The Epistemological Challenge of Truth Subversion to the Liberal International Order

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Abstract Truth-subversion practices, which populist leaders utilize for political domination, are a significant source of current pressure on the Liberal International Order (LIO). Truth-subversion practices include *false speak* (flagrant lying to subvert the concept of facts), *double speak* (intentional internal contradictions in speech to erode reason), and *flooding* (the emission of many messages into the public domain to create confusion). Aiming to destroy liberal truth ideals and practices, truth subversion weakens epistemological security; that is, the experience of orderliness and safety that results from people's and institutions' shared understandings of their common-sense reality. It privileges baseless claims over fact-based opinions, thus creating communities of the like-minded between which communication becomes impossible. Truth subversion challenges the LIO's three key institutions: democracy, markets, and multilateralism. If truth-subversion practices prevail, societal polarization, inaccurate information, and emotional inflaming strain democracy and human rights protections. Markets that depend for their functioning on accurate information can falter, and multilateralism that relies on communication and reasoned consensus can decay. International relations (IR) scholarship has recognized knowledge production practices as a key feature underlying the LIO, but has not yet identified challenges to those practices as a threat for the LIO. We discuss what the discipline can do to alleviate its blind spots.

Our purpose in this article is to demonstrate that a significant reason for (rather than a mere consequence of) the stress that the Liberal International Order (LIO) faces is a wave of "truth-subversion" politics. Truth-subversion practices undertaken by the Trump administration and the Brexit campaign provided an early (if not the only) indication that this mode of politics is challenging the LIO. Many books and articles in the popular press have been written about what is commonly referred to as "post-truth."[1] Our article adds a theoretical systematization to that literature that explains how specific practices of knowledge production underlie international orders, and how challenges to those practices plunge orders into crises. This systematization allows scholars to move beyond the day-to-day occurrences of populist politics

1. Among others, see D'Ancona 2017; McIntyre 2018. We are skeptical of the term *post-truth*, because of its dichotomous implications, suggesting that an era of "truth politics" has been replaced by an era of "post-truth politics."

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and Trumpism to understand the broader meaning and implications of truth-subversion practices in their historical and international context.

Contemporary international relations (IR) scholarship has shown limited interest in the epistemological foundations of social orders, and therefore fails to explain the possible epistemological origins of international order change. We suggest studying truth-subversion practices as a form of power aimed at undermining liberal norms and institutions for the sake of political domination. We define truth subversion as a set of specific practices, technologies, and norms that illiberal leaders use to spread messages into the public domain to erode the notion of truth as an ideal, which had formed a core foundation of the LIO. Truth-subversion practices include *false speak* (deliberate and obvious lying with the aim of subverting the concept of facts), *double speak* (intentional internal contradictions in speech eroding the notion of reason), and *flooding* (the emission of many different messages into the public domain to create confusion). These practices encourage people to believe their opinions to be more important than facts, and help create communitarian identities of the like-minded. With this emotional and antiscientific approach, empirical evidence will not provoke changes in perspectives and allegiances because reasoned arguments across different communities become impossible.

Rather than exploring in depth the causes that may have brought about the development of truth-subversion practices, we analyze the phenomenon as a distinct and irreducible challenge to the LIO that is anchored in broader populist practices.[2] Truth subversion is not entirely new, nor is it the only fundamental challenge that the LIO faces. However, truth-subversion practices have acquired a popularity and prevalence in the contemporary era that render them a unique feature of the crisis disrupting the LIO. Truth subversion destabilizes social order because it generates linguistic relativism, thus endangering people's and institutions' "epistemological security,"[3] or "the sense by which we get our bearings in the real world."[4] Epistemological security and ontological security are related concepts; each one can cause the other. The concepts differ, however. Whereas ontological security refers to the stability of an individual's and a state's identity, epistemological security refers to the trust in collectively shared knowledge.

This disruption to epistemological security poses challenges to the LIO at three different levels. First, the absence of a collectively shared understanding of what is true challenges any form of order because if all statements can be randomly deceptive or truthful, and if people do not know what is real, individuals can base their actions on only what they have directly experienced themselves.

Second, truth-subversion politics can potentially threaten the Westphalian dimension of the international order because it makes rational communication among

2. Swidler 2001.
3. Adler 2019.
4. Arendt 2006, 257.

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international political actors impossible. It therefore increases uncertainty, which heightens the security dilemma, and could in extreme circumstances lead to war.

Third, truth-subversion politics has the most direct impact on the liberal aspects of the LIO because it endangers the epistemological security on which the LIO rests. Norms of reasoned consensus are challenged, populations polarized, and the rational-legal authority of key institutions compromised. The pluralistic security community on which the LIO's positive peace rests becomes impaired. If people cease sharing an epistemic understanding of what *is,* how can they know what *ought* to be?

Epistemological insecurity affects the LIO's three key features: political liberalism, economic liberalism, and liberal internationalism.[5] If the public is misled and confused about what constitutes accurate information, fair and free elections cannot be guaranteed. Societal polarization and emotional arousal endanger the protection of minority rights, and therefore fundamental human rights. Markets depend for their functioning on accurate information. Multilateralism relies on coordination and cooperation, reasoned consensus, and the authority of international organizations.

Many of the articles in this special issue focus on the demand side of populism, exploring why populations across the liberal world have become susceptible to populist and illiberal leaders. In contrast, we highlight the supply side of populism. We argue that truth-subversion practices are a defining feature of populism in the contemporary era and that they represent a distinct and irreducible challenge to the LIO. Truth-subversion practitioners lie repeatedly "*on principle*, and not only with respect to particulars,"[6] and develop other practices to undermine the notions of truth, expertise, reason, and logic, relying on technologies, such as the Internet and social media, to extend and disseminate these practices. Proponents of the LIO, in turn, seek to halt truth-subversion practices by establishing standards of veracity via fact-checkers, or the regulation of social media sites. These ongoing struggles over factual claims, reason, and logic are struggles over the epistemological foundations of the LIO.

The LIO is resilient; it has the capacity to weather this storm, not least because it has been a comparatively prosperous and peaceful order, in no small part because of its reliance on science. It might be difficult to imitate its success in the medium and long term. Moreover, liberal principles are deeply engrained in liberal societies, and truth-subversion practitioners can dialectically generate popular pushback against their tactics. Liberal elites also might find the right mix of policies, regulations, and technologies to restore the norms of accuracy. Ultimately truth-subversion practices will fade if populations cease being susceptible to them.

