

The Making of “Dominion” Status at the 1907 Imperial Conference: Dissociation, Racialization, and the (Re)Constitution of International Pecking Orders

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This paper theorizes dissociation as a key but overlooked dynamic in the (re)constitution of international pecking orders. Conceptually, dissociation captures how actors look to ensure they are considered separate from, dissimilar, and fundamentally uncomparable to certain “others” with whom comparison is considered undesirable and disempowering. Drawing on original archival research, we showcase the value-added of this conceptual lens by examining the reformulation of the British imperial hierarchy at the 1907 Imperial Conference, which formally institutionalized “Dominion” status for the first time. We show how the British settler-colonies sought to dissociate themselves from the backward and racialized “Crown Colonies,” ultimately adopting the label “Dominion” to assert their status as a qualitatively distinct type of polity. We further argue that dissociation often relies on—and reinforces—racialized logics, which actors draw upon to naturalize social boundaries. Our argument suggests that actors are not merely concerned with being “above” other actors in their comparison group on a status ladder. Rather, we demonstrate how actors also struggle to construct pecking orders and social boundaries so that they are considered not simply superior to, but categorically different from—and ultimately uncomparable to—those they deem inferior.

Este artículo teoriza sobre la disociación como una dinámica clave pero que se suele pasar por alto en la (re)constitución de los órdenes jerárquicos internacionales. A nivel conceptual, la disociación refleja cómo los actores buscan asegurarse de que se los considere como algo separado, diferente y fundamentalmente incomparable con ciertos «otros», con quienes la comparación se considera indeseable y debilitante. Partimos de una investigación archivística original para desarrollar este argumento de manera inductiva. Con este fin, estudiamos la reformulación de la jerarquía imperial británica en la Conferencia Imperial de 1907, que institucionalizó formalmente el estatus de «Dominio» por primera vez. Demostramos cómo las colonias de asentamiento británicas intentaron distanciarse de las «Colonias de la Corona», a las cuales consideraban atrasadas y racializadas. Para ello adoptaron, finalmente, la denominación de «Dominio» con el fin de afirmar su estatus como un tipo de entidad política cualitativamente distinta. Además, argumentamos que la disociación se basa, con frecuencia, en lógicas racializadas (y las refuerza) que los actores utilizan para naturalizar las fronteras sociales. Nuestra hipótesis sugiere que a los actores no solo les preocupa estar «por encima» a nivel de una escala de estatus con respecto a otros actores en su grupo de comparación, sino que, más bien y tal como demostramos, los actores también luchan para construir órdenes jerárquicos y límites sociales con el fin de que se los considere no simplemente superiores, sino categóricamente diferentes, y en última instancia incomparables, a aquellos a quienes consideran inferiores.

Cet article théorise la dissociation comme une dynamique clé, mais ignorée, dans la (re)constitution des ordres hiérarchiques internationaux. Sur le plan conceptuel, la dissociation désigne la façon dont les acteurs paraissent pour s'assurer qu'ils sont considérés distincts de, non similaires à et fondamentalement incomparables à certains « autres » avec lesquels toute comparaison ne serait pas souhaitée et les placerait en situation de faiblesse. Nous fondons sur une recherche archivistique inédite, nous développons cet argument de façon inductive en examinant la reformulation de la hiérarchie impériale britannique lors de la conférence impériale de 1907, qui a institutionnalisé formellement le statut de « dominion » pour la première fois. Nous montrons que les colonies de peuplement britanniques souhaitaient se dissocier des « colonies de la Couronne », rétrogrades et racisées, et ont fini par adopter le nom de « dominion » pour affirmer leur statut de régime politique d'un type tout à fait distinct sur le plan qualitatif. Nous affirmons en outre que la dissociation repose souvent sur, et renforce, des logiques racialisées, sur lesquelles les acteurs se fondent pour naturaliser des frontières sociales. Notre propos suggère que les acteurs ne se préoccupent pas simplement d'être « au-dessus » d'autres acteurs au sein de leur groupe de comparaison sur une échelle de statuts. Nous démontrons que les acteurs s'efforcent plutôt aussi de construire un ordre hiérarchique et des frontières sociales pour qu'ils ne soient pas considérés simplement supérieurs à ceux qu'ils considèrent inférieurs : ils veulent qu'on les voie appartenir à une autre catégorie, ce qui les rend incomparables.

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Introduction

Two interesting changes occurred at the 1907 Imperial Conference. First, before it moved to other business, the conference itself was renamed: the “Colonial Conference of the British Empire” was officially rebranded the “Imperial Conference.”¹ The second change was that the Conference represented the first time that certain settler-colonies of the British Empire came to be collectively and institutionally known as “Dominions.” In other words, the Conference saw the introduction of a new official category within the British Imperial hierarchy.

Drawing upon original archival research, we use this episode to ask: how and why do actors struggle to reconstitute international pecking orders in world politics? To understand how and why the term “Dominion” came to refer collectively to the settler-colonies of the British Empire, we develop the notion of “dissociation” for status research in International Relations (IR). A major focus of this scholarship to date has been on *association*. Although they do not always use this term, scholars frequently study how actors seek to further their associations with social superiors to ensure higher status and a positive sense of self (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Ward 2019; Wohlforth et al. 2018). Often, this involves looking to join “elite clubs” or ensuring close relations with high-ranking actors vis-à-vis one’s “peer reference group” or what Renshon calls a “status community,” against which actors compare themselves and their status (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 68; Renshon 2017, 4). Actors compare themselves to actors who are higher, lower, and of comparable standing to themselves (Kim 2024; Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 68). In short, the baseline premise of this research is that actors try to outperform others with whom they compare themselves.

In contrast, this paper develops and showcases the (often complementary) theoretical dynamic of *dissociation*. The lens of dissociation draws our attention to the ways actors also struggle to separate, detach, and/or disconnect from certain social categories, groups, or actors to try to establish an uncomparability between themselves and certain undesirable others. This lens illuminates how actors struggle to construct divisions and distinctions in a bid to make comparisons between themselves and certain others inconceivable. Because status is relational, we also need to theoretically consider who actors strive *not to be* or *not to be like* and, consequently, who actors struggle to ensure they are *not* compared to. Dissociation allows us to capture and theorize this process.

Drawing on original archival research, we illustrate that dissociation is a crucial aspect of how “Dominion” status was constituted at the 1907 Imperial Conference and, specifically, how and why the term came to refer collectively to the settler-colonies of the British Empire. We show how the British Empire’s settler-colonies struggled to reconstitute the Empire’s status hierarchy to separate and distinguish themselves unequivocally from the “Crown Colonies,” whom they viewed as beneath them. Thus began the search for a category that would produce this dissociation and ensure the settler-colonies could not be conceived of in similar terms as the “Crown Colonies.” The settler-colonies eventually settled on the category of “Dominion” to collectively refer to themselves and distinguish themselves from the “Crown Colonies.” This new category was intended to in-

stitutionalize this differentiation, establishing the “Dominions” and the “Crown Colonies” as two different and uncomparable categories of actor, subject to different and uncomparable institutional arrangements.

