign nation (Werner 2014:198). Moreover, deviantisation may be used to delegitimise certain collectives seeking recognition as a legitimate state driven by political expediency or their lack of adherence to Kantian values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights (Zhang 2014:688). In this context, 'the state project must be seen as involving the persistent drawing and redrawing of boundaries, establishing and re-establishing those demarcations which make it possible to speak of the state' (Jackson & Nexon 1999:315). It follows that 'boundaries come *before* the entities which they bound, and the relations of "inside" and "outside" *precede* supposed substances like "the state"' (ibid.:315, emphasis in the original). In this

regard, the state is 'both process and object' constituted and maintained through the identification of a deviant other (Dotter 2015:115). This allows us to conceive of the state project 'as an historical solution to the perennial problems of the One and the Many, similarity and difference […]' (Jackson & Nexon 1999:315), providing 'both a spatial and a temporal resolution to questions about what political community can be' (Walker 1993:62–63). This brings us back to our opening quote, as it highlights that the markers of deviance are intersubjectively established, consolidated and transformed through continuous relations involving a plurality of state and non-state formations alike.

Reification involves a heightened danger of falling back into essentialist thinking, i.e., attributing fixed or unchanging qualities to social or cultural phenomena rather than acknowledging them as the product of dynamic and historically contingent factors. This is one of the many critiques levelled against Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' theory (Huntington 1996). Predating English School reflections on the Standard of Civilisation, Elias instead proposed to study the issue from a relational and processual angle (Linklater 2021:15–17). Approaching civilisation as a process rather than a condition, he reconstructed how Europeans began to regard themselves as 'civilised', thereby distinguishing themselves from both their medieval ancestors and the 'backward' people of the non-Western world (Linklater 2012:3). Taking a long-term perspective, Elias argued that civilisation is never complete but continuously evolving and susceptible to changes as history evolves, discourses take on new meaning, and power balances between and within societies shift over time, opening up opportunities for those deemed 'uncivilised' to contest and renegotiate their status (Linklater 2021:20–22). Importantly, the civilising process is not an entirely 'owned' process. It can neither be fully controlled by the actors involved nor does it itself function as a preexisting 'thing' or 'an exclusive source of action' (Emirbayer 1997:285). The civilising process alters the *relations* that establish the group and is, in turn, altered by them. This understanding collapses the classical distinction between agency and structure, as neither is seen to exist outside social relations – both agents and their environment are constituted through these relations (Dépelteau 2008:61).

3.2. Self-Action, Inter-Action, and Trans-Action

Relational sociologists commonly differentiate two varieties of substantialism based on the extent to which they display reificatory and essentialist undertones: self-action and inter-action. This distinction goes back to a tripartite conceptual framework originally proposed by Dewey and Bentley in 1949, who contrast the two types of substantialism with a truly relational counterpart, trans-action (Dewey & Bentley 1960 [1949]). In the following, I will provide a brief

overview of the three approaches as they form the theoretical backbone of the arguments advanced in this thesis. They should be understood as ideal types.

From a **self-actional** perspective, 'things are viewed as acting under their own powers' (Dewey & Bentley 1960 [1949]:108). Researchers working within this framework base their analysis on the assumption that '[…] it is durable, coherent entities that constitute the legitimate starting points of […] inquiry' (Emirbayer 1997:285). These entities – or social things – 'completely, inherently, and hence necessarily, *possess Being*' (ibid.:283; emphasis added). As such, they exist independently from any other thing: A is what A is without some relation to B and, as such, has full agency to generate its own actions. A is objectively real; its existence predates our analysis of it.

Substantialism may also take an **inter-actional** form, where 'entities no longer generate their own action, but rather, the relevant action takes place *among* the entities themselves' (ibid.: 285). In other words, their action emerges as a result of the interconnection between entities, in a process by which 'thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection' (Dewey & Bentley 1960 [1949]:132). The inter-actional perspective stresses the role of interactions in shaping the nature of the social world by expanding the scope of analysis to include not only A but also its relation to B. Despite the language of relations, however, inter-actional approaches retain a substantialist touch by assuming that these entities 'exist prior to and outside those relations' (Selg 2018:545). A and B nevertheless exist independently of one another, and their relations merely add another dimension to their beings. Both 'remain fixed and unchanging throughout such inter-action, each independent of the existence of the other[s], much like billiard balls or the particles of Newtonian mechanics' (Emirbayer 1997:285–286).

A **trans-actional** approach rejects the separation of entities as artificial and 'denies that social actors and their action can be understood as preexisting "things" outside social relations' (Dépelteau 2008:61). Instead, entities 'gain their whole being' through their relations with other entities (Cassirer 1953:36; Emirbayer 1997:287). Trans-actionism thus goes beyond the first two approaches, which emphasise either 'independent self-actors, or […] independently interacting elements or relations' (Dewey & Bentley 1960 [1949]:136). In this truly relational account, neither A nor B can act independently from one another because 'the action[A] is the action[A] only because it is interconnected to the action[B], and vice versa' (Dépelteau 2008:60). Neither can control the evolution of social processes alone, yet they both play a part in the process and its evolution, along with the Cs to Zs that make up the social universe (ibid.:67). Moreover, A and B cannot exist independently from one another. Relations logically (but not

necessarily temporarily) precede entities, for 'the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction' (Emirbayer 1997:287). Rather than viewing entities as the primary unit of analysis, transactionalist research gives analytical primacy to relations.

4. Locating Deviance in the Conceptual Triangle

In the introduction, I briefly introduced deviance as the organising principle that links the scholarly discussions of rogue states, stigmatisation, and the standard of civilisation in IR. I will now situate these strands of research within the conceptual triangle outlined above. This serves a dual purpose: The framework allows us to make these links more explicit by integrating the different research foci into a single framework, while also facilitating a more structured exploration of the variations in how deviance is understood across these fields. Notwithstanding the important contribution that recent studies have made in denaturalising deviance and highlighting its constructed nature, I will argue that they have yet to fully transcend inter-actional thinking and embrace a trans-actional and hence relational perspective.

4.1. Deviance from a Self-Actional Perspective

A self-actional approach to deviance locates deviance in the entity rather than in the audience or the wider network of relations. Proponents of this view argue that deviants comprise a separate category, sharing certain traits that are not found in non-deviants (Goode 2015b:12, 17). Most of the literature on rogue states adopts an overwhelmingly self-actional understanding of deviance, treating 'rogue states' as a pre-determined category of analysis into which states are placed according to seemingly objective criteria (Wagner *et al.* 2014b:5). It is largely policy-oriented, with the main aim being on developing appropriate strategies and policy instruments to contain the threat emanating from these states (ibid.). The most prominent definition of rogue states was developed in the National Security Strategy of the G.W. Bush administration, according to which 'rogues' are states that

(1) *'brutalize their own people and squander their national resources for the personal gain of the rulers;*
(2) *display no regard for international law, threaten their neighbors, and callously violate international treaties to which they are party;*

(3) are determined to acquire weapons of mass destruction, along with other advanced military technology, to be used as threats or offensively to achieve the aggressive designs of these regimes;

(4) sponsor terrorism around the globe; and

(5) reject basic human values and hate the United States and everything for which it stands.' (National Security Council of USA 2002)

Within the scientific literature on the subject, there is some disagreement about the precise definition of 'rogue states'. Segel, for example, foregrounds their external behaviour and the threats they constitute to international peace and security (Segel 2004). Caprioli and Trumbore instead focus on their internal disposition and propose indicators such as the levels of state repression and violence, ethnic discrimination, and lack of democracy (Caprioli & Trumbore 2003). Classifying a 'rogue state' according to how it treats its own population provides a theoretical and later practical link to debates on failed states, human security, and the responsibility to protect (R2P) (Bilgin & Morton 2004). Nincic similarly identifies renegade regimes by their non-democratic nature, but embeds this in their broader opposition to the 'expanding normative accord within the international community' concerning the superiority of liberal forms of governance and economy, and the need to limit sovereignty in order to safeguard human rights (Nincic 2005:5-6, 52). According to some analysts, this makes rogue states 'outlaw, anomic, unsavory, and troublesome places' (Rotberg 2007:8).

The rogue state literature has thus largely adopted what Dotter called a 'pathological definition of deviance' (Dotter 2015:114). Deviance is viewed as an inherent flaw or disease and, as such, has a disruptive impact across society. Former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright exemplified this point by proclaiming that the very essence of rogue states is that they 'not only do not have a part in the international system, but […] [their] very being involves being outside of it and throwing, literally, hand grenades inside in order to destroy it' (Albright 1998). This sentiment was also echoed by George W. Bush when he proclaimed that these are '[…] states for whom terror and blackmail are *a way of life*' (Bush 2001; emphasis added). There are clear parallels to self-actionism, as previously outlined in chapter 3.2.: Rogue states are identified by certain intrinsic and objective qualities that are assumed to exist independently of other entities and human interpretations. The rogue state exhibits a certain domestic and/or international behaviour. It is driven by internal forces, which, depending on the perspective, are rooted in it being either 'bad, mad, sad or rational' (Smith 2000). These states, so the argument goes, take self-action to an extreme, pursuing their interests and needs not only independently from, but

also to the detriment of, the wider international community. Precisely because they are driven by inner forces rather than structural impediments or relations to others, they exhibit – in the words of former US National Security Advisor Anthony Lake – 'a chronic inability to engage constructively with the outside world, and they do not function effectively in alliances – even with those like-minded' (Lake 1994:46). The danger of these deviants is largely derived from this belief that they cannot be reasoned with (Homolar 2011:710). It goes without saying, however, that rogue states are seldom viewed from an exclusively self-actional perspective, since relations with their external environment and with the United States as their most prominent Other are taken into account to some extent, especially by those policymakers who try to devise structural incentives to counter their roguish behaviour (Henriksen 1999). Nevertheless, the literature tends to lean towards self-action rather than inter-action perspectives.

Critique

What this perspective on deviance fails to realise is that deeming someone 'rogue' or 'evil' is a label rather than an analytical category (Roele 2012:653). For some critics, this labelling functions as a security narrative deployed largely by the US from the 1980s onwards (Litwak 2000; Homolar 2011) or a 'perceptual construct' utilised by American policymakers (Hoyt 2000:298). Kustermans, on the other hand, refutes the argument that the rogue state narrative is an entirely American intervention and stresses its intersubjective nature (Kustermans 2014). He locates its (re-)emergence within the broader discourse of 'good international citizenship', which is not an exclusively American intervention but corresponds to a broader Western, liberal republican narrative about responsible state behaviour in international relations. For him, the significant inconsistencies with which the label is applied is evidence for the polysemous nature of the discourses informing international practices in general, with 'rogue states' sharing 'the inherent fragility of all things intersubjective' (ibid.:33). In his famous article *On Causation and Constitution*, Alexander Wendt similarly writes that 'there are theoretical reasons to doubt that social kinds can always be reduced to their internal structures, and political reasons to worry that the effort to do so will obscure the role, and therefore responsibility, of society in making social kinds what they are' (Wendt 1998:113). Illustrating this point with reference to rogue states, he argues that a rogue is not only constituted by its 'rejectionist attitude' towards international norms but also by its 'social relations to other states in the form of the representational practices of the international community' (ibid.). According to Wendt, this explains the selectiveness with which some states are stigmatised for failing to adhere to international standards of

behaviour while others are not (ibid.). This opens the discussion on deviance to questions of identity and otherness.

4.2.   Deviance from an Inter-Actional Perspective

An inter-actional perspective on deviance recognises that internal attributes alone do not suffice for someone or something to become deviant. Howard Becker, one of the fathers of the modern sociology of deviance, stressed that 'deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender"' (Becker 1963:9; emphasis in the original). It is located 'in the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it' (ibid.:14). It follows that, from an inter-actional perspective, 'a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed' (Goffman 1991 [1963]:11). In short, a state cannot 'be' deviant without relation to some *other*. This perspective widens our focus to the ways in which entities interact with their social environment and the expectations and norms that govern these interactions. These issues have been readily addressed by constructivist norms scholarship and international society perspectives stressing the influence of historical and contemporary standards of civilisation on othering dynamics.