Our aim in this article is twofold. First, we explore truth-subversion practices as a fundamental challenge to the LIO; second, we set an agenda for studying international order change resulting from changes in practices of truth production. IR scholars should explore how specific practices of truth production underpin a

5. See Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021.
6. Arendt 2006, 247.

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given order, and how an unraveling of these practices throws international orders into crises. Numerous scholars have highlighted that ideational factors constitute international orders[7] because they are "what makes the world hang together."[8] Poststructural and critical scholars have analyzed the importance of positivist metatheoretical frameworks for sustaining the contemporary order.[9] Our account differs from preceding constructivist and poststructural work because we do not study the content of specific ideas or theoretical frameworks for constituting a particular order. Our focus is rather on the practical foundations that allow societies (rather than science or scholars) to determine what reality is. We therefore see our work as complementary to preceding constructivist and poststructural scholarship. Furthermore, although our account is ideational, it also attributes a role to practices, technology, and material reality for establishing truth claims. It thus acknowledges that material factors play an important role, albeit not an exclusive one, in the production of truth claims.

To set the agenda for this research program we first explore how truth practices underpin international orders. Second, we elaborate why and how severe challenges to established truth practices threaten the stability of international orders. Third, we describe the epistemic authority that prevails in the LIO. Fourth, we differentiate among liberal lying practices, fascist practices of creating totalizing truths, and truth-subversion practices, and we provide a taxonomy of truth-subversion practices. Fifth, we elaborate on how truth-subversion practices jeopardize the epistemological security upon which the LIO rests, and endanger the LIO's three key features of political liberalism, economic liberalism, and liberal internationalism. We conclude by arguing that IR scholarship has recognized practices of knowledge production underlying the LIO, but has stopped short of identifying challenges to those practices and the threats that they signify for the LIO. We discuss what the discipline can do to alleviate its blind spots.

Epistemological Foundations of International Order

We remain agnostic about what truth *really* is. We do not take a side in debates between a correspondence theory of truth and a theory of truth as intersubjective validity standards. Instead, we are interested in what people collectively think truth is and how they establish truth claims through shared practices. Our major theoretical claim is that all international orders, and particularly liberal orders, require a societally recognized notion of truth as their basic condition of possibility because such a shared notion of truth is a prerequisite for communication and coordination. Philosophers, at least from Augustine onwards, considered truth an important

7. See, among others Allan 2018; Crawford 2002; Reus-Smit 1999.
8. Ruggie 1998.
9. See Ashley 1984; Cox 1981.

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element for the functioning of societies,[10] although they differed in their understandings of what truth entailed. If a societally shared notion of truth unravels, societies plunge into chaos. In the enlightenment tradition, a notion of reasoned scientific truth and facts is important, and is supported by recognized practices of truth production, which bestow epistemic authority. This lineage has underpinned the LIO. Practices of truth subversion aim at undermining any possibility of recognizing a shared notion of truth.

Practices of Truth Production Underpin International Orders

Practices of truth production are important in ensuring the functionality of international orders for two reasons. First, they translate material reality into discourses and policy recommendations.[11] For example, scientific discoveries related to global warming prompt political actors to pursue climate change mitigation policies. Second, practices of truth production secure the epistemological ground for societies to determine a public and collectively shared sense of the world. This epistemological security helps individuals and communities experience orderliness, safety, and the absence of threats to their identity, conditions that result from justified beliefs in the knowledge on which their "common-sense reality" rests.[12] Communication, argumentation, and cooperation all become possible as a result of this shared common-sense reality. In its absence, trust and confidence in fact-based opinions weaken, and maintaining international orders becomes difficult.

To illustrate further, lack of trust is the primary difficulty in the security dilemma. Game theoretic approaches on which the security dilemma rests assume that international actors do not communicate with each other, or alternatively, that talk is cheap, and that spoken utterances are unreliable.[13] But international actors can—and do—communicate with each other. Experimental and historical research suggests that when they do, the equilibrium outcome expected from the prisoner's dilemma (defection) becomes significantly less likely.[14] Similarly, Fearon proposed that the security dilemma is notably ameliorated among democracies because of their superior communication capacities.[15] Democratic states face higher audience costs at home if they back down in a crisis, and can therefore communicate their resolve more credibly than autocracies. But if truth-subversion practices become flagrant, it becomes impossible to discern whether or not a leader escalated a crisis, whether or not he/she backed down, or who was responsible for starting a war. If truth-subversion practices are widespread, the result will be an absence of reliable communication, a heightened uncertainty about others' intentions, and a lack of trust. These characteristics

10. Bok 1999.
11. See the epistemic communities' literature in *International Organization* 46 (1).
12. Ezrahi 2012,106.
13. Jervis 1978.
14. See Lindley 2003; Minkler and Miceli 2004.
15. Fearon 1994.

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significantly increase the security dilemma, challenging not only the Westphalian features of the contemporary order, but perhaps also the possibilities of order altogether.

Every international order can have different practices of truth production that will shape, but not fully determine, that order's system of rule and authority. What counts as truth historically varies. But for any social order to exist, shared standards for evaluating truth claims must exist.

Practices of truth production are socially meaningful patterned actions that establish what exists in the world. They are the organized nexuses of doings and sayings that practical understandings link together, and the rules that people adhere to when establishing truth claims.[16] The LIO includes, for example, scientific practices of experimentation and argumentation, statistical data analysis, interviewing, and investigative journalism, as well as public policy debates, peer review processes, and institutional selection mechanisms that lead to the selective retention of some findings and the discarding of others. In the medieval period, in contrast, practices of truth production rested on interpreting religious scriptures with the help of logical reasoning and a focus on ideas' essences, rather than on the observation of concrete realities or specific entities as they existed in the world. Logically consistent argument and reasoning were preferred, but this "scholastic philosophy, as perfected by Thomas Aquinas, was not very favorable to the growth of natural science, because, in its emphasis on an inner reality, it drew attention away from the actual details and behavior of concrete things."[17]

Practices of truth production are embedded in normative understandings about the values and purposes of knowledge production. For example, modern scientific practices rest on enlightenment thought and the primacy of reason and rationality, whereas medieval practices of truth production had as their foundation the normative value of discovering the God-given natural order.[18]

The production and dissemination of truth claims requires specific technologies, and truth-production practices evolve in tandem with technologies. The technologies render specific practices possible, but they do not determine them. Only with the availability of dissemination technologies can large audiences access societal truths, allowing a shared epistemological basis for an international order to emerge. Because these technologies shape the communication of truth claims and who has access to communicate those claims, the technologies of dissemination also influence epistemic authority. For example, with the advent of paper, the printing press, and writing in the vernacular, the dissemination of written texts dramatically increased in the early modern period. Books became significantly cheaper, and the church lost its quasi-monopoly on knowledge production.[19]

16. Adler and Pouliot 2011.
17. Palmer and Colton 1995, 42.
18. Ezrahi 2012.
19. Deibert 1997, 47–93.

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Within international orders, certain actors acquire epistemic authority; that is, the societal legitimacy and trust to establish truth claims.[20] In the LIO, epistemic authority resides in a diffuse transnational community whose members span universities, research institutes, think tanks, international organizations, select nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and some multinational corporations (MNCs).[21]

Practices of truth production, normative understandings about the values and purposes of knowledge production, dissemination technologies, and epistemic authority form a web of tightly inter-related factors. When this web unravels, international orders plunge into crises.