Through these arguments, we make two contributions. First, we illustrate how actors are not merely striving to be “higher up” on a status ladder than those they consider themselves comparable to (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 68); nor do actors just “choose the right pond” to ensure more favorable comparisons (i.e., Frank 1985; Wohlforth et al. 2018, 529). Instead, we demonstrate how actors also strive to construct pecking orders in ways that ensure they are perceived as a fundamentally distinct entity (or even a distinct “species”) from those they hold in contempt beneath them. This is not simply a case of actors striving to be “not only better but different” within a “status community” or “peer reference group” to whom they compare themselves (Kim 2024; Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 68). Rather, it is an instance of actors actively looking to ensure they are understood as fundamentally different *kinds* of actors and thus not conceivably part of the same “status community,” precisely because being part of such a community is demeaning and undesirable. In other words, actors also seek to (*re-*)construct the boundaries of ponds, often with the intention of not being comparable to actors that they consider to be in “dirtier,” “lower quality” ponds, with whom any sort of comparison would be disparaging. Thus, while previous work has examined how actors seek to differentiate themselves from those below them in status hierarchies (de Bhal 2023; Kim 2024), we foreground a different logic—one rooted in efforts to render comparison itself impossible or illogical. Fundamentally, our contribution emphasizes uncomparability, rather than simply “outranking,” as the intended outcome of many of these processes. In short, to escape the disparaging impacts of comparison and association with a range of “bad apples,” it may be appealing to reframe oneself as an “orange” instead of an “apple,” to make such comparisons illogical and impossible.

Second, and relatedly, this has important implications for practices of recognition. In Freedman’s words, “[j]ust as we cannot separate an actor’s status from their recognition, we can also not separate an actor’s status recognition from their subjective perception of what such recognition *ought* to look like” (Freedman 2016, 815–6). Existing work on recognition has considered how actors seek recognition through access to certain stratified rights (Ward 2019), reclaiming specific historical status symbols of importance to that actor (Freedman 2016), and reaffirming an actor’s positive self-concept by granting said actor a higher ranking relative to those that it compares itself to (Larson and Shevchenko 2010). We add to conceptions of status recognition by illustrating how actors are not just looking to affirm their own position in a pecking order, but also ensure that comparisons between themselves and those from whom they are dissociating are inconceivable. Essential to practices of status recognition, therefore, is understanding whom actors do not want to be compared to.

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, we show how status research in IR has understood status primarily through the lens of association, overshadowing the dynamic of dissociation. Second, we draw dissociation from this shadow and build an account of how it helps us better understand the constitution of international hierarchies. Within this discussion, we consider the role racialization often plays in this process. Third, we showcase how the general dynamic of

¹Minutes of Proceedings of the Colonial Conference, 1907 (henceforth “MPC 1907”), London: HMSO, 38.

dissociation helps us understand the formalization and institutionalization of “Dominion” status in the British Imperial hierarchy at the 1907 Imperial Conference. Fourth and finally, we conclude by gesturing at the implications of our argument for other theoretical debates.

Status in World Politics

IR scholars have reinvigorated their interest in status in world politics over the last few decades. Status is generally understood as an actor’s standing or position in social hierarchies (Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014, 7; Renshon 2017, 4; Ward 2019, 213). It is now widely accepted that “status matters” in IR (MacDonald and Parent 2021; Røren 2024, 2), with scholars having decisively demonstrated how this important variable influences a range of outcomes in world politics. For instance, scholarship has shown the importance of status for understanding the onset of war (Renshon 2017), rising power foreign policy (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Ward 2017), small state behavior (Wohlforth et al. 2018), and normative change in domestic political environments (Schulz and Thies 2023). All types of status-seeking require other relevant actors to recognize and socially sanction one’s pursuits (Duque 2018, 580). Which audience(s) are considered important is an empirical question that varies by context (Røren 2024).

The main conceptual and empirical focus of the status literature in IR can be characterized as focusing on *association*, exploring how and why actors attempt to further their association with social superiors by joining “elite clubs” or ensuring closer and better relations with high-ranking actors (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Renshon 2017; Ward 2019; Wohlforth et al. 2018). Actors pursue higher status than the “reference group” to which they belong, composed of actors “of equal or slightly superior” social standing (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 68; Renshon 2017, 22). More recent work has shown that actors will also engage in comparison with those that they consider inferior to themselves (Kim 2024; de Bhal 2023). Scholars have studied the range of strategies actors use to pursue higher status than their reference groups, including using branding techniques to pursue a “positive identity” (Wohlforth et al. 2018), entering elite clubs (Ward 2019), and/or engaging in forms of conspicuous consumption that signal their eligibility for higher standing (Gilady 2018). More recent studies on small and middle power status-seeking indicate that these actors can achieve higher status by engaging in morally admirable behavior, especially if such behavior reinforces the status quo (Wohlforth et al. 2018). The point to underscore here within this focus on association is that actors are understood to strive to outperform others to whom they compare themselves.

We build upon a more specific strand within this literature that has concerned itself with the construction and constitution of “international pecking orders” (Pouliot 2016). International pecking orders—or “status orders”—are normally understood as the socially constructed rankings and positions available to actors, underpinned by “sets of shared, and often tacit, assumptions ... about what things, practices, or reputations count as effective symbols for determining actors’ social status” (Røren 2023, 17; Naylor 2019, 1–2). These studies are based on the premise that if status is socially constructed, we ought to understand the processes of social construction through which status hierarchies are made (Beaumont 2024; Naylor 2019; Pouliot 2016). We also extend upon and depart from the insights of social iden-

tity theory (SIT), arguably the most influential framework for understanding the strategies actors use to seek social status in world politics (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Ward 2017, 822). SIT posits that actors will choose different status management strategies depending on the permeability of higher groups and the extent to which they are free to identify with new groups (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Ward 2019). There is nothing here that is incompatible with the understanding of “dissociation” we offer in this paper. However, Ward notes that understanding processes of social construction through which actors produce international pecking orders “requires going beyond the world of social psychology” and SIT (Ward 2017, 824). Indeed, social psychological approaches such as SIT are less concerned with social construction and the constitution of status, and more with how actors behaviorally respond to low status (Ward 2017, 824). Dissociation is an interpretive lens that can help us further our understanding of how actors engage in certain types of social construction in response to low status.

Recovering and Theorizing Dissociation

Building upon these studies of association, we develop the equally important dynamic of *dissociation*. Dissociation, according to the Cambridge English Dictionary, refers to “being separate from and not related to something else” (2024). As an interpretive lens, dissociation focuses our attention on the ways actors struggle to separate, detach, and/or disconnect from certain social categories, groups, or actors with whom comparison is perceived to be disparaging and/or undesirable. We also want to highlight the definition’s emphasis on the intended outcome of separation, which is to achieve a state of *not* being related or compared to something else. The core implication of this is that dissociation captures how often actors are not merely looking to “rank above” others in their “comparison group.” Instead, they are looking to construct the world in such a way as to ensure that comparison between themselves and certain “others” is inconceivable, precisely because such comparisons are undesirable in the first place. Dissociation is focused on separation and detachment from such actors, not simply outperformance.

Dissociation is a commonly used concept to study stratification and identity formation in sociology and urban studies. Many of these studies use the concept to understand how actors attempt to separate themselves from and ensure they are not related to “others” with whom comparison would be disparaging, demeaning, and ultimately undesirable. Often, the main focus of these studies is how disadvantaged people deal with their situation when a range of undesirable pejoratives become—or have the potential to become—attached to them: “scum,” “dirty,” “disgusting,” “rough,” and “backward,” just to name a few (Miller 1997; Preece 2020; Skeggs 1997; Watt 2006). For example, Lawler documents how there is a long tradition of working-class people being represented as an unruly “mass” or “mob,” while “terms like ‘trailer trash’ (in the United States) and ‘chav’ (in Britain) circulate widely as terms of disgust and contempt” (2015, 140). In cognate fields, the concept of dissociation is often deployed to understand how non-elite actors navigate stratification and construct stratified social orders. The specific predicament that these studies focus on is how these non-elites deal with being cast as part of homogenized, undifferentiated “masses.” These “masses” are often stereotypically characterized in negative, demeaning, and undesirable terms.