Much has been written about the role of norms in world politics and their centrality in creating and upholding international order. The fundamental tenets of the English School are built on a conceptualisation of norms as the glue binding states together into an international society. Likewise, constructivist scholarship on state socialisation has devoted significant attention to processes of norm diffusion across and within states. However, the link between norms and deviance remains theoretically underdeveloped in both approaches (Adler-Nissen 2014:144; Zarakol 2014; Smetana & Onderco 2018:517). The first wave of constructivist norms scholarship focused on the global emergence and diffusion of norms through socialisation, internalisation, and institutionalisation (Kratochwil & Ruggie 1986; Nadelmann 1990; Finnemore & Sikkink 1998). Non-Western societies were, in this context, perceived as passively emulating or actively accepting global norms rooted in Western practices and beliefs (Linklater 2021:12). Defiance to these universal, cosmopolitan norms was regarded 'as illegitimate or immoral' (Acharya 2004:242). Deviance was thus located in the 'failure to obey group norms' (Dotter 2015:104) and seen as 'failed socialisation' (Adler-Nissen 2014:171). However, this perspective overstates the degree of normative consensus in society on what constitutes deviance (ibid.:105) and advances a static conceptualisation of norms (Pratt 2020). Moreover, critical and postcolonial scholars have criticised the norms literature for isolating discussions on the structuring and ordering quality of norms from considerations of power and agency,

presupposing a linearity in the spread of norms and the expansion of international society that not only fails to capture the complexity behind these processes but also overlooks the power relations underlying the construction of normative orders (Epstein 2012, 2014). In this regard, they call for a 'shift from "norms" to "normalisation"' by paying attention to how certain practices become normalised while others are deemed unacceptable (Epstein 2014:300). According to this perspective, the modern world is held together by stigmatisation rather than socialisation (Zarakol 2014). Stigmatisation, in this regard, plays a crucial role in maintaining the status quo and ensuring the continued dominance of Western standards and the prevailing hierarchy of states by reinforcing existing patterns of domination (ibid.). Yet as Zarakol points out, 'for a stigmatizing […] dynamic to emerge in a social system, there does not have to be a deliberate master plan of oppression … (although sometimes there are those as well)' (Zarakol 2010:66). In this regard, the process by which dominant groups in society draw the boundaries of normality by establishing standards, norms and best practices involves a much more diffuse kind of stigmatisation (Rogstad 2022:2–3). In a similar vein, Linklater attests that while international society may have outgrown Europe, 'it has not exactly outgrown European or Western civilization' given the latter's prevalence in contemporary world politics (Linklater 2013:2). Standards of civilisation serve to rationalise existing inequalities in international society (Schulz 2014:838). Contesting the Eurocentrism inherent in this order is therefore no longer viewed as regressive but as an emancipatory practice aimed at '*undoing* the world worked up by monistic universalism' (Blaney & Tickner 2017:302; emphasis in the original) and building an alternative 'pluriverse' (ibid.). Notwithstanding the critique levelled against this overly positive view of contestation and transgression as celebratory acts of defiance (Wolff & Zimmermann 2016; Evers 2017; Bettiza & Lewis 2020), this line of research has brought considerations of power in the construction of deviance to the forefront. Moreover, it has paved the way for more epistemic relativism by stressing the inter-actional nature of the process and giving back agency to the stigmatised in the form of stigma management strategies (Adler-Nissen 2014).

Critique

Recent work on stigmatisation has been instrumental in denaturalising deviance and highlighting the social processes underpinning its construction. Deviance is no longer located in the state but in the reaction by 'the audience of normals' (Adler-Nissen 2014:152). However, many of these accounts are yet to fully transcend inter-actional thinking for two reasons. First, scholarship on stigmatisation is mainly centred on analysing and comparing distinct instances of stigmatisation and stigma management and has largely left aside the question of how stigmatisation

processes change over time (Rogstad 2022:1–2). Taking the existence of fully-fledged states for granted in their analysis, they do not explore the deep connection between deviance and statehood and thus take a rather 'presentist' viewpoint. Having said that, this void has been successfully filled by English School accounts on 'the Standard of Civilisation', which have, for a long time, traced the dynamics governing the inclusion and exclusion in international society (Gong 1984). Yet both strands of literature have recently attracted criticism for retaining binary categorisations. For its part, the English School has exhibited an inclination 'to apply a rigid binary distinction between members and outsiders of international society' (Schulz 2014:844). Yaqing criticises the substantialist undertones inherent in this 'either-or-logic': 'by focusing on the forms and properties of a categorically defined being, […], it fails to see and explore the processes of a relationally oriented becoming' (Yaqing 2010:133). This binary juxtaposition of the insider and the outsider is mirrored in research on stigmatisation, for it tends to conceptualise social hierarchies in binary terms 'as a differentiation between states that meet standards and states that do not' (Towns & Rumelili 2017:758).

Therefore, the second reason why I argue that these accounts are yet to fully transcend interactional thinking lies in their tendency to reduce the deviantisation process to the relations between two entities: the stigmatiser and the stigmatised, the Self and the Other or the insider and the outsider – to name the most prominent binary categorisations. As Towns and Rumelili highlight, these accounts do stress the radical interdependence of Self and Other (Towns & Rumelili 2017) by pointing to the fact that deviance is a normal part of any social order rather than a pathology and that what is considered deviant cannot be understood without an understanding of what constitutes normality (Smetana 2020a:538). However, they do not sufficiently acknowledge that the deviantisation process is not reducible to dyads; it is not the result of an interaction between the stigmatiser and the stigmatiser but embedded within wider networks of relations, narratives, and actors (Kurowska & Reshetnikov 2021). Yes, the relative position of the stigmatiser vis-à-vis the stigmatised does matter in the (re-)production of the deviantisation process. But, as Pouliot points out, 'the principles by which a dyad is hierarchized are not confined to its two members but defined "in reference to the whole"'(Pouliot 2017:130, referencing Dumont 1966:92). The 'whole' in this case denotes the wider international community but, in a truly relational sense, also includes non-state actors such as NGOs, international lawyers and other professionals whose assessment reports, standards and rankings across fields such as press freedom, economic performance and human rights contribute to setting standards of 'best practice' against which deviance is measured (Rogstad 2022:2–3). As Suzuki highlights, however, recent studies on international status have confined their analysis to studying states' relations

with 'the mainstream' section of the international community, namely the Western-led 'liberal core' (Suzuki 2017:223). Deviance, in these accounts, is thus only a relative phenomenon to the extent that the Self requires a *single* Other: the deviant as the Other of the Western-led liberal international order. Treating the international community as a monolithic whole, however, firstly overstates the extent to which there is agreement *within* the 'Western camp' on whether or not a state should be deviantised (Wagner *et al.* 2014b:7). One of the best examples is the long-standing disagreement between the US and the EU over policy towards Iran, where the latter's preference for dialogue and economic incentives caused quite a stir in Washington in the 1990s and early 2000s, and differences over the nuclear deal persist to this day (Pinto 2001; Lohmann 2016). Second, it fails to acknowledge the existence of non-Western 'sub-cultural groupings' and the empirical signs that the West is no longer 'the only game in town' (Suzuki 2017:223,227). In her article on Stigma Management in IR, Adler-Nissen does, in passing, mention the prospect of rising powers constituting 'new audiences of normals' in the future, but she leaves this possibility largely unexplored (Adler-Nissen 2014:172). We should be mindful not to inflate the degree of normative cohesion in international society, as there is sufficient evidence to suggest that, in line with the repluralisation of the international order, alternative audiences do already form around diverging conceptions of normality. These 'counter-audiences' are increasingly organised in rejection of the Liberal International Order (LIO) and form both from outside its core, where the main line of critique concerns the continued privileging of Western interests (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol 2021), as well as from within through various populist movements spanning from Hungary to the United States (Ikenberry 2018). Taking audience relativity seriously would thus serve to break up the stabilised juxtaposition of Self and Other. A third line of critique emanating from these binary conceptualisations is that they leave no room for figures such as the 'in-group deviant', the 'group isolate' (Goffman 1991 [1963]:150), or the 'trickster' (Kurowska & Reshetnikov 2021) whose liminal positions defy clear Self-Other, stigmatiser-stigmatised or insider-outsider binaries.

4.3. Towards a Trans-Actional Approach to Deviance

Whereas inter-actional approaches to deviance largely conceive of the stigmatisers and the stigmatised as being in struggle with each other over the ascription of the deviance label, a trans-actional perspective would go a step further, as it '[…] lessens the stress on separated participants' and directs attention towards 'the full system' (Dewey & Bentley 1960 [1949]:139). From this perspective, deviantisation is not reducible only to a relation between the stigmatiser and the stigmatised. Erving Goffman – in many ways the pioneer of the interactionist

perspective on stigma – is absolutely correct in his statement that '[t]he normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives' (1991 [1963]:146). There are simply no 'bad' norms from the perspective of those promoting them (Wunderlich 2014:87). However, reducing the deviantisation process to a 'two-role social process' (Goffman 1991 [1963]:145–146) risks obscuring the nuances between the two poles and the multitude of levels at which this process takes place.

Sociologists of deviance have filled this in-between space by distinguishing between *societal* and *situational* deviance (Goode 2015b:15). Societal deviance denotes the vertical dimension which recognises that those individuals or collectives with more authority can define what comes to be considered as deviant in society as a whole. Societal deviance is thus intrinsically connected to issues of social stratification since it is the dominant stratum or segment of society that has the power to set and enforce the boundaries between normality and deviance on a wider level (Goode 2015b:16; Smetana 2020a:538–539). Despite the gradually dwindling dominance of Western norms, values and institutions in the global arena, those aspiring to full membership within the international community arguably cannot hope to achieve it without the necessary social recognition from Western states, as the case study of Myanmar will show (Suzuki 2017:239).

However, exclusively positioning 'the deviant' as the Other of the Western-led international order fails to paint the whole picture, for it ignores the horizontal, 'grass-roots' dimension of deviance. This situational dimension stipulates that 'deviance can be anything that any collectivity or social circle reacts to negatively, regardless of how much or how little power they have' (Goode 2015b:15–16). What may be considered deviant in one social circle may pass as normal in another. Moreover, the boundaries of acceptability may shift depending on the social or physical setting. Take, for example, the field of diplomacy. The use of profanity or vulgar language is likely to be perceived as breaching the norms and conventions of professionalism, formality and propriety guiding diplomatic interactions. At the same time, swearing might be perfectly acceptable in informal settings or subcultures. Deviance is thus not only a matter of perspective but also positionality and practical involvement.

4.4.   Spelling out the Connection between Deviance and Stratification

The above chapter makes a case for conceptualising deviance as 'a fleeting, protean, adaptable, and yet in many contexts durable' process by which certain beliefs, behaviour and traits come to be identified as deviant in the eyes of a particular audience (Goode 2015a:xx). Actors' social

position, or the place they occupy within a social structure, plays a central role in shaping the nature of their exposure to this process. This social position is neither fixed nor predetermined but shaped by the relationships actors share with others and the structuring principles in which these relations are embedded. As critical and postcolonial scholars rightly point out, these relations are, at least at present, deeply hierarchical. Hierarchy refers to any system that ranks or organises actors into vertical relations of superiority and subordination (Mattern & Zarakol 2016:624). It is a system clearly implicated by differential power dynamics and based on organising principles of difference (Pouliot 2017:128–129). To account for the horizontal and vertical dimensions of deviance and address the shortcomings of existing studies, however, we require a more complex understanding of hierarchy that goes beyond reducing relations to dyads. How can we acknowledge that deviantisation is 'achieved as a result of employing, applying, or invoking hierarchies of power' (Goode 2015c:565) while simultaneously leaving enough conceptual space for actor, audience and situational relativity (Curra 2015:122)? The solution may well lie in applying a practical, performative understanding to social stratification since it acknowledges that social relations do not unfold in rigid, top-down or unidimensional hierarchies and actors can occupy multiple positions and perform different roles depending on the context. From this perspective, hierarchy is not a natural, static construct but a set of *social practices,* a continuous process that emerges through relations (Mattern & Zarakol 2016:641). The resulting social order is thus continuously shifting and emergent (Bueger & Gadinger 2015:453); it is constituted through power-laden processes of order*ing* (Rogstad 2022:4). Precisely because ordering is never complete, the boundaries demarcating the normal from the aberration are somewhat fluid, making contestation an inherent feature of every order (Dotter 2015:108; Rogstad 2022:4). The logical consequence of conceptualising contestation as a given is to acknowledge that there is potentially not just one reality, but many. There are no global or universal wholes but multiple, overlapping orders (Bueger & Gadinger 2015:453). Social actors position themselves and others within these orders through their social practices. Consequently, we may view social practices related to ordering as dynamic patterns of '*positioning*'.

This provides the conceptual link to the body of literature known as positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove 1991; eds. Moghaddam, Harré & Lee 2008a; Harré *et al.* 2009; Baert, van Langenhove & James 2019). It is not sufficient to merely point to the connection between deviance and stratification in the abstract without providing possible links to its operationalisation: How can we assess the hierarchical social position(s) of a state within the parameters set by our relational ontology? Given the sociologists of deviance's emphasis on negative societal

reactions, we need an approach attuned to the sociolinguistic construction of reality. Positioning theory, which looks at how different agents use discourse to establish their place and the place of those around them, addresses this need, not least because it echoes our epistemological emphasis on the study of relations and provides a link between power relations and discourse. Understanding whether someone is positioned as 'part of the group' or 'outside' and 'against us' offers valuable insights into the dynamics of power and status determination.