International Orders' Crises Triggered by Challenges to Established Practices of Truth Production

There are two fundamental challenges to truth-production practices that can lead to major crises and, potentially, to the collapse of international orders. First, the discrepancies between factual reality and truth-subverting claims can become so large that such discord may lead to flawed policy decisions and ungovernable societies.[22] When truth-production practices stop serving the pragmatic purpose of providing a reasonable foundation for governing, reality can kick back.[23] Some political leaders had this painful realization during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as when Donald Trump promoted the injection of bleach to cure COVID-19, or when Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador promoted hugging.

Second, alternative practices of truth production can challenge an order's truth practices. If this challenge becomes substantive, people lose the ability to evaluate truth claims and they suffer from epistemological insecurity. People cease to know what is true, a condition that threatens the epistemological ground for determining a public and collectively shared sense of the world. Different parts of society might believe in different truths, and these cleavages can become so massive that communication and cooperation between different communities cease to be possible. The public sphere disappears, and a Tower of Babel emerges. Societies fall out of order, and in extreme cases, they plunge into chaos. The Reformation was such a period, when the invention of the printing press caused the church to lose its monopoly on the production of truth claims. Humanists and reformers placed each individual and that person's capacity for independent reasoning and empirical observation at the center of the universe.[24] A long period of civil strife and general confusion came to an end, in part, through the development of a new synthesis, rather than via a radical break with the past. Epistemological insecurity is also a major challenge that the LIO faces today.

20. See Haas 2018; Zagzebski 2015.
21. Nowotny 2000, 17.
22. Arendt 1973.
23. Dewey 1938.
24. Deibert 1997.

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Practices of Truth Subversion Challenge the LIO

Practices of truth subversion most directly threaten the liberal aspects of the contemporary order. Conforming to the introduction to this special issue, we identify the LIO as a Western-led order that emerged after 1945, has as its core members liberal democracies, and at present does not fully comprise many states; for example, China, Russia, and some Islamic countries are not included. The order has been backed up by US hegemonic power and over time has adopted a neoliberal touch. Science often supported this neoliberal ideology. But the order is also based on the enlightenment notion of liberalism, whose basic principles are equality of individuals, self-determination, and the pursuit of individual freedom. Three distinct but inter-related components of liberalism support these principles: democracy and the rule of law including protection of human rights (political liberalism), free markets (economic liberalism), and multilateralism based on "'generalized' principles of human conduct" (liberal internationalism).[25]

The LIO is a comparatively peaceful and prosperous order, and its core member states developed a pluralistic security community in which they share "dependable expectations of peaceful change."[26] For two reasons it is important, for maintaining this order, that the domestic regimes of the LIO's core member states are liberal democracies. First, democracies are decentralized and transparent in their decision making. Together with transnationalism and global capitalism, this creates multiple access points to decision making, and nondomestic actors have opportunities to find their interests represented. "The democratic industrial world exhibits patterns of political order that lie between traditional images of domestic and international politics, thus creating an unusual and distinctive subsystem in world politics."[27] Second, the core democratic member states and their peoples have shared a civic identity attached to the pursuit of individual freedom and human rights, as well as capitalist modes of consumption. Communitarian and integral nationalist identities were kept at bay in favor of a measure of cosmopolitanism. Socialization in multilateral institutions further contributed to this shared identity.[28] These features established trust among the order's key participants, although not always beyond that core.

Epistemic Authority in the LIO

The LIO has, as its condition of possibility, truth-production practices that emerged from enlightenment thought and that rest on experimental science, observation, and reason.[29] In the nineteenth century, the professionalization of the social sciences

25. Ruggie 1992, 571.
26. Deutsch et al. 1957, 5.
27. Deudney and Ikenberry 1999, 195.
28. Ibid.
29. See Buzan and Lawson 2015, 97; Ezrahi 2012.

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began. New universities such as Sciences Po and the London School of Economics emerged, institutions that were supposed to provide bureaucrats and statesmen with the qualifications needed to lead their respective countries. "The practice of political decision-making became ever more dependent upon basic truths spelled out by elites in their capacity as 'experts.'"[30] Central to these developments was a mission to promote progress in European societies through research. Statistical methods served that purpose; they appeared to provide "an exact representation of the external world."[31] These new ideas caused difficulties both for dynastic rule based on divine rights, and for the authority of the Catholic Church. The liberal order's democratic foundations entail the understanding that political elites have been elected by the many to rule on their behalf in a transparent way, which permits citizens to evaluate governmental actions. Citizens had to be educated, such that general education went hand-in-hand with citizenship rights. Mass media provided the public with accurate information for decision making, and the tradition of investigative journalism scrutinized elites' public statements and policies. The press reserved some pages for citizens' commentaries, and thus provided a public space for debate and argument.

Market economies depend for their functioning on an adequate degree of information, and on science and research to promote economic growth.[32] International organizations emerged in parallel with the spread of the industrial revolution,[33] and the same enlightenment ideas also influenced their epistemic authority. Based on the normative values of rationalism, legalism, and a bureaucratic culture, and backed up with hegemonic power, international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), or the European Union (EU) are buttressed by authority. They use this authority to perform governmental functions in the international realm (admittedly often in line with neoliberal ideology), and thus direct the interactions between states and other actors.[34]

In sum, the enlightenment's focus on reason, observation, and individualism promoted the role of science and expertise in politics. A transnational community of actors emanating from specific organizations, including universities, research institutes, and the mass media, possess the relevant epistemic authority to establish truths on which the key institutions of the LIO depend; namely, democracies, markets, and international organizations.

The epistemic authority in the LIO and the LIO itself have recently come under strain. Many authors in this special issue highlight demand factors in the population that made citizens susceptible to populist messages. These factors include regional economic inequalities,[35] extreme economic inequalities between the one percent

30. Rosenfeld 2019, 64.
31. Ibid., 67.
32. Mokyr 2017.
33. Buzan and Lawson 2015.
34. Barnett and Finnemore 1999.
35. Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021.

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and the rest,[36] the economic effects of immigration,[37] institutional inefficiencies in shielding the workforce from globalization's effects,[38] the demand for recognition on the part of the left-behinds,[39] the quest for localized and spatially constrained identities,[40] and the role of racism and white nationalism.[41] Many of these features emerged from specific aspects of the LIO's design.

