

World Political Change

Three Storytelling Practices

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Abstract *This chapter explores how actors make sense of world political change. It understands change as a significant difference over time and emphasises the importance of narratives: It is through narratives that actors highlight differences between the past, present and future and imbue these differences with political significance. The chapter distinguishes three storytelling practices through which actors craft such narratives: periodization, historical regularities and future worlds. Studying three episodes of actors trying to make sense of world political change in the past 50 years, it shows that these storytelling practices are often used in combination and, moreover, are closely intertwined with practices of theorising and modelling what world politics is and how it works.*

Introduction: World Political Change and Its Narration¹

To observers from outside the academic field of International Relations (IR), the end of the Cold War, the wars in the Middle East and the “war on terror,” or the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the rise of China to the status of a global power—to name but a few examples—might appear to be clear indicators that significant change is occurring in world politics. Against this background, such observers might be quite surprised to learn that one of the most influential theoretical paradigms in IR for many years, namely political realism in its different versions (most notably as “classical” political realism, or as structural realism), has been built on assumptions that basically see very little change at all happening in world politics. This is the case because international politics is considered either to reflect basic assumptions about human nature, constituting an ongoing Hobbesian power struggle, as in classical

¹ This chapter has been written in the context of the project “Comparing Power in Times of World Political Change, 1970–2020” in the DFG-funded Collaborative Research Centre “Practices of Comparing” at Bielefeld University. We would like to thank Dorothee Grünholz and Nike Retzmann, as well as the audience at the Midterm conference for their very helpful feedback.

realism, or to reflect an anarchic structure of the international system of states, as in structural realism.² What happens is variation in power constellations and distribution, but not “systemic” change. Similar underlying motives can be found in narratives (which in fact reflect specific philosophies of history) of “hegemonic cycles” or of the “rise and fall of great powers.”³ The dominant power or hegemon of the day may change, but not the social context described by the presence of one.⁴

These introductory remarks already illustrate one of the most important and most tricky issues in analyzing change in world politics: it all depends on context; that is, the implicit or explicit parameters of the (boundaries of the) relevant system, realm, or structural level that is taken to represent world politics. Of course, if world politics is seen as nothing but a power struggle between polities, then in this abstract sense not much has changed: the Peloponnesian War could easily and legitimately be compared to the Falklands War, and that is indeed not uncommon in practices of comparing in both political discourse and academic debates (again, mainly in the field of International Relations). However, the point to be made in this contribution is that if one does not take the comfortable position of remote historical-philosophical deliberation, the tracing of processes of change in world politics requires tracing which narratives of change not only represent, but also actually constitute such change. These narratives, to reiterate a point just made, however, not only constitute change in what otherwise would constitute a fixed realm of “world politics,” with historically “stable” boundaries, but always also participate in remaking that realm.

In the present chapter, we first highlight why it is actually so difficult to make sense of “world political change.” As a global historian put it, history cannot be simply compiled, “it has first to be thought.”⁵ The same applies to world political change. What counts as world political change depends on how actors theorize and model world politics and the changes that happen within it.⁶ In this sense, the next sec-

2 On classical realism, cf. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York 1948; on structural realism, cf. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York 1979.

3 On hegemonic cycles: Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression 1929–1939*, Berkeley, Cal. 1973; on the rise and fall of great powers: Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict 1500–2000*, New York 1987.

4 For an overview of discussions about change in International Relations, Sociology and History: cf. Mathias Albert/Tobias Werron (eds.), *What in the World? Understanding Global Social Change*, Bristol 2021.

5 Jürgen Osterhammel, Weltgeschichte. Ein Propädeutikum, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 56 (9/2005), 452–479, see 453 (our translation).

6 We understand *theorizing* as the development of sets of concepts and principles that serve as frameworks for thinking about and analyzing phenomena, and *modeling* as the development of abstract (and usually partial) representations of phenomena that serve as tools for investigating them. For a discussion of the interplay between theorizing and model-

tion will briefly explore some of the underlying issues involved in identifying system boundaries, in thinking in terms of historical periods, and in identifying breakpoint versus evolutionary change that not only constitute analytical and theoretical challenges in IR, but are also—implicitly or explicitly—always present in narratives of change employed by actors in world politics. Secondly, we unpack the storytelling practices that produce such narratives in the following two sections. We first distinguish three storytelling practices, each with a distinct way of relating and comparing past, present and future: periodization, historical laws /regularities, and future worlds. Using three episodes from the transatlantic world of the past half-century as an example, we then illustrate how actors trying to make sense of world political change combine these storytelling practices, and highlight how the storytelling practices are intertwined with practices of theorizing and modeling.