Introduced by Harré and Langenhove in 1991, positioning theory initially focused on the analysis of interpersonal encounters but has since broadened its scope to include diverse disciplines such as anthropology (Holland & Leander 2004), journalism (Miller 2010), public relations (Wise & James 2013) and international relations (Moghaddam & Kavulich 2008). Its applications range from the study of political identity construction (Slocum-Bradley 2008) to an examination of cultural stereotyping (van Langenhove & Harré 1994) and global conflict resolution (eds. Moghaddam, Harré & Lee 2008a). Despite being relatively overlooked in the field of international relations, positioning theory is increasingly recognised for its potential to illuminate global ordering processes by moving beyond a narrow focus on states, as suggested by Baert et al. (2019) and Pavón-Guinea (2021). The key insight of positioning theory lies in the recognition that the nature of positions is context-specific and, at times, transitory. Individuals, groups, or states may experience multiple forms of privilege and subordination simultaneously, based on the intersection of factors such as economic status, historical background, geopolitical location, or identity. Any act of positioning thus remains open to challenge, given this potential for parallel and competing status interpretations (Harré *et al.* 2009:10). Positioning unfolds as a discursive process within the dynamics of evolving relations, wherein subjects metaphorically cast both themselves and others as actors in a drama, each assigned different 'positions' in relation to the others (Baert *et al.* 2019:4.8). Positioning acts are made up of three components: positions, actions, and storylines.

Positions are defined as 'clusters of beliefs about how rights and duties are distributed in the course of an episode of personal interaction and the taken-for-granted practices in which most of these beliefs are concretely realized' (Harré *et al.* 2009:9). Essentially, they represent 'the parts being performed by the participants', defining the boundaries of what the actors are entitled to express and do based on their positions (van Langenhove 2017:9). People engage in positioning within the framework of various cultural, legal, and institutional moral orders, and the ability to resist or shape these orders is linked to 'the power positions of people in their ongoing social interactions' (ibid.:11). *Actions* encompass any action – verbal, symbolical or

physical – undertaken to enact or attribute the abovementioned positions (Louis 2008:25–26). Within this context, *storylines* represent the narratives utilised to give significance to words and actions, drawing inspiration from sources such as history or media presentations (Moghaddam, Harré & Lee 2008b:11–12). The theory suggests that positions, actions, and storylines form a mutually influencing triangle (ibid.:12-13). Positioning is not always a conscious act; rather, actors often habitually engage in positioning behaviours that reflect and perpetuate existing hierarchies and power dynamics within a society. In other words, it is sometimes '[…] less the result of instrumental calculations than of established ways of doing things' (Pouliot 2017:122–123).
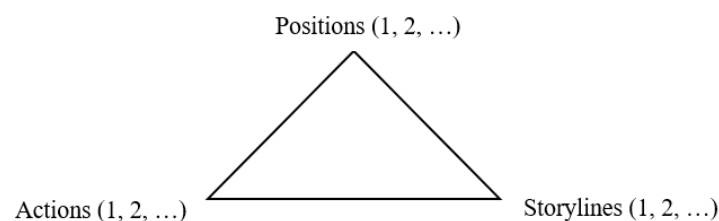

Figure 1: The Positioning Triangle. Based on Moghaddam, Harré & Lee 2008b:12.

Positions are related to, but not synonymous with, roles, as the latter implies a more static, ritualistic and prescriptive logic of action (Henriksen 2008:42). The distinction between the two is best viewed along a spectrum, as the assignment of rights and duties through an act of positioning can, over time, solidify into the enduring expectations associated with a role (Moghaddam *et al.* 2008b:9). In our discussion, this means that although the category of the 'deviant' lacks a coherent life history, those positioned within it may nevertheless find themselves confined to a pre-defined role that persists through everyday acts of positioning, not least because not everyone has the same capacity, power and willingness to position and be positioned (Harré & van Langenhove 1991:406). We will return to this issue in Chapter 7.2., when we look at how Myanmar's 2011 reform process destabilised preconceived notions of deviance held by the US and the EU. For now, let us turn to the methodological implications of the theoretical framework outlined above.

5. Methodological Considerations and Limitations

Taking a relational approach to deviance entails certain meta-methodological implications. First, and perhaps rather obviously, it comes with a commitment to placing relations and processes rather than elements in the focus of analysis. Epistemologically, it posits that deviance cannot be studied when looking at entities through self-actional or inter-actional perspectives. In contrast to the latter, in particular, it calls for taking a long-term perspective to acknowledge the intricate connection between deviance and statehood, and to consider both societal and situational dimensions of deviance rather than merely studying the interactions of a dyad in the form of a stigmatiser and a stigmatised. Second, it necessitates a research design rooted in constitutive inquiry, or 'nonlinear' and 'multi-directional causality' (Fisher 2013). States do not exist prior to the web of relations through which they are constituted, and these relations, in turn, shape and are shaped by deviantisation processes. The boundary-drawing is embedded in historically, culturally, and politically contingent perceptions of legitimate statehood (Werner 2014:198).

Leaving these meta-discussions aside, let us now turn to discussing specific methodological approaches. While relationalism does not prescribe a specific method (Jackson & Nexon 2019:595), sociologists of deviance, as we now know, do provide a precise search-and-find strategy for locating deviance by emphasising the importance of negative reactions. These reactions (or 'actions' and 'storylines', to stick with our positioning terminology) may be discursive in nature, expressed through written or verbal criticism, through the use of negative tropes and labels, or through other forms of communication such as images. Reactions are also measured by certain behavioural patterns. These include overt actions such as embargoes and sanctions, as well as gestures and forms of social closure, such as denying the perceived offender access to resources, opportunities, or privileges, and excluding them from certain status clubs (Keene 2012). In terms of data collection, employing a discourse or narrative analysis emerges as the most appropriate method to capture and analyse these responses, particularly in conjunction with positioning theory. However, undertaking such an approach would by far exceed the scope provided for in this thesis. In addition, since the thesis tilts towards a theoretical exploration rather than an empirical one, the case study is primarily illustrative in nature. Consequently, I will rely primarily on secondary accounts to analyse Myanmar's international positioning from 1988 to 2016, while selectively including primary sources such as public statements and speeches to enrich the analysis and illustrate some of the discursive features identified by others.

Needless to say, the thesis suffers from several limitations. First, and perhaps most obviously, if relations form the backbone of all phenomena and feed into everything, where do we draw the line? Boundary specification, i.e., 'moving from flows of transaction to clearly demarcated units of study, from continuity to discontinuity' (Emirbayer 1997:303), is perhaps the greatest challenge to relational analyses. One might even say that this thesis has taken its critique too far and set itself up to fail in the process due to the sheer magnitude of the implications it has generated. And indeed, I am acutely aware that the space provided for in a master's thesis does not allow me to conduct a fully relational analysis. I can only hope to offer an approximation, at best. Having said that, every empirical research requires boundaries, and there is an agreement among relational scholars that we may analytically speak about entities as if they were bounded and separate phenomena to 'secure provisional descriptions and partial reports' (Dewey & Bentley 1960 [1949]:142), provided that we recognise their temporary and unfolding nature in line with the relations underlying them (Selg 2018: 548). In fact, many relational scholars at times display substantialist tendencies (Emirbayer 1997:290). The analysis will remain sensitive to these considerations, even though a certain level of reification and simplification is necessary to keep the research within feasible boundaries. In order to pay due respect to spatio-temporal contexts, the focus is narrowed to Myanmar's positioning within dominant European and US public and policy discourses, as well as within ASEAN. Despite these empirical limitations, it is hoped that readers will nevertheless be able to see the inherent strengths of using relational ontology in conjunction with positioning theory in order to shed light on the complex construction of deviance in international politics.

A second limitation is that, at a deeper ontological level, the analysis betrays its own commitments to relationalism. Morozov's critique of relational sociology (Morosov 2022) is also relevant to my conceptualisation of audiences: Although I conceive of audiences as dynamic and emergent, they are ultimately composed of individuals, and my conceptualisation thus reverts back to a form of ontological individualism. A secondary concern arises from the potentially problematic association of the term 'audiences' with securitisation theory in IR. Nonetheless, there are compelling justifications for retaining the term within this thesis. Firstly, I want to maintain a scholarly connection to sociological and international relations scholarship on deviance, where the term is widely used. Secondly, the term 'audience' does not presuppose the analytical primacy of the state. And thirdly, it refrains from presupposing ideological or cultural homogeneity. Viewing audiences through a performative and practical lens opens the door to the possibility of unexpected cross-border alliances and variations in their composition across time and space. A development such as the EU and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

(OIC) joining forces to condemn Myanmar's treatment of its Rohingya minority (Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations in New York 2021; 2023) is easy to grasp in terms of audience, but less so with references to hegemonic formations centred on the promotion of liberal norms and human rights practices. In contrast to the predominantly reactive nature of the referent audience in securitisation theory, the conceptualisation of audiences here does not depict a passive group of spectators. Instead, it portrays a dynamic formation that actively contributes to the construction of deviance through acts of positioning (Smetana 2020b:34–35). That the term 'audience' does not adequately reflect this dynamism may be partly a linguistic problem since many Western languages tend to reduce processes to static conditions.[7]

A third possible line of criticism centres on the question of whether adopting a constructivist perspective on deviance implies an endorsement of moral relativism. Scholars working on deviance devote considerable effort to deconstructing stigma and deviance, while refraining from making explicit moral judgements about the subjects of their analysis. It is important to clarify that this deconstruction is neither understood as an emancipatory effort nor is it in any way intended to diminish the gravity of atrocities. However, when dealing with sensitive issues such as the grave human rights violations in Myanmar, we have a responsibility to reflect carefully on the normative and ethical implications of such an approach and to address potential points of criticism. It is to this purpose that the next chapter is devoted.

6. Normative and Ethical Considerations

For decades, the sociological study of deviance has come under intense scrutiny, drawing criticism from both orthodox positivists as well as voices across the political spectrum. In her book *The Politics of Deviance*, Anne Hendershott accuses the field of trivialising behaviour that is harmful to society by endorsing a form of cultural relativism that lacks clear and absolute moral standards (Hendershott 2002). Hendershott believes that certain behaviours, characteristics, and beliefs *are* intrinsically wrong and *should,* therefore, be stigmatized in order to prevent moral decay and the erosion of traditional values (Goode 2004:47). In short, she advocates to '*de-relativize*, *essentialize*, and *absolutize* deviance' (ibid.:48, emphasis in the original), which is reminiscent of the approaches discussed under the banner of self-actionism in chapter 4.1. This perspective, often influenced by religious beliefs, finds political support from conservative and right-wing forces worldwide. Conversely, critical and Marxist scholars have criticised the field for not being critical enough in its analysis of structural power dynamics and for obscuring the

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[7] On the role of language in promoting substantialist thinking, see Elias (2012 [1978]:106–108).

power relations involved in deviantisation processes (Liazos 1972; Sumner 1994; Lavin & Zozula 2020:825). At the same time, viewing morality and ethics as a construct is problematic for them as well: If we can question the idea that our societal order is not a fixed reality but a social construction, we can also challenge key concepts such as justice, freedom, exploitation, and oppression – all of which are central to our definition of human rights and democracy (Goode 2004:55–56). Both lines of critique sensitise us to a central question: Does adopting a constructivist perspective on deviance imply endorsing a dangerous kind of moral relativism that either a.) is too sympathetic to those considered deviants, or b.) rejects any universal notion of human rights and democracy as an external imposition, or even as ontologically impossible?