In contrast to these accompanying articles in this special issue, our argument focuses on the supply side of populism. Truth-subversion practices can spread in a media environment lacking checks on the accuracy of disseminated messages, and when the population is susceptible to these messages. In recent years, populist politicians and their promoters—who hitherto almost exclusively existed at the margins of liberal democracies—entered the mainstream in many Western liberal societies. They deliberately developed and refined a set of truth-subversion practices—including but not limited to purposeful and flagrantly visible lying—to create epistemological insecurity, thereby undermining the domestic and international liberal order. These politicians found inspiration, and sometimes outright support, from populist leaders in *illiberal* democracies and authoritarian regimes such as those in Russia or Venezuela.[42] The widespread use of social media was central in changing the opportunity structures for the dissemination of truth claims.[43] Compared with traditional broadcasting, social media dramatically reduced the entry costs for disseminating messages and provided the means to avoid the mediation via mainstream media.[44] This diminished the role of gatekeepers who were responsible for detecting misinformation[45] and therefore undermined the epistemic authority of mainstream media in the LIO. In turn, political entrepreneurs (mainly but not exclusively from the ultra-right) used this new opportunity structure to develop highly effective truth-subversion practices and to spread their statements widely. Their success is the result of a certain susceptibility to these messages in the population, originating from the demand factors of populism highlighted previously.

Truth-subversion practitioners are challenging the LIO primarily through the operation of domestic politics. Specific emerging features in the international structure, such as social media, and populist allies in other democracies, hybrid regimes, and autocracies, support truth-subversion practitioners in their domestic battles.

36. Flaherty and Rogowski 2021.
37. Goodman and Pepinsky 2021.
38. See Börzel and Zürn 2021; Goldstein and Gulotty 2021; Mansfield and Rudra 2021.
39. Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2020.
40. Simmons and Goemans 2021.
41. Buzas 2021.
42. See Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2020; Farrell and Newman 2021.
43. For example, according to opinion polls conducted in the United States, between 47 percent and 62 percent of US adults obtain news from social media. See Shearer and Gottfried 2017; Silverman 2016.
44. Gurevitch, Coleman, and Blumler 2009, 168.
45. Lazer et al. 2018. A debate emerged regarding whether the largely self-regulating mechanisms of the media for ensuring accuracy are effective. Eberwein and Porlezza 2016.

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Differentiating Among Lying to Deceive, Creating a Totalizing Truth, and Truth-Subversion Practices

We can differentiate among three sets of communication practices: (1) lying to deceive, (2) truth-subversion practices, and (3) creating a totalizing truth to prohibit dissent. First, the truth-subversion practices adopted by illiberal leaders differ substantially from the practices of lying that political leaders in liberal democracies typically engage in. Liberal democratic leaders may lie to deceive the public or the international community for personal gain, to pursue specific policies that they think are important but that are likely to be unpopular, or for national security reasons.[46] They take great care when crafting their lies.[47] They take a notion of truth for granted and rely on its existence, which enables them to acquire power through the act of lying. If their dishonesty is uncovered, the population experiences a moment of epistemological insecurity, but this epistemological insecurity can recover reasonably well if a collectively shared parameter of truth exists in the relevant society. In such cases, the exposed delinquent experiences a loss of power.

In perhaps the most prominent postwar example of lying in a liberal democracy, Richard Nixon lied to cover up his own involvement in the Watergate affair. In this act of lying, he did not discursively challenge the notion of truth, but rather relied on it, and used it to deceive. For example, in his first Watergate speech, Nixon declared that "members of the White House staff should appear and testify voluntarily under oath before the Senate committee which investigates Watergate," and that "the truth should be fully brought out, no matter who was involved." In announcing the resignation of key staff members in 1973, Nixon argued that "Watergate represented a series of illegal acts and bad judgements by a number of individuals. It was the system that has brought the facts to light."[48] Eventually Nixon had to resign when his lies were uncovered, an event recalled as one of the starkest instances of a loss of power following the discovery of dishonesty. Two decades later, after being exposed for having lied under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky, Bill Clinton apologized for having "misled" the public, thus acknowledging the normative value of the notion of truth.[49] Perhaps because of the stark consequences that can result from the detection of lies, and contrary to popular belief, liberal democratic leaders lie with great care and do not get caught very frequently in the act of lying.[50]

In contrast, truth-subversion practitioners seek to dismantle the very notion of truth for the sake of power and domination. They do not care whether they get caught lying; their power increases with the more attention that they garner and the more that they manage to shape people's emotions. In such a process, not every statement they utter needs to be a lie; the statements rather have the features of *bullshit*. While

46. Pfiffner 2004.
47. Walters and Luscombe 2017.
48. Nixon 1973.
49. In Bok 1999, xv.
50. Mearsheimer 2011.

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bullshit "is produced without concern for the truth, it need not be false…The essence of bullshit is [therefore] not that it is false but that it is phony." [51]

Truth-subversion practices share similarities with autocratic, even fascist communication practices, and most prominent among these connections is the reliance on emotions rather than reason. As Timothy Snyder wrote, "in fascism feeling is first. Fascists of the 1920s and 1930s wanted to undo the enlightenment and appeal to people as members of a tribe, race, or species. What mattered was a story of us and them."[52] It is the political movements and news outlets of the far right that most consistently—although by no means exclusively—use truth-subversion practices. The messages they disseminate often contain racist and nationalist overtones, harbor a distrust for traditional elites, and seek to speak directly to the people, to whom they promise a return to an idealized past. There are important similarities between the contemporary era and the 1930s, and George Orwell's term "double think" neatly describes the epistemological insecurity that can result from autocratic communication practices as well as truth-subversion practices: "To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which canceled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it."[53]

Although communist and fascist forces might have deployed truth-subversion practices prior to their consolidation of power, truth-subversion practices of today differ from the propaganda output of totalitarian regimes. Perhaps the most striking difference is that the propaganda machinery of totalitarian regimes was extraordinarily consistent and did not allow for contradictions or dissent.[54] This is also to some extent true for many authoritarian regimes today. The aim is to fully control public opinion by censoring any possible dissent and creating a rigid and internally coherent world view. Although this might be truth-subversion practitioners' goal, this goal is currently unobtainable. Not only are many such practitioners operating in democracies in which they do not have the power to curtail free speech (or at least in hybrid regimes, in which it is not fully possible to shut out dissent), but also the Internet and social media platforms render speech difficult to monopolize. Instead, truth-subversion practitioners aim to create confusion.

A Taxonomy of Truth-Subversion Practices

Truth-subversion practices are such practices that seek to undermine the epistemological foundations of an order. Our empirical focus is the post-2016 period and

51. Frankfurt 2005, 43.
52. Timothy Snyder, "Fascism is Back, Blame the Internet," *Washington Post*, 21 May, 2018. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/05/21/fascism-is-back-blame-the-internet/> Accessed 1 October 2020.
53. Orwell 2008, 27–28.
54. Arendt 1973.

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the challenges that truth-subversion practices have posed to the LIO during this period. We leave it to others to evaluate whether our analytical framework can be applicable to other time periods and geographical settings. Similar practices of purposefully promoting epistemological insecurity might, for example, have been brought into play in the nascent American Republic, in nineteenth-century European parliamentary politics, in twentieth-century Latin America, or in the contentious politics of interwar Europe.

