

# Strategic Ontologies: Narrative and Meso-Level Theorizing in International Politics

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This paper offers a theory of incremental theoretical evolution connecting the practice of international politics with disciplinary IR. It theorizes how international political actors engaged in strategic local decision-making exert productive power over dominant scientific ontologies of the international system. We refer to the narratives emerging from these processes as strategic ontologies, defined as gradual reformulations of the subjects, objects, and relational logics of the international system according to positionally determined priorities. As strategic ontologies gain acceptance, their innovations endure beyond the context of their utterance, leading to meso-level theoretical evolution. We substantiate this account with comparative case studies of contested strategic ontologies that have yet to become dominant in either the international arena or IR theory. Without strategic ontology as an analytical lens, scholarship might miss embryonic theoretical innovations in the process of gaining traction. First, we examine how Israel and West Germany engaged in strategic ontological contestation when negotiating a reparations agreement following the Holocaust. Second, we analyze how states have used vulnerability in climate negotiations in 2020–2021 to recast global policy priorities. Recognition of strategic ontologies across contexts illuminates theoretical innovations in real-time and opens a path for dynamic new bridges between the academy and policymaking.

Este artículo ofrece una teoría de la evolución teórica incremental que conecta la práctica de la política internacional con las RRII disciplinarias. El artículo teoriza cómo los actores políticos internacionales involucrados en la toma de decisiones estratégicas locales ejercen un poder productivo sobre las ontologías científicas dominantes en el sistema internacional. Nos referimos a aquellas narrativas que surgen de estos procesos en forma de ontologías estratégicas, definidas como reformulaciones graduales de los sujetos, objetos y lógicas relacionales del sistema internacional de acuerdo con unas prioridades determinadas posicionalmente. A medida que las ontologías estratégicas van ganando aceptación, las innovaciones que generan perduran más allá del contexto de su expresión, lo que conlleva una evolución teórica a nivel meso. Corroboramos esta hipótesis a través de estudios de casos comparativos de controvertidas ontologías estratégicas que aún no se han vuelto dominantes ni en el ámbito internacional ni en el ámbito de la teoría de las RRII. Si no se utiliza la ontología estratégica a modo de lente analítica, el mundo académico podría pasar por alto algunas innovaciones teóricas embrionarias durante el proceso de consolidación. En primer lugar, estudiamos cómo Israel y Alemania Occidental se involucraron en una impugnación ontológica estratégica mientras negociaban un acuerdo de compensaciones después del Holocausto. En segundo lugar, analizamos cómo los Estados han utilizado la vulnerabilidad durante las negociaciones climáticas de 2020 y 2021 con el fin de reformular las prioridades de las políticas globales. El reconocimiento de las ontologías estratégicas en todos los contextos arroja luz acerca de las innovaciones teóricas en tiempo real y abre un camino para tender nuevos puentes dinámicos entre el mundo académico y la formulación de políticas.

Cet article propose une théorie d'évolution théorique croissante qui fait le lien entre la pratique de la politique internationale et la discipline des relations internationales. Il théorise comment les acteurs politiques internationaux impliqués dans les prises de décisions stratégiques au niveau local exercent un pouvoir productif sur les ontologies scientifiques dominantes du système international. Nous nommons les récits issus de ces processus « ontologies stratégiques », que nous définissons comme des reformulations progressives des sujets, objets et logiques relationnelles du système international selon des priorités déterminées en fonction du rôle. Grâce à l'acceptation croissante de ces ontologies stratégiques, leurs innovations continuent d'exister en dehors du contexte de leur énonciation. Se dessine donc une évolution théorique au niveau méso. Nous justifions cette explication à l'aide d'études de cas comparatives d'ontologies stratégiques contestées, qui ne sont pas encore dominantes sur la scène internationale ou dans la théorie des RI. S'ils n'emploient pas l'ontologie stratégique comme angle d'analyse, les chercheurs pourraient manquer des innovations théoriques embryonnaires qui prennent de l'ampleur. D'abord, nous analysons comment Israël et l'Allemagne de l'Ouest ont utilisé la contestation ontologique stratégique lorsqu'elles négociaient un accord de réparations après l'holocauste. Puis, nous nous intéressons à l'emploi de la vulnérabilité par les États lors des négociations sur le climat de 2020 et 2021 pour réorienter les priorités politiques mondiales. La reconnaissance des ontologies stratégiques dans plusieurs contextes met en lumière les innovations théoriques en temps réel et laisse entrevoir de nouveaux ponts dynamiques entre la recherche et la politique.

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Daniela Lai, Jeffrey Friedman, Sean Fleming, Lee Jarvis, Barak Bahador, Christiane Cromm, David Martie, Tom Miller, Chris Teale, Will Youmans, and Lucas de Oliveira Paes, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their comments on drafts of the piece. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the 2022 American Political Science Association annual conference, the University of East Anglia's Politics Seminar Series, and George Washington University. The authors would also like to thank the dog Moose, on whose walks the authors discussed and developed many of the ideas in this piece.

Lerner, Adam B., and Ben O'Loughlin. (2023) Strategic Ontologies: Narrative and Meso-Level Theorizing in International Politics. *International Studies Quarterly*,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad058>

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## Introduction

This article offers a new theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between international theory and international political practice by introducing the concept of strategic ontologies. Too often, IR scholarship creates an artificial separation between international political practice and academic knowledge production. This separation implies that theoretical innovation is the domain of IR scholars, and bridging the gap consists of practitioners—those contesting, formulating, and implementing international political action—communicating data and problems to academics, who generate “useful” theory in response.<sup>1</sup> However, this dominant conception often forces scholarship to miss theoretical innovation on the part of practitioners, which can feed back into the academy.<sup>2</sup> Practitioners do not always operate according to pre-given frameworks; they theorize to navigate international politics. By highlighting this real-world theorizing, this article encourages a more nuanced and dynamic conversation between scholars and practitioners.

The concept of a strategic ontology illuminates this process by uncovering the theoretical work occurring within policy debates. We define a strategic ontology as a recasting of the subjects, objects, and relationships that constitute the international system in real-time, according to positionally determined priorities. When practitioners debate, formulate, and implement international political action, they may be concerned primarily with immediate problems. Nevertheless, when they sustain and institutionalize a scientific ontology<sup>3</sup> that deviates, however, incrementally, from dominant understandings, they set precedents for future imaginaries and actions. In this sense, novel strategic ontologies exert subtle productive power over dominant understandings of the international system (see [Barnett and Duvall 2005](#)). Only by understanding strategic ontology work by practitioners can we appreciate theoretical innovation that occurs implicitly in political action.

The value of this insight is two-fold. First, it allows scholarship to see theoretical innovation occurring within policy debate that they might otherwise miss. Even prior to major international changes taking place, actors forward strategic ontologies in relevant policy discourses, containing embryonic possibilities for reimagining the international system. Scholarship that grasps these potentialities will be better able to anticipate change and will have a broader array of potential theoretical resources available for analysis. A second addition concerns levels of analysis. Approximately a decade ago, Lake proposed the concept of mid-level theorizing to advocate empirically driven incrementalism that he saw as absent in prior generations’ paradigm wars. However, multiple scholars criticized Lake for naturalizing assumptions

with which many disagreed. To frame the concept of strategic ontologies, we offer a new typology of theoretical levels of analysis, including the macro, meso, and micro levels. By clarifying the meso-level of theorizing between grand theory and depoliticized problem-solving theory, we illuminate a new space for dialogue between the academy and practice. The concept of a strategic ontology proves a potent lens at this *actual* middle-ground and thus better facilitates dialogue between scholars and practitioners on theoretical innovation.