Regarding the first point: Critical and postcolonial IR scholars indeed tend to view noncompliance in positive terms as a means to emancipate, democratise or legitimise global norms, thereby making a strong normative claim for diversity (Wolff & Zimmermann 2016:518). This overly positive view of contestation may obscure more radical forms of resistance aimed at dismantling the existing global order (ibid.:533). Public reactions to the October 2023 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel illustrate that deviants are indeed sometimes idealised in public discourse, and their violent and destructive actions are transformed into a fight for freedom by the misunderstood and oppressed.[8] This critique *does not* deny the analytical value of critical and postcolonial perspectives but underlines the need to address their vulnerability to normative bias and instrumentalisation within and beyond academia. Having said that, Hendershott's critique is of a more fundamental kind, grounded in a rejection of constructivist perspectives on deviance, with which, as someone who identifies as a 'constructivist' in the broad sense, I disagree. This is not the place to discuss the philosophical underpinnings of constructivism; suffice it to say that a brief look at history shows us that what is considered wrong is more often than not bound by time and place. While I admit that the consequences of viewing ethics and morality as a construct sit rather uncomfortably with my inner liberal, we must nevertheless recognise that norms, be they liberal or otherwise, do not exist independently from the various performative practices in which they are embedded. Moreover, from an analytical perspective, I believe it makes sense to analyse the differences that actually exist in the real world rather than to dismiss them because they don't fit into our moral conception of what *ought* to be considered wrong. As Katzenstein pointed out, the centrality of norms 'lies not in being true or false but in *being shared*' (Katzenstein 1993:268, emphasis added). It is an empirical fact that liberal norms

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[8] For an insightful critique of these simplistic narratives in the context of the 2023 terrorist attack, see Illouz (2023).

of democracy and human rights are being challenged, and pointing this out does not amount to their relativisation.

Concerning the second point, we ought to draw a clearer distinction between relativism and relationalism. Despite their apparent similarity, these concepts differ significantly in their ontological views of the universality of human rights and democracy. While any move towards recognising cultural differences and acknowledging post-colonial sensitivities to Western influences inadvertently runs the risk of legitimising autocratic discourses on the subject, relativism is particularly vulnerable to instrumentalisation. Historically, ASEAN has been at the forefront of promoting the idea of a cultural mediation of human rights through a philosophical appeal to relativism and 'Asian values', emphasising '[…] due regard for specific cultural, social, economic, and political circumstances' (ASEAN 1993). In contrast to this relativism, which in its extreme form promotes a view of culture as bounded, static and monolithic, relational approaches, as exemplified by Norbert Elias' perspective discussed in Chapter 3.1, recognise culture as an ongoing, dynamic process whose primary characteristics include '[…] the ability to disseminate, diffuse, and reproduce' (Boryczko, Leung & Madew 2023:32). Both relationalism and relativism share the assumption that human rights are not abstract principles but are intimately bound up with the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are enacted, but the former does not share the fatalism of the latter. While (radical) relativists conclude from this cultural diversity that, ontologically speaking, there can be no such thing as universality, relationalists take a more agnostic stance on the matter. They do not reject the possibility of universal human rights altogether but emphasise that such universality must emerge within the framework of specific relationships, social structures, and power dynamics (Dallmayr 2002; Nedelsky 2008). As such, universality is a context- and time-specific arrangement whose realisation depends on the *quality* of interactions and relationships between individuals, communities, and the institutional arrangements that govern them (Dallmayr 2002:177; Nedelsky 2008:147–150). After all, relational logics produce different forms of relational settings depending, for example, on whether they operate in democratic, heteronomous, hegemonic or colonial international contexts (Powel 2020:554). Relationalism thus shifts the focus from the rights themselves to the relationships underlying them. In this regard, the most prominent criticism of 'universal' human rights is that they are not really universal but primarily a reflection of continued Western dominance. For human rights to gain universal acceptance, the processes by which they are defined must, therefore, be embedded in more democratic structures (Nedelsky 2008:162). Admittedly, this is somewhat paradoxical since recognising the diversity of the human experience is, at the same time, unlikely to give rise to a singular

hegemonic narrative surrounding the definition of human rights. Moreover, focusing on the process alone doesn't provide much insight into the substantive normative legitimacy of the outcome. At a theoretical level, then, relationalism cannot resolve the tension between universalism and relativism. By proposing a shift towards embedding human rights in the broader social landscape, it does, however, provide a clear call to action: since human rights can only be realised under 'socially supportive conditions' (Anderson & Honneth 2009:130), we ought to focus on how to create and protect relational contexts that enable their realisation.

7. Case Study: Myanmar

The overarching aim of my thesis is to show that the deviantisation process cannot be reduced to dyads because constructions of 'the deviant' constitute historically and situationally unstable figurations. Deviance is not located in the person or the audience but in a broader network of relations that operate within a hierarchical system of differentiation. To support this argument, the next logical step is to demonstrate that the talk of relationalism is more than mere academic parlance by illustrating, through a case study, the ways in which a relational perspective enriches our understanding of the dynamic interplay between stigmatisation and social stratification. In this regard, I will proceed in five steps: First, I examine the positioning discourses of those actors most fervently involved in branding Myanmar's military (hereafter also referred to by its Burmese name *Tatmadaw*) as deviant: the EU and the US. Notably, I deliberately exclude the other end of the policy extreme, China and Russia, because as the junta's main diplomatic supporters they have refrained from publicly employing negative status ascriptions. Instead, in a second step, I have chosen to provide a brief overview of the Tatmadaw's self-positioning. Recognising that an analysis of deviance constructions requires an examination of how those labelled as deviant respond to such characterisations, this inclusion adds depth to our investigation. Attention then turns to ASEAN, whose Myanmar strategy has alternated between resisting the EU and the US and seeking recognition from various internal and external audiences. This provides an illuminating opportunity to examine the impact of differential power dynamics at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of deviance against the backdrop of actor, audience, and situational relativity. My commitment to taking a long-term perspective is served by the fourth step, which considers how Myanmar's international standing vis-à-vis the EU and the US has evolved in response to its democratisation. In the fifth and final step, the analysis shifts from a chronological to an analytical structure. Here, I identify four underlying logics (both/and, in-between, here-and-now, in-motion) that underpin constructions of Myanmar's deviance.

Myanmar is one of the first countries that comes to mind when one thinks of international deviancy. During its long period of military rule, the regime was shunned by the US and the EU for its failure to uphold human rights and democratic standards. Tropes such as 'outpost of tyranny', 'evil regime' and 'pariah' were regularly invoked in political and media discourse to position the country as being outside the realm of civilised states. International shaming, coupled with calls for regime change, effectively negated the Burmese generals' self-perception as the legitimate rulers of the nation and challenged their claim to moral authority. To this day, the United States continues to use the name 'Burma', a practice that persists despite widespread international recognition, including by the United Nations, of the military regime's official name change to 'Myanmar' in 1989 (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs 2021). The EU, too, only gradually adopted the term 'Myanmar' after the initiation of reforms in the early 2010s, a strategy identified as 'semantic sanctions' aimed at disputing the legitimacy of the regime (Portela 2013:37, 2014:11).[9] Reflecting the widespread sentiment at the time, US State Department spokesman Nicolas Burns suggested that the regime's 'human rights performance is so woeful and so irresponsible that surely it should not be treated as a *normal country* […]' (Japan Times 1997; Marston 2023:286–287; emphasis added).

However, the US and the EU are not the only source of social recognition. Since 1997, Myanmar has been integrated into ASEAN, where, as noted by Davies, '[…] it has never been a case of nine members versus a renegrade' (2012:7). The 'civilised versus uncivilised' dichotomy is further destabilised by the fact that neighbouring countries such as India, China and Russia have continued to engage Myanmar on real-political terms throughout the period of stigmatisation (Routray 2011; Singh 2012; Steinberg & Fan 2012; Lutz-Auras 2015). It would also be inaccurate to frame this as a 'West versus the rest' issue, as Australia and Japan, for example, have adopted more independent and, at times, lenient policy lines (Steinberg 2007:224–226) – confirming our initial observation that the 'audience of normals' is not a unitary bloc. Broadening the analytical gaze to encompass the entire web of relations, rather than confining Myanmar's position to the 'Western-led pariah state' narrative, reveals the multiple role positions the regime embodies depending on the relational setting and offers insights into the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of global hierarchies.

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[9] States that continue to use the term 'Burma' do so in solidarity with the pro-democracy movement, which rejected the name change as an illegitimate move by an undemocratic regime without the consent of the people. Although I occasionally use the two terms interchangeably, I tend to stick with 'Myanmar' in recognition of the fact that the term has become much more widely used in recent years. However, I explicitly reject the veneer of inclusiveness with which the military has justified the name change and stand in solidarity with those calling for a more democratic solution.

To be clear, analysing Myanmar's international status is not a straightforward exercise. Not only are moral hierarchies fluid and contested, but they also intersect with material factors such as economic and geopolitical considerations to create a myriad of status projections, narratives, and foreign policy approaches within the international community. Given space and time limitations, the analysis will focus exclusively on examining how the US and the EU, on the one hand, and ASEAN, on the other, positioned the Tatmadaw in relation to themselves. The aim is not to provide an in-depth analysis but to sketch key features of their positioning discourses. While narratives that position the junta as a human rights violator arguably play the most prominent role in its deviantisation, and therefore also in discourses aimed at challenging this narrative, I do not claim them to be exhaustive.[10] Although this increases the risk that the analysis will remain somewhat superficial, the wealth of descriptive literature available on the subject, even if it does not employ a deviance framework (with the partial exception of Radtke 2014), nevertheless provides a valuable resource for effectively navigating this complexity.

A considerable body of literature has examined US and EU sanction regimes towards Myanmar, emphasising their limited effectiveness (Kreutz 2006; Egreteau 2010; Steinberg 2010b; Portela 2014; Dosch & Sidhu 2015; Haacke 2015a). Within the field of comparative regionalism, scholars have explored how differences over how to deal with Myanmar have significantly complicated EU-ASEAN relations. This exploration centres on analysing the impact of divergent membership conceptions within these two regional bodies (Schembera 2016) and the influence of ASEAN's norms and cultures (Petersson 2006; Flers 2010), particularly the principle of non-interference, in shaping their respective strategies (Cook 2010). Recent scholarship has moved away from this variable-based comparison to a greater recognition of the dynamics of contestation and defiance. Stacey, for example, illustrates how both ASEAN and the EU have adopted different narratives of Myanmar's position within the regional community over time (Stacey 2021, 2023). Similarly, Ba adopts a process-relational perspective to reveal the complexities ASEAN faces in managing multiple audiences and objectives simultaneously and devising its Myanmar strategy accordingly (Ba 2023). By shifting the analytical focus from treating norms as static units to understanding their dynamic nature and from studying reified entities to unfolding relations, these scholars provide valuable insights into the deeply relational nature of

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[10] McGregor, for example, identifies two additional human rights discourses within Australia: One that positions Myanmar as a humanitarian disaster and the other that frames the country as a development partner (2005:201–202). It goes without saying that discourses always manifest themselves in a variety of forms and perspectives, even if the analysis does not pay due attention to this.

how deviance is constructed in international politics. These contributions serve as a basis for the application of the deviance framework developed in the previous chapters.

7.1.   Myanmar under Military Rule: 1988 to 2011

Myanmar's modern history has been marked by political turmoil, particularly since its liberation from British colonial rule in 1948. During the transition from colonial rule, internal disputes over the structure of the newly formed state became entangled with rising ethnic tensions, which eventually erupted into civil war.[11] This instability laid the groundwork for a significant expansion of the military's role in government. In 1962, the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, seized control of the government through a coup d'état. Operating under various names, the military maintained its grip on power for more than two decades, justifying its rule as a necessary measure to prevent national disintegration. Throughout this period, the Tatmadaw not only exercised political dominance but has also penetrated deeply into the country's economic and social spheres. This deep entrenchment of the military has led analysts to classify the country as a 'praetorian state', characterised by state repression, systematic human rights abuses, economic mismanagement and ethnic conflict (Egreteau 2016; Croissant 2022).

Until 1988, however, the authoritarian nature of the Burmese state was of little concern to the international community. In fact, the country experienced a 20-fold increase in official development assistance (ODA) during the 1970s (Ware 2014:253), with some of the most generous aid coming from Western European countries (Egreteau 2010:16; Du Boisseau Rocher 2013:195). Despite a shift in US foreign policy towards prioritising human rights during President Carter's administration, Burma's human rights record remained conspicuously absent from international agendas (Steinberg 2010b:180). Paradoxically, between 1980 and 1988, the United States trained more Burmese officers than any other nationality through its IMET programme, despite a provision in the International Security Act of 1978 that would have prohibited such assistance because of human rights abuses (ibid.). This highlights that a specific relation between norm violation and deviantisation only exists when meaning is attributed to it. Labelling Myanmar a 'pariah state' only became part of the political rhetoric of Western nations following the brutal suppression of the nationwide pro-democracy protests, commonly referred to as the '8-8-88 Uprising', which culminated in the establishment of renewed military rule under the State Law and Restoration Council (SLORC) (Marston 2023:286). Tensions escalated

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[11] This is obviously an oversimplification of historical events. For those interested in reading more, Farrelly (2013), Myoe (2021) and Walton (2021) provide insightful introductions to Burmese history and politics.

in 1990 when the military junta refused to cede power to the National League for Democracy (NLD), despite its overwhelming electoral victory. These events laid the groundwork for an ongoing foreign policy dispute between ASEAN, the United States, and the European Union. The central point of contention revolved around who should be recognised as the legitimate authority representing Myanmar, the military junta or the NLD.