The most obvious practice of truth subversion is *false speak,* which is outright purposeful lying in an easily verifiable way. A prominent example is the claim by the Vote Leave campaign in the United Kingdom's referendum on EU membership that Turkey would soon become a member state.

A second truth-subversion practice is *double speak*, which relates to the development of internal contradictions in one's own speech. Such blatant internal contradictions challenge reasoned speech on which enlightenment ideals of truth depend. For example, during a news briefing Donald Trump asserted, "We're going to put a hold on money spent to the WHO." Shortly thereafter, when a reporter asked him whether he was going to withhold money from the WHO during a pandemic, he responded: "I'm not saying I'm going to do it. But we are going to look at it."[55]

A third truth-subversion practice is *inflammatory speak*, which seeks to enrage the population. It involves attacks against opponents with a vocabulary that has hitherto been deemed inappropriate for mainstream political exchanges. A prominent example of this are Trump's attacks on the media as "the enemy of the people." Andreas Kalbitz, one of the leading politicians of Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, called a climate activist in a regional election debate a "pigtail-faced moon-face girl."[56]

A fourth form of truth subversion is *promoting alternative facts*. This practice entails direct verbal attacks against the enlightenment notion of truth and the epistemic authority of key institutions based on that notion. A prominent example is the reference by Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the US president, to "alternative facts" in a TV interview. "Alternative facts" transform opinion into facts. Another example is the derision of expertise, as when Michael Gove, the United Kingdom's Justice Secretary, claimed that "people in this country have had enough of experts."[57]

A fifth practice routinely used by illiberal regimes in the Internet age is that of *flooding*. These regimes disseminate many kinds of messages across the Web, such

55. White House Memo, "In Trump's Marathon Briefings, the Answers and the Message Are Often Contradictory," *New York Times*, 8 April 2020. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-news-briefings.html>, accessed 1 October 2020.

56. Author's translation from German, *Die Zeit*, 22 August 2019. Available at <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-08/afd-ostdeutschland-landtage-wahlkampf-programm>, accessed 1 October 2020.

57. Henry Mance, "Britain Has Had Enough of Experts Says Gove," *Financial Times*, 3 June 2016. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>, accessed 1 October 2020.

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that truth becomes undiscernible for the general populace.[58] Trump appears to imitate that practice: he has issued an average of 7.5 false statements per day since he came into office, a daily average peaking at 16 in June and July 2018.[59] In Brazil, 90 percent of respondents have been exposed to fake news about the pandemic on WhatsApp, and 70 percent of respondents trusted the information.[60]

Sixth is *misplaced faith.*[61] This notion refers to statements about a future success voiced with high conviction, ignoring the complexity of challenges that lie ahead. For example, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic Jair Bolsonaro claimed that Brazil would not be severely affected, because Brazilians "never catch anything. You see some bloke jumping into the sewage, he gets out, has a dive, right? And nothing happens to him."[62]

Seventh, in seeking to sow discord, social polarization, and disdain for truth, illiberal leaders disseminate *conspiracy theories*. For example, Victor Orban claimed that George Soros wanted to take over Hungary.

These truth-subversion practices are not mutually exclusive, and neither this topography nor the practices used by truth subverters are preserved in aspic. Furthermore, although some of these discursive strategies were used historically in the LIO in isolation to obtain specific objectives, they were not used in combination with this degree of concentration with the express objective of undermining the LIO's truth architecture, other than at the margins.

The Spread of Truth-Subversion Practices

The nature of the Internet means that it is difficult to establish absolute control over the dissemination of messages in either liberal or authoritarian regimes.[63] As a result, it is harder for authoritarian and hybrid regimes to fully control speech in their own territories as they may once have done. Indeed, such regimes might also have identified advantages in controlling social media and speech less rigorously, such as early warnings of people's dissatisfaction with specific policies.[64] Because of the difficulties inherent in completely controlling speech, these regimes instead increasingly resorted to truth-subversion practices (notably flooding) to sow confusion, several years before these practices became a serious concern in established democracies.

58. Farrell and Newman 2021.

59. Roger Cohen, "Trump's Nemesis in the Age of Pinocchio," *New York Times*, 10 August 2018. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/opinion/donald-trump-glenn-kessler-factchecking.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>, accessed 1 October 2020.

60. "Spread of Fake News Adds to Brazil's Pandemic Crisis," *Financial Times*, 13 July 2020. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/ea62950e-89c0-4b8b-b458-05c90a55b81f>, accessed 1 October 2020.

61. Snyder 2017, 68.

62. "Jair Bolsonaro Claims 'Brazilians Never Catch Anything' As Covid-19 Cases Rise," *Guardian*, 27 March 2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/mar/27/jair-bolsonaro-claims-brazilians-never-catch-anything-as-covid-19-cases-rise>, accessed 1 October 2020.

63. Farrell and Newman 2021.

64. Gunitsky 2015.

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Although scholars during this period noticed that truth-subversion practices could negatively influence prospects for emerging democracies,[65] before Trump's election and the Brexit referendum it was less clear whether such practices would have a similar impact in established liberal democracies. It first appeared that such democracies might have sufficiently strong civil societies to withstand the challenge from these tactics.[66] Equally, Russia's international communication strategy appeared curiously out of touch, unfocused, and eccentric. The danger that truth-subversion practices poses has become fully apparent only since their unexpected success in established democracies.

Democracies can nowadays weaken following democratic elections in which truth-subversion practices play a major role. The 2016 US presidential election firmly placed this phenomenon on the world stage.[67] Popular engagement with fake news stories increased dramatically in the run-up to the election, while engagement with true news stories decreased during that period.[68] Not only did the Trump campaign make truth-subversion practices highly visible and demonstrate their success, it also provided legitimacy to practices that liberal democracies had hitherto shunned and admonished when used by countries in the Global South. The new-found legitimacy of these practices makes their spread more likely. Particularly since the 2016 US election, a rising number of political entrepreneurs and their consultants have imitated similar practices. In thirty of the sixty-five countries surveyed in 2017 by Freedom House, paid government commentators had organized online disinformation campaigns.[69] Since 2013, there has been a steady rise in the number of governments involved in disinformation efforts.

Extreme right parties such as France's Front National and Germany's AfD use the Internet and social media to deploy truth-subversion practices. The AfD, for example, has become more advanced in using social media than have mainstream German parties.[70] In Brazil, social media and fake news contributed to the success of the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro in winning the 2018 presidential elections.

Although public rallies offer a useful secondary means, social media remains the ideal vehicle for populists to practice truth-subversion. Social media sites are the primary entry point from which people acquire fake news stories,[71] and on those sites, fake news stories outperform accurate news stories in user engagement. A 2018 study, analyzing all verified news stories posted worldwide on Twitter since its launch in 2006, found that false news stories spread faster and more widely than true news stories by a wide margin, and that such false news stories generated

65. Diamond, Plattner, and Walker 2016.
66. Oates 2013.
67. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018.
68. Silverman 2016. We refer here to fake news stories and not to all truth-subversion practices because most data are on the former.
69. Freedom House 2018.
70. Medina Serrano et al. 2019.
71. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017.