To demonstrate our concept’s value added, we examine two case studies of embryonic strategic ontologies whose theoretical potency has been overlooked: reparations between West Germany and Israel after World War II, and differently positioned states narrating climate policy at international conferences in recent years. Each case draws its conclusions via a discourse analysis of primary documents, including parliamentary debates, official correspondence, public speeches, and an original database of state and UN leaders’ statements at the 2020 Climate Ambition Summit.<sup>4</sup> Reparations and the contest of major emitters and vulnerable states on climate are important but not completed problems or dilemmas. We do not argue that novel strategic ontologies promise actors’ complete success and a universally accepted recasting of key components of international politics. However, by appreciating theoretical work occurring in policy debates, we reveal how each case offers altered worldviews durable beyond the immediate circumstances of their articulation.

In the first case, West Germany and Israel engaged in narrative contestation that reimagined a longstanding international practice, but these norms have not yet become dominant, and international reparations remain a contested subject. Nevertheless, we demonstrate that theoretical contestation from over 70 years ago is being newly invoked as an ontological template in contemporary debates. On climate change, states’ arguments suggest new avenues for thinking about loss and damages for climate catastrophe. In our analysis, we see evidence of strategic ontologies forwarded by certain small states becoming accepted by others, suggesting potential avenues for consensus building and policy change. By revealing the theoretical work occurring in contemporary climate negotiations, we enable greater scholarly reflection on how climate change as an issue challenges dominant worldviews.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, we locate our contribution in debates on theoretical innovation. By clarifying the levels of macro, meso, and micro theorizing, we both overcome limitations inherent to existing accounts of IR theory development and clarify an intermediate space at which a more productive dialogue between practitioners and academics can take place. Second, we outline the concept of strategic ontology, which expands existing work on strategic narrative to capture narratives’ ontological productivity. Narrative contestation, we argue, proves vital not only for negotiating policy outcomes, but also for determining consensus interpretations of the world that policy shapes.

The third and fourth sections provide evidence of our theoretical framework’s value via our two comparative cases—divergent examples of strategic ontologies spreading through narrative contestation and informing policy imaginaries. Because prior scholarship, particularly in IR, has yet to fully examine these cases’ embryonic theoretical innovations, they serve as deviant cases—those that do not conform to prior theory’s expectations—and thus are of

<sup>1</sup>We use the term practitioner rather than policymaker to emphasize the multiple potential realms of international political action relevant to our study. Though both of our cases focus on state leaders and leaders of international organizations, depending on the relevant discourse the term practitioners can also encompass activists, journalists, and other members of the public.

<sup>2</sup>Alternatively, scholarship on social movements has offered frameworks for understanding “theorizing from below,” though often in ways that emphasize resistance rather than incremental innovation—the focus of our study. See [Rossdale \(2010, 2019\)](#).

<sup>3</sup>Following [Jackson and Nexon \(2013, 545, 551\)](#), we distinguish “scientific ontology,” which refers to “the catalog of basic substances and processes” that a researcher employs in their study, from “philosophical ontology,” which refers to the proposed relationship between the researcher and their object of study. This distinction is not intended to suggest a singular understanding of “science,” but rather simply offers greater clarity with regard to levels of analysis—a core contribution of our novel typology.

<sup>4</sup>For this methodological approach, see [Milliken \(1999\)](#) and [Lerner \(2022\)](#).

particular use in demonstrating novel theory's added value. Indeed, because both are cases where strategic ontologies have gained some acceptance, but not yet fully taken hold in scholarship and practice, they are prime examples of how our framework can illuminate otherwise overlooked theoretical innovation. Further, because of their significant differences—which examine different time periods, a bilateral versus a multilateral setting, entirely different sets of actors, and different issue areas—their comparison increases inferential leverage and, in turn, confidence in the wider applicability of our theoretical framework.<sup>5</sup> In the conclusion, we reflect on how scholars can take strategic ontology seriously as both an empirical phenomenon and a lens for understanding theoretical innovation.

### Meso-Level Theorizing

The 2010s saw IR's traditional paradigm wars come to a standstill and the discipline both fracturing and diversifying. While some scholars increasingly opened IR theory to critical theoretical insight, others turned to more methodologically and empirically driven subject matter, casting aside "great debates" (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013). This situation led Lake to propose orienting IR toward "middle-level theorizing" in a contentious keynote address in this journal, later developed in a *European Journal of International Relations* special issue on the "End of IR Theory" (Lake 2011, 2013).<sup>6</sup> In this section, we revisit debate over Lake's proposal to position our argument about strategic ontology as a form of theoretical innovation. We offer a new framework for examining theory's levels of analysis that helps orient IR to the theorizing that occurs in international political practice.

In both his speech and article, Lake (2011, 465) argued IR's paradigmatic debates had devolved into disagreements between "academic religions"—adhered to so dogmatically that they resisted progress. For Lake (2011, 465), over-emphasizing paradigms in both pedagogy and scholarship left society without the "basic theoretical and empirical knowledge about world politics," making IR policy irrelevant. To remedy this, he suggested ditching grand theoretical concerns and focusing instead on developing "contingent, mid-level theories of specific phenomena" (Lake 2011, 466). Middle-level theories would produce goal-oriented, problem-solving knowledge. He further suggested framing research around questions of interests, interactions, and institutions—focal points that ground theory in empirics, rather than paradigmatic assumptions or epistemological disagreements (Lake 2011, 473).

Though aspiring to bridge divides, Lake's proposal was soon criticized for reflecting his own biases. Nau (2011) argued that Lake's proposed unifying typology privileged his preferred concepts and rationalist approach over viable alternatives, marginalizing critical theoretical advances. Rathbun (2011) added that in IR rationalism often manifests as a quasi-paradigm, committed to a narrow vision of egoist state or sub-state actors with fixed identities. Others noted that Lake's model of knowledge production and pol-

icy relevance missed the array of constituencies that produced and depended on the knowledge of international politics—a chief motivation for this article (Guzzini 2013; Sjöberg 2015; Jahn 2016). Lake's vision thus reified traditional understandings of IR theory as academics' response to new problems and data furnished by practitioners, neglecting potential avenues for innovation occurring in the opposite direction.

Part of the issue with Lake's approach was that it operated with a limited conception of what constitutes IR theory. While Lake wished to rid IR of wars between "isms," his focus on middle-level theorizing as developing solely contingent problem-solving explanations of phenomena neglected theory's role in framing worldviews and thus defining problems to be solved. This point was highlighted by Jackson and Nexon's contribution to the *EJIR* special issue. They pointed out that the core research traditions of IR—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—never constituted incommensurable paradigms in a Kuhnian sense. These "isms" never articulated sufficiently robust and distinct philosophical ontologies—the metaphysical and episto-methodological foundations of research—to prevent them from being compared and tested against one another. Rather, each was best defined by its distinct *scientific* ontology—a "catalog—or map—of the basic substances and processes that constitute world politics" (Jackson and Nexon 2013, 550). Whereas realisms have tended to emphasize state actors, power relations, and war as a primary international interaction, liberalisms have alternatively focused on wealth, diplomacy, institutions, and economic transactions. Constructivism, on the other hand, emerged as a rival by highlighting the role of ideas, norms, and logics of appropriateness, yet leading constructivist scholars typically articulated their paradigm in a way compatible with the philosophical ontologies grounding what they labeled existing "materialist" approaches.

While we agree with Jackson and Nexon's insight on the importance of scientific ontologies in IR debates, we argue that their mapping of contemporary IR scholarship into camps of scholars engaged in a potential "fifth debate" (see Jackson and Nexon 2013, 554) is discordant with the current state of the discipline, both in theory and practice. For better or worse (see Mearsheimer and Walt 2013), contemporary scholarship is more oriented toward modest, incremental refinements (often labeled micro-moves or, in some cases, "turns," rather than grand theoretical clashes (Solomon and Steele 2017; Baele and Bettiza 2021). This incrementalism is even more pronounced when one considers IR theorizing among practitioners. As practitioners typically lack academic socialization, they often articulate their theoretical advances as more limited—new concepts, ideas, or proposed linkages that alter scientific ontologies on the margins but do not fundamentally overturn prior research traditions. Therefore, we argue for a combination of Lake's incrementalism with Jackson and Nexon's focus on scientific ontologies. Though Lake's vision of *détente* undoubtedly reflected his own biases, applying his incrementalism to questions of scientific ontology helps better unravel the tangled loops of knowledge production between the academy and practice (Isaac 2009).