“World Political Change”: A Change of What Exactly?

This chapter starts from the assumption that there is change going on in world politics. In fact, and in marked contrast to the various approaches mentioned above (which would deny that change can ever take place in world politics on a fundamental level), it subscribes to the view that the fact *that* change is taking place is in no need of explanation whatsoever. However, what does require a theoretical social-scientific explanation is how even temporary forms of order can emerge in an ocean of individual actions and communication—rather than devolving through some kind of “social entropy.” In more practical analytical terms, the focus then would be on how different kinds of change are related to each other.

On an abstract level, it seems possible to say that change in world politics can be (and has been) understood and described in two ideal-typical ways: on the one hand, change can occur in the form of a chain of event-related, or “breakpoint” changes. In this case, change is described through crystallization points—that is, events that both signify and constitute change. These events can be of different kinds, and while most of them are *dated* events, they are quite flexible when it comes to determining their actual duration in time (one could, for example, argue whether the French Revolution needs to be dated as occurring in the year 1789, or as a multi-year event, or on the specific day of 14 July 1789).⁷ As Barry Buzan and George Lawson have shown,

ing, cf. Margaret Morrison/Mary S. Morgan, *Models as Mediating Instruments*, cf. Mary S. Morgan/Margaret Morrison (eds.), *Models as Mediators: Perspectives on Natural and Social Sciences*, Cambridge 1999, 10–37.

7 On the extension of historical events, cf. William H. Sewell, Jr., *Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille*, in: *Theory & Society* 25 (6/1996), 841–881.

this approach of understanding change in world politics has over time led to the privileging of a specific number of “benchmark dates” that together have condensed into forming a dominant narrative of change in world politics, at least in the field of IR:⁸ despite many references to historical continuities before that, the almost mythical “starting point” of international relations/world politics is 1648, with some very important transformative things then happening in 1815 and 1914/18 as well as in 1939/45.⁹ Another significant benchmark date is 1989, while the jury is still out on how most notably 2001 (9/11 and the “war on terror”) or 2022 (Russia’s invasion of Ukraine) will fare in this respect.

While this is of course a gross caricature of a specific ideal-typical way of understanding change in world politics, far more nuanced and analytically rich versions of which can be found in individual analyses, it does capture quite well how this kind of change is not only understood, but also narrated—that is, with an explicit reference to specific outstanding dates and events.

The second ideal-typical approach involves an understanding of change in world politics in terms of processual change. While processual change might exhibit specific important dates and events as markers of change, it cannot be reduced to the latter. What constitutes relevant processes of change arguably describes a field that is wider and more variable than the “standard” background story of benchmark date-related change in IR, ranging from processes of international organization (in the sense of organizing), through global governance (in the sense of quasi-governing), to international legalization, constitutionalization, or contestation, etc.

The important point to be made here is that as ideal types for understanding and narrating change in world politics, breakpoint and processual change can be combined in a variety of ways that are established in and through specific storytelling practices both in politics and in academic analysis.¹⁰ In this chapter, we are primarily interested in how, in storytelling practices in politics, change is described through comparisons, and how the aforementioned ideal types are recombined in different instances. We focus on the *reflexive dimension* of change—that is, how actors identify and frame certain developments as *relevant* processes of change. Change can be

8 Barry Buzan/George Lawson, Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations, in: *European Journal of International Relations* 20 (2/2014), 437–462.

9 Such benchmark dates are also discussed at lengths in History, especially in debates about the periodization of epochs. Cf. Antje Flüchter, *Überlegungen zur Sinnhaftigkeit und den Problemen von Periodisierungen aus vergleichstheoretischer Perspektive* [unpublished chapter manuscript], Bielefeld 2023.

10 For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that conceptually both ideal types can be combined elegantly if change is understood in terms of (social) systemic evolution, which is a fully processual account of change, yet can account for “benchmark dates” in terms of highly visible selections or, more abstractly, systemic tipping points.

defined as a “significant difference” between two points in time.¹¹ When actors tell stories of change, they thus—implicitly or explicitly—engage in comparisons: which processes of change are relevant and which are not? How does the present differ from the past, or the future from the present? The *comparata* and *tertia* that the actors use in their comparisons are informed by the ways in which they theorize and model world politics. They are underpinned by, and at the same time provide, insights into what—for the actors—world politics “is” (as historically contingent form). This, as alluded to above, is the case because these practices of comparing invariably—explicitly or implicitly—refer to, and thus at least co-establish, what world politics “is” in terms of its relevant system boundaries. These relevant system boundaries could, for example, be identified in functional terms (i.e. in terms of the “relevant” powers, the relative importance of economic vs. political or legal factors, etc.). They could also be identified in geographical terms (most notably in terms of a specific regional order). Needless to say, they could also be identified through a mix of such terms.¹²

While it is not a necessity, we expect that most practices of comparing expressed in the storytelling practices of actors would also include elements of historical comparison. This historical comparison would usually (but neither necessarily nor exclusively) entail a specific kind of comparison of present with past and/or future orders, although what *kind of order* is used as a *comparatum* is an empirically open question (it could be anything from a “liberal world order” to the order of an idealized imperial past, etc.).