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emotional reactions of "fear, disgust and surprise."[72] Fake news stories can be more sensationalist than factual news stories, and can be easier to digest than more nuanced news stories, which instead aim at accuracy. Fake news thus has a higher likelihood of provoking a reaction. "Liking" and sharing on Twitter and Facebook give people recognition for what they share and like, a process that positively reinforces their views, and creates group cohesion.

Through these means, truth-subversion practitioners have reached large portions of the population. According to Facebook figures, Russian disinformation alone on that platform likely reached 126 million users in the months preceding the 2016 US election.[73] A 2016 opinion poll reported that 32 percent of respondents said that they often see fake news online, and 39 percent said that they see it sometimes.[74] These data suggest that truth subversion is a widespread phenomenon.

Truth-Subversion Practices Create Epistemological Insecurity

Truth-subversion practices create epistemological insecurity, both at the individual level and at the level of social orders. The concept of epistemological security is associated with the more familiar concept of "ontological security"—or "a sense of confidence of one's identity rooted in habits and routines"[75]—if only because, as with the broader concepts of epistemology and ontology, they are co-dependent. The concepts differ, however, because whereas ontological security refers to the stability of the individual and corporate (state) self, epistemological security refers to trust in the common-sense knowledge needed to know oneself.

For the individual, epistemological insecurity is a state of disorientation about what is true and real. It emerges from information inconsistencies and ambiguities, and generates uncertainty.[76] Widespread truth-subversion practices sow "seeds of doubt and confusion among subjects."[77] For example, in a 2016 opinion poll, 64 percent of respondents thought that "fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events," and a further 23 percent thought that such stories cause at least some confusion.[78] This epistemological insecurity leads to a lack of trust, and the resulting disorientation can result in ontological insecurity; that is, a perceived threat to one's identity. The confusion simultaneously

72. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018, 1146.

73. Jane Mayer, "How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump," *New Yorker*, 1 October 2018. Available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/how-russia-helped-to-swing-the-election-for-trump?mbid=social_twitter>, accessed 1 October 2020.

74. Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb 2016.

75. Giddens 1991, 98; see also Mitzen 2006.

76. Blyth 2002.

77. "Post-Truth Politics and Why the Antidote Isn't Simply 'Fact-Checking' and Truth," *The Conversation*, 23 March 2018. Available at <https://theconversation.com/post-truth-politics-and-why-the-antidote-isnt-simply-fact-checking-and-truth-87364>, accessed 1 October 2020.

78. Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb 2016.

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generates a desire for sense-making.[79] As the epistemic authority of leading institutions weakens, the fallback becomes a reliance on one's individual opinions and beliefs. Actors actively search for a coherent world view to rid themselves of discomforting feelings of ambiguity and internal contradictions.[80] If this reliance on personal opinions and beliefs becomes very strong, it can restore ontological security and lead to an overly zealous sense of the self.

As a feature of social order, epistemological insecurity means that there is no single socially agreed-upon metric for establishing what is true. Disagreements about what counts as knowledge and truth occur, creating multiple incompatible versions of truth making and truth production, and challenging the epistemic authority of key institutions. The platform for a unifying public sphere in which open debate is possible crumbles, and the role of arbiters in evaluating and judging truth claims evaporates.

Epistemological insecurity manifests itself in four ways on the LIO. First, such insecurities make effective government extremely challenging. The alignment of expectations around facts, events, norms, and principles is paramount.[81] Governments and policymakers have to coordinate interests and intentions, and they require stable expectations to be able to do so. The same uncertainty makes it difficult to coordinate international activities and can generate suspicion among established partners, thus challenging the effective operation of multilateralism.

Second, epistemological insecurity threatens enlightenment norms and principles, including reason and rationality, science and expertise, and the ideology of liberal internationalism, which are the foundations for peaceful cooperation in the LIO. These liberal principles are instead replaced by intensified inciting of emotions.

Third, epistemological insecurity challenges the truth claims of key institutions and can erode their authority. For example, the Democracy Project found that 68 percent of respondents believed media accuracy to be getting worse.[82] The same distrust of expertise undermines the foundations on which international organizations' authority rests.

Fourth, truth-subversion practices polarize domestic and international societies. Populations no longer have a shared basis on which to evaluate truth claims, so reasoned discussions across camps become impossible.[83] Research indicates that partisan divides in the United States are entrenched as never before.[84] These divides militate against social and political consensus about functions, statuses, and constitutive normative rules. These same cleavages also hinder global interconnectedness,

79. Kessler 2011.
80. Natorski 2016.
81. Krasner 1983.
82. Democracy Project 2018.
83. Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015.
84. Julie Beck, "This Article Won't Change Your Mind," *The Atlantic*, 13 March 2017. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/03/this-article-wont-change-your-mind/519093/>. Accessed 1 October 2020.

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thus promoting disassociation and undermining liberal internationalism. How else would people stay "connected" without a common epistemic background?

Truth Subversion's Challenges to Political Liberalism, Economic Liberalism, and Liberal Internationalism

Epistemological insecurity and its effects test the LIO's three fundamental features: political liberalism, economic liberalism, and liberal internationalism. We discuss each of these dimensions in turn.

Truth Subversion's Challenges to Political Liberalism

Since the Enlightenment, two conceptions have competed to determine democracy's epistemic authority: one that enshrines rule in expertise as held by enlightened elites, and another that enshrines rule in the collective wisdom of "the people."[85] John Dewey and Hannah Arendt persuasively argued for a compromise position through which publics should inform political judgments, but in which such judgments should be based on facts—and when possible—on science.[86] A shared understanding of what is real and true is a prerequisite for people to assess their government's performance.[87] In the absence of such a shared understanding, government becomes resistant to domestic and international scrutiny.

Populists, however, are not moved by a concern for popular democracy, let alone by finding a balance between republicanism and popular democracy. Rather, moved by the goal of political domination, they pretend to be democrats, calling attention to people's judgment and common sense. But by using truth-subversion practices, they prevent the public from undertaking politically informed judgments. The rise of populism in the West was not the reason for the consolidation of truth subversion, but there is rather an elective affinity between both: "the upsurge of populist politics is symptomatic of the consolidation of post-truth communication as a distinctive feature of contemporary politics."[88] As Waisbord explains, "the root of populism's opposition to truth is its binary vision of politics. For populism 'the people' and 'the elites' hold their own version of truth. All truths are necessarily partial and anchored social interests … A common truth is impossible given the essential nature of antagonistic, conflict-centered politics."[89]

One of the ways through which political leaders practice populism into existence is by exposing the supposed conspiracy of political, economic, intellectual, and media

85. Rosenfeld 2019.
86. Werner-Muller 2019.
87. Ezrahi 1990.
88. Waisbord 2018, 17–18.
89. Ibid., 25.

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elites that amass their own power and epistemic authority to the detriment of popular opinion and popular "common sense."[90] Having already confused the public, populist leaders create a democratic fiction.[91] They make a double move of simultaneously consolidating their own epistemic authority while destroying elites' established authority. Having entirely relativized all possible approaches to facts, they encourage people to trust their own personal opinions, which they reinforce with emotionally inflaming and conspiratorial thought.[92] A tightly knit community of the like-minded based on nativist tribal identities can emerge, where reasoned argument is impossible.[93] This community forms the home base, without which populist rule cannot stand. Truth-subversion practices have thus contributed to the rise of new domestic actors, such as right-wing nationalist parties, that challenge the foundations of democracy.