Understanding how practitioners and scholars alike engage in incremental refinement of scientific ontologies is perhaps easiest by way of an example: the 9/11 attacks. As Lawrence Wright (2006) chronicles in *The Looming Tower*, in the wake of smaller-scale attacks in the 1990s, intelligence officials in the CIA and FBI continually debated what al Qaeda was—what elements constituted it—and how they might gain knowledge of its capacities. They asked whether

<sup>5</sup>For a further exploration of this case selection logic, see Lerner (2020, 2022, 18–19).

<sup>6</sup>Other articles in the *EJIR* special issue serve as interesting foils to Lake and support our arguments. For instance, Guzzini argues IR theory has moved from finished cookbooks of the traditional "isms" to IR theory now as "unfinished dictionaries" of concepts and models that are continuously being updated by IR scholars (Guzzini 2013, 523; italics original). Sylvester (2013, 609) argues similarly that IR has moved to "a field of differences," on in which even traditional concepts like war are being considered through newer, developing theories.

they were fighting an ideology, a terrorist group, or its state sponsors, as well as how the group fit into their theoretical topologies of international politics. On the other side, al Qaeda operatives continually morphed and reconfigured their organization to ensure secrecy, project power, and evade capture. We argue that these debates implicated *scientific ontologies of world politics* and, as they progressed, they inspired incremental updating of worldviews. In turn, shifts in scientific ontologies implicated downstream epistemological questions about how to gain knowledge of newly theorized actors and their capabilities. Indeed, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made the epistemological stakes of this practitioner-driven theoretical innovation clear in his speech arguing for delineating known unknowns from unknown unknowns (Zak 2021). In this case, the urgency of real-world events and practitioners' real-time theoretical responses to them drove scholarly engagement. Whereas the term "terrorist" appeared in only forty articles in *International Organization* and *International Studies Quarterly* between 1990 and 2000, it appeared in 148 between 2002 and 2012, echoing the urgency emphasized by policymakers. This points to the importance of theoretical innovation driven by practitioners—in this case, both al Qaeda members and US intelligence officials—rather than solely by academics.

To better appreciate these tangled loops of theoretical innovation, we suggest an alternative schematic for organizing IR theory debates that distinguishes true paradigm wars and Lake's vision of problem-solving theory from the ontological tinkering, which is far more common in both the academy and practice. This schematic involves three levels—micro, meso, and macro—with the meso-level highlighting both Lake's incrementalism and Jackson and Nexon's turn to scientific ontologies (see Table 1). At one extreme, macro-level theorizing occurs at the level of incommensurable Kuhnian paradigms and thus can be seen most clearly in debates over philosophical ontology that occur between, for example, neopositivist and poststructuralist scholars. This level is poorly represented among practitioners in real-time, as it involves reflection on philosophical wagers uncommon in strategic decision-making. Nevertheless, as Jahn (2016) has argued, it is not entirely divorced from policymaking over longer timeframes due to the foundational commitments implied by overarching political milieus.

At the other extreme, micro-level theorizing operates with fixed and oftentimes unstated ontological and epistemological assumptions. It examines questions of discrete causality or specific meanings, and typically remains contingent on well-defined parameters (Lerner 2021a). This theorizing is often found in contained scholarly debates, as well as among practitioners weighing discrete options and possibilities. In practice, much of what Lake understands as mid-level theorizing belongs at this micro level (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013). Here, scholarship avoids ontological and episto-methodological reflection in favor of practical data analysis.

Meso-level theorizing occupies the diverse space in-between. It achieves what Lake's mid-level theorizing failed to—occupying an actual middle ground between paradigms separated by incommensurable assumptions and empirically driven reflection within contained communities or policymakers' day-to-day practice. Meso-level theorizing consists of the sort of theoretical tinkering that occurs when IR theorists and practitioners debate questions of scientific ontology, epistemology, and methodology *at the margins*, in problem-driven terms. While IR scholars often engage in meso-level theorizing formally by proposing new theories

or concepts that add to or subtract from existing worldviews, practitioners often do the same theoretical work informally. They frequently debate the relevance of specific actors, ideas, or relationships to various international political systems, alongside consideration of normative principles' applicability and evidentiary standards for compiling facts. Meso-level theoretical innovation can be both a deliberate and subtle evolutionary process, emerging as a by-product of more practice-driven debate.

Separating the meso-level of theoretical innovation from the micro and macro levels allows analysis to better appreciate the incremental theoretical innovation that is commonplace in both the academy and practice. It overcomes the false parsimony of Lake's mid-level theorizing while avoiding a return to unproductive "paradigm wars." However, without greater theoretical specification, appreciating the meso-level's diversity also has the potential to drown analysis in theoretical reflection. For this reason, in the next section, we introduce our concept of strategic ontology, which serves as a lens for illuminating meso-level innovation in policy debates.

### Narrative Contestation and Strategic Ontologies

To understand how actors propose and contest scientific ontologies of world politics, we emphasize the role of narrative—a primary meaning-making device for international actors. Diverse scholarship has already explored the central role of narrative in the international system, particularly in constituting policy debate (Hansen 2006; Roberts 2006; Ringmar 2012; Subotic 2019). It has been evaluated how actors in varied contexts use narrative to legitimize policy for domestic or international target audiences, but equally how actors can be constrained by pre-existing narrative understandings and expectations of how international politics is conducted (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014, 2017; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Zeng 2021). For the purposes of this article, we highlight how two specific aspects of narratives—their strategic utility and their ontological productivity—come together to make them potent tools for practice-driven theoretical innovation. When strategic narratives imply alterations to actors' scientific ontologies, they can have theoretical impacts beyond the immediate context of their utterance, informing future action and, in turn, scholarly reflection. The concept of strategic ontology thus highlights strategic narratives' dual role in plotting political action and reshaping international imaginaries.

The first aspect of narrative's meso-theoretical potency stems from their strategic value, meaning they provide plots of how actors can address constraints and achieve specific goals. Actors in international politics communicate strategic narratives to express the direction they seek to take, such that other actors can evaluate the extent to which they can cooperate or if they will pursue an alternative, perhaps even contradictory or hostile, strategic direction. In this way, "strategic narratives are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2017, 6). Though strategic narrative is a practice of political leaders, it can equally be understood from the other side of the "tangled loops" of knowledge production. Strategic narrative also constitutes an analytical approach for scholars researching how actors narratively depict their understandings of the international system, the identity of actors in that system, and the issues they confront. Narratives come together to form a

**Table 1.** Levels and bases of theoretical innovation

	<i>Ontology</i>	<i>Epistemology</i>	<i>Methodology</i>
Macro/Grand	Debates over both philosophical ontology and comprehensive scientific ontologies ( <i>complete</i> catalogs of the subjects, objects, and relations that constitute international politics)	Debates over the nature of scholarly knowledge production, including the role of subjectivity and between nomothetic and idiographic approaches	Debates between systems of methods (methodologies) and their role in knowledge development
Meso	Debates over component parts of a scientific ontology and their relationships to one another	Debates over knowledge's reliability and relevance, as well as the degree to which conclusions can be drawn from available data	Debates over which methodological tools are preferable in which contexts
Micro	Debates with fixed sets of actors and relations focused on which elements, relationships, and meanings govern a particular phenomenon	Debates about specific information and its relationship to knowledge <i>about a subject</i>	Debates over the implementation of tools in specific contexts

wider circuit of communication that frames theoretical reflection, defines horizons of possibility, and shapes assumed causal links between events.<sup>7</sup> While all communicated narratives may further social goals, strategic narratives are those that provide explicit plots for political action (Miskimmon, O'loughlin, and Roselle 2014).