In the following, we seek to demonstrate that these storytelling practices are not completely arbitrary. Rather, in world politics a relatively limited set of such practices is very prominent.

Common Storytelling Practices

Narratives can be understood as forms of discourse that create a meaningful sequential order of events.¹³ They become narratives of change when the sequence is

11 Cf. Theodore Schatzki, *Social Change in a Material World*, London 2019, 15.

12 On the definition of a system of world politics, cf. Mathias Albert, *A Theory of World Politics*, Cambridge 2016.

13 Linus Hagström/Karl Gustafsson, Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics, in: *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32 (4/2019), 387–406, see 390; cf. Albrecht Koschorke, *Fact and Fiction: Elements of a General Theory of Narrative*, Berlin 2018; and, with regard to the relation between narratives and comparisons, cf. Kirsten Kramer et al., *Vergleichen und Erzählen. Zur Verflechtung zweier Kulturtechniken. Working Paper des SFB 1288 Nr. 4*, Bielefeld 2020; cf. Martin Carrier et al. (eds.), *Narratives and Comparisons: Adversaries or Allies in Understanding Science?*, Bielefeld 2021.

framed in terms of a significant difference over time. Narratives of change thus invariably involve comparisons between times: they might relate a past to the present, a present to the future, the past to the future, or, in one token, past, present, and future. What makes a significant difference over time is often subject to debate. Narratives of change in this sense are selective: they highlight some variations over time, rather than others, and they imbue these variations with meaning by framing them as politically relevant.

Politics is ultimately always about decisions that need to be taken in the *present*. Narratives of change inform contemporary (foreign) policy debates and decisions by relating the present to a past and/or to a future. In an abstract sense, here the past always takes the form of “lessons learned,” and the future the form of some future state of affairs. In an equally abstract sense, one could say that these narratives of change constitute the ongoing practice of relating, in Koselleck’s sense, a “space of experiences” (“Erfahrungsraum”) to a “horizon of expectation” (“Erwartungshorizont”).¹⁴ Of course, and put in even more abstract Luhmannian terms, such relating practices are always centred on the present. Ultimately, they can never be about past or future presents, but they select from, and then relate between, a multitude of present pasts and present futures.¹⁵

This selection and relation could, in principle, be done in many ways. However, we argue that it is possible to identify at least three different storytelling practices that are prominently used in political (as well as academic) debates about world politics. Each storytelling practice involves a particular way of comparing the past, present and future:

- Firstly, *periodization*: the emphasis here is very much on breaking points (and thus quite close to a general understanding and framing of change as breakpoint change, as alluded to above). Breaking points end old and begin “new eras,” and the future is characterized precisely by *not* being the same as, or even only a mere continuation of, the past.¹⁶
- Secondly, the invocation of *historical “laws”* or “regularities”: the emphasis here is on recurring historical patterns, such as the “rise and fall of great powers,” which hold lessons for contemporary politics in order to repeat past successes or avoid past mistakes. The difference between invoking “regularities” and “laws” might

14 Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeit*, Frankfurt am Main 1989, 349–374.

15 Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen der Moderne*, Opladen 1992, 129–147.

16 For a discussion of periodization as a practice of making sense of change, cf. Angelika Epple, Periodization in Global History: The Productive Power of Comparing, in: Mathias Albert/Tobias Werron (eds.), *What in the World? Understanding Global Social Change*, Bristol 2021, 43–61.

often appear to be gradual, yet it might also be categorical, particularly when the laws referred to are connected to religious/eschatological motives.

- Thirdly, stories about *future worlds*: stories about the future can be told in various ways: through the anticipation—e.g., in the form of foresight or forecasting practices—of what a specific future or range of possible futures will look like, through utopian or dystopian novels, or through normative arguments about how world politics should be practiced or organized in the future. In political debates, the anticipatory and normative dimensions will more often than not be woven together.
- While these three ideal-typical storytelling practices can sometimes be found in almost pure form, very often they are combined with each other. Quite probably, the more elaborate and complex the narrative, the less likely it is that a focus on only one of these ideal types can be found.