For example, Preece (2020) has documented how people in a traditionally working-class neighborhood have constructed the geography of their neighborhood. In his study, he observes how individuals construct the boundaries of their own neighborhoods in a way that allows certain individuals to dissociate and distinguish themselves from the “rough people” and “rough” areas of “other” neighborhoods, often cognate with their own (Preece 2020, 835). He documents how the boundaries between such neighborhoods are often constructed in a way to ensure that certain actors are considered separate from those they consider “unruly.” Indeed, someone unfamiliar with such an area would think that the neighborhoods being described were one and the same; occupants, though, were eager to draw boundaries between themselves and those they did not want to be associated with or compared to. Watt (2006, 786–90) has likewise shown how those living in council estates in London were anxious to make distinctions between themselves and what they would call “problem tenants,” the implication being that the “non-problem tenants” were more respectable than the unruly, drunk, and problem-creating council estate residents. This often manifests in attempts to draw geographical boundaries—in a socially gerrymandered manner—to ensure that the “problem tenants” are considered to live in a different neighborhood from the “non-problem tenants.”

Studies of dissociation, therefore, examine how actors struggle to separate themselves from and ensure they share no relation or possible comparison to negatively perceived and undesirable categories and actors. This involves shaping *perceptions* that actors are separate, different, and, ultimately, unrelated and not comparable. The studies cited above from urban studies illustrate how this separation and differentiation can often be physical, i.e., where actors seek to occupy physically and qualitatively different spaces (Malik 1996, 93; Preece 2020; Watt 2006). The “problem” groups and individuals from whom actors are often trying to dissociate are considered to be “contaminated,” and association with such individuals can be considered dangerous for “respectable folk” (Malik 1996, 169). While constructing the “other” as polluted, actors engaged in dissociation contribute to this perception of the “other” as infected, while this trope also serves to create social distance between the “respectable” and the “rough.” These are two qualitatively different types of human beings: one respectable and the “other” almost “subhuman” because of their “moral turpitude” (Malik 1996, 247). The implication here is that these actors should be conceived of as different and subject to different types of treatment.

The other related way that actors struggle to dissociate themselves is by using categories to impose differences between one set of actors and another. By placing one set of actors in a different type of category, actors attempt to produce differentiation that shapes perceptions about actors being fundamentally different and, consequently, separate entities. In brief, categories are mechanisms of demarcation and separation. We return to this idea in a moment. First, we turn to differentiate the notion of dissociation from other cognate concepts in order to illustrate its value-added.

Differentiating Dissociation: The Value Added of Dissociation

In this section, we differentiate “dissociation” from cognate concepts like “association,” as discussed above, and “othering.” How is dissociation distinctive from these cognate concepts? How do we know dissociation when we see it? And what does dissociation add to our understanding of the construction and constitution of international pecking orders?

Associative behaviors, as discussed above, are generally geared toward establishing connections with other actors and outperforming peers. But, as noted above, we highlight *comparability to peers* as the baseline assumption of associative behavior (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 68; Renshon 2017, 4). Associative behavior is geared toward outranking or being superior to those with whom one compares oneself. Dissociation, by contrast, refers to behaviors concerned with separating, exiting, and detaching from a given category of actors. The main point to highlight here is that dissociation is not concerned merely with outperforming a set of peers that an actor considers itself comparable to. Rather, it is concerned with establishing a basis on which comparison between that actor and certain “others” is inconceivable. In an ideal-typical sense, the intentionality of these concepts and their associated behaviors is critical to their differentiation. One is concerned with ensuring superiority or outperformance in relation to a set of actors that one compares oneself to; the other is aimed at separating from and *preventing* comparisons with certain actors with whom any sort of affiliation or connection would be undesirable, demeaning, and/or potentially disempowering. The associative script is familiar to scholars of IR. What does the conceptual lens of dissociation add to our understanding of status in IR, and how do we identify dissociation? Likewise, how do we know when dissociation is a primary driver of behavior, and how can we identify dissociative motives and actions?

First, dissociation highlights a specific aspect of what Naylor calls “the status game” and a particular type of “status anxiety” (Naylor 2019, 7; Onea 2014), whose observable implications are extremely distinctive. Because dissociation is geared toward generating separation and trying to prevent comparisons, we would expect to initially observe actors expressing their aversion to being considered “in the same category” or “in the same league” as a set of actors they hold in contempt. We would then see the dissociating actors attempt to generate separation through comparisons that, paradoxically, seek to establish uncomparability and fundamental differences between themselves and those actors from whom they seek to dissociate. Comparisons may be invoked to establish the alleged impossibility of comparing or drawing any equivalence between the dissociator and the group from whom they hope to distance themselves. Ironically, it is through the use of such comparisons that actors seek to produce the dissociation they desire. To reiterate, an actor engaged in dissociation is not seeking to simply outperform a set of “peers,” but rather to ensure that comparison is inconceivable and reject the suggested peer group. By introducing dissociation as a conceptual lens, we are trying to “see” a different aspect of the status game, to make it more visible, and to consider it as distinctive and worthy of greater theoretical attention.

Second, and as our case study reveals, we can often observe dissociation in episodes when actors look to introduce new forms of categorization in order to escape perceived affiliation with pre-existing categories that are considered undesirable or demeaning. The new category is intended to displace, replace, and be mutually exclusive from the previous category. Historical examples of such dissociative efforts in IR include Australia and Canada introducing the category of “middle power” to displace and replace their previous categorization as “small powers” (de Bhal 2023), or certain states reinvigorating the idea of being “Central European” to replace being categorized as “Eastern European” in the 1980s and 1990s (Mälksoo 2009, 63). The logic of “Dominion” in the case study that follows is the same; there is a mutual exclusivity between the category being introduced

and the category that actors are looking to separate from or escape. One of the theoretical advantages of adopting the heuristic developed in this paper is its ability to integrate and understand these hitherto unrelated social categories as related and doing similar things. We return to some of these other categories in the conclusion.

With this said, whether and why actors engage in dissociation—or do not—is contingent on actors’ perceptions of groups and categories. Actors can often have very different understandings of the same categories or groups (Beaumont 2024). One state might find its categorization as a “developing” state demeaning and want to dissociate from it, while another might wear it as a badge of pride. Studies of dissociation have noticed that the same is true of certain subordinate categories related to sexuality, race, or class; some find such categorizations stigmatizing and try to distance themselves from them, while others lean into them as a source of pride and solidarity (Skeggs 1997, 74). The conditions under which actors do this are an empirical question shaped by actors’ perceptions, political purposes, and context (Beaumont 2024).