However, though strategic narratives typically reflect actors' immediate circumstances and priorities, certain narratives that suggest new subjects, objects, and relationships can play a secondary, ontological role. In addition to providing a strategic template to achieve a specific set of goals, they can exert productive power that shapes worldviews. By definition, narrative must express a scene or environment, a set of characters, a problem those characters must address, the tools they can use to do that, and the desired or feared ending or resolution (Burke 1969). Hayden White (1980, 13) coheres these five features around plot, which he defines as "a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified with a coherent whole." These relationships, which aspire to sufficient coherence to be intelligible to other actors, relationally define the component parts of a scientific ontology, affording it a particular logic.

Oftentimes, narratives will rely on existing sets of characters, problems, and relationships, and thus will operate at the micro-level of theorizing. However, when dominant scientific ontologies prove inadequate for achieving a goal, international actors can pursue bolder innovations. They can pitch their strategic narratives at the meso-level by proposing innovations in scientific ontologies. These narratives remain strategic because they are, first and foremost, a tool used for a specific end. Though all narratives can be interpreted as having some underlying rationale—the act of narration, after all, implies at least a goal of communicating meaning to others—the term strategic here refers to narratives deliberately crafted to achieve political aims. However, in addition to being strategic, they are also ontologically productive, meaning their novel elements alter dominant worldviews in ways that can potentially endure beyond the circumstances of their utterance. Strategic ontologies thus balance the need to innovate sufficiently boldly to address otherwise intractable political problems with the need to innovate sufficiently modestly to gain acceptance by other relevant actors. For other actors to find one's narrative con-

vincing, they must agree with the ontological commitments it contains and these commitments' utility in addressing a dilemma.

Recognizing the social dynamics inherent to strategic ontologies' contestation and spread illuminates a parallel with what Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) previously identified as the "life cycle" by which international norms emerge, cascade across social networks, and are internalized by dominant actors.<sup>8</sup> Much as with international norms, novel strategic ontologies' success or failure can be determined by the degree to which they are repeated by other actors, including those not directly involved in addressing an initial dilemma, and their assumptions are normalized, altering common understandings of what *is*—what actors and "stuff" create problems to be solved, how they relate to one another and in what context. However, norms and strategic ontologies have important differences. Because norms are defined as "a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity," their articulation typically relies upon shared ontological commitments that ground value-based claims (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891). For example, for a norm to develop that a particular weapon is "taboo," actors must agree on what the technology is and how it relates to other practices and technologies (Tannenwald 1999). Strategic ontologies, by contrast, are more fundamental. They speak to the very elements included in international political discourses, providing a basis upon which normative assessments can be made.

To illustrate how strategic ontologies function, we return to the example of al-Qaeda's constitution as an international adversary. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, US President George W. Bush (2001) announced that "[t]he search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts," and that the US would "make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." This narration encouraged the identification of a concrete adversary that could be decisively defeated by the US and its allies. However, when the US government identified the sprawling al-Qaeda network as the perpetrator, it discovered an "unidentified terrorist object" (Raufer 2003). Though many analysts presumed al-Qaeda operated a "Western-style organization" with Osama Bin Laden as its veritable CEO, it discovered a proliferating "nebula" that could not easily be dismantled via conven-

<sup>7</sup>On narrative's implied causal linkages, see Lerner (2022) and H. White (1980).

<sup>8</sup>Florini (1996), alternatively, has suggested a more "evolutionary" account of normative change over time that draws an analogy to population genetics.

tional military operations, legal mechanisms, or even counterinsurgency (Raufer 2003, 393–94). It was difficult for intelligence agencies to assess who was being “radicalized” by whom, in what geographic locales, via what mechanisms, and whether identified actors and information were linked to violence.

Nevertheless, the US government had a strategic rationale to delineate an enemy at which it and its allies could direct forceful and symbolic retribution. Thus, the Bush administration forwarded a strategic ontology that characterized al-Qaeda as a coherent organization and worthy global adversary, aligned with identifiable “rogue states” subverting the international system. In so doing, the Bush administration transformed what some understood as a decentralized network or conglomerate of multiple local groups into a coherent international actor, with established sponsorship by the rogue state of Afghanistan, against whom a US-led coalition could wage a decisive “War on Terror.” This strategic ontology implied a logic distinct from possible alternatives—for example, understanding al-Qaeda as a dispersed ideological movement, criminal cartel, or jihadist rallying cry—that became popular alternatives as the military quagmire became clear. In the attack’s immediate wake, this strategic ontology encouraged a response centered around decisive military operations, with alternative policies, including police action, public diplomacy, and outreach to disaffected potential recruits, treated as ill-suited to the dilemma at hand.

International actors of varying strengths can promote novel strategic ontologies. However, we argue that they are particularly important tools for weaker actors—including small or developing states or non-state actors. Weaker actors often lack coercive power to forcibly change the international system. Nevertheless, they do have alternative forms of communicative power, including media, political speech, and public diplomacy. Further, dominant scientific ontologies of the international system often reflect the world created by dominant powers, and thus weaker ones have good reason to promote ontological revisionism to further their interests. Strategic ontologies allow weaker actors to highlight boundary cases that problematize more powerful states’ preferred understandings or, in certain cases, offer robust alternative worldviews better suited to their goals. Though they face difficulties due to power imbalances, as our analysis will show, over time their narratives can convince others. As they gain acceptance, weaker actors’ strategic ontologies can chip away at dominant understandings of the international system and promote different policymaking logics.

### From Victor’s Justice to Moral Economies: Israel, West Germany, and International Reparations

The practice of exacting reparations as “victor’s justice” from the losing side of an armed conflict has a long history in international politics. War reparations were typically not narratively linked to specific war crimes, but rather were exacted as a means of “making the war pay for itself.” In the nineteenth century, for example, France paid approximately 20 percent of its annual GDP following defeat in the Battle of Waterloo and 25 percent following its defeat, in 1871, in the Franco–Prussian War (White 2001, 351). In the early twentieth century, the most prominent case came with the post-World War I Treaty of Versailles, where the Allies mandated Germany pay 81 percent of its annual GDP. Though payments were reduced substantially over time, in the century since many scholars have deemed

Versailles’ reparations clause a colossal failure, which contributed not only to runaway German inflation, but also the rise of Nazism—a “bitter legacy” that, for many, tainted the idea of reparations altogether (Sagi 1986, 7).

However, despite this dominant cynicism of war reparations during the interwar period, this consensus began to erode in the post-World War II era, and, in recent decades, reparations for human rights abuses have emerged as a commonly debated tool of international reconciliation. We argue that this shift is due in large part to the strategic ontology that emerged from the Luxembourg reparations agreement between Israel and West Germany signed in 1952 (Barkan 2001; Colonomos and Armstrong 2010). The narrative contestation that informed this agreement reshaped understandings of state responsibility and introduced an additional, albeit limited, moral economy to discussions of reparations. Over time, this moral economy has expanded such that reparations are now a commonly invoked (though, in practice, often underwhelming) tool of global justice.