If change means a significant difference *over time*, this raises the question of both the analytically useful and the practically “real” temporal *scope* of the narratives and their underlying storytelling practices that is worth considering when one is interested in analyzing their role in world political change. Remembering the basic (temporal) reference structure of the narratives in question seems of utmost importance in this respect: the temporal horizon of references to the past and the future is, in principle, completely open. It can extend to a significant event that happened a week ago or to lessons learned during thousands of years of oppression; it can pertain to questions of how to deal with some issues over the coming winter months as much as to the issue of how to fulfill the holy destiny of the motherland.

In any case, in the storytelling practices of political actors, these references will invariably be related to a present that is necessarily defined as being the time horizon of what could be called “political actionability.” Politics is about managing change—that is, decisions about how to react to, but also foster and (re)shape, change. While this might be done in the form of an important decision taken by a single head of government in any given hour of the day, it might also be done by taking a few years in a bureaucracy in order to draft a plan extending quite some time into the future. In all cases, however, the actors need to “create a convincing ‘story’ of the future development of the phenomena at stake”¹⁷ in order to garner the political support necessary for putting into action their proposed reactions to the change. What makes stories convincing depends on the repertoire of prevalent stories, but also on the fit between stories and commonly accepted empirical information—e.g., statistics—about the development debated. As the actors want to influence contemporary political decisions, one can expect the stories that the

17 Jens Beckert, *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations in the Economy*, in: *Theory and Society*, 42 (3/2013), 219–240, see 224.

actors tell to be stories that not only highlight world political change but also present it as world political change *amenable to contemporary political decisions*. That being said, of course what can be changed, and the associated time horizons, are themselves subject to shifting narratives. Thus, for example, even only a couple of decades ago few would have dared to tell stories about stratigraphy sequences (i.e., the “Anthropocene”) as a relevant temporal reference point for change to be affected by contemporary political decisions.

Three episodes

In the following, we use three episodes to explore how actors use these storytelling practices to identify and interpret processes of change in world politics. While the three episodes relate to different phases of world political change, our aim is neither to identify changes in the storytelling practices over time, nor to track a shift in narratives, e.g., from bipolar to multipolar visions of world politics. Rather, our aim is twofold: firstly, we want to show that while world political change can be, and has been, identified and interpreted in very different ways, storytelling practices always play a key role. We therefore selected three episodes that are instances of actors trying to make sense of world political change but that differ in key respects: in the modes that the actors chose, as well as in the understandings of world politics underpinning these modes (see table 1). Yet, despite these differences, all three episodes involve combinations of the three storytelling practices that we have outlined above.

Secondly, we want to tease out the interplay between storytelling practices and other practices that produce knowledge about phenomena such as world politics. To make their stories more convincing, actors often use storytelling practices in conjunction with other practices such as theorizing and modeling¹⁸—whether the realist way of theorizing that we mentioned in the introduction, or economic forecasting, or other kinds of trend projections. These practices help actors to relate past, present and future and thus underpin the storytelling practices. However, the storytelling practices also shape how actors theorize and model how world politics effects changes.

18 This interplay has been emphasized especially by scholars studying the formation of expectations in economies. Cf. Mary S. Morgan, What if? Models, Fact and Fiction in Economics, in: *Journal of the British Academy* 2 (2014), 231–268; cf. Jens Beckert/Richard Bronk (eds.), *Uncertain Futures: Imaginaries, Narratives and Calculation in the Economy*, Oxford 2018.

Tab. 1: *The three episodes*

	Episode 1	Episode 2	Episode 3
Actor	a political scientist	analysts from an investment bank	EU institutions
Mode	a scholarly essay on foreign policy strategy	an economic forecast	a foresight process
A change of what?	world politics understood as a realm of power politics and order management	the world economy and more specifically its pecking order (with world politics being treated as a realm of governance shaped by the rise and fall of groups of states)	the world, with world politics as a crucial dimension (and understood as a realm of interdependence, global governance and power politics)
Storytelling practices	periodization + historical regularities	future worlds + historical regularities	future worlds + periodization
Relation to theorizing and modeling	classical realist theory of world politics as basis of narrative	future story is both the product and interpretation of statistical modeling	stories of future worlds (only) in part based on statistical modeling

Episode 1: a scholar diagnosing the advent of political multipolarity

In 1968, Henry Kissinger, then a political scientist at Harvard University, published an essay on “Central Issues of American Foreign Policy” in which he argued that world politics was undergoing profound change and that US foreign policy had to adapt to this change.¹⁹ Soon afterwards, Kissinger became one of the principal architects of US foreign policy. From January 1969 to November 1975, Kissinger served as National Security Advisor in the Nixon administration, and from September 1973 to January 1977 as Secretary of State in the Nixon and then Ford administrations.²⁰

For Kissinger, the key change reshaping world politics was the advent of political multipolarity. He combined two storytelling practices—periodization and historical

19 Henry Kissinger, Central Issues of American Foreign Policy, in: Louis J. Smith/David H. Herschler (eds.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume I: Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969–1972*, Washington 2003, 21–48.