Dissociation is closely related to, but distinct from, the cognate concept of “othering.” Both involve boundary-drawing practices that often contribute to the construction of hierarchies, and many scholars see othering as intrinsic to identity, status, and hierarchy formation (Doty 1996; Neumann 1999). However, dissociation refers to a more specific process, particularly in the context of status concerns, in three key respects. First, dissociation is a targeted response to a particular form of status anxiety—namely, the anxiety that arises when an actor is grouped with or considered comparable to others they regard as highly undesirable. Whereas othering is sometimes framed as a response to more diffuse or generalized anxieties, dissociation captures a focused and strategic effort to manage an unwanted comparison. Second, dissociation involves actors acting to sever a perceived negative affiliation. More specifically, this intentionality is aimed specifically at rendering certain comparisons illogical or invalid, rather than simply establishing superiority. While dissociation often draws on familiar othering tropes—such as essentialism, stereotyping, racism, and stadial logics—it represents a more deliberate attempt to recalibrate the terms of comparison. Third, in ideal-typical terms, dissociation is focused primarily on building up and stabilizing the self, with the othering of the “other” emerging as a byproduct of that process, whereas othering is more directly oriented toward defining the self through the denigration of the other.² Othering plays a role in processes of dissociation, but dissociation is a more precise and purposeful phenomenon.

Dissociation and the Construction of Pecking Orders: Categories and Classification

Dissociation is not merely a behavioral response to low status, as SIT might expect; it is also a fundamental aspect of how actors look to actively construct pecking orders. The most observable and common ways that actors look to construct status orders in dissociative ways are by formally introducing and reifying categories that distinguish themselves not simply as members of a “higher rank” but also as fundamentally different from those they consider “beneath them.” As neo-Bourdieuists have discussed, “[c]ategories structure and order the world for us. We use categories to

parse the flow of experience into discriminable and interpretable objects, attributes, and events. Categories permit—indeed entail—massive cognitive, social, and political simplification” (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004, 38). Importantly, categories are a key means by which divisions, distinctions, and boundaries between actors in the social world are drawn and naturalized (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 28). In other words, such categories are intended to produce and naturalize distinctions between one set of actors and those from whom they are seeking to dissociate.

Several authors have discussed precisely how categories and classifications can produce distinctions that can seem “natural,” as if they distinguish between “natural kinds.” Furbank (1986, 7) maintains that social classifications are often intended to function as if they were “scientific” and “value-free,” as if differences between actors are natural and real, rather than socially constructed and conditional. In Doty’s words, “[t]he construction of classificatory schemes often serves to naturalize by placing human beings into the categories in which they ‘naturally’ belong. Hierarchies are often established based upon the presumed essential character of various kinds of human beings” (Doty 1996, 10). Furbank (1986, 115) similarly insists that one of the main purposes of social classifications and categories is to draw social barriers and boundaries between sets of actors. This echoes what neo-Bourdieuists call the “oppositional nature” of attempts to produce status distinctions (Swartz 1997, 148). In short, these categories are oppositional in the sense that they are often defined in large part by *what they are not*. Claims about such distinctions should not be treated as innocent reflections or descriptions of reality but rather as attempts to bring such distinctions into existence and naturalize them. Attempts to reify such categories—and the boundaries produced by successful reification—are therefore “performative statements which seek to bring about what they state” (Bourdieu 1991, 225). In brief, categories are a central means by which actors look to construct status orders via dissociation: they are used to establish and maintain differences and boundaries between actors as if they were “natural.”

Such categories often try to impose a quasi-biological and “natural” character on divisions and distinctions between actors that establish them as evolutionarily different (McClintock 1995, 46). Furbank (1986, 9) discusses how there is often a “species-fallacy” when talking about classes like the “middle class;” he observes that talking about the “middle class” often treats such a category of actors as if they are a *species*. Furbank is gesturing at an important aspect of the rhetoric of dissociative categories and dissociation more generally. Specifically, those identifying as “middle class” historically have done so with the idea not merely of suggesting they are “higher status” than the “others” such people hold in contempt. Instead, the use of the term is meant to imply that the self-identifying “middle class” is a different *species* from these other actors. For example, Kenan Malik (1996, 93) has analyzed how the “working classes” were constructed to be biologically and racially different from the rest of society by people who themselves identified as “middle class.” To use Furbank’s terms, these people sought to characterize themselves as a different species.

As already suggested, the most common dissociative category in domestic societies and one of the most theorized by sociologists is that of the “middle class.” Several theorists draw our attention to how this category was developed historically to dissociate self-proclaimed “middle class” individuals from the “working classes,” which they held and hold in contempt. Wahrman notes how one of the defin-

²We thank an anonymous reviewer for the formulation of this final distinction.

ing aspects of the historical emergence of the category of “middle class” in the late eighteenth century was the category’s use “to clearly distinguish the ‘middle class’ ... *from those below it*, ‘the populace’” (Wahrman 1995, 171, *emphasis added*). In these representations of the “middle class” and the “working classes,” the former are presented as “civilized” and “respectable,” with the latter depicted as “disgusting,” “uncivilized,” and “unruly.” In this instance, these dissociative status categories are intended to ensure that an actor escapes and dissociates from the undifferentiated, homogenized “masses” or “the mob.” Skeggs similarly documents the constitution of the “middle class” as a stratificatory category. She argues the “middle class” “came to recognize themselves through difference: a difference they produced through the generation and distribution of representation of different ‘others’” (Skeggs 1997, 4). Crucially, the “other”—whether it be an unruly “working class” or some other racialized “other”—was fundamental to the constitution of “middle class” status.

McClintock echoes the analysis of Wahrman and Skeggs, arguing

The degenerate classes, defined as departures from the normal human type, were as necessary to the self-definition of the middle class as the idea of degeneration was to the idea of progress, for the distance along the path of progress traveled by some portions of humanity could be measured only by the distance others lagged behind. (McClintock 1995, 46, *emphasis added*)

This type of stadial logic is common in dissociation. Actors use such logic to distinguish between the category of human they see themselves belonging to and “other” categories. The “lower” categories are depicted as innately inferior and different from the “higher” categories, as if the higher categories are more evolved and advanced (McCarthy 2009; McClintock 1995). These distinctions were intended to identify these different categories or “groups” as fundamentally distinct. As McCarthy puts it, “permanent varieties of the human species ... are typically represented as embodying different stages in the evolution of the species” (2009, 76). This involves dividing people into “subdivisions of humanity” (McCarthy 2009, 11). Those looking to dissociate depict themselves as more advanced and further down the path of progress than the “others” they are dissociating from. Separation in this instance is therefore a moral prerogative that is justified through appeals to “ideologies of progress” (Buzan and Lawson 2015). Categorization and classification of the self and “others” are integral to this process of imposing division and difference and creating this type of separation.

Dissociation, Racialization, and Social Orders

Many of the examples in this paper (including its main case study) involve actors drawing upon and reifying racialized understandings of people and groups to engage in dissociation. Indeed, as a starting point, the construction of human society as divided into different “species” in different phases of “progress” has historically been deeply intertwined with racialization (McCarthy 2009). Racialization can be understood as the “processes that infuse social and political phenomena with racial identities and implications” (Maass 2023, 91). How and why does dissociation seem to rely so heavily on and so heavily implicate racialization and racialized understandings?

Throughout the course of modern history, “race” and racial understandings have been fundamental to the fabric of social orders, be they domestic or international (Acharya 2022; McCarthy 2009; Malik 1996). Dissociation and racialization often go hand-in-hand because racialization provides a convenient, visible, and historically socially accepted way to create and reinforce boundaries between groups, often based on perceived biological or cultural differences that are framed as “natural.” For example, different “races” are often considered to be not only naturally different, but also as standing in a natural hierarchy to one another, based on sets of biologically immutable or “cultural” characteristics and stereotypes (McCarthy 2009). If dissociation is concerned with separating one set of actors from another, then actors engaging in dissociation will appeal to and use discursive and ideological resources that can naturalize and reify such separation. “Race” is one of the most common resources that actors will use to do this, as this paper has suggested.