The idea of reparations for Nazi crimes against European Jewry emerged to address a limitation of dominant international political understandings and practices. As early as 1944, international Jewish organizations began raising collective monetary claims against Nazi Germany—prior to Israeli statehood, when they felt powerless to stop the genocide underway across Europe (Sagi 1986, 15). The logic motivating these calls was both straightforward and unprecedented. Due to the comprehensiveness of the annihilation of European Jewry, in many cases, even if post-war domestic justice systems were re-established, suitable individual heirs could not take legal action or receive payments, and thus the question arose of who would make claims on their behalf and where. At the 1944 International Jewish Conference in Atlantic City, World Jewish Congress (WJC) President Stephen S. Wise narrated these crimes as against the entirety of the Jewish people and thus argued for reparations from the entire Christian world, including the establishment of a “Jewish Palestine” by the United Nations for the then-stateless Jewish people.

At that meeting, the WJC’s Nahum Goldmann, who would later help negotiate the Luxembourg Agreement, narrated the Jewish community’s demands as multileveled and global, extending beyond limited payments to individual survivors or even the rehabilitation of European communities. “No program of Jewish demands has meaning or historic significance if it does not culminate in a demand for a Jewish Commonwealth in Palestine,” Goldmann said. “If there is any kind of real reparations due us from the democratic world it can be made only through the establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth, a place where every Jew from Europe or elsewhere who wants to go there, or is forced to go, will be received and find refuge” (Jewish Telegraphic Agency 1944, 1, 2). These initial narratives linked the persecution of Jewish communities across Europe with the political priorities of a Jewish nation seeking a Zionist state in Palestine. Though this scientific ontology had some precedent in decades of Zionist activism, its international reach to that point had been limited. Further, by directing claims at the United Nations and “democratic world,” these narratives strategically evaded the idea of direct engagement with the soon-to-be vanquished Nazi Germany—a policy, based on widespread Jewish revulsion toward Germans, that provided an initial barrier to negotiations.

After the war’s conclusion, this developing narrative logic motivated the Jewish Agency for Palestine, the organization representing Zionist settlers under the British Mandate for Palestine, to issue a formal request for reparations from the

victorious Allied powers occupying Germany. The letter, authored in 1945 by Chaim Weizmann, the future first president of Israel, argued that Germany's "first declaration of war" had been targeted not at Poland or Czechoslovakia, but rather at "the Jewish people, and it took a special form," entailing the destruction of both all individuals and their collective national culture. Further, [Weizmann \(1953\)](#) noted that, of those Jewish survivors displaced in Europe, "the vast majority desire to make their permanent home in Palestine." The letter thus requested that reparations be directed to "the Jewish Agency of Palestine, as the body charged by international authority with the duty of developing the Jewish National Home." By 1948, this initial request became the official policy of the State of Israel, as did refusing contact with any German officials ([Sagi 1986](#), 31–33). By linking genocide in Europe to the Zionist aim of a state in Palestine, bolstered by reparations extracted from Germany without direct contact, Jewish leaders' narratives thus recast the Holocaust as not a case of a persecuted minority struggling for its rights, but rather an emergent nation seeking the international recognition and support necessary to prevent genocide's recurrence.

While this consensus developed among Jewish leaders, the narrative provoked mixed reactions among the four Allied states occupying Germany (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the USSR). Immediately after the war, the Allies faced competing priorities of securing more traditional post-war reparations for German wartime plunder while also encouraging German growth to prevent economic collapse and resurgent extremism ([Sagi 1986](#), 7–12). Before long, the Allied powers began interpreting post-war reconciliation and European reconstruction through the strategic lens of Cold War rivalries. Though both Cold War blocs supported the 1947 UN Partition Plan that created the State of Israel, they also initially resisted Jewish demands for collective reparations, believing draining West and East German coffers could promote instability on the Cold War's front lines. In 1949, the United States and the United Kingdom terminated their reparations demands and instead focused on strategic investment in West Germany via the Marshall Plan ([Sagi 1986](#), 13). Alternatively, by East Germany's establishment in 1949, the Soviet Union had already begun extracting traditional post-war reparations for itself and thus focused on continuing this transfer instead of compensating Israel. By this point, the Soviet attitude toward Israel began changing due to fears the young state was gravitating toward the West ([Tovy 2013](#), 78–79). Thus, when Israeli leaders reiterated their demands to Allied powers for reparations from both German states, they were rejected on both fronts. The Western powers relayed their sympathies but suggested direct negotiations with the West German government in Bonn—anathema to stated Israeli policy—while the Soviet Union waited over a year to state it would reject any East German payment ([Tovy 2017](#), 483–84).

The reluctance of dominant world powers to consider reparations demands created a unique space for strategic ontological contestation. Israel and West Germany were new states struggling with immediate state-building concerns, as well as with larger ontological concerns regarding their relationships to past crimes, national groups, and their place in the international system. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who had been persecuted by the Nazi regime, recognized that international skepticism remained over his state's Nazi past. As [Lorena de Vita \(2020, 11–80\)](#) writes, his narrative entrepreneurship proved vital to overcoming resistance to international reparations in West Germany. Indeed, he began furtive negotiations with Israeli representatives prior to

assurance of support from his cabinet and, in September 1951, made a proactive statement to the Bundestag outlining his pro-reconciliation position. The speech, which benefited from Nahum Goldmann's comments, narrated a break from his nation's anti-Semitic past and portrayed reparations as moral reckoning ([Sagi 1986](#), 71).

[U]nspeakable crimes were perpetrated in the name of the German people, which impose upon them the obligation to make moral and material amends, both as regards the individual damage that Jews have suffered and as regards Jewish property for which there are no longer individual claimants... The Federal Government is prepared, jointly with representatives of Jewry and the State of Israel, which has admitted so many homeless Jewish refugees, to bring about a solution of the material reparations problem in order to facilitate the way to a spiritual purging of unheard-of suffering ([The New York Times 1951](#)).

Adenauer's speech proved pivotal for multiple reasons. First, it embraced the logic first outlined by Weizmann linking the State of Israel to an international Jewish collective, brought together by Nazi-era victimization. Though it suggested reparations would compensate Israel for resettling Holocaust survivors, rather than a larger symbolic act of forgiveness, Adenauer nonetheless framed reparations as a moral imperative—a sharp break from then-dominant cynical views about reparations as victors' justice. He thus coupled his call for payments with a policy of educating young Germans about the Nazi regime's crimes.

Though resistance remained among some quarters of the German government, Adenauer's efforts proved vital to shifting consensus over the long term. Previously, many West Germans had opposed reparations payments, believing they were too onerous for the recovering state or should first go to German widows ([Colonomos and Armstrong 2010](#), 394). But Adenauer's narrative forged a path forward, leading to supportive comments from multiple opposition parties and a moment of silence from the entire parliament ([Sagi 1986](#), 72). Over time, it helped bolster a strategic ontology durable beyond the circumstances of its utterance.

The Israeli government responded cautiously to Adenauer, as Israeli public sentiment remained firmly against any communication with either West or East Germany. Nevertheless, Israeli leaders were open to an agreement due to the young state's dire economic situation, worsened by the costs of both rehabilitating over 400,000 Holocaust survivors and bolstering the country's defenses ([Yablonka and Tlaim 2003](#), 9). For this reason, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion decided to seek approval for negotiations from the Knesset, where his Mapai party held a majority. During parliamentary debate in January 1952, Ben-Gurion argued for a limited agreement consisting of reclaiming stolen Jewish property rather than a form of symbolic reconciliation or even opening bilateral diplomatic relations. His slogan encapsulated this narrative framing: "Let not the murderers of our people also be their inheritors!" ([Sharett 2011](#), 166). This logic was reiterated by other party leaders, including Mapai Minister Golda Meir, who narrated payments as vital to Israel's sovereignty.

We must be strong not only because by that very fact we are honoring the memory of those who were murdered, but also in order to prevent a repeat of that calamity. I believe that this was the last testament of our martyrs. We were slaughtered and burnt because we were weak, and only if we are truly strong can

we prevent that from happening again (Sharett 2011, 225).