20 For two recent political biographies, cf. Bernd Greiner, *Henry Kissinger: Wächter des Imperiums*, München 2020; cf. Thomas Schwartz, *Henry Kissinger and American Power: A Political Biography*, New York 2020.

laws—to substantiate this interpretation. The essay proclaimed the beginning of a new era: “The international system which produced stability for a century collapsed under the impact of two world wars. The age of the superpowers, which temporarily replaced it, is nearing its end.”²¹ Kissinger thus told a story of world politics structured into periods with distinct features: a long period of stability in the 19th century, followed by a period of sustained crisis in the first half of the 20th century, followed by a period of military bipolarity in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by a new period of political multipolarity from the 1970s onwards. This periodization foregrounds two characteristics of world politics: firstly, the degree of stability of international order, and secondly, changes in the distribution of power. These were the characteristics that were central to Kissinger’s theoretical approach to world politics. His scholarly work was grounded in (classical) realist theorizing which conceived of world politics as a struggle over power whose dynamic stemmed from the rise and fall of powerful states and which was to some degree manageable through skillful balance-of-power politics. In his PhD dissertation Kissinger had studied exactly that: how the five great powers of the early 19th century had succeeded in creating an international order that proved to be stable for a whole century.²² The essay in this sense told a familiar story, but with a new twist: the argument that a new period was beginning that required a rethinking of balance-of-power politics.

The essay assumed, without openly discussing it, a continuity in international order: as in the 19th century, the stability of international order depended on the skillful management of the balance of power. For Kissinger, “there can be no stability without equilibrium.”²³ However, he drafted the essay not as an argument about historical continuities. Rather, he stressed that the practices of the past had to be adapted because world politics had changed. Put differently: besides periodization, the essay also involved the storytelling practice of postulating historical regularities. But the periodization qualified these continuities. Each period had its own characteristics. To be viable, balance-of-power politics had to be adapted to these characteristics.

This meant that neither the balance-of-power politics of the 19th century nor the transatlantic US “hegemony”²⁴ of the 1950s and 1960s were good models for the order management needed for the new phase of world politics. The world had changed too much. The conditions enabling the balance-of-power politics of the 19th century—in particular “stable technology,” a “multiplicity of major powers,” “limited domestic

21 Kissinger, *Central Issues*, 21.

22 Cf. Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812–22*, London 1957.

23 Kissinger, *Central Issues*, 46.

24 Kissinger, *Central Issues*, 31.

claims” and adjustable borders—were “gone forever.”²⁵ Nuclear weapons had upended the traditional understanding of the balance of power. Decolonization raised new political questions, potentially affecting the “moral balance of the world.”²⁶ Europe’s economic power was growing, ending the transatlantic US hegemony and making the world more multipolar. The upshot for Kissinger was that the US had to develop a new conception of order, one based “on political multipolarity even though overwhelming military strength will remain with the two superpowers.”²⁷ Without such a conception, he warned, “stability will prove elusive.”²⁸

Kissinger’s essay is thus an example of how the storytelling practices of periodization and historical regularities are combined to update a model of how world politics works—more specifically, how a stable international order can be created and maintained. This model is not formalized—or, for that matter, grounded in statistical analysis—but is rather a guide for foreign policy distilled from past experience through historical research and in need of revision when world politics changes in significant ways, with “significant” meaning—for a realist such as Kissinger—ways that affect the practice of balance-of-power politics.

The Nixon and Ford administrations pursued a foreign policy that was in line with Kissinger’s narrative.²⁹ They sought to stabilize military bipolarity through nuclear arms control negotiations, with the US and the Soviet Union concluding the SALT I treaty in 1972 and afterwards working on a follow-up agreement. The US, moreover, adapted to the emerging political multipolarity. It improved its relations with China. Besides, it supported the formation of the Group of Seven (G7)—which comprised Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and the US—as the new informal steering group for the world economy after the collapse of the hegemonic Bretton Woods system.