Because of their ubiquity in modern societies, racial understandings and differences frequently serve dissociative purposes and are often resources actors draw upon to insist on natural “differences” between them and “others” as they pursue dissociation. However, racialization and racialized understandings are not always made explicit and may also function in more subtle ways. Actors might use language that is “racially coded,” meaning that they imply racial distinctions or stereotypes without explicitly mentioning race (Malik 1996, 209). As Khoo articulates, “someone using a code word exploits (intentionally or otherwise) their audience’s stereotypical beliefs about what they are talking about, without explicitly communicating these beliefs” (2017, 35). For example, phrases like “illegal immigrants” or “illegal aliens” in the United States are often racially coded to refer to Latin American and Caribbean migrants. Racialization does not necessarily depend on explicit invocations of race; it can function more subtly through implicit, historically specific racial tropes and stereotypes too (Carson, Min, and Van Nuy 2024, 194).

Racial understandings become a resource actors draw upon to “graft” (Price 1998) new categories that help them dissociate from the racialized “other.” Moreover, by drawing upon racialized understandings that constitute the ideological and discursive basis of social orders’ foundations to engage in dissociation, actors are both *drawing upon* and *reinforcing* racialized social orders. This is because such dissociation legitimates and further normalizes understandings of “race” and racial differences. One of the consequences of this is that social orders are further racialized.

What Do International Actors Dissociate from?

One of the first things we noted is how, in sociology and urban studies, the concept of dissociation is often deployed to understand how non-elite actors navigate stratification and construct stratified social orders. The specific predicament that these studies focus on is how these non-elites deal with being cast as part of a homogenized, undifferentiated “mass.” This is immediately translatable to IR, where there is also a historical tendency to contrast between “the Great powers and the rest” (Simpson 2004, 108). Likewise, Hironaka’s observation that “the Great Power hierarchy stands as the preminent social fact of the state system, serving as a beacon in an ocean of ambiguity” (Hironaka 2017, 3–4), also reflects the idea that the international system is often seen as clearly divided between a great power grouping, and an undifferentiated mass of inferior polities.

Jonathan Renshon similarly alludes to this distinction in reference to Britain’s crisis of international standing during the Suez Crisis, arguing “Eden and his advisers were focused on ensuring that Great Britain remained in the ‘club’ of great powers, not with their international standing relative to *an undifferentiated grouping of other states*” (Renshon 2017, 251, emphasis added). Scholars have already theorized a range of dichotomies that structure international social stratification: the great powers/the rest (Simpson 2004, 108), civilized/uncivilized (Gong 1984), modern/backward, Western/Eastern (Zarakol 2011), developed/underdeveloped (McCarthy 2009), White/non-White (Sabaratnam 2020), empire/colony (McCarthy 2009), state/failed state (Jackson 1990), and democratic/undemocratic (Fukuyama 1989). There may often be overlap between these dichotomies and their respective hierarchical implications. For example, levels of development, civilization, and modernity are often deeply racialized, with those classified as developmentally and civilizational inferior often considered as such for racial reasons (McCarthy 2009). Efforts at dissociation in the international sphere are likely to be focused on escaping and maintaining distance from categorization in the second and “lesser” half of the dichotomies listed above. The case study discussed in the subsequent section shows, for example, how the settler-colonies of the British Empire developed the category of “Dominion” to give them a status that was elevated above that of “mere colonies” but that was still subordinate to “Empire” (Fieldhouse 1962, 85).

Crucially, for dissociation to succeed and be taken seriously, actors also need to be able to make a plausible and compelling case for dissociation and separation from certain “others.” This means that the difference they are positing that differentiates sets of actors is seen as legitimate and fundamental enough to warrant distinctive categories. Actors will try to appeal to existing understandings of hierarchy and stratification to produce this demarcation and dissociation. This necessarily requires “grafting” onto existing forms of categorization and understandings of the world; dissociative actors are compelled to draw on dominant linguistic and discursive resources around hierarchy and stratification to engage in dissociation in the first place (Price 1998, 627–8). As our case study implies, the British settler-colonies were grafting onto pre-existing racialized forms of differentiation that already existed; the category of “Dominion” built upon these pre-existing differences to produce dissociation and separation.

Dissociation and the Reconstitution of the British Imperial Hierarchy

We examine the case of the emergence of “Dominion” status as a category to refer collectively to the settler-colonies of the British Empire at the 1907 Imperial Conference to illustrate the dynamics of dissociation that we describe above. What is particularly noteworthy about this case is how dissociation was such a strong aspect of the settler-colonies’ claims to create a new category that would apply to them. The settler-colonies did not pursue status through attempts to join an “elite club” or claim equality with those above, as some might expect in an actor’s pursuit of status. Rather, they were concerned with ensuring they were not lumped in with those at the bottom of the hierarchy; in this case, the “Crown Colonies.” They were, in effect, struggling to ensure they were considered a qualitatively different and uncomparable entity to the “Crown Colonies.” The term “Dominion”

was the category that the settler-colonies ultimately settled upon to produce this dissociation. In what follows, we draw on the recorded minutes of the Conference to examine how and why “Dominion” came to be the term that referred collectively to the British Empire’s settler-colonies.

We also note that the term “Dominion” existed before the 1907 Imperial Conference as a technical term used to refer to certain possessions of the British Empire, such as Canada. However, the 1907 Imperial Conference marked the first time the category became a term used to *collectively* refer to the settler-colonies of the British Empire to distinguish them politically and institutionally from other colonies (Edwards 1983, 8). The conference thus represented an important moment of “meaning-making” and construction of the term “Dominion.” The archival records we draw on allow us to examine the understandings held by relevant actors, the arguments they deployed at the conference, and the processes of social construction involved in the production of “Dominion” status. The settler-colonies sought the British imperial metropole’s recognition that they were indeed “in a different category to the Crown Colonies.”³

The 1907 Imperial Conference, “Dominion” Status, and the “Crown Colonies”

What began as the 1907 “Colonial Conference” was renamed the “Imperial Conference” during proceedings.⁴ The Conference saw officials from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Newfoundland, Transvaal, Natal, the Cape Colony, and the United Kingdom come together to discuss various matters, ranging from imperial defense and the establishment of an Imperial Council to issues of trade and emigration (Valkoun 2021, 39). This agenda raised important questions about the role and status of the polities invited to the conference, all of which were, at this point, British possessions. Indeed, one of the first issues discussed at the conference was the purpose and nature of the Conference forum itself. It was in this context that the standing and nature of the settler-colonies came to the fore. The imperial core had been previously aware of the settler-colonies’ anxieties about their status and standing. In response to these anxieties, several British politicians and thinkers suggested and preferred the term “Commonwealth,” instead of “Empire,” to refer specifically to the relationship between London and the settler-colonies (Valkoun 2021, 14). Likewise, seeking to avoid “imperial decline,” empire reform was a key goal of many British thinkers and politicians at the time. Increased political consolidation of the “white” parts of the Empire—Great Britain and its settler-colonies—was understood as one very plausible solution to this (Bell 2020, 2).