The government's opposition seized on contradictions in the Mapai party's narrative, narrating the Holocaust's traumatic memory anew to shame Ben-Gurion and his allies. Member of the Knesset Elimelech Rimalt, an Austrian survivor who lost his parents, flipped Mapai's logic on its head, arguing that Israel should avoid a reparations agreement with West Germany because "the Germans in the East and the West are one and the same" with the Nazi regime that preceded them—an alternative strategic ontology about an international adversary's identity and reparations's conciliatory meaning. "A people, the majority of whom were murderers... does not change so quickly" (Sharett 2011, 170). Likewise, the firebrand leader of the Herut party, future prime minister Menachim Begin, spoke to a protest of over 15,000 in Jerusalem prior to the debate to oppose negotiations with West Germany. In his subsequent speech to the Knesset, Begin rejected the idea, previously forwarded by Adenauer, that "the vast majority of the German people were revolted by these crimes...[and] did not take part in these crimes" (Sharett 2011, 178, 180). He referred to Germans as "a herd of wolves who devoured our people as prey," reframing the relationship between West Germany and Israel as a new iteration of a tragic prior dynamic (cited in Shilon 2012, 169). Begin even accused Ben-Gurion of selling out the Jewish people to their predator.

Despite this opposition, Mapai retained sufficient parliamentary support to pass the measure. Direct negotiations between West German and Israeli representatives, as well as representatives of the Claims Conference for individual survivors, began in the Netherlands in March 1952. For the most part, negotiations were kept confidential. Deliberations focused predominantly on the amount, timeline, and form of reparations for resettling Jewish refugees (Sagi 1986, 103–64). Much of the controversy that emerged publicly related to simultaneous international negotiations over Germany's outstanding external debt underway in London. Israeli representatives were outraged that their claims might take a back seat to commercial interests, as they believed the moral economy of reparations should trump such lay concerns (Sagi 1986, 136). Nevertheless, later that year, the two sides signed an agreement under which West Germany would transfer a total of 3.45 billion DM (approximately 845 million USD) in goods and services to Israel. Reluctant to hold a final signing ceremony in West Germany, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett joined Adenauer and Nahum Goldmann, representing the Claims Conference, in Luxembourg, a neutral country. The leaders shook hands, inspiring laudatory international press coverage (Sagi 1986, 178–79). Payments to Israel began shortly after and continued until 1965, bolstering the Israeli economy.

Though the agreement remained controversial among many in West Germany and Israel at the time of its signing, the narrative contestation that resulted in the 1952 Luxembourg Agreement inspired two sets of long-term precedents that we argue marked meso-level shifts in dominant scientific ontologies of the international system. First, the agreement helped establish West Germany and Israel's international identities by clarifying their relationships to the past and providing a basis for future relations. On the West German side, by making it the first international agreement his government signed, Adenauer signaled a sharp break with the past, as well as the rejection of any remaining extreme right factions. The text of the agreement effectively othered its predecessor as the "National-Socialist régime or terror,"

for whose "material damage" the "Federal Republic of Germany...within the limits of their capacity, [sought] to make good" ("Agreement..." 1952). Reparations provided a vital symbolic shift that helped facilitate West Germany's integration into the Western international order.

From the Israeli perspective, the agreement cemented the state's relationship to the genocide of European Jewry and provided vital resources to prevent it from collapsing. Though Arab states rejected the logic justifying Israel's existence via the Holocaust, Ben-Gurion had long drawn on its potency, even articulating it as part of Israel's *raison d'être* in his declaration of independence in 1948: "The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people...was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the community of nations" (Ben-Gurion 1948). The agreement helped legitimize this identity and thus provided ballast to Israel's efforts at international normalization. Finally, though Israel's governing coalition had argued that a potential agreement would not entail breaking the boycott of diplomatic relations with any German officials, the agreement's delayed payment structure in many ways necessitated the beginning of what eventually became a close diplomatic relationship, established formally in 1965.

A step removed from these two states' specific identities, the narrative emerging from the agreement set broader precedents regarding international reparations. The Luxembourg Agreement marked the first-time international reparations had been paid for moral reasons, by one successor state to another, and not coerced by the victor in an armed conflict. Though international public opinion exerted pressure on West Germany to initiate reparations payments, the Allied powers ended their occupation without mandating them. For this reason, we argue that Adenauer's introduction of a moral economy to reparations that transcended existing notions of state responsibility and debt was vital to their eventual completion, further evidenced by the absence of parallel payments by Austria and East Germany.

As Elazar Barkan has written, the agreement helped usher "[t]he idea of compensation, the rhetoric of [national] guilt, and limited recognition-forgiveness were translated, through the legal medium of restitution into new possibilities in international relations." Ultimately, Barkan argues that the agreement marked "the moment at which the modern notion of restitution for historical injustices was born" (Barkan 2001, xxiii, xxiv). To compensate for other Nazi war crimes, Germany subsequently signed "global agreements" compensating other European states and renegotiated to pay more to the Claims Conference, while Austria signed an agreement with the United States, in 2001, to create a settlement fund for victims (Lerner and Heinrichs 2023). Though examples of substantial interstate reparations programs have been irregular—only twenty-one such programs have been launched since 1940—the *idea* of reparations between successor states for historical injustice has inspired long traditions of both scholarship and activism (Howard-Hassmann and Lombardo 2007, 2008; Butt 2008; Lu 2017; Craemer 2018). In recent years, the Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion movements, as well as the CARICOM Reparations Commission, have given this idea renewed international momentum. Most CARICOM member states did not exist during the time of slavery, and thus their demand that European states pay post-colonial states for historical injustices committed by those previously in power



directly reflects strategic ontologies developed in 1950s negotiations with Israel. Indeed, the commission's chairman, Hilary Beckles, has directly cited the Luxembourg Agreement as precedent for his organization's activism (Rojas 2020). Likewise, in 2021, Germany even agreed to pay €1.1 billion to Namibia for the early twentieth-century genocide of the Herero and Nama people (Oltermann 2021)—this payment operated on precisely the same logic as the Luxembourg Agreement, where two successor states negotiated their relationships to past historical injustices. West Germany and Israel may not have realized the theoretical implications of their narrative contestation, but it has provided a durable strategic ontology with implications for generations after. To this day, dominant understandings of reparations in contemporary international politics reflect the innovations negotiated between West Germany and Israel.

### Ontological Contestation and Climate Change Negotiations

Contemporary international discourse on climate change provides an informative comparison due both to climate change's profound challenge to the international order and the issue's clear differences with reparations negotiations. We examine how narratives developed at two recent public fora—the Climate Action Summit (CAS) of December 2020 and the Leaders' Summit on Climate (LSC) of April 2021—created potentially durable scientific ontologies that reframed debate at the COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021, the COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh in November 2022, and beyond. The former two events featured state leaders' reflections on the inadequacies of dominant approaches—especially those codified in the 2015 Paris Agreement—including suggestions of targets to establish at COP26. Examining the three events together helps reveal embryonic efforts to promote plots that challenge dominant scientific ontologies of the international system by creating new categories of actors and relations. Though certainly not yet dominant, we observe these strategic ontologies spreading to other actors, offering paths for policy solutions that address the immense stakes of the climate crisis.

In recent years' negotiations, a key narrative promoted by weaker states has included a binary opposition between two groups: those who self-identify as vulnerable and their counterpoints and those the vulnerable identify as big emitters. This binary suggests a strategic ontology with a hierarchically defined international political and moral economy that is distinct from prior international alignments. Vulnerable states bear the brunt of big emitters' recklessness and thus portray the latter as obliged to act. However, while this strategic ontology has been accepted by a variety of actors and incorporated into their policy agendas, it continues to face challenges from certain big emitters, mid-level states, and what we label an awkward squad of states reluctant to take any responsibility or pursue significant policy change.

