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Citizenship as a Contested Global Caste Order: How Political Rhetoric Creates Symbolic Boundaries in World-System Hierarchies

Farrah Bennetⁱ and Ana Velitchkovaⁱⁱ

Abstract

This study examines how political rhetoric can reproduce and contest global citizenship hierarchies. We draw on Ana Velitchkova's framework of the global citizenship order as a caste-like system and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory to analyze the symbolic language world leaders, particularly from the United States, use to rank nations and reinforce global inequalities among citizens of different nations. Based on qualitative discourse analysis of speeches, press statements, and diplomatic exchanges during the first year of the second Trump administration, the study reveals three recurring rhetorical processes: paternalistic interventionist framing, where the U.S. casts itself as a benevolent guardian superior to lower status states; hierarchical devaluation, where nations, especially in the global periphery and their citizens are symbolically stigmatized as inferior; and discursive contestation, where people in targeted countries reclaim sovereignty and dignity. The findings show that speech acts serve as instruments of symbolic boundary-making, shaping who is deemed a "first-class" versus "second-class" global citizen. Nonetheless, the responses of people in less powerful nations challenge the legitimacy of these hierarchies and expose the contestability of symbolic power. This study demonstrates how the political language of world leaders can reflect and shape the caste-like stratification of the global citizenship order. The study offers insight into how symbolic boundaries are drawn, enforced, and resisted in the evolving world-system.

Cite as: F. Bennet and A. Velitchkova, 2026.
Citizenship as a Contested Global Caste Order: How
Political Rhetoric Creates Symbolic Boundaries in
World-System Hierarchies. *Dhaxalreeb*, 22 (1), pp.
123-149. DOI: 10.13169/Dhaxalreeb.22.1.0123



Keywords: Global caste system, World Systems Theory, Symbolic boundaries, Global inequality, Sociology

Introduction

A year after Donald Trump's second inauguration as President of the United States, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney gave a historic speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos announcing "a rupture in the world order, the end of a pleasant fiction" (2026 "Davos..."). The "pleasant fiction" Carney mourns is the liberal international order the U.S. established and led after World War II (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024). At the core of this liberal international order is the United Nations Charter promising "the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small" (UN Charter). According to Carney, the beginning of President Trump's second term marked "the beginning of a harsh reality, where geopolitics, where the large, main power, geopolitics, is submitted to no limits, no constraints" (Davos 2026). In a year, President Trump's administration dismantled the liberal international order not only in practice but also rhetorically, openly asserting "American hegemony" and demanding "subordination" by any means possible (Davos 2026). This new U.S. presidential rhetoric further "traumatized" the foreign policy establishment domestically and internationally and undermined the legitimacy of U.S. foreign policy, already damaged during President Trump's first administration (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024). At the same time, President Trump's international rhetoric in 2025 laid bare the reality of global inequalities. Examining this rhetoric, therefore, can shed light on the processes by which world hierarchies are created and symbolically maintained.

The most prominent sociological understanding of global inequalities is grounded in world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1974). Global inequalities, according to world-systems theory, emerge as a result of the dynamics in a unified capitalist world-system where economic exploitation and imperialism produce a tripartite global hierarchy. Capital accumulation and unequal exchange concentrate power and wealth in a global core. Resource extraction and exploitation produce a global periphery of weak and economically dependent regions. A semi-periphery

with features of both the core and the periphery serves as a buffer in the world-system (Wallerstein 1974). This tripartite global hierarchy results in between-country economic inequality, which in turn affects people through the national citizenship they are assigned by birth (Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009; Velitchkova 2023).

The existence of global economic inequalities has been obvious. Following World War II and decolonialization, the United Nations and its Charter, however, have maintained the symbolic equality of different countries and their people, at least nominally. The liberal international order established by the United States through the United Nations and other international organizations, rules, and norms has provided legitimacy and helped maintain the unequal global economic hierarchy. This legitimacy was achieved as much through peace and order as through nominal symbolic equality. Hence, the foreign policy establishment was shocked when the US dismantled much of the liberal international order (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024). How else can the United States (as well as other core countries) justify global inequalities and its primacy in the global core?

Racialization serves as another possible explanatory framework. President Trump has used racially charged statements about Mexican immigrants being “rapists” and bringing “drugs” and “crime” (Washington Post 2017) and referenced “shithole countries,” including majority non-white and Muslim countries, such as Afghanistan, Haiti, and Somalia (Wang 2025). The production of “racial” distinctions, according to the racialization approach, has been used to “justify” global inequalities. Du Bois (1947) argues, for example, that European imperial domination was built upon and justified through a global racial hierarchy in which “the doctrine of the Superior Race” cast white Europeans as “heaven-sent rulers of yellow, brown, and black people” worldwide; the black race was constructed as “dirty, stupid, and inevitably inferior” whereas “everything great, everything fine, everything really successful in human culture, was white” (Du Bois 1947:11, 13). The United States could imagine itself as a contemporary carrier of white European civilization, according to the racialization framework. However, while Du Bois highlights important symbolic boundary dynamics, the racialization

approach alone cannot explain President Trump's dismissive treatment of Canada and of U.S. European allies.