7.1.1. Positioning Myanmar: The Self-Proclaimed 'Audience of Normals'

US-American Positioning Discourse(s)

Prior to the US pivot to Asia during the Obama administration, Myanmar's geographical remoteness relegated it to a position of low strategic priority. In Washington, policymakers focused primarily on promoting democracy and human rights in their engagement with the country (Haacke 2015a:56; Marston 2023:285). The term 'boutique issue', coined by Steinberg, aptly characterises Myanmar's place in US policy (Steinberg 2010b). Described as a small, fashionable concern in human rights and foreign policy circles, Myanmar received detailed attention only from a select clientele – 'those concerned with the world's most recent good and moral cause' (ibid.:175). Congress played a leading role in shaping US policy, and there was strong bipartisan support for policies aimed at removing the military junta from power (Haacke 2015a:71; Marston 2023:285). Individual members of Congress, notably Republican Senator Mitch McConnell and Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein, played a prominent role in championing the cause, while expatriate groups and civil rights advocates also contributed significantly to 'America's moral vilification of Myanmar' (Haacke 2015a:58). As one influential congressman noted in an anonymous statement documented by Steinberg, '[…] a few congressmen were interested in [sanctions], and no one could be seen as voting for a pariah regime' (2010b:181).

Between 1988 and 2009, US strategy revolved around the international isolation of the military regime in order to bring about regime change. The driving force behind this push for regime change was the NLD's sweeping election victory in 1990, which was widely interpreted as a clear call for democratic governance and a rejection of military rule (Steinberg 2010b:183–184; Marston 2023:285). The military's refusal to accept the election results led to a comprehensive set of sanctions, including the suspension of US economic and military aid, as well as the imposition of economic sanctions and arms embargoes (for a comprehensive overview of the policies, see Martin 2020). US policy made a concerted effort to ostracise the military regime and deny it the rights normally accorded to a sovereign state. The intricate link between the

deviantisation of the ruling junta and the denial of sovereignty by the US is exemplified by a provision in the 1998 Foreign Affairs and Reform and Restructuring Act. This provision stipulated that all US assistance to Myanmar under the UN Development Programme must bypass the government and be administered exclusively through NGOs, subject to 'consultation with the leadership of the National League for Democracy and the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma [NCGUB]' (United States 1998:Sec 1106). The fact that the NCGUB operated as a government-in-exile and the NLD is an opposition party is a testament to the fact that the military junta was denied status as the governing authority of Myanmar, effectively creating a de facto parallel government within Myanmar (Steinberg 2007:224). While the legalities of this legislation and the extent to which the US exercises autonomy over UN programmes were somewhat unclear (Steinberg 2010b:185), this provision nevertheless underscores an observation made in Chapter 3, namely that 'statehood' is not a static condition but a dynamic process in which the ability of the governing body to enter into relations with others, and hence its legitimacy in the face of prevailing power structures, complements functional and territorial criteria. In this context, deviantisation is employed to delegitimise the junta for its failure to adhere to Kantian values. The Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003 further solidified this stance by officially recognising the NLD as the legitimate representative of the Burmese people (U.S. Congress 2003; Steinberg 2010b:185).

The US also led international efforts to condemn Myanmar at the United Nations, partnering with the United Kingdom to present a draft resolution to the Security Council in 2007 that sought to declare Myanmar a 'threat to international peace and security' (United Nations Security Council 2007). While this move carried symbolic weight, it was arguably more of a theatrical gesture than a genuine attempt to secure approval, as many believed that the motion did not meet the criteria for such an extraordinary threat declaration (Steinberg 2007:221–222). Despite the expected vetoes from China and Russia, then-President George W. Bush insisted on pushing for the resolution. This tactical manoeuvre showcased the US's role as a self-appointed rule enforcer, seeking to mobilise the 'audience of normals' to denounce Myanmar on the global stage. Personal motivations may also have influenced Bush's decision as he was a vocal opponent of the military junta (ibid.; Haacke 2015b:291), and his wife, Laura Bush, publicly positioned herself as a prominent advocate of Aung San Suu Kyi in her struggle against the regime (Beech 2007; Bush 2012).

US representatives also pursued their moral vilification against the generals through rhetorical means, using different tropes to portray the military regime as incompetent and morally corrupt.

Early in George W. Bush's second term, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described Burma as an 'outpost of tyranny', grouping it with countries such as Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Belarus and Zimbabwe (Rice 2005). Her predecessor, Colin Powell, had previously described Myanmar's military rulers as 'thugs' – a label that would later resurface in the aftermath of the 2021 coup (The Irrawaddy 2022). Following the violent attack on Aung San Suu Kyi and an NLD convoy in Depayin in May 2003, he stated:

'By attacking Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters, the Burmese junta has finally and definitively rejected the efforts of the outside world to bring Burma back into the international community. Indeed, their refusal of the work of Ambassador Razali and of the rights of Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters could not be clearer. Our response must be equally clear if the thugs who now rule Burma are to understand that their failure to restore democracy will only bring more and more pressure against them and their supporters.' (Powell 2003)

This statement clearly positions Myanmar outside of the international community. It also reflects a broader pattern of US policy: Its personalisation around Aung San Suu Kyi. Concern for her well-being and condemnation of her mistreatment framed US policy (Steinberg 2010a). Depayin caused widespread international outrage precisely because of the perceived danger to Aung San Suu Kyi and initial, albeit incorrect, reports of her personal harm (ibid.). As a result of this personalised approach, US policy towards Myanmar tended to be reactive rather than proactive (Haacke 2015b:290). Aung San Suu Kyi's substantial support in Congress led experts to believe that her views played a pivotal role in shaping US policy towards Myanmar (Steinberg 2010b:181; Haacke 2015b:290; Heiduk 2020). High-profile figures emerged as fervent supporters of 'the Lady'. In her autobiography, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright hailed Aung San Suu Kyi as a 'hero' and 'a real friend', praising her graceful appearance and unwavering determination (Albright 2003:252–254).

This narrative extended to the US media, which often portrayed Aung San Suu Kyi as physically frail but morally resolute, embodying hope for a nation described in Orientalist terms as exotic and underdeveloped (Brooten 2005). This representation carried a strong gender bias, presenting her not as a strong and capable national leader but as a delicate, feminine icon (ibid.:151) – a portrayal that contrasted with her own repeated self-identification as a politician rather than a democratic symbol (Snow & Ireland 2013; Selth 2020:478). The media's framing implied that the Burmese people required external help while positioning the United States as a mature and virile model of democracy led by skilled and compassionate leaders committed to advancing global freedom and democracy (Brooten 2005:136). Furthermore, films such as *Beyond*

Rangoon and *Rambo* also played an important role in sensitising a wider audience to the plight of the Burmese, further idealising Aung San Suu Kyi and perpetuating stigmatising perceptions of the junta (Selth 2009).

European Positioning Discourse(s)

On the other side of the Atlantic, Aung San Suu Kyi also enjoyed considerable prominence and status. In December 1990, she was awarded the *Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought* by the European Parliament, a prelude to her receipt of the *Nobel Peace Prize* one year later. Widely regarded as the Burmese counterpart to revered figures like Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, she enjoyed overwhelming support from European publics (Egreteau 2010:18).

Although the EU's sanctions policy was not as stringent as that of the US (Steinberg 2007:219), it was similarly driven by normative convictions and a self-image as a 'guardian of human rights' (Stacey 2021:114). As the EU began to embrace human rights as a significant part of its identity, closely linking its ambitions for 'normative power' (Manners 2002) with the global promotion of good governance, Myanmar became a focal point of contention (Egreteau 2010:17; Stacey 2021:105). The EU propagated a 'military versus the people' narrative that positioned the generals as illegitimate, authoritarian rulers and human rights violators (Stacey 2021:130). Consequently, EU-Burma relations experienced a complete turnaround, with arms embargoes, sanctions and diplomatic boycotts now guiding EU policy towards Burma. The EU Common Position in 1996 provided the foundation for further engagement (Egreteau 2010:20–22; Dosch & Sidhu 2015:90). In this context, the narrative of the opposition's struggle became the benchmark for measuring Myanmar's democratic progress (Stacey 2021:112), and European diplomats continuously stressed the EU's role in strengthening Burmese civil society and thereby gearing up for democratisation (Egreteau 2010:30). The condemnation of the 'monstrous' military junta (Matsakis 2008) became a central component of European statements on Myanmar, particularly in international forums like the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly (Egreteau 2010:19). Political conditions in Myanmar were deemed 'unacceptable', described as 'a travesty', or referred to as 'a farce' (Du Boisseau Rocher 2013:205). This declaratory diplomacy aimed to dramatise hostility towards the junta, emphasise the EU's good intentions and assert its moral superiority (ibid.). In its effort to project a positive image to the international community, civil rights groups and the media, the EU accorded significant influence to public opinion, NGOs and Burmese expatriates, giving them '[…] an influential but emotional place in the EU decision-making process' (ibid.:204). However, despite its strong moral convictions, EU policy towards Myanmar since 1988 has been characterised as reactive

rather than following a clear, premeditated plan and strategy (Egreteau 2010:21; Dosch & Sidhu 2015:89). In other words, it was 'high on rhetoric but low on achievement' (Crawford 2002:924).

One could contend that the EU very rarely speaks with one voice. And indeed, there were divergent views among EU member states on whether to ease sanctions in favour of more pragmatic engagement so as not to jeopardise relations with ASEAN (Dosch & Sidhu 2015:96–97). However, the chosen course of action proved difficult to reverse, as human rights had become a crucial component in the EU's quest for normative power in global affairs (Stacey 2021:109), and after years of diplomatic effort, the EU had succeeded in establishing human rights as an integral part of the official EU-Asia diplomatic agenda at the third ASEM Summit in Seoul in 2000 (Dosch & Sidhu 2015:96). Moreover, once established, the EU Common Position was maintained precisely because there was no consensus among the member states on an alternative strategy. As a result, a 'gridlock' emerged, preventing any substantive move to revise the Common Position, which remained 'immobilized in this polarized configuration' (Egreteau 2010:29).

Discussion

In summary, both the US and EU attempted to seize the moral high ground by positioning the military junta as unjust rulers. This perception was firmly rooted in a narrative that pitted the military against 'the people', with the military seen as 'anathema' to both domestic Burmese society and the international society of states (Steinberg 2007:228). This characterisation conveys a strong sense of condemnation and hierarchisation based on modern standards of civilisation. These standards served as moral benchmarks for evaluating the actions, beliefs, and characteristics of both 'self' and 'other' within relationally negotiated norms, establishing positions of moral standing and competence (Lee, Lessem & Moghaddam 2008:116). By positioning themselves as global guardians and promoters of human rights and democracy, the US and the EU asserted their right to comment on developments in Myanmar and, more importantly, their duty to act on their identity and facilitate positive change in the country – to ensure consistency with their commitment to be 'a formidable force for good in the world' (EU Security Strategy 2009:42).

The analysis revealed that positioning the generals as deviant took place at different scales, including supranational organisations, nation-states, legislative bodies, individual politicians, the media, lobby groups, and the general public. The extent to which the generals were

positioned as deviant also varied, with the US being more extreme than the EU in terms of both policy and rhetoric. Given the different scales and degrees at which deviance is negotiated, it is perhaps not surprising that certain narratives take on a life of their own and become difficult to dismantle, as will be explored in Chapter 7.2. By openly supporting Aung San Suu Kyi and framing the discussion in binary terms of right versus wrong or good versus evil, both Brussels and Washington limited the potential for dialogue with the junta and discouraged a more nuanced understanding of Myanmar's complex political landscape and the central role of the military in society (Du Boisseau Rocher 2013:196; Heiduk 2020:366). The democratic opposition around Aung San Suu Kyi, in particular, played a crucial role in further demonising the junta. Her portrayal as a beacon of resistance to the repressive regime positioned her in direct opposition to the military junta. Faced with direct comparisons to a higher-status rival, the military sought to delegitimise her by labelling her a foreigner and accusing her of collaborating with imperialist forces (Selth 2020:415). However, the junta's efforts to discredit her only further elevated her status on the international stage. Essentially, they unwittingly created their own 'nemesis' (Steinberg 2010b:190; Du Boisseau Rocher 2013:196).