Episode 2: an investment bank pointing to the rise of the BRICs

The second episode is a report published by the investment bank Goldman Sachs. In November 2001, the Goldman Sachs analyst Jim O’Neill published a report on changes in the world economy, highlighting the rise of four “large emerging market economies” which he termed the “BRIC”: Brazil, Russia, India and China.³⁰ In

25 Kissinger, *Central Issues*, 24.

26 Kissinger, *Central Issues*, 38.

27 Kissinger, *Central Issues*, 24–25.

28 Kissinger, *Central Issues*, 24.

29 Cf. Greiner, *Wächter des Imperiums and Schwartz, Henry Kissinger and American Power*, München 2020.

30 Jim O’Neill, *Building Better Global Economic BRICs* (Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper No. 66), New York et al. 2001.

October 2003, Goldman Sachs issued another report on the BRICs, this time written by Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, which presented a forecast of the rise of the four states until the year 2050.³¹ With these reports, Goldman Sachs created the narrative of the rise of the BRICs, which gained political prominence in the following years.³²

We focus on the second report, which combined the two storytelling practices of a future story and historical regularities. The Goldman Sachs analysts were interested in investment opportunities. They did not engage in a broad discussion of world political changes, but more narrowly gauged the changing importance of different economies. They projected a profound change in the pecking order of the world economy: “in less than 40 years, the BRICs economies together could be larger than the G6 in US dollar terms”.³³ As this quote illustrates, the report framed its story of the future in terms of one grouping of states, the BRICs, overtaking another one, the G6. Both groupings were analytical constructs, rather than actually existing political groupings, with G6 used as label for the six “developed economies with GDP currently over US \$ 1 trillion”³⁴: the US, Japan, the UK, Germany, France and Italy (Canada, as the seventh G7 member, was not included because its GDP was below this threshold). The story had both an individual and a collective dimension: individually, the BRIC states were expected to overtake several of the G6 states, with only two of the G6—the US and Japan—still being “among the six largest economies”³⁵ in terms of GDP by 2050. Collectively, the BRICs were expected to supersede the G6 as the leading grouping, again in terms of GDP, in the world economy by 2040.

What underpinned this narrative was formal modeling. The two analysts developed a model of economic growth, defined as GDP growth, that presupposed three key elements: employment, capital stock, and technical progress.³⁶ They then used the model to project current trends into the future, thus calculating GDP growth rates and GDP figures for the BRIC and G6 states up until 2050. The narrative was in this sense the interpretation of the results of the modeling. The narrative, though, was not simply the product of the modeling. Rather, the interplay was more itera-

31 Dominic Wilson/Roopa Purushothaman, *Dreaming With BRICs: The Path to 2050* (Goldman Sachs Global Economic Papers No. 99), New York et al. 2003.

32 The label BRICS – the BRIC plus South Africa—became central to the narrative of “rising powers.” Cf. Ayse Zarakol, “Rise of the Rest”: As Hype and Reality, in: *International Relations* 33 (2/2019), 213–228.

33 Wilson/Purushothaman, *Dreaming With BRICs*, 1. For a practice-theoretical approach to pecking orders in world politics, see Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy*, Cambridge 2016.

34 Wilson/Purushothaman, *Dreaming With BRICs*, 3.

35 Wilson/Purushothaman, *Dreaming With BRICs*, 1.

36 Cf. Wilson/Purushothaman, *Dreaming With BRICs*, 7.

tive: the first report crafted a narrative of the rise of the BRIC that then informed the modeling of the second report, which in turn gave more substance to the narrative.

Why trust the model? The report acknowledged that long-term projections involved a “great deal of uncertainty.”³⁷ This implied that they could turn out to be wrong, as had for instance been the case with the prediction that Japan would supersede the US as the world’s biggest economy. To give their model credibility, the two analysts applied it to the past, calculating growth rates for a set of eleven developed and developing countries from 1960 to 2000. They then compared the projected growth rates with the actual GDP figures. The results, they argued, were “generally encouraging,” with the projected growth rates being “surprisingly close to the actual outcomes.”³⁸ The model, in short, was good because it was able to predict the past.

This argument hinged on an implicit, yet crucial assumption: the future would be like the past. Some states would rise, others would decline. But the underlying mechanisms—in particular the factors for economic growth—would remain the same. And because they would remain the same, the changes in the pecking order could be predicted. The story about the future was based on a story about historical regularities. It was these historical regularities that made possible the prediction of historical change.

The reports focused on the world economy, but they also spelled out the implications for world politics. Notably, the Goldman Sachs analysts proposed to change the membership of the G7 to make it more reflective of the changing world economy and more capable of governing it.³⁹ This proposal did not gain political traction. Rather than reforming the G7, the world’s biggest economies decided to supplement it with the Group of Twenty (G20) as the new informal steering committee for the world economy in the wake of the Global Economic Crisis of 2007–2008. All four BRIC states are members of the G20, as are the G7 states.⁴⁰ The G6 vs. BRIC rivalry that the Goldman Sachs report insinuated still remains a possibility, though.⁴¹ The G7 has continued to act as a political group. The BRIC states in parallel constituted themselves as a political group as well. Mirroring the G7’s practice, they met for a summit in 2009 and, after co-opting South Africa, have organized annual BRICS summits since 2010.