We do not make any predictions about whether truth-subversion practices will become more dominant or whether they will recede because we consider it an open battle. Instead, we highlight some mechanisms and indicators through which truth-subversion practices will further challenge the LIO if they continue to gain dominance.

Illiberal leaders' verbal attacks on the press are leading to declining trust in media. In some cases, populists are actively preventing the press from providing checks on governments. Consequently, if truth-subversion practices become more dominant, we expect indicators of press freedom to decline. Furthermore, if concerted disinformation campaigns (potentially with the intervention of foreign powers) become the norm in election periods, it will no longer be possible to speak of the conduct of "free and fair" elections. Rising partisan divisions, increasing emotional inflaming, an absence of accurate information, and the disappearance of a public sphere can also erode protections of minority rights and human rights, which can potentially result in violence, as in the United States in the wake of George Floyd's death. When inaccurate and emotionally inflammatory information saturates the majority, paying attention to minorities becomes difficult, pluralism is strained, and the rule of law gets tested.

In sum, if truth-subversion practices become predominant, we predict that a rise in populist parties as represented in election results and opinion polls, and deterioration both in overall indicators of democracy and in individual metrics linked to minority rights, the rule of law, press freedom, and free and fair elections will follow.

Such developments would strain the community of values on which the LIO rests. The challenge to the LIO's legitimacy would test its cooperative nature and could make the order more antagonistic and conflictual. An emerging lack of transparency and the closing off of multiple access points to decision making for international actors would strain important transnational features, while new covert forms of

90. Rosenfeld 2019.

91. An online survey found that respondents believe 75 percent of the fake news stories that they see, whereas 83 percent believe accurate news stories. Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016.

92. Schindler 2020.

93. Iakhnis et al. 2018

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transnational collaboration emerge between authoritarian regimes and illiberal Western leaders. New populist regimes—particularly if they sustain themselves in major Western countries—can become, in people's minds, the model for governing to be pursued elsewhere by imitation.

Truth Subversion's Challenges to Economic Liberalism

Epistemological insecurity undermines open markets through two major means. First, truth-subversion practices generate insecurity within financial and commercial markets, because markets depend on reliable information to operate effectively. If market actors do not trust the information that they receive, market mechanisms run amok. Certain algorithms used on financial markets depend on news feeds and on what is trending on social media sites.[94] In one occasion in 2013, the Dow Jones lost 143 points in the few minutes following the tweet of a fake news item.[95] In another instance, the spread of a fake news item resulted in USD 130 billion losses in the stock market.[96]

Second, because of its implications for polarization, epistemological insecurity strains consensual domestic social purposes' adoption and sustenance. Epistemological insecurity challenges the reconstruction of "embedded liberalism's" principles, on which the postwar international economic order has rested.[97] Difficulties in achieving compromises at the domestic level reinforce the adverse effects of truth subversion on international actors' stable expectations, which are grounded on previously agreed-upon norms, rules, and principles. The resulting strains in international cooperation can weaken the LIO's international economic institutions and regimes, and may end up destroying their social legitimacy. The consequence can be economically suboptimal policies. For example, trade wars—such as the one that rages between the United States and China—can trigger economic recessions, and even plunge the world into a global depression.

Truth Subversion's Challenges to Liberal Internationalism

Epistemological insecurity tests multilateralism on several fronts. First, targeted misinformation campaigns can deceive citizens about the advantages and disadvantages of international cooperation. The primary case in point is the United Kingdom's vote

94. Jill Treanor, Justin McCurry, and Rob Davies, "Bank of England Investigating Dramatic Overnight Fall in Pound," *The Guardian*, 7 October 2016. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/oct/07/confusion-as-pound-falls-10-in-insane-asian-trading-and-no-one-knows-why>, accessed 1 October 2020.

95. Laybats and Tredinnick 2016.

96. Kenneth Rapoza, "Can 'Fake News' Impact the Stock Market?" *Forbes*, 26 February 2017. Available at <www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2017/02/26/can-fake-news-impact-the-stock-market/>, accessed 1 October 2020.

97. Ruggie 1982.

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to exit the EU, which occurred in part because of an extraordinarily successful misinformation campaign. Data from 168 opinion polls conducted in the United Kingdom between September 2015 and June 2016 demonstrate that until March 2016, a majority of the population was in favor of remaining in the EU. Once the campaign progressed, voters became more inclined to vote "Leave."[98] The Leave campaign spent almost all its funding on social media, and the three key messages that British voters remembered from the referendum campaign were all inaccurate Vote Leave messages.[99] At the time of this writing, the same truth-subversion practices continue to make it difficult to negotiate a regulated exit from the EU.

Second, epistemological insecurity entails a lack of predictability, which makes it hard for other leaders in the international arena to collaborate, and threatens the trust among core member states. If some states still openly expose liberal values, while others do not, the shared identity of core member states that formed the foundation for the pluralistic security community will disappear. If there is a widespread lack of trust in expertise, the authority of international organizations will weaken. If truth-subversion practices gain dominance, we expect to see decreasing international collaboration in the form of signed treaties and membership in international organizations. Perhaps less noticeably, international organizations may become empty vessels. Although they may continue to exist formally, epistemological insecurity can lead to their paralysis.

An IR Research Agenda for Addressing the Epistemological Challenges to the International Order

Constructivist scholars, and particularly those inspired by Habermas's communicative action theory, have referred to the importance of deliberative discourse, truth seeking, and argumentation in the LIO. They highlight that reasoning and argumentation are central in achieving mutual understanding, solving collective problems, and reaching an agreement over shared norms.[100] Constructivists also assumed that the public sphere would scrutinize actors' statements because of a shared (and presumably liberal) normative framework.[101] Even if actors are not interested in reaching a reasoned consensus, some scholars have argued that such actors can be rhetorically entrapped and coerced into agreeing to policies that are not in their interest and that they were not convinced of.[102] This rhetorical entrapment can contribute to order maintenance.[103] But this scholarship has generally not considered how discursive

98. What UK Thinks: EU 2019.
99. Marshall and Drieschova 2018.
100. See Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Mitzen 2005; Risse 2000.
101. For an exception see Checkel 2001, 570, who suggested that processes of persuasion work best behind closed doors.
102. Goddard 2008/9.
103. Bially Mattern 2001.