7.1.2. The Tatmadaw's Self-Positioning

Naturally, the Tatmadaw did not share these negative views. The military generals never saw themselves as immoral but rather as the only defence against the looming threat of national disintegration. They invented for themselves an alternative subject position in which they were not the antagonists but the 'saviours', 'protectors' or 'guardians' of the nation and its Buddhist culture, thereby justifying the use of violence as a legitimate response to internal and external threats (Selth 2018:18). The military's dominance is rooted in and justified by the junta's narrative that Myanmar is a vulnerable nation plagued by ethnic conflict, and that it is the only actor capable of maintaining national cohesion (Kivimäki & Pasch 2009:37–38). This discourse conceptually links the survival of the nation to the survival of the military regime, effectively blurring the distinction between the regime's power and interests on the one hand and the well-being of the people and the country on the other (ibid.). The Tatmadaw sees itself as 'the embodiment of the Myanmar state' (Myoe 2014:248). As a result, any civil society dissent against the regime is perceived as a security threat, leading to the securitisation of politics (Kivimäki & Pasch 2009:38) and a 'preference for military solutions to political problems' (David & Holliday 2018:80). There is a deep-rooted scepticism towards civilian politicians, who are seen as too weak to govern (Farrelly 2013:321–322).

It is in the context of this antithetical self-positioning that the generals' reaction to their moral vilification must be understood. IR scholars working on stigma have outlined several strategies that states use to manage their stigmatised identities, such as stigma recognition and normalisation, neutralisation, stigma rejection and counter-stigmatisation (Adler-Nissen 2014:155; Smetana 2020b:42). To the best of my knowledge, no attempt has been made to place the Tatmadaw in these categories. This is not the place to fill this gap, as it is not the primary focus of the thesis, and any half-hearted attempt to do so would run the risk of gross oversimplification. Nevertheless, some general patterns can be observed. First, in an attempt to 'discredit the discreditors' (Meisenbach 2010:278), the generals have frequently denounced what they view as imperialist and neo-colonial efforts by the US and European countries to interfere in their internal affairs (Selth 2008:17). Observers have noted that this rhetoric is not exclusively a self-serving attempt to denigrate the regime's opponents but also reflects authentic fears of an existential threat, which are rooted in Myanmar's colonial past and have been exacerbated by periodic fears of invasion (ibid.:17-18). Second, shortly after the 2003 Depayin incident, which had drawn widespread criticism even from ASEAN, the junta announced steps to 'normalise' (Smetana 2020b:43) its deviant image by outlining a 'Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy' that was to eventually restore democracy in Myanmar through a seven-step process.[12] Third, the military government sought to create 'social buffers' by joining ASEAN, both for the practical purpose of ensuring regime survival (a 'safety in numbers' strategy, see James 2004:533) and perhaps also to capitalise on a 'bulwark' against the looming identity threats by relying on '[…] social referents that will impart and validate a desirable sense of one's […] self' (Ashforth *et al.* 2007:160). After years of isolationist foreign policy, Myanmar recognised the benefits of regional integration, particularly through the non-invasive norms of the ASEAN Way (Myoe 2020:783–784). Moreover, guided by the long-standing foreign policy principles of non-alignment and neutralism, Myanmar sought to reduce its reliance on China. Although China was the junta's largest international supporter, and the generals relied on Beijing for diplomatic protection, the strong dependence was viewed unfavourably (James 2004:535). As

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[12] In outlining the roadmap, then Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt placed the blame for the country's political situation squarely on the architects of the sanctions and the NLD. He said: 'Due to pressure and embargos placed by some big nations as well as due to continuous political manipulations in order to bring down the present government, the transformation process was again retarded. As long as a political force in the country is acting in harmony with the efforts of the collaborators of neo-colonialism from abroad who are trying to find ways to bring down the existing government and as long as this political force continues to maintain a negative attitude or refuses to change its methods, it will result in a situation where the golden land we all hope for will remain in the distance.' Taylor (2004:176–177)

the next chapter will show, ASEAN was initially more sympathetic to the Burmese version of the story.

7.1.3. Positioning Myanmar: ASEAN Perspectives

ASEAN was not so quick to ostracise Myanmar. This was partly due to the vested economic interests of countries such as Thailand (Jones 2008:288) and strategic considerations, as it was felt that alienating Myanmar risked pushing it even closer to China (Acharya 2014:103) or that the alternative, a collapsed state, would have significant externalities, such as increased migration and drug trafficking along the border (Stacey 2021:108). But Myanmar also had symbolic value for ASEAN, which ultimately sought to unite Southeast Asia under a common regional framework (ibid.). Therefore, 'constructive engagement' became the dominant strategy adopted by ASEAN between 1990 and 1997 (Renshaw 2013:37). Rather than embarrassing and isolating the Burmese junta, this approach prioritised practical assistance and friendly, informal peer pressure to gradually nudge Myanmar towards moderate reforms (Acharya 2014:103). It allowed continued access to the country's markets and raw materials and was justified on the grounds that it would promote socioeconomic development and the emergence of a middle class throughout the country, all while socialising Myanmar's elite into becoming responsible members of the international community (Renshaw 2013:37). ASEAN members were thus more inclined to see the Tatmadaw as part of the solution to Myanmar's challenges, rather than the central problem (Stacey 2021:130). Their own histories of nation-building, geostrategic considerations, economic interests, and authoritarian tendencies all contributed to a narrative that initially positioned Myanmar as a protégé – a nation guided to maturity by its more experienced peers. ASEAN positioned itself as better equipped to handle Myanmar than its Western dialogue partners, invoking 'the ASEAN Way' characterised by informality, consensus-building, inclusiveness and respect for member diversity as more appropriate (Acharya 2014:63). In contrast to the EU and the US, ASEAN thus chose a path of socialisation, believing in the power of engagement over isolation.

Admitting Myanmar to ASEAN in 1997

While non-compliance with democratic standards was not in itself a major concern for ASEAN states and was not a prerequisite for membership, extending an invitation to Myanmar to join ASEAN in 1997 was nevertheless 'not a foregone conclusion' (Haacke 2006:42), as there were differences of opinion within ASEAN (Acharya 2014:106). According to some analysts, a major reason why these differences were ultimately resolved in favour of Myanmar's admission

was the intense pressure and criticism ASEAN faced from the US and the EU[13] to withhold membership until the regime took steps to restore democracy (Renshaw 2013:38; Acharya 2014:106; Stacey 2021:107). Bowing to these attempts at external interference would have undermined ASEAN's core objectives of regional unity and autonomy. Strengthening the newly independent Southeast Asian states against the backdrop of internal unrest and external intervention is deeply entrenched in ASEAN's normative fabric, not at least because of the experience of colonialism (Davies 2012:13–14). Asserting its right to non-interference by external powers thus became a necessity if the organisation was to maintain its inward sense of self and its outward credibility as an autonomous actor (Nischalke 2002:105; Davies 2012:14; Ba 2023:1073). While there was in principle normative space for alternative approaches to Myanmar's membership, as evidenced by long-standing intra-ASEAN differences and the fact that ASEAN members were both willing and able to delay Cambodia's entry into the organisation until 1999 due to a coup (Ba 2023:1074), external pressure pushed ASEAN into closing ranks and adopting 'a sort of defiant position vis-à-vis the West' (Snitwongse 1997, as cited in Acharya 2014:106).

According to James, the US government's attempt to position itself as a 'force against evil' during the Iraq War was unsuccessful because it was perceived in many countries as lacking the authority to assume such a role (James 2014:26). Similarly, the US and the EU were not seen as having the *right* to interfere in Myanmar's membership question. In his opening speech at the 1997 Annual Ministerial Meeting, in which he welcomed Laos and Myanmar as new ASEAN members, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad explicitly rejected the moral hierarchies imposed by some Western countries, stating that 'ASEAN must resist and reject such attempts at coercion' because 'they have failed far too often for us to be convinced that only they know what is right and what is wrong' (ASEAN 1997).[14] Singapore's Foreign Minister, Shanmugam Jayakumar, offered a 'normalising counterargument' (Dotter 2002:441) in favour of Myanmar's admission by likening the situation to marriage: 'Europeans urged ASEAN to negotiate a pre-nuptial agreement with Myanmar. […] in Asia, we marry first and expect the bride to adapt her behaviour after marriage. Once Myanmar joins ASEAN, it would be influenced by her peers' (Lee 1997). Non-interference was positioned as the more suitable regional mechanism, as emphasised by former Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong:

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[13] For example, the EU cancelled the scheduled ASEM meeting after Myanmar first attended the Asian Ministerial Meeting as a 'guest' in 1994 (Stacey 2021:108).

[14] While not specifying the 'they' he referred to, ASEAN's non-Western partners, such as China and Japan, did not interfere in ASEAN's handling of the Myanmar issue (Ba 2023:1073).

'We don't set out to change the world and our neighbours. We don't believe in it. The culture of ASEAN is that we don't interfere' (Tong 1992, as cited in Stacey 2021:79). In summary, ASEAN narrated two overarching storylines: that Western sanctions were ineffective, and that the solution to a regional problem could only be found within the region itself (Stacey 2021:115–116).

Against this background, Myanmar was admitted to the organisation on 23 July 1997. This move, however, tarnished ASEAN's image and impeded its ability to engage its Western partners, as the EU and US's refusal to engage the pariah in their midst created logistical obstacles (Ba 2023:1074). From their perspective, ASEAN was shielding and legitimising an authoritarian regime, and thus serving as a negative example of what a regional community should be (Stacey 2021:103-104). Myanmar's deviant status became emblematic of the organisation as a whole (Radtke 2014:89), echoing Madeline Albright's sentiment that 'by admitting Burma as a member, ASEAN assumes a greater responsibility, for Burma's problems now become ASEAN's problems' (Albright, as cited in Erlanger 1997). This dynamic is not uncommon, as Goffman notes that deviant community members often come 'to play a special role, becoming a symbol of the group […]' (1991 [1963]:141).

From 'Constructive Engagement' to 'Enhanced Interaction'

ASEAN's strategies evolved in response to the entanglement of Myanmar's deviant status with its own institutional legitimacy, resulting in tensions between its various institutional objectives. The narrative of Myanmar as a protégé took on new meanings over time, as three interrelated 'internal diversification trends' influenced the Myanmar calculus of ASEAN leaders, who, as a result, increasingly had to 'explain and defend their internal decisions on more than one stage and to more diverse sets of interested "others"' (Ba 2023:1066).

First, *domestic diversification*. The Asian financial crisis of 1997/98, which coincided with the accession of Myanmar and Laos to ASEAN, revealed the weaknesses of the region's economic and political structures and led to calls for reforms and pro-liberalisation initiatives in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and post-Suharto Indonesia (ibid.:1076). This increased the influence of domestic audiences in these countries and also made them somewhat more receptive towards criticism from Western partners (Katsumata 2009; Ba 2023). In particular, ASEAN's founding members became increasingly concerned about the negative impact that Myanmar's unresponsiveness to ASEAN initiatives would have on the organisation's post-crisis image rehabilitation (Ba 2023:1076).

Second, *purpose expansion*. In a bid to counter an eventual marginalisation caused by alternative regional frameworks suggested by non-ASEAN states in the 1990s, ASEAN established dialogues and partnerships with external powers and organisations through the so-called ASEAN-Plus frameworks, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (ibid.:1071). In doing so, it acquired a new legitimising purpose, namely to place ASEAN firmly at the centre of the region's architecture, epitomised by the phrase 'ASEAN Centrality', which is also enshrined in the ASEAN Charter (ibid.). On a meta-level, the principle of ASEAN Centrality further heightened the need for social recognition by select external audiences, as this served to '[…] differentiate and elevate a subset of ASEAN partners as an external legitimizing audience – namely, the United States and western European states who play the most prominent roles in making Myanmar's membership a source of institutional delegitimation […]' (ibid.:1065). Moreover, ASEAN also began incorporating human rights governance, even if only in a rather 'ritualised' and strategic manner to appease some of its critics (Davies 2021:252).

Third, *membership diversification*. Admitting Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to ASEAN effectively introduced a new category of agents with an active interest in preventing human rights from dominating discussions, given their own track records and political systems. While Myanmar undoubtedly received the most attention, it has never been a nine-against-one dynamic (Davies 2012:7). For example, when ASEAN faced pressure to prevent Myanmar from becoming the ASEAN Chair in 2006, the newer ASEAN members were concerned that this would set a precedent for future denials of the chairmanship on the basis of state repression (Ba 2023:1075). When Myanmar did withdraw, following behind-the-scenes discussions between ASEAN and Myanmar representatives, it was portrayed as being due to internal considerations rather than external demands (Haacke 2005:200; Ba 2023:1075).