Velitchkova's (2023) theory of citizenship as a global caste marker offers an alternative, yet complimentary account of how global inequalities can be justified. This approach includes but is not limited to racialization. Velitchkova proposes the global institution of citizenship and the caste-like system it creates as a mechanism providing a symbolic foundation for global inequalities. According to Velitchkova's theory, nation-states exercise symbolic and physical violence to create and maintain caste-like distinctions between nation-states and their citizens. Racialized distinctions are used to produce the lowest castes in the global citizenship order (cf. Du Bois 1947). Recipients of symbolic and physical violence, in Velitchkova's theory, can contest it, as peripheral and semi-peripheral regions in the world-system can challenge their position in the global hierarchy. Following Velitchkova's (2023) theory, we expect that the U.S. administration can justify global inequalities by asserting caste-like distinctions between core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral nations and their citizens. We also expect, however, that this justification would be contested.

The political rhetoric employed by the U.S. administration and its challengers to justify or oppose global inequalities represents "boundary work" (Hofius and Kranke 2025; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002, 2013). International relations scholars have adopted the sociological concept of "boundary work" (Lamont and Molnár 2002) to examine the symbolic practices involved in creating and justifying both distinctions and cooperation internationally (Hofius and Kranke 2025). We take on this approach as well and propose that the political rhetoric employed by President Trump and his administration at the beginning of his second term in office represents a case of "boundary work" justifying U.S. hegemony in the contemporary world-system.

The first year of President Trump's second administration was a critical juncture for the dismantling of the liberal international order, as Carney's Davos speech indicates (Davos 2026). The same period, therefore, would be a crucial case for examining the U.S. administration's international "boundary work" and justification of global inequalities. This article examines publicly

circulated statements by President Trump in 2025 referencing foreign countries in relation to the United States. The goal of this discursive analysis is to understand how his administration's political rhetoric reflects and reinforces global hierarchies symbolically. The case is sociologically important because it illustrates how political rhetoric becomes a vehicle of symbolic power globally: it can normalize unequal global valuation of countries and their citizens, justify domination, and define who belongs to the core versus the periphery of the current world-system.

Guided by these frameworks, the study addresses three interrelated research questions:

1. How do President Trump's statements portray the United States's role in relation to other countries, and what do they reveal about the country's assumed global power?
2. In what ways, if at all, do President Trump's characterizations of foreign nations explicitly or implicitly rank them as inferior or subordinate, reinforcing a global symbolic hierarchy?
3. If so, how do leaders and publics in other countries respond to President Trump's remarks, and to what extent do these reactions challenge or renegotiate the symbolic hierarchies the U.S. President asserts?

We find Velitchkova's (2023) theory of the global citizenship order as a caste order, combined with world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1974; Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009), to be a useful framework to understand the international "boundary work" (Hofius and Kranke 2025; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002, 2013) of the second Trump administration. We argue that President Trump's 2025 statements about countries around the world function as exercises of symbolic power that project a hierarchical global order of "first-class"/core and "second-class"/peripheral countries, and, by extension, citizens. We show that President Trump's rhetoric frequently combines paternalistic claims of U.S. authority with symbolic devaluation of countries portrayed as lesser, irrelevant, or threatening. Majority non-white and Muslim countries appear to be subjected to the worst treatment, as suggested by the racialization approach (Du Bois

1947). At the same time, international responses to these remarks, whether from state leaders or official representatives, demonstrate resistance and contestation, revealing both the reach and the limits of symbolic power in the global arena. In tracing these interactions, we highlight how global inequalities are reproduced through discourse and how they are challenged by those positioned as targets of unfavorable classification.

This inquiry is a timely intervention in a period of turmoil in the world-system. The United States finds its hegemony challenged by rising semi-peripheral powers, most notably China, but also Iran. The United States' current administration is responding by anchoring itself in nationalist political rhetoric. President Trump's ideological anchor "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) operates not only as domestic political branding and strategy (McVeigh and Estep 2019) but also as a source of international symbolic boundary-making (Hofius and Kranke 2025; cf. Wimmer 2002). Internationally, MAGA functions as a globally intelligible claim about rank and worth, one that privileges U.S. interests while casting other nations as deficient, threatening, or undeserving. Such rhetoric can legitimate policy agendas and simultaneously project a moral imagination of a world order, where "greatness" is defined through contrast and hierarchical classification. The centrality of this political rhetoric in the U.S. administration's approach to international relations in 2025 highlights the importance of symbolic power in global affairs. In what follows, we further elaborate on our ideas and present the theoretical framework, methodology, and empirical findings supporting these ideas.

Citizenship-based Caste Distinctions in the World-System

This study is situated at the intersection of two complementary sociological frameworks dealing with global stratification: Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory and Ana Velitchkova's (2023) conceptualization of citizenship as the foundation of a global caste-like system. By synthesizing these paradigms, we develop a robust lens to examine how political rhetoric reinforces or intermittently destabilizes global hierarchies.

Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory posits a macro