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practices aimed at subverting the very notion of truth destroy the baseline from which reasoned consensus or rhetorical entrapment operate. Although constructivists have highlighted the foundations that practices of knowledge production provide for the maintenance of order, they have not, to the same extent, considered the possibility of order change based on changes in these practices.

Foucauldian and postmodern scholars have directed attention to historically constituted power/knowledge networks that operate through discourses and create a reality that makes some policies seem natural. They focused on the connection between interests and knowledge, and the importance of knowledge for establishing control and maintaining communication.[104] They correctly suggested that although modern forms of reason-based knowledge production appear transcendent, they emerged via historical processes and are therefore subject to change. Moreover, they argued that modern knowledge and theory serve established elites—even as these knowledge architectures portray themselves to be neutral—and therefore help to maintain existing power relations in support of the LIO.[105] These critical scholars focused on demonstrating how liberal knowledge practices marginalized alternative voices.[106] They were presciently concerned about equating science with an elitist project. Today, however, illiberal leaders are challenging the liberal knowledge structure not with the aim of emancipation, but rather with the goal of domination. Directing their attention to the repressiveness of the liberal order, critical scholars (although focused on change of knowledge practices) did not foresee the possible digression toward a more repressive world. They therefore did not develop the theoretical vocabulary to understand such challenges. This has been our focus here.

The epistemological challenge that truth-subversion practices pose for the LIO took IR scholars by surprise.[107] IR scholarship should undertake several steps to address its blind spots. First, being able to discern the challenges that truth-subversion practices pose requires theorizing long-term historical changes that occurred over decades, perhaps centuries. Although *longue-durée* historical scholarship has increased,[108] major political upheavals, such as the contemporary one, suggest the need for more work along these lines. In this regard, it is essential to stress that truth-subversion practices are a form of *politics* with historical antecedents.[109] This means that IR scholars need to conduct historical macro-comparative research, including, for example, on the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the twentieth century, and our own times, and need to pay special attention to practices of truth generation and their effect on the stability and change of social orders. One avenue of research could consider how specific technologies—such as the printing press, radio, television, the Internet, and social media—create opportunity structures for

104. Ashley 1981.
105. Cox 1981.
106. Ashley and Walker 1990
107. But see, for example, Baron 2018; d'Ancona 2017.
108. See, for example, Allan 2018; Buzan and Lawson 2015; Reus-Smit 1999.
109. Baron 2018.

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specific forms of truth generation. Comparative analyses of practices of truth generation across different international orders during the same period can provide further insights. Scholars could, for example, compare the liberal West with the Chinese zone of influence and the Islamic world.

Second,[110] IR scholarship could pay more attention to the interconnected nature of international, domestic, and local politics. Each tier is mutually embedded, and truth-subversion practices are channeled through the networks and communication arteries of these co-evolving social orders. But are certain core elements of the LIO (democracy, markets, and multilateralism) more immune to truth-subversion practices? Trump's truth-subversion practices appear to have had similar effects on all LIO elements, exemplifying their interconnected nature. More empirical research is needed in this area.

Third, and relatedly, studying the recent disruptions to the LIO requires paying attention to the transnational practices and discourses that undermine democracies, and how these may in turn influence the international order. In this regard, IR scholarship should consider more closely comparative politics research on the reasons for democratic failure and the renaissance of populist authoritarianism. For example, under which conditions are truth-subversion practices more effective? In which types of political regimes do truth-subversion practices flourish? Do electoral systems make a difference? What role does personality play in authoritarian leadership? On which institutional structures do truth-subversion practitioners most rely? And what kind of nationalism promotes truth subversion? Lake, Martin, and Risse[111] rightly argue that nationalism has been important in promoting populism, but not all nationalisms are the same.

Fourth, IR scholarship needs to pay more attention to political communication and media studies. Scholars should consider how recent sweeping technological developments have created opportunities for change in everyday societal and elite practices of interaction and knowledge formation, and how these changed practices have influenced the international order. IR scholars should theorize the impact of technology on ordinary citizens' everyday practices: as a discipline, IR has paid scant attention to what ordinary people do. There is a need to connect seemingly mundane micro-developments at the national and subnational level (such as "liking" Facebook posts) to broad macro-level international order changes. New technologies that are emerging on the horizon—such as the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, and big data analysis—have the potential to affect international order, for better or for worse. Depending on how these technologies are used—and how they might contribute to new practices of knowledge formation—they could lead to digital authoritarianism, the dislocation of economies, and the conditioning of human behavior; all of which could mean the "kiss of death" for international liberal practices.

110. The following discussion significantly benefited from one reviewer's input.
111. Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021.

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Finally, there may be some political, economic, social, educational, and communication practices that are more effective than others in challenging and perhaps eradicating truth-subversion practices. Might science, for example, which has become the target of truth-subversion practitioners, hold the key to countering their influence? Can the COVID-19 pandemic empower science in the long run? And if so, might this have positive effects on science's epistemic authority to confront truth-subversion practices regarding other global threats, such as climate change?

Conclusion

The LIO is currently betwixt and between as an international order: the past is not gone, but the future has not yet arrived. There are ongoing struggles over truth claims and practices of truth production between proponents of the liberal order and truth-subversion practitioners. In the current era, liberal forces are still dominant in many democracies and can form powerful coalitions against illiberal leaders. Defenders of the liberal order can challenge truth-subversion practices through fact-checkers, stringent regulations, controls on social media posts, promotion of media literacy, and discursive challenges to the practices of truth subversion. Wherever possible, attempts could be made to reform the LIO to eradicate some of the demand factors that attracted populations to truth-subversion practices in the first place.

Whether truth-subversion practices will flourish or fade depends in the first instance on populations' susceptibility to them. A primary marker of that susceptibility is election results. The LIO has been a comparatively peaceful and efficient order that has allowed for unprecedented prosperity, in no small part because of its reliance on science in decision making. At some point, a confrontation with reality—and the need to rely on science to solve conundrums such as the COVID-19 pandemic—can ultimately debunk ineffective truth-subversion practices that threaten populations' well-being. Populations also might become weary of truth-subversion practices once taken-for-granted features of the liberal order (such as the rule of law, or freedom of expression) are visibly challenged. Liberal democracy, free trade, and multilateral institutions rest on principles, which although often violated by self-identified liberal states, are nevertheless deeply rooted in culture and have survived previous crises.[112] In some countries, where populist leaders and practices have become entrenched, illiberal populism has dialectically fomented a pushback. If the electorate fears that properties of the LIO that it takes for granted are at risk, it might turn its back on truth-subversion practitioners. In the meantime, we can hope that the LIO's institutions are sufficiently "sticky" to weather the storm. We are cautiously optimistic that the LIO has the necessary resilience to overcome truth-subversion practices and other threats that jeopardize its durability.

112. Deudney and Ikenberry 2018.

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