Narratives of international climate action based on this binary opposition are particularly favored by weaker states that, since 2009, have formally organized as the V-20—the Climate Vulnerable Forum of countries uniquely at risk from climate change. For them, this strategic ontology begins by rejecting the idea that climate change poses unknown, randomly distributed threats across the globe. They argue instead that they face unique risks due to their disadvantageous geographic and structural positions and thus should be understood as a distinct international class. This self-presentation defies the expectations of much rationalist

IR, as it entails admitting one's own weakness. Nonetheless, it serves strategic purposes in the context of international climate negotiations, as it allows these states a unique authority in international fora where they are often side-lined. At CAS, Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, portrayed climate change as a greater threat to “small island states” and “tourism dependent countries” than others (CAS 2020). Honduras president Juan Orlando Hernández described suffering two hurricanes in a single month, ongoing flooding of agricultural and industrial areas, families waiting to be rescued, and half the Honduran population directly affected. At LSC, the President of the Marshall Islands, David Kabua, emphasized the unique geographical vulnerability of living in a low-lying atoll nation “barely a metre above sea level” (LSC 2021). Indonesian President Joko Widodo said his country was uniquely vulnerable as “the largest archipelagic country” (CAS 2020). At COP26, Tuvalu's Foreign Minister Simon Kofe presented his speech standing in the ocean in a suit, his trouser legs rolled up, indicating climate change-related flooding was already eroding his state's territory (Reuters 2021).

For some states, vulnerability extends beyond geography to international politics, indicating efforts to extend these categorizations' import beyond a single issue. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani described floods, erosion, and acceleration of cycles of drought as uniquely threatening due to the destruction wrought by four decades of conflict. At LSC, Gabon's President, Ali Bongo Ondimba, said “Over half of African countries are projected to experience climate-driven conflict” due to extreme weather events' interaction with unresolved socio-political frictions, inequalities, and injustices (LSC 2021). Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said her country faced resource constraints when addressing climate change because they were spending on 1.1 million forcefully displaced Uighurs from Myanmar. These states depict their vulnerability as an identity that distinguishes them as a category of actors from those who should be held responsible for taking decisive action.

This scientific ontology of a world divided between those especially vulnerable and those less so is narratively linked to a sharp contrast with, and blame against, a second group of states—those countries vulnerable states characterize as a cohesive group of “major emitters” (Marshall Islands President David Kabua, CAS, Seychelles President Ramkalawan at COP26) or “big emitters” (Tshering, LSC) (CAS 2020; LSC 2021; COP26 2021). Notably, this label is not reducible to wealthy states and thus does not parallel neo-Marxist scientific ontologies that define actors according to their positions in global capitalism. Rather, this narrative suggests that bare “survival” is at stake and the plot is about avoiding “climate genocide” (Antigua and Barbuda's Browne, CAS)—emotionally charged descriptions that characterize major emitters' negligence as not merely economic externalities, but rather targeted exploitation (CAS 2020). Some vulnerable states supplement this characterization with the argument that they are in fact carbon *negative* and thus free riders who exploit their selflessness in an international moral economy. Bhutan's Prime Minister Tshering said, “I cannot understand this irony of contributing a lot to environmental preservation yet having to suffer so much” (LSC 2021).

Though this strategic ontology has been accepted by a variety of small state actors, their articulations differ. Notably, states disagree over whether and how leaders apportion blame according to this binary between vulnerable states and big emitters—a difference with consequences in framing policy responses. Some leaders do not mention blame explicitly, but nevertheless outline policy responses that

require major emitters to lead international action. At COP26 Indonesian President Widodo said, “there is no point blaming each other,” but nevertheless asserted a moral responsibility “developed countries” must take, attacking those “clinging to coal” (COP26 2021). At CAS, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina argued climate change will not “spare us” unless “all developed countries” lead the world in swift action (CAS 2020). She thus framed Bangladesh’s national adaptation plan as of secondary importance to international efforts led by major emitters. However, at LSC, Hasina said leaders should not point fingers, and she called for a complex response based around actions developed countries should take. The narrative developed here refers not to explicit antagonistic hierarchies; rather, an international system where connectivity between actors varies across issues. This leads Hasina to offer an ontology of a polycentric world entangled in different ways across different issues.

At times, vulnerable states’ strategic ontologies avoided direct blame but nonetheless facilitated criticism of existing frameworks and plans, enabling new approaches. Separating critique from economics alone served two strategic functions. First, it avoided generalized attacks on capitalism and offered more concrete moral evaluations instead. Second, it created a new arena for assistance beyond existing development aid. At LSC, Bhutan’s Tshering indicated existing international deals were insufficient and detailed what finance and technology transfer he deemed necessary. At CAS, Antigua’s Browne called specifically for the United States and China, two major emitters, to lead new approaches. At LSC (2021), Ramaphosa argued that “aid on climate change should be provided separately, and should not be part of conventional development assistance.” This narrative sought to create a new realm of relationships according to this novel strategic ontology, divorced from prior power dynamics. He tied global emissions cuts to a wider socio-economic transformation and placed South Africa atop the hierarchy framed by this new moral economy, as it now followed a low-emissions development strategy. Hence, even those not explicitly directing blame at major emitters were still making policy demands that implicitly critiqued those states’ past actions and asked them to shift course.

Other vulnerable states employed language assigning moral blame to justify more direct calls for big emitters to act. At CAS (2020), Barbados’ Mia Mottley contradicted the “build back better” economic trope then prominent in the United States and the United Kingdom, arguing “there will be no build back better for countries and economies like mine.” Marshall Islands President Kabua said the responsibility was on major emitters but “Too often vulnerable countries hear the excuse that steep emissions cuts are too costly” (CAS 2020). These leaders rejected major emitters’ economic defenses and drew on an international moral economy to demand immediate action. At COP26, Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley evoked a musician, and her team put some of her transcript in capitals, “What excuse should we give for their failure? IN THE WORDS OF EDDY GRANT ‘WILL THEY MOURN US ON THE FRONTLINE?’” (COP26 2021).

The strongest attribution of blame came from Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda. At CAS, he positioned his state within the forty-four-member Alliance of Small Island States who, through “no fault of their own, confront the greatest threats of Climate Change” (CAS 2020). At COP26 (2021), he said, “I recall the words of Aristotle: ‘The greatest injustices, proceed from those who pur-

sue excess.’” He added at CAS (2020) that vulnerable states were already indebted even before COVID halted tourism in 2020, but that multilateral institutions tied these states into initiatives that did not allow debt relief. The result was emigration and industrial decline. These connections informed a uniquely ideological interpretation of this strategic ontology: Browne argued rich states must provide some form of rescue, or small island states would look to alternative ways of organizing their societies not based on markets or democracy. In lieu of outlining such an alternative model, Browne proposed a long list of actions that rich countries and international organizations *must* do to save small states and compensate for financial, medical, and geographic damage already suffered. By the time of COP26 (2021), he said he was willing to “plead” for action.

Leaders of big emitters offered diverse responses to this strategic ontology, ranging from acceptance of its binary with a clear division of labor at one end, to a differentiated set of responsibilities at another, implying each state could decide *for itself* how it could and should act. They offered varied narratives that either affirmed existing assumptions or advocated alternative, more moderate shifts. At a mid-point, leaders offered moral support for vulnerable countries, indicating they were willing to accommodate vulnerable states’ narratives at the margins. However, they often did so without referencing vulnerable states’ experiences of climate change damage. The specific empirical plots forwarded by vulnerable states were absent, as more powerful states opted for a strategic ontology depicting a world in which damage and suffering remained abstract.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson had a leading role in both CAS and LSC because he would serve as host to COP26 in Glasgow. At CAS, Johnson offered an alternative strategic ontology of the international system, from *his* country’s perspective. It consisted of three categories: The United Kingdom, “friends” who would work with the United Kingdom, and “humanity” who would benefit (COP26 2021). This narrative centered on technological innovation and leadership. Johnson wanted to “turn the UK into the Saudi Arabia of wind power generation” and London to lead as “the natural home of green finance,” though he did not explain how this could happen. On the other side of the ledger, at LSC, he said vulnerable countries would be recipients of what “the richest nations” would offer, neglecting to engage with ideas of moral debt (LSC 2021). This suggested a narrow scientific ontology from a triumphalist Anglocentric perspective with little concrete acknowledgment of vulnerable countries’ narratives.