37 Wilson/Purushothaman, *Dreaming With BRICs*, 6.

38 Wilson/Purushothaman, *Dreaming With BRICs*, 12.

39 Cf. O’Neill, *Building Better Global Economic BRICs*, 10–11.

40 For a discussion of the transition, cf. Andrew F. Cooper, *The G20 as an Improvised Crisis Committee and/or a Contested Steering Committee for the World*, in: *International Affairs* 86 (3/2010), 741–757.

41 For the evolution of the three groups—the G7, G20 and BRICS—cf. Peter Hajnal, *Whither the G7 and G20?*, in: *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 28 (2/2022), 127–143; cf. Oliver Stritzel, *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order*, 2nd Edition, Lanham/MD 2020.

Episode 3: an international organization anticipating world political change

The third episode focuses on the foresight practices of the European Union (EU). Since 2010, the EU has established an inter-institutional foresight process to anticipate future opportunities and challenges.⁴² The process is named the “European Strategy and Policy Analysis System” (ESPAS) and involves four key institutions: Commission, Parliament, Council, and the EU’s diplomatic division, the European External Action Service. The main output is the ESPAS “Global Trends” report. The initial report, published in 2012, was written by an EU think tank, the European Union Institute for Security Studies.⁴³ The ESPAS process has since then produced two further reports, one published in 2015,⁴⁴ one in 2019.⁴⁵ ESPAS covers all policy fields that the EU deals with, and assumes that many of the trends that affect these policy fields have a global dimension. It is geared towards identifying the trends that matter most in the next 10 to 20 years and teasing out their implications for the ways in which the EU can govern the policy fields and position itself in world politics.

The “Global Trends” reports accordingly tell stories of future worlds—or, more precisely, stories about multiple, parallel processes of change and the futures these processes of change make more or less likely. The reports are informed by a broad understanding of “global trends” which encompasses various processes of change and which is not limited to world politics (which the reports treat as a realm of interdependence, global governance and power politics). Given the global nature of the trends, though, they are portrayed as affecting world politics and, in particular, the role of the EU in world politics.

The 2015 report for instance highlighted five “key global trends” and three “global revolutions.”⁴⁶ The five trends were: a richer humanity with more inequalities; a “more vulnerable process of globalization led by an ‘economic G3’” (the US, China and the EU); an industrial and technological transformation; a “growing nexus of climate change, energy and competition for resources”; and more volatile world politics characterized by “changing power, interdependence and fragile multilateralism”. The interplay of these trends, the report posited, fueled an “economic and

42 For a discussion of the history of ESPAS, cf. Eamonn Noonan, *Foresight Within the EU Institutions: The ESPAS Analysis So Far* (European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing), Brussels 2020.

43 Cf. European Union Institute for Strategic Studies, *Global Trends 2030: Citizens in an Interconnected and Polycentric World*, Paris 2012.

44 Cf. ESPAS, *Global Trends to 2030: Can the EU Meet the Challenges Ahead*, Brussels 2015.

45 Cf. ESPAS, *Global Trends to 2030: Challenges and Choices for Europe*, Brussels 2019.

46 Cf. ESPAS, *Challenges Ahead*, 15–48 (for the five global trends), 49–76 (for the three revolutions).

technological” and a “social and democratic” as well as a “geopolitical” revolution.⁴⁷ The 2019 report drew on a different conceptual language to discuss the changes, identifying seven “mega-trends”, seven “catalysts” and seven “game-changers.”⁴⁸ The overall message, though, was the same: the world was changing in profound ways and the EU had to take the right decisions to remain capable of shaping its own fate. The mega-trends and catalysts outlined the possible futures, while the game-changers captured the key political questions that “will determine the future”⁴⁹—that is, the levers through which the EU could influence the processes of change.

With regard to the relation between storytelling and modeling, the ESPAS reports sit apart from both Kissinger’s essay and the Goldman Sachs forecast. The latter have a coherent theory—of what makes international orders stable, of what makes economies grow—that informs their storytelling. In contrast, the ESPAS reports are more eclectic in their approach. Moreover, Kissinger’s storytelling did not rely on statistical trend analysis whereas the Goldman Sachs analysts based their whole narrative on it. The ESPAS reports sit somewhere in the middle. They included statistical forecasts, usually visualized in the form of graphs, to substantiate the discussions of issues such as population growth, GDP growth, and climate change. However, such modeling was used only for some trends, and the reports relied on the conceptual languages mentioned above rather than on formal modeling to map and analyze the interplay of the various processes of change.