An important development that took place against the backdrop of these diversification processes was the strategic shift from 'constructive engagement' to 'enhanced interaction'. An earlier proposal by Former Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan ('flexible engagement') had been overwhelmingly rejected for being too interventionist (Stacey 2021:117). Although the principle of non-interference had already been significantly watered down in relation to Myanmar, it still retained its significance as a founding belief and unifying force within the region, preventing it from becoming too diluted (Jones 2008:276, 2010). Instead, 'enhanced interaction' became the new foundation for ASEAN-Myanmar relations in 2003. The policy permitted individual member states to address the country's internal affairs in their capacity as sovereign

states but, unlike 'flexible engagement', prohibited the discussion or consideration of these issues at the ASEAN collective level (Haacke 2005:189–190). This essentially served as a compromise, allowing the more critically minded states to comment on developments in Myanmar while reconciling this with the organisation's longstanding commitment to noninterference, which was particularly important to the Indochinese states (ibid.). The latter, in particular, feared that deepened actions towards Myanmar would 'open up a can of worms' (Haacke 2005:189) and perhaps eventually lead to closer scrutiny of their own regimes. However, while this shift in policy gave rise to a significant hardening in tone vis-à-vis Myanmar, it also increased the incoherence with which pressure was applied (Davies 2012:7).[15]

Towards 'Critical Disengagement' (Jones 2008)

In 2007, the military violently cracked down on a series of protests led by Buddhist monks and activists (the so-called 'Saffron revolution'). This again brought ASEAN into a dilemma. In a rare display of such strong language, ASEAN issued a statement that it was 'appalled to receive reports of automatic weapons being used' against protestors, expressing their 'revulsion' and demanding that 'the Myanmar government immediately desist' (ASEAN 2007). The frustration with Myanmar was growing. The organisation increasingly sought to 'disengage itself' from the country and 'decouple' its deviant behaviour from ASEAN's status by transferring responsibility to the UN and calling on Myanmar's neighbours China and India to intervene (Jones 2008:282–287). The consensus among ASEAN members seemed to shift towards acknowledging the limitations of sheltering Myanmar without achieving tangible outcomes. While the scale of human rights abuses may have reached a threshold at which even the most authoritarian member states found them appalling, it is likely that ASEAN's desire to safeguard its legitimacy in the eyes of external audiences was a significant driving factor behind this newfound resignation, as also noted by Poole (2015) and Davies (2021). In a 2006 Wall Street Journal editorial titled *It is Not Possible to Defend Myanmar*, Malaysia's Foreign Minister, Syed Hamid, expressed his frustration with the generals publicly, stating that their refusal to cooperate was 'putting into question ASEAN's credibility and image' and holding their relations with the Western dialogue partners 'hostage' (Syed Hamid 2006; Jones 2008:283). Ong Keng Yong, the Secretary-General of ASEAN at the time, similarly lamented that 'ASEAN has lots of other things to do … almost 99 per cent are other than Myanmar. But now Myanmar seems to be

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[15] As an example, in September 2005, ASEAN's economic ministers chose to boycott the 6th Asia-Europe Meeting held in Rotterdam as 'a matter of principle' due to the Dutch government's refusal to grant a visa to their Myanmarese colleague (Davies 2012:12). However, merely two months later, during the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN leaders applied pressure on Myanmar in an 'unusually direct' manner (ibid.).

always there and "clouding" the other issues out of the way' (2006; Bernama 2006, cited in Jones 2008:283).

Discussion

Ascriptions of deviance defy adherence to a coherent life story, as deviance is a relational phenomenon that derives its situational meaning in relation to various narratives, actions, and positions. While the Myanmar regime was labelled a 'deviant Other' by the US and the EU, the underlying notions of difference in the ASEAN context proved more complex. Moreover, neither subject position – the deviant or the protégé – is ever complete because deviantisation is an ongoing process. The preceding analysis shows that it was increasingly difficult for ASEAN to establish a coherent positioning triangle. The protégé narrative gradually unravelled in response to external pressures (at the societal level of deviance) and internal diversification (at the situational level). This complexity defies positioning Myanmar in singular terms and underlines the presence of plural and/or logics.

Let us now recall Elias's argument in Chapter 3.1 that the civilising process is not a fully 'owned' process but that there is a certain automaticity in the way it alters the relations between social agents and is, in turn, altered by them. The question of Myanmar's positioning led to a 'deadlock' in US/EU relations with ASEAN (Du Boisseau Rocher 2012:166). Situated within a broader narrative of responsible state behaviour in international relations (Kustermans 2014), both the EU and the US linked Myanmar's pariah status to their self-proclaimed rights and responsibilities to promote international standards of civilisation. At the same time, ASEAN could neither respond to calls for Myanmar's expulsion without compromising key elements of its own institutional identity, purpose, and practice, nor remain inactive without calling into question its very existence. Neither party could easily retreat from its chosen path. Myanmar's embrace of liberal reforms in 2011 thus provided a long-awaited opportunity to formulate new political strategies without sacrificing essential elements of their respective self-positionings.

7.2. Myanmar's Period of Liberalisation

In 2011, the government, led by President Thein Sein, undertook a number of reforms that included the release of political prisoners, the easing of media censorship, and political dialogue with the opposition. This marked the beginning of a rapid, albeit short-lived, transition from outright military rule to a more democratic government. Despite the remarkable speed of these reforms, substantial evidence suggests that they were carefully planned by the armed forces in line with their 2003 Roadmap to Democracy (Selth 2018). Whatever the precise motivation for

these reforms, scholars agree that they were implemented from a position of strength and confidence on the part of the generals rather than as a direct response to external sanctions or peer pressure (Callahan 2012; Bünte 2014; Egreteau 2017). Despite democratisation, the Tatmadaw retained its status as the most influential political actor in Myanmar, significantly constraining the agency of elected leaders (Bünte 2022). These reforms were arguably, in part, an attempt to neutralise their deviant status and reintegrate back into the mainstream by situating themselves within a new narrative of transition. Initially met with scepticism, the reforms were eventually embraced by the US and the EU, sparking a notable shift in Myanmar's international standing. Both the United States and the European Union actively worked towards repositioning the country from an outcast to a valued partner in its pursuit of democratisation. The country's reform journey not only resolved the persistent obstacles in EU/US-ASEAN relations but also reflected ASEAN's growing rhetorical commitment to liberalism, as evidenced by its formal embrace of democratic principles and human rights in documents such as the 2007 ASEAN Charter and the 2012 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. These circumstances facilitated a more cooperative approach towards Myanmar (Dosch & Sidhu 2015:105).

The EU's Myanmar policy underwent a 'U-turn' (Heiduk 2020:357) following the 2012 parliamentary by-elections, in which the NLD competed for the first time since 1990 and won the majority of seats. The EU suspended and then lifted all sanctions except the arms embargo in 2013 (ibid.:357-358). Myanmar's trade preferences under the GSP scheme were restored, and the country became a frequent destination for EU delegations eager to assist 'the Government in rebuilding its place in the international community' (Council of the European Union 2013:2). Analysts have noted the EU's 'sudden, almost hyper-optimistic embrace' of the fragile reform process (Bünte & Dosch 2015:13), which did 'not seem to factor in the possibility of backward steps and is based on a scenario of ongoing, linear political and economic reforms' (Dosch & Sidhu 2015:106). Official EU documents, particularly those from 2011 onwards, consistently expressed a strong sense of optimism about the 'remarkable' reform process (ibid.), which had seen Myanmar '[…] transition from pariah to "darling" and partner' in a very short period of time and in as black and white terms as the previous pariah designation (Heiduk 2020:358). The EU's enthusiastic support for Myanmar's fragile reform process may have been fuelled in part by the expectation that Aung San Suu Kyi's re-entry into formal politics would mark a crucial turning point in the country's history and usher in lasting change (ibid.). The reforms also provided a window of opportunity for the EU to improve relations with ASEAN without compromising its identity as a guardian of human rights (Stacey 2021:123–124) and to position

itself as a reliable partner in Southeast Asia (Du Boisseau Rocher 2013:208–210). Myanmar's regional integration into ASEAN, which the EU had for decades opposed, was now explicitly encouraged (Council of the European Union 2013:5). The EU's elevated self-position in the status hierarchy not only legitimised but also necessitated its involvement in Myanmar's democratisation. Believing it had 'a responsibility to help', the European Union aimed to share 'European experiences and lessons learned regarding political transition and democratisation' (ibid.:1). Even though concerns of democratic backsliding were voiced by the UN as early as 2013, the newfound image of Myanmar largely prevailed in Europe until late 2016 (Heiduk 2020:359).

The US took a more cautious approach to normalising relations with Myanmar than the EU. The Obama administration had already adopted a new policy of 'pragmatic engagement' with Burma in September 2009, both recognising that sanctions had not worked and to strengthen US presence in the Indo-Pacific (Haacke 2015a:59). Control of Burma policy was removed from traditional congressional oversight and shifted to the State Department and the White House (Marston 2023:288). When Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar in November 2011, the first high-level US official to do so in more than 50 years, she announced that '[…] the United States is willing to match actions with actions' (Clinton 2011). This tit-for-tat strategy recognised the 'real and significant' but nevertheless 'fragile and reversible' nature of the reform process (Yun 2012; Haacke 2015a:60) – a change in policy that was closely coordinated with Aung San Suu Kyi (Haacke 2015a:60–61). Over time, Myanmar came to be seen as a role model for other authoritarian countries (ibid.:72-73). Moreover, President Obama also argued that US involvement in Myanmar's political transition demonstrates effective 'American leadership' on the world stage (Obama 2014).[16] However, despite Obama's assertion that 'we don't need to be defined by the prisons of the past' (Obama 2012), opposition in Congress prevented the administration from normalising relations with Myanmar at the same pace as the EU (Bünte & Dosch 2015:13; Haacke 2015a:71–76; Steinberg 2016:17). There was still a strong sense of mistrust and lingering resentment towards the former military regime, which many congressional politicians and activists understandably preferred to see completely dismantled rather than transformed and legitimised (Steinberg 2016:18). As Haacke noted at the time, 'the pragmatism of the Obama administration seems to jar with the principled position still held by members of the

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[16] The original statement: 'We're now supporting reform and badly needed national reconciliation through assistance and investment, through coaxing and, at times, public criticism. And progress there could be reversed, but if Burma succeeds we will have gained a new partner without having fired a shot. American leadership.'

legislature' (Haacke 2015a:75), many of whom felt that it was only logical and deserving that Aung San Suu Kyi should become president in the near future (Haacke 2015b:309).

Discussion

Positioning theorists distinguish between two forms of positioning: moral and situational positioning (Harré & van Langenhove 1991). In the pre-reform period, and in an emotionally charged environment, the positioning of the junta as deviant was largely derived from a predefined storyline ('the junta as human rights violator') rather than emerging organically from specific episodes of interaction (Henriksen 2008:55). Indeed, it was this moral positioning that stood in the way of interaction with the Tatmadaw in the first place, with both the US and the EU (at the collective level) refusing to engage with the repressive regime. By placing not only the generals but also the opposition around Aung San Suu Kyi into recognisable social roles ('the deviant'/'the icon') based on criteria of human rights and democracy, the self-styled leaders of the liberal order engaged in a practice of *ordering* through this moral positioning. If we think of roles and positions as two ends of a continuum, as briefly touched upon in Chapter 4.4., we can, therefore, say that the positioning of the generals as deviant had hardened into a coherent role ascription between 1988 and 2011.

However, this role attribution underwent significant destabilisation in the aftermath of the 2011 reforms. Henriksen employed the metaphor of a hand to explain the distinction between roles and positions (ibid.). Roles, depicted as a clenched fist, represent a rigid, take-it-or-leave-it package. Positions, on the other hand, are comparable to individual fingers. When the hand is clenched into a fist, these fingers amalgamate into a predefined role. However, when the hand metaphorically opens, the underlying positions (fingers) can be addressed individually, allowing for a more flexible and nuanced approach to conflict resolution (ibid.:57). In keeping with the hand metaphor, President Obama noted a similar transformation in Myanmar during his speech in Yangon, where he described the shift from a clenched fist, symbolising decades of dictatorship, to an unclenched hand, signalling a willingness to change (Obama 2012). Referring to his inaugural address, where he urged 'governments who ruled by fear' to unclench their fists, he now reciprocated this gesture by 'extending the hand of friendship' to Myanmar (ibid.).[17] In this transformed narrative, the generals are no longer assessed solely on moralistic

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[17] The original statement: 'When I took office as President, I sent a message to those governments who ruled by fear. I said, in my inauguration address, "We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." And over the last year and a half, a dramatic transition has begun, as a dictatorship of five decades has loosened its grip. Under President Thein Sein, the desire for change has been met by an agenda for reform. A civilian now leads the government, and a parliament is asserting itself. The once-outlawed National League for Democracy stood in an

grounds but within the context of ongoing situational progress across multiple issue areas like trade, development, and national reconciliation. The government's performance in human rights and democracy was no longer deemed so deficient as to be the defining sector against which its overall status was measured – at least not in official discourse. While the long-term goal was still to depict an alternative future for the military in which it holds a legitimate but limited role in society (Haacke 2015a:68), its day-to-day positioning took on a more situational quality. In other words, the moral dimension of Myanmar's positioning did not disappear, but the rights and duties accorded to its representatives were 'fine-tuned' in the ongoing interaction with their reform partners. Orders are nested, after all, and beyond the cultural, legal and institutional, there is the realm of situational, practical engagement (van Langenhove 2017:4-6;11).