Against this backdrop, the concerns of the settler-colonies regarding their status came to the fore early in the conference, particularly in discussions about the conference’s constitution, including questions about its purpose and who ought to be invited. Specifically, the settler-colonies were eager to distinguish themselves from what they referred to as the “Crown Colonies” of the British Empire. This anxiety surfaced very early on in the proceedings, in discussions about the future composition of the erstwhile Colonial Conferences and the means to maintain continuity between conferences. The representatives of the settler-colonies were particularly pedantic about the language used to refer to their polities and how they related to the colonies of the British Empire that were not present at the conference.

³Sir Joseph Ward, MPCC 1907, 30.

⁴MPCC 1907, 38.

Even though the settler-colonies were part of the Colonial/Imperial Conferences and the “Crown Colonies” were not, the settler-colonies were still notably insecure about their standing vis-à-vis the “Crown Colonies.” This is puzzling for existing status literature because Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth (2014, 10–11) treat summit participation as a clear marker of one’s status vis-à-vis non-participants. Despite their inclusion and the “Crown Colonies” exclusion, the settler-colonies were still anxious and determined to ensure that a status distinction was made between themselves and the “Crown Colonies” they considered beneath them. Why?

Viewing these polities’ anxieties through the lens of dissociation helps us understand this. Specifically, they were worried about being compared to what they continually referred to as the “Crown Colonies.” As discussed above, this category was racialized, sometimes explicitly but sometimes more subtly through stadial logics that did not explicitly refer to race. The settler-colonies viewed comparisons with these polities as disparaging, demeaning, and ultimately undesirable. Thus began the quest to dissociate from these actors.

Initially, this manifested in a proposal from Australian Prime Minister Alfred Deakin asking for a separate division in the British Colonial Office for the self-governing settler-colonies. As we noted earlier in the paper, dissociation can often entail a struggle to produce a physical separation between actors. Using the language of “dissociation” explicitly, Deakin proclaimed

It appears to me that it would be for the advantage of the Colonial Office, and it would be to our advantage, if we were dissociated altogether from the Dependencies which are governed, and admirably governed, if I may say so, from this office.⁵

Sir Joseph Ward, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, echoed Deakin’s concerns. He made similar demands about the dissociation of the settler-colonies from the “Crown Colonies.” There was no doubt in his mind that “our self-governing countries are not in the same position” as those of the “Crown Colonies.” He went one step further, however, insisting that the physical separation of the settler-colonies and the “Crown Colonies” ought to manifest in a categorical separation as well. He argued that

We should be in a different category to the Crown Colonies. I think the term “Colony,” so far as our countries are concerned, ought to cease, and that that term ought to apply to the Crown Colonies purely, and that those of us who are not at present known as Dominions or Commonwealths, should be known as States of the Empire, or some other expressive word, so, as to make a distinction as between the Crown Colonies and the self-governing Dependencies... if we were put under a separate category, and necessarily with a separate administration for the working of our self-governing countries, that would be a great improvement, and, although perhaps not important in the minds of some people, would be a source of considerable satisfaction, certainly to our country.⁶

Ward would later say “if the self-governing Colonies were separated from the Crown Colonies to a very large extent the desires of the country I represent would be met.” He was insistent that he wanted “to get out of the position of the

self-governing countries being regarded as on a par with the Crown Colonies.”⁷ In other words, Ward specifically wished to put distance between settler-colonies like New Zealand and the Crown Colonies, to avoid any possibility of New Zealand being placed in the same category with, or viewed as a peer of, those allegedly inferior polities. It is notable that Ward was not attempting to claim equality with the Imperial metropole, but to assert that the “Crown Colonies” and the “self-governing Dependencies” were entirely different. The idea that they could even be conceived of as comparable was preposterous, in his words; they belonged to “a different category.”

Ward was not the only leader of a settler-colony that felt this way. Deakin, the Australian Prime Minister, had insisted that the difference between the settler-colonies—or what he called the “self-governing colonies”—and the Crown Colonies ought to formally manifest itself in the form of a different department of government or office of government.⁸ Winston Churchill, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies at the time, was aware of the status concerns fueling these requests but was nevertheless reluctant to accept the proposals of Ward and Deakin, arguing “there would be an almost insuperable difficulty in the classification of the different states and dependencies of the Empire exclusively according to status.”⁹

Why was it such a problem that the settler-colonies were, to quote Ward above, “being regarded as on a par with the Crown Colonies?”¹⁰ The answer is simple: the “Crown Colonies” were considered “backward” by the settler-colonies. The most obvious reason for this is racism. The conference took place against the backdrop of “white” anxieties related to the “global color line.” Lake and Reynolds’s (2008) magisterial book shows how leaders of the settler-colonies were central in drawing and reinforcing the global color line that divided the world into “white” and “colored” races. A number of the leaders of the settler-colonies that partook in the 1907 Imperial Conference feature as key figures in attempts to draw and institutionalize the “global color line” in Lake and Reynolds’s account. The Australian Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, in particular, was notorious and one of the leading white supremacists in this broader movement, who himself saw Australia as a key light in this broader global racial struggle (Lake and Reynolds 2008, 137–8).

At the 1907 Imperial Conference, settler-colonial leaders would make their contempt of “tropical countries or those in which there are colored races” crystal clear later in the conferences when discussing questions of labor and naturalization.¹¹ Ward, for instance, was insistent “that New Zealand is a white man’s country, and intends to remain a white man’s country,” opposing any naturalization of “members of an alien colored race” as subjects of the Empire.¹² The infamous “White Australia Policy” had also been introduced just years earlier to ensure Australia maintained its “racial purity” (Burke 2008, 33). References to the inferiority, undesirability, and repulsiveness of other races abound in the minutes of the 1907 Imperial Conference. To be considered in the same category as the “Crown Colonies” that were racially inferior was simply unacceptable to the leadership of the settler-colonies, whose rampant and pervasive white supremacy during this period is well documented. As

⁷Ward, MPCC 1907, 65.

⁸Deakin, MPCC 1907, 28–29, 72.

⁹Winston Churchill, MPCC 1907, 68.

¹⁰Ward, MPCC 1907, 65.

¹¹Deakin, MPCC 1907, 613.

¹²Ward, MPCC 1907, 538.

⁵Alfred Deakin, MPCC 1907, 29.

⁶Ward, MPCC 1907, 30–31.

Lake and Reynolds have outlined, there was a feeling in the settler-colonies during this period that the "white man's 'pride of place' in the world" would be "humiliated" if the "the black and yellow races" were granted the same rights as them (Lake and Reynolds 2008, 137–8). Similarly, the minutes of the Conference see representatives of the settler-colony refer to polities such as Fiji, Trinidad, Barbados, and India as part of the "Crown Colony" category.¹³ With this said, racism was also visible in less explicit ways, with settler-colonies often using the euphemism of "civilization" to refer to their superiority vis-à-vis the "Crown Colonies,"¹⁴ a term that was often laced with racial connotations (McCarthy 2009).

In addition to explicit and implicit racialized language, the representatives of the settler-colonies also expressed their fears of being "on a par with" the Crown Colonies by emphasizing the different governance structures of the settler-colonies. In this discourse, the Crown Colonies were portrayed as backward and fundamentally different in character from the settler-colonies, and as therefore subject to (and likely deserving of) inferior treatment. Allowing settler-colonies to remain in the same category as Crown Colonies might therefore also limit the political power and prestige of the settler-colonies. In advocating for a new label for, and a new British government department to interact with, the "self governing communities," Deakin argued such polities were profoundly "different in character" from the "Crown Colonies."¹⁵ Deakin denied having "much knowledge" of such "foreign" communities, but praised the Colonial Office's "strides ... in the development of those countries," clearly drawing physical, civilizational, and implicitly racialized boundaries between the "Crown Colonies" and the predominantly white settler-colonies. Deakin explicitly argued that the settler-colonies had "outgrown" the Colonial Office and that the "methods of administration and treatment," that were appropriate for interacting with "Crown Colonies" were not appropriate for interacting with polities like Australia, which were more autonomous, civilized, and deserving of consideration. In Deakin's framing, the settler-colonies were more advanced and fundamentally different from the "Crown Colonies." According to Deakin, traditional Colonial administration "begets an attitude of mind, based upon *presuppositions and preconceptions*, which cannot be *escaped* from but which *do not at all* attach to self-governing states."¹⁶ The desire to deny equivalence or comparison with the "Crown Colonies" and escape from the prejudices, stereotypes, and standards of treatment with which such colonies were associated was thus made explicit.

Deakin suggested that "self-governing communities" like Australia should no longer be governed from the Colonial Office and should undertake "a good deal more for themselves" and eventually communicate directly with the British Prime Minister, "where they will not be jostled in a Department over-burdened with administrative work alike and yet different in character."¹⁷

This attempt to dissociate relied upon but also reinforced racialized understandings of the term "Crown Colonies." Some of these understandings were made explicit, like when the settler-colonies referred to "colored races." Some, however, were more subtle. Ideas about self-governance, something which the settler-colonies implied the "Crown Colonies" were not capable of doing, were racially coded.

At the time, "colored races"—to use the language of several at the Conference—were often considered incapable of self-government (Fryer 1988, 72). Indeed, the categories of "Crown Colonies" and "self-government" or "self-governing communities" were strongly racially coded.

Matters then came to a head over the wording that would describe the membership of the Imperial Conference. More specifically, the settler-colonies took issue with the titles that were used to describe them in the conference resolution. Deakin, for instance, was very enthusiastic about a suggestion put forward by Churchill, which would see the word "colonies" dropped from the wording of the resolution to ensure that the polities that attended the Conference and the "Crown Colonies" were understood to be fundamentally different in nature.¹⁸ Instead, Churchill recommended using the term "His Majesty's Dominions over the seas."¹⁹

However, the settler-colonies were determined to clarify the boundaries of the category "Dominions over the seas" and how such a status stood in relation to the "Crown Colonies." Canada's Wilfrid Laurier expressed reservations about the meaning of the term and whether it would adequately distinguish polities like Canada from that of, in his own words, "Trinidad":

I am not satisfied as to the words "Dominions beyond the seas."... I do not know that it may not include Trinidad as well as Australia and Canada. It is not limited, so far as I can see, to the self-governing colonies.²⁰

In response to Laurier, New Zealand's Joseph Ward recommended the term "*self-governing colonies*." Ward was clearly emphasizing the self-governing aspect of these polities' status, and arguing that it was this that formed the basis of differentiation from the non-self-governing colonies of the Empire like Trinidad and India.²¹ Laurier immediately replied by building on the language put forward by the New Zealand Prime Minister, suggesting the term "*self-governing Dominions beyond the seas*." This seemingly minor addition and change of language was intended to ensure there was no way that the term "Dominions beyond the seas" could possibly "apply to Trinidad or Barbados as to Canada."²²

Laurier made no attempt to hide his intentions to differentiate the status of polities like his own from that of "Trinidad or Barbados." After announcing his preference for "self-governing Dominions beyond the seas," Laurier immediately reneged on his recommended title, suggesting that perhaps an entirely new phrase ought to be invented that more accurately captured the essential difference between the settler-colonies and the "Crown Colonies." He asserted

I would like to use some expression which would make a differentiation between the self-governing colonies and the other colonies. So far as the colonies represented [at the Conference] are concerned, I wish we could drop the word "colonies" and try to invent something which would strike the imagination more.²³

The Secretary of State for the Colonies then immediately asked Laurier "would the words 'self-governing communi-

¹³See MPCC 1907, 68, 80, 44.

¹⁴MPCC 1907, 158, 238, 263, 408.

¹⁵Deakin, MPCC 1907, 44.

¹⁶Deakin, MPCC 1907, 44, emphasis added.

¹⁷Deakin, MPCC 1907, 44.

¹⁸Deakin, MPCC 1907, 78.

¹⁹Churchill, MPCC 1907, 78.

²⁰Laurier, MPCC 1907, 80.

²¹Ward, MPCC 1907, 80.

²²Laurier, MPCC 1907, 80.

²³Laurier, MPCC 1907, 80.

ties of the Empire' do?"²⁴ Again, Laurier's reply repeated his previous concerns, stating

I talked it over yesterday with a friend and we agreed that we have passed the state when the term "Colony" could be applied to Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. I would like to have suggested the word "State," but for the fact that in Australia they call states what we call provinces, and it might lead to confusion. Perhaps one of us can make a better suggestion.²⁵

Laurier's declaration that Canada, Australia, and New Zealand had "passed the state" of being mere "colonies" once again highlights his desire to characterize the settler-colonies as fundamentally different from the "Colonies"; polities like Canada were more civilized, autonomous, and developed than, and superior to, the "Crown Colonies." Laurier was desperate to ensure that Canada was no longer classified as a "colony" and was desperate to find some alternate title, category, or classification that ensured that was the case.²⁶

The Prime Ministers of the settler-colonies then agreed that the term "Dominion" by itself would cover all the distinctive meanings that would distinguish them from the "mere colonies." Joseph Ward's response to this was interesting; he made it clear that he did not mind which term was used to designate New Zealand as more than simply a colony, as long as it was explicitly acknowledged that New Zealand was indeed part of such a category:

As long as it is understood that New Zealand is a Dominion, I do not object to the word "Dominion." We ourselves understand New Zealand is a Dominion, but I would like it understood that our country is covered by that term here.²⁷

However, the Prime Minister of Natal and the Commissioner of Public Works from the Cape Colony expressed concern about the term "Dominion," asking if this also applied to their polities given that "Colony" was in their title.²⁸ The Secretary of State for the Colonies confirmed that the British colonies in South Africa would indeed be classified as "Dominions."²⁹ Ultimately, this meant that a formal distinction was drawn between what were now officially christened the "Dominions," and the "Crown Colonies."

The final resolution passed on the Constitution of the Imperial Conference no longer referred to the settler-colonies as "colonies" but rather as "Dominions."³⁰ All references to these polities in the Constitution of the Imperial Conference as "colonies" had been removed; in the words of Edwards (1983, 8), "the self-governing colonies were christened the Dominions." Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Newfoundland, Transvaal, Natal, and the Cape Colony had become "Dominions," formally and institutionally distinguishing themselves from the "mass" of racialized "Crown Colonies," which they perceived to be inferior. Moreover, as mentioned above, the Conference itself was renamed. Although the Conference opened with the title of the "Colonial Conference," by the end, it was the "Imperial Conference."