Relatedly, the ESPAS reports turned not to historical regularities but to periodization to tease out the implications of the trends. The 2015 report framed the geopolitical revolution as the end of an era: “Asia’s rise looks set to continue and the roughly two centuries of global dominance by the European continent and the United States are drawing to a close.”⁵⁰ The 2019 report continued this theme, albeit with a different time frame: “Many analysts have already proclaimed the advent of multipolarity. They are overhasty: in fact, we are only just beginning to transit out of the post 1990 unipolar system.”⁵¹ While acknowledging the “uncertainty of the geopolitical future,”⁵² the report stressed that traditional realist-style analysis was inadequate to grasp the implications of the changing distribution of power because the nature of power was changing as well. What was emerging, the report argued,

47 The quotes are from the section titles, cf. the table of contents of ESPAS, *Challenges Ahead*.

48 Cf. the table of contents of ESPAS, *Challenges and Choices*.

49 ESPAS, *Challenges and Choices*, 6.

50 ESPAS, *Challenges Ahead*, 8.

51 ESPAS, *Challenges and Choices*, 19.

52 ESPAS, *Challenges and Choices*, 19.

was not a multipolar world but a “poly-nodal” one: an interconnected and interdependent world in which the power of states will depend not just on their military and economic resources but on their “relational influence”: their ability to leverage relationships with state and non-state actors to form and steer coalitions that can tackle global problems.⁵³

ESPAS is designed as a deliberation process “for developing a foresight thinking culture” among the EU institutions,⁵⁴ thus contributing to a shared understanding of world political change. It provides a frame for the debate about the EU’s best strategy for its future external action. In line with the reports’ message that the EU faces adverse trends—such as a decline in its relative power and a weakening of the multilateral framework favored by the EU for tackling global problems—the notion of “strategic autonomy” has become central to this debate.⁵⁵ The notion underscores the goal of the EU—to be a powerful actor in world politics capable of mastering its own fate—but also hints at the problem at the heart of the debate: the question of how the EU can be more autonomous and at the same time foster the open, interdependent and multilateral system that fits to its aims and endows it with relational power.

Conclusion

When studying world political change—or, for that matter, other forms of historical change—researchers can postulate their own yardsticks for what counts as relevant change. Alternatively, they can explore the yardsticks that practitioners (the “actors” and “storytellers”) use, implicitly or explicitly, to make sense of how the world in which they live is evolving. We argue that this reflective dimension of change—the ways in which practitioners make sense of change—is crucial for understanding how actors deal with change. Change may take place without the actors affected being aware of it. But to become a social or political issue, actors have to designate some difference(s) over time as a process of change that is relevant in some regards. In other words, they have to make temporal comparisons, highlighting differences over time, and to imbue these comparisons with meaning. In this chapter, we have teased out three storytelling practices through which they do this: periodization, historical regularities, and future worlds.

53 ESPAS, Challenges and Choices, 19.

54 Cf. Hervé Delphin, Above the Fog and the Fury: EU Strategic Policy Planning and the EU’s Future in Times of Global Uncertainty, in: *European Foreign Affairs Review* 26 (1/2021), 35–54, see 50.

55 Cf. Delphin, Above the Fog and the Fury, 44–48.

Exploring the storytelling practices that actors use to make sense of change provides deeper insights into several aspects of change. Firstly, it makes visible the contingency of processes of change. How these processes unfold often depends on how actors react to them, and these reactions in turn are shaped by the narratives that are told about them. The storytelling practices thus help to reconstruct why change unfolded in certain ways rather than others. Secondly, as practice theory emphasizes, there is a simultaneity of change and stability. By differentiating the three storytelling practices, it becomes possible to delve into how actors grapple with this simultaneity and relate continuities to changes. The three episodes highlight some of the options: changes that end continuities, changes amidst continuities, and continuities enabling the forecasting of changes. Thirdly, the episodes reveal how the actors draw on theories and modeling to reduce the uncertainty of the future, thus giving substance to their narratives. Kissinger's essay was grounded in a theory of recurring problems of order management, while the Goldman Sachs and ESPAS reports mobilized statistical trend analysis to forecast changes into the future. At the same time, the episodes also show that this reduction of uncertainty about the future was only possible because the actors were certain about the past. However, just as it is possible to tell different stories about the future, so it is possible to tell different stories about the past. Making sense of change is a process with two open ends in need of interpretation and narration: the past as much as the future.

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