That being said, the junta's attempt at moral cleansing did not convince everyone, as some politicians and human rights groups were unwilling to abandon their principled stance due to past atrocities and growing concerns of democratic backsliding. Scholars agree that stigma reversal is difficult to achieve (Adler-Nissen 2014:160; Smetana 2020b:47–49). Onderco notes that 'the failure to completely replace the old status with a new one is likely to be due to the sticky old [rogue] status, too strongly internalized by the public and always ready to be revived' (2014:184). This challenge was compounded by the new government's failure to demonstrate exemplary behaviour, which could have potentially accelerated the full normalisation of its deviant status. Shortly after the Obama administration lifted almost all remaining sanctions on Myanmar in October 2016 (Marston 2023:292), the military launched an ethnic cleansing operation in Rakhine state, the catastrophic consequences of which would later come to be known as the Rohingya crisis. A few years later, in 2021, the Tatmadaw staged a coup that ended a decade of experimentation with democracy and led to renewed isolation.

7.3. Pluralising Myanmar's Positionality

Having completed the analysis, let us now briefly consider its theoretical implications. Rather than strictly adhering to a binary classification of *either* deviance *or* normalcy, Myanmar's positionality between 1988 and 2016 is shaped by the coexistence of at least four logics: both/and, in-between, here-and-now, and in-motion. Based on a relational rather than a substantive definition, the above analysis underlines that deviance is a matter of time, perspective, positionality,

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election, and Aung San Suu Kyi is a Member of Parliament. Hundreds of prisoners of conscience have been released, and forced labor has been banned. Preliminary cease-fires have been reached with ethnic armies, and new laws allow for a more open economy. So today, I've come to keep my promise and extend the hand of friendship. America now has an Ambassador in Rangoon, sanctions have been eased, and we will help rebuild an economy that can offer opportunity for its people, and serve as an engine of growth for the world.'

and practical engagement. In this context, Myanmar is *both* deviant in the eyes of the EU and the US *and* normal in relation to actors such as China and Russia, who don't share, or at least don't openly deploy, this negative status ascription. However, what applies to one relational setting may not apply equally to another. Notably, notions of difference were more pronounced in the (dominant) positioning discourses of the EU and the US, where Myanmar solidified as 'the deviant' with reference to a moral order that champions good governance and human rights. Conversely, within ASEAN, Myanmar was increasingly perceived as being both 'part of' and simultaneously standing 'apart from' the organisation (for a similar account of Russia's positionality, see Baranovsky 2000). In relation to ASEAN, Myanmar thus aligned itself with states that occupy a liminal subject position in the international status hierarchy – those that exist 'neither here nor there' but rather 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner 1991:95). Similar dynamics have been observed in relation to Turkey and Russia, where civilisational discourses have placed them in liminal spaces, straddling a position that is neither entirely within Europe nor entirely separate from it (Morozov & Rumelili 2012; Rumelili 2012). In the ASEAN context, this *in-between* position is exemplified by the narrative positioning Myanmar as a 'protégé'. Although both 'the deviant' and 'the protégé' imply an ontologically inferior subject position, the latter allows for the potential attainment of normal status. In contrast to the unequivocal rejection of an expanded military role in civilian politics presented in the 'military as anathema' narrative, the 'socialisation' narrative left room for the generals to evolve into responsible members of the international community. The related 'protégé' position echoes the idea that 'the individual is told that if he adopts the right line (which line depending on who is talking), he will have come to terms with himself and be a whole man; he will be an adult with dignity and self-respect' (Goffman 1991 [1963]:131). However, Goffman also highlights the contradiction inherent in this positioning discourse, as the individual in a subordinate subject position '[…] is told that he is like anyone else and that he isn't – although there is little agreement among spokesmen as to how much of each he should claim to be' (ibid.:132). This contradiction was implicit in ASEAN's 'peer pressure' paradigm: While reassuring the stigmatised junta that they were human beings like everyone else – peers even – a cautionary message prevailed against actions perceived as betraying or disappointing 'their' group by exposing ASEAN to EU and US criticism (ibid.). However, because the boundaries of acceptability are fluid and vary according to the relational setting, it is difficult to achieve a coherent positioning triangle at the collective level – even more so for an intergovernmental organisation such as ASEAN. The third logic, the *here-and-now* dimension of positioning, sensitises us to one of the possible causes of this incoherence:

the fact that positioning acts carried out in the realm of practical engagement may take on a more situational quality than those carried out purely with reference to particular notions of order. Against this backdrop, ASEAN's Myanmar strategies must be read as a tension-filled amalgam of defiance and desire for social recognition from a wide range of internal and external audiences. This relativity in terms of audience and context explains why Myanmar's positionality is not static but characterised by an *in-motion* logic that is constantly in flux and responsive to the changing currents of space and time.

8. Conclusion

A move to place social relations at the heart of a discipline called *International Relations* may seem rather superfluous, yet it is anything but. Its basic proposition – that the relations between formations are ontologically more important than the formations themselves – departs from state-centric, static, and materialist schools of thought in IR such as realism. But it also departs from conventional constructivist accounts that take a substantialist view of norms as 'things' that exist independently of and prior to the relations of which they are a part. In a world that is becoming increasingly diverse and complex, perhaps it is time to return to 'relations' as the basic ontological foundation of the international once again. While this question is perhaps best left to more senior scholars, the present thesis has proposed that deviance, as a central component in the construction of world order, is best conceptualised through a relational ontology. Turning to relationalism not only reveals the reasons for the persistence of rigid boundaries of either 'Self' or 'Other' but also offers a promising way out of the current impasse.

The introduction began by asking how the boundaries between normality and deviance emerge, how they are maintained and how they evolve over time. In order to break down the prevailing dichotomies in the existing literature, I argued for a transactional – or relational – approach to deviance, stressing the need for a more nuanced understanding that appreciates plural logics capable of transcending binary categorisations of being *either* normal *or* deviant. Social hierarchies, whether domestic or international, are too complex, porous, and ephemeral for this kind of bifurcation. Actors' positions in the status hierarchy, i.e. the rights and duties accorded to them vis-à-vis others, are to a large extent shaped by social practices and interactions rather than being strictly dictated by rigid structural conditions or abstract rules. If we were to answer the initial question posed in the introduction in one very long sentence, it would therefore go as follows: The boundaries between deviance and normality *emerge* through the actions and reactions of multiple state and non-state formations alike as they position themselves and are

positioned in relation to others and with reference to particular notions of order; they are *maintained* through power dynamics as those figurations (or audiences) with higher status/authority (both in material and ideational terms) construct the moral orders against which deviance is measured; and they *evolve* because this process of ordering is never complete, as its relationality in terms of figurations of actors and contexts ensures that 'the deviant' and 'the normal' are conceptualised differently over time and space, as history unfolds, power relations shift, and discourses take on new meanings.

While primarily theory-driven and exploratory, the thesis illustrated some of the core dynamics of deviantisation through an analysis of Myanmar's international status between 1988 and 2016. From an ethical standpoint, it is certainly justified to view the Tatmadaw as morally corrupt, self-serving agents who do not hesitate to terrorise those unfortunate enough to be subject to their rule. From an academic point of view, however, the self-actionism inherent in this perspective is misplaced, as it fails to recognise the role of society in 'making' the rogue. Rather than treating deviance as an apolitical concept, I have argued for its politicisation by positioning it at the centre of political relations. In this regard, it is also not sufficient to view the Tatmadaw as the 'Other' of the international community in inter-actional terms. Although the US and the EU attempted to mobilise an 'audience of normals' to condemn Myanmar's actions on the international stage, diplomatic support from Russia and China, as well as the country's integration into ASEAN, rendered this move largely symbolic and ineffective. Myanmar's positionality is defined by the simultaneous performance of several, at times seemingly contradictory logics (both/and, in-between, here-and-now, in-motion), which are all part of the multifaceted nature of social stratification. Understanding Myanmar's social status therefore requires a practical, performative understanding of social stratification, which recognises that social relations do not unfold in rigid, top-down or unidimensional hierarchies and that actors can occupy multiple positions and perform different roles depending on the relational setting. Moving away from an exclusive focus on the present reveals that positions and role attributions evolve over time, as exemplified by the shifting meanings attributed to the 'deviant' and the 'protégé'.

There are, of course, significant limits to how much can be generalised from a single empirical case study, especially one that, being only illustrative in nature, has diluted its own ontological commitments due to space and time constraints. The analysis presented above is a compilation of various secondary sources, each with different research emphases. Therefore, the findings should be regarded as preliminary and in need of further refinement through a discourse analysis. Furthermore, the thesis did not explicitly address the concept of identity, despite it being a

crucial element in any attempt to engage with difference and deviance. Under what circumstances do positions ascribed to the Self show greater continuity than those ascribed to the Other? How do actors position their identities differently depending on whether they are engaging in an act of moral positioning or navigating the realm of situational, practical engagement? These questions provide a possible link to the literature on ontological security[18] and call for closer integration with the literature on emotions in IR, especially as the Myanmar case has demonstrated the central role of moral aspirations and emotional responses in driving deviantisation (Hutchison & Bleiker 2014). Moreover, IR scholarship could benefit from a closer examination of positioning theory, given its inherent relationality and sensitivity to context and power dynamics. Moving away from state-centrism and statism, it could shed light on the evolving ways in which state and non-state formations interact and construct world order (Baert *et al.* 2019:4.11). On a practical level, it also has potential as a tool for foreign policy analysis and conflict resolution. It encourages analysts to critically reflect on taken-for-granted storylines, customs, and habits and calls for a thorough examination of both real and imagined grievances when formulating policy strategies (Moghaddam *et al.* 2008b:3–4). As the concepts of deviance, stigma, and stigmatisation continue to gain traction in IR scholarship, there is also ample room for compelling case studies, such as an analysis of Myanmar's stigma management strategies. While I have explored the phenomenon of civilisational deviance with respect to human rights and democracy, there are also many more markers of deviance to be explored, encompassing cultural and racial differences (Freeman *et al.* 2022), as well as specific issue areas such as nuclear (Smetana 2020b) and financial (Chwieroth 2015) deviance. And lastly, perhaps the most politically relevant question concerns the impact that the repluralisation of the international order may have on the definition of normal and acceptable state behaviour.

We currently find ourselves at a critical juncture, navigating a period of transition in which the once-dominant liberal international order is in crisis, if not in decline. The way forward, however, remains uncertain, leaving us to ponder what the normative order(s) of the future will look like and how they will be stratified. From a relational point of view, the answer to this question must be sought in the interactions between those participating in and shaping these new orders as they position themselves and are being positioned in relation to others. While subject to evolution, the emerging global order, influenced by rising powers seeking to redefine traditional power structures, shows compelling signs of encouraging greater diversity in accepted norms

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[18] In a recent contribution to the debate, Zarakol offers a non-state-centred and context-sensitive account of ontological security that prioritises relations over entities, which provides a good entry point from the perspective of the arguments advanced throughout the thesis (2017).

of being, acting, and believing – at least within the limits set by an international society made up of states. The concepts of 'multipolarity', 'multiplexity' (Acharya 2017), and 'pluriversality' (Hutchings 2019) all suggest, albeit to varying degrees, an ontology of the international based on (societal) multiplicity (Rosenberg 2016; Powel 2020). In parallel, we are also witnessing a discernible trend towards a resurge in civilisational identities, evident in the emergence of self-proclaimed 'civilisational states' from India and China to Russia and a resurgence of provincialist sentiments across Europe (Kundnani 2021). How these trends will converge remains to be seen, especially since, from a practice-relational perspective, the world is a product of our own making. But if we are indeed moving towards a more pluralistic system characterised by a more balanced distribution of status power, the ability to set the gold standard for others to follow will be significantly curtailed. Different notions of normality – remnants of the old and elements of the new – will coexist uncomfortably, and as deviantisation processes become less effective in imposing one notion over the other, we are likely to see the rise of even more plural figures in the spaces where they overlap. Whatever the future holds, however, deviance will continue to weave its way through the fabric of international relations. As a mechanism for drawing boundaries, fostering group solidarity, reinforcing identity and mitigating uncertainty, it reverberates as a manifestation of pervasive power dynamics.

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10.   Declaration of Authorship

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