Deakin and Ward also had their request met to see a separate department or part of the Colonial Office established that dealt with what were now known as the "Dominions" separately from the "Crown Colonies." The "Dominion Department" within the Colonial Office was established at the end of 1907 (Hyam 1968, 342).³¹ The language used by Cross is instructive here, noting that the meaning of the term "Dominion" was intended to distinguish and dissociate those polities from the "Crown Colonies." He argued "[a]s good a symbol as any of the position the self-governing countries of the Empire had reached before the first world war ... was the adoption, in 1907, of the term 'Dominion' to give them a status distinct from that of Crown Colonies" (Cross 1964, 189, emphasis added). It was hoped that the new Dominion Department would be characterized by, in Deakin's words, "methods of administration" and "treatment" which were more fitting for the Dominion's status than the treatment to which they had been subject by the Colonial Office.³²

The "Dominions" after the 1907 Imperial Conference: Recognition and the (Further) Racialization of the British Imperial Hierarchy

In the words of John Darwin, "the shift from colonial to 'dominion' status [was] consummated in 1907" (Darwin 2009, 175). The settler-colonies had their new status recognized and institutionalized by the British Government, as the Conference's Constitution now officially referred to them as the "Dominions." Both the British press and King Edward VII also recognized the settler-colonies as belonging to this new category as well. On May 9, 1907, just days before the Conference ended, King Edward hosted a banquet, raising a toast to the "Dominions." He would say, "I cannot leave this room without raising my glass to wish prosperity and happiness to my guests, who represent my Dominions beyond the Seas," as reported in *The Daily News*.³³

On April 26, 1907, the *London Evening Standard* published a letter to the editor from a British individual who had "resided for about twelve years in the self-governing British Dominions beyond the seas." The author praised the British Government's decision to drop the use of the term "colony" or "colonial" to refer to the settler-colonies. The letter states, "there is nothing an Australian, Canadian, or New Zealander dislikes more than to be called 'Colonial'." The writer quoted a communication they had recently received from a Canadian friend stating that "We are British subjects, and resent the term Colonials. We think, many do, at least, that it is used in a derogatory sense." The letter writer then celebrated that "Sir Joseph Ward rightly touched on the same subject at the Imperial Conference ... when he urged that the self-governing Colonies should be regarded in a different category from the Crown colonies, and would be glad to discard the term 'Colony' [as it applies to the settler-colonies]."³⁴ The British Press, Government, Monarch, and members of the public had all recognized the "Dominions" and the dissociative meaning and utility of the term for the settler-colonies.

The "circle of recognition" (Wohlforth et al. 2018, 527) for the settler-colonies was the imperial metropole; their "vision" of who mattered in the international system was

²⁴Lord Elgin, MPCC 1907, 81.

²⁵Laurier, MPCC 1907, 81.

²⁶Laurier, MPCC 1907, 81.

²⁷Ward, MPCC 1907, 81.

²⁸F.R. Moor and Thomas William Smartt, MPCC 1907, 83.

²⁹Lord Elgin, MPCC 1907, 82. Of course, South Africa did not become a "Dominion" until 1910, when the four British colonies there were united to become the Union of South Africa.

³⁰MPCC 1907, v.

³¹The Dominions were also given their own Office in the British Government in 1925 known as the "Dominions Office."

³²Deakin, MPCC 1907, 44.

³³"King's Banquet: The Colonial Premiers at Buckingham Palace," Thursday May 9, 1907, *The Daily News*, 7.

³⁴"The Word 'Colony': Why it is misunderstood," Letter to the Editor of the *Standard*, April 26, 1907, *London Evening Standard*, 5.

largely limited to the British Empire. It was not until the experience of the First World War that the settler-colonies’ vision of the international system was “globalized,” and their circle of recognition expanded. Recognition of these self-governing communities’ superior and uncomparable status (relative to “Crown Colonies”) was forthcoming at the League of Nations, with “Dominion” status officially recognized in Article 1 of the League Covenant.

There is also the question of how the introduction of “Dominion” status affected the racialized character of the British imperial order. Intriguingly, in a remark describing the settler-colonies, John Darwin states that these polities were “called ‘dominions’ after 1907, or, colloquially, ‘the white dominions’” (2009, 11, emphasis added). The settler-colonies had drawn upon racialized understandings of self-government and non-white peoples to draw the distinction between themselves as “Dominions” and the “Crown Colonies.” That these polities were known colloquially as the “white Dominions” is further evidence of how racialization and dissociation were and can be deeply intertwined.

The settler-colonies reinforced these dominant understandings of different racial categories by drawing upon and ultimately reproducing them in order to engage in dissociation. The “global color line” (Lake and Reynolds 2008) was a set of racialized discourses and understandings that the settler-colonies both drew upon and sought to reinforce. The settler-colonies weaponized the presumed differences between different “races” of people and re-entrenched into a newly official and institutionalized category in the international social hierarchy. These racialized stereotypes went unchallenged and were reinforced as a result.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to capture and theorize a hitherto conceptually overlooked aspect of how actors seek to construct and constitute international pecking orders. Specifically, we showed how dissociation is a crucial aspect of how actors look to construct pecking orders. Empirically, we showed how dissociative dynamics were significant in the constitution of “Dominion” status at the 1907 Imperial Conference. We illustrated how the category was developed to dissociate and distinguish the settler-colonies from the “Crown Colonies” they held in contempt and considered beneath them.

While the article drew on a historical case study, there is a *prima facie* case in several categories that stratify the international system and display similar dissociative properties and undertones, much like the example of “Dominion” status analyzed in this article. For example, our account drew heavily on sociological literature suggesting “middle class” was a strongly dissociative category. The category of “middle powers” seems to be doing similar work in the international sphere, as per de Bhal’s analysis (2023). For instance, de Bhal (2023) cites Fraser, who documents how the term “middle power” developed to ensure certain users of the term would “not ... be lumped in with the impotent riffraff whose sovereignty was no more than nominal and whose contribution to the maintenance of world peace would be negligible” (Fraser 1966, 7). The development of the category of “Central Europe” by certain states that had previously been behind the Iron Curtain also seems to carry strong dissociative undertones (Hagen 2003; Mälksoo 2009). Mälksoo suggests the development of this category was meant to en-

act social distinctions, as the category of “Central Europe” was initially deployed by self-identifying “Central European” states “to remind the West of (as well as to recreate) a *demarcation line* between Russia and the parts of the West it had “kidnapped” in the course of the Second World War” (Mälksoo 2009, 63, emphasis added). Likewise, Lindstrom (2003) has examined how Slovenia sought to “exit from the Balkans” throughout the 1990s. She cites an example of a former Slovene foreign minister narrating this “exit” using comparable language to the “Dominions.” He stated that Slovenia had become “separate from the area to which it had belonged since the First World War,” which he labeled “the Balkan pot-house” (Lindstrom 2003, 321). While we have provided just three very brief plausible extensions of our argument, we are confident that the analytics developed herein travel further.

Similarly, future research into dissociation could examine other discourses, labels, and categories that actors deploy and exploit to dissociate. Two contemporary possibilities include the discourses of “carbon neutral” and “nuclear-free” status, both of which have *prima facie* dissociative connotations.³⁵ Our discussion implies that dissociative forms of self-identification and promotion may have “dark underbellies.” In the case of “dominion” status, the dark underbelly was one of profound racialization. In examining any *prima facie* dissociative discourse, it is important to ask, “who do actors using these categories seek to dissociate themselves from?” Future scholarship could also examine dissociation and its audiences, including questions of how those being dissociated *from* respond to being further stigmatized and how the recognition of dissociative status-seeking may resemble or differ from the recognition of association. This paper has set the groundwork for a possible future investigation into such questions.

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³⁵We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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