Though US President Donald Trump was absent at CAS, Biden expressed a similar position to Johnson at LSC, emphasizing how adaptation to green energy could lead to job creation and economic benefit for the United States. His speech targeted a domestic audience, plotting domestic policies and only vague promises of international cooperation (CAS 2020). Japan and South Korea similarly focused on domestic policies at all summits. For South Korean President Moon Jae-In at LSC (2021), the primary policy discussed was ending his country’s public financing for overseas coal-fired power plants, not how renewable energy could be achieved or exported. At CAS (2020), he explained a national public debate was happening about “different scenarios” to reach a carbon neutral international society, but offered no specific plans—indicating South Korea could live with a differentiated international response. At COP26 (2021), he called ending emission cuts “a Herculean task.”

Some leaders of countries labeled big emitters did accept vulnerable countries’ strategic ontology to a certain

degree, adapting their policy initiatives accordingly. Leaders of France, Canada, and Ireland highlighted their relationship to vulnerable countries as explicitly moral. At CAS, Macron spoke of “an obligation to those countries most vulnerable” and argued policy must be based on justice and sustainability (CAS 2020). Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin argued action must be guided by “climate justice,” “just transition,” and “solidarity,” reaching “the least equipped to cope” and “small island developing states” (CAS 2020). At LSC (2021), Trudeau argued that climate change action should address international law and human rights in a wider narrative of systemic change. He argued “We are all facing different realities,” a pluralistic scientific ontology that created room for multiple otherwise-conflicting narratives. Indeed, US Vice President Kamala Harris even echoed this in her speech at LSC (2021), while European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen emphasized “justice” and demanded that “major economies ... show that we have all understood” what action is demanded by this moral economy. All these leaders tacitly embraced a values-led hierarchy, though they neglected the enormity of the policy shifts this vision could entail.

A final approach from big emitters countered vulnerable states’ strategic ontology with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. At LSC (2021), Chinese President Xi Jinping positioned China as a developing state but, in terms of GDP and emissions, one that was a global leader and thus faced unique responsibilities. At CAS (2020), Xi said developed countries should give more support to developing countries—but not in a binary relationship. This would be a pluralistic form of global governance, “a new architecture of climate governance where every party does its part” depending on “their respective national circumstances.” At LSC (2021), Xi argued against the hierarchical moral economy of vulnerable states, saying “we must join hands, not point fingers at each other.” He opposed “green trade standards” that would penalize those considered not meeting climate targets. China’s differentiated approach to climate change would “follow the Thought on Ecological Civilization,” a “new development philosophy” based on rebalancing the relationship between “man and Nature.” This ontology was far from Johnson and Biden’s green technology revolution, led by existing major powers.

Xi’s approach represented a very different ontology to that offered by leaders of other major emitters. This was reinforced when, at the final moment of COP26 (2021), China and India insisted the final document proposed to “phase down” but not “phase out” coal (Hook, Hodgson, and Pickard 2021). This countered what many vulnerable countries recommended. It undermined hopes in Europe and the United States that they could direct the global response. The United Kingdom’s climate minister Alok Sharma apologized for this loss of control.

Though the divide between major emitters and vulnerable states is pivotal, not all states fit within it. Two other positions must be noted. First, mid-positioned states’ leaders made efforts to triangulate their position in any new international order. At LSC (2021), leaders of India, Chile, and Colombia argued they offered low emissions, but suffered disproportionate damage—constituting a strategic victimhood narrative (Lerner 2020). In contrast, leaders of Turkey, Argentina, Saudi Arabia, and Ukraine each focused on the mixed ranking of their country within the international moral economy’s hierarchy, offering mixed policy prescriptions accordingly. Second, a group emerged that we call the “awkward squad” of states resistant to international climate action—Russia, Brazil, and Australia. They were not invited

to CAS and, at LSC and COP26, presented largely isolationist narratives that did not engage rival strategic ontologies. The resistance offered by these isolationist countries, major emitters unwilling to engage vulnerable states’ strategic ontologies and wavering mid-ranked states help explain why, despite its increasing acceptance, vulnerable states’ strategic ontology has yet to motivate significant international action.

Thus, a few leaders of big emitters (France, Canada, Ireland, and the European Commission) specifically engaged with vulnerable countries’ strategic ontology and accepted portions of its commitments. Indeed, at COP27, a loss and damage fund was established precisely to help vulnerable countries—its agreement depended on at least *some* big emitters accepting this strategic ontology (UNFCCC 2022). However, more populous and powerful major emitters largely avoided those countries’ ontologies and signed on to the loss and damage fund with significant caveats or strategic silences. The need to persuade domestic publics to support action and investment later in 2021 at COP26 gave this a strategic rationale. Yet it failed to engage with the scientific ontology forwarded by vulnerable countries, reducing the opportunity for global narrative alignment. As Trudeau said, societies face different realities, but rich countries’ narratives did not indicate how these differences could be bridged. Hence, COP26 leaders’ speeches demonstrated incommensurate strategic ontologies among differing groups of actors. Vulnerable states argued they were *forced* to group themselves against big emitters, articulating a common antagonistic worldview, because they already experience damage. This binary had been emerging at CAS and LSC, but informed dividing lines at COP26. In effect, international cooperation was impeded by the calcifying of opposing strategic ontologies.

## Conclusion

This article has offered a new theoretical framework for understanding theoretical innovation among practitioners, articulated as strategic ontologies. By clarifying the meso-level of incremental theoretical innovation, we reveal how practitioners’ strategic narratives can prove ontologically productive, constituting new subjects, objects, and relations in international politics. This has implications for how IR scholars appreciate theoretical innovation in the discipline, since it allows for greater dialogue between practitioners and academics theorizing on similar subjects, but with different purposes and audiences. Indeed, the concept of strategic ontology can help bridge the gap between policymakers and IR, overcoming false divisions of labor that create scholarly blind spots.

Our two case studies both involve actors facing challenges that could only be addressed by redrawing dominant scientific ontologies of the international system. The Luxembourg Agreement allowed West Germany and Israel to define their relationships to the past in important ways, while its success created a template for other actors seeking reconciliation after mass violence. Effectively, Israel and West Germany reimagined international reparations to operate via a logic of restitution, rather than victor’s justice. In the case of climate change, ontological contestation is ongoing, but we see vulnerable states gaining traction by promoting a hierarchical worldview pitting them against “major emitters.” This effort has encouraged new understandings of the differential responsibilities climate change entails and helped forge new categories of actors to negotiate policy outcomes. However, the different ontologies expressed by leaders help

explain why policy preferences on global climate action continue to differ markedly.

This research raises multiple questions for future scholarship. Our cases show that strategic ontologies can promote incremental but, crucially, ongoing theoretical innovation, contributed to by both academics and practitioners. How do these processes scale to the realm of grand theory, furnishing incommensurable paradigms? How does their adoption reshape patterns in micro-level theory? Likewise, we note a potential fruitful intersection with ontological security literature on biographical narratives and their role in informing international political imaginaries and action (Steele 2008; Subotić 2015; Hagström 2021; Lerner 2021b). How can this insight be incorporated into our larger theoretical framework? By clarifying the role of narrative in bridging levels of analysis, we offer a template for future scholarship to address these questions and better account for the tangled loops of knowledge production between the academy and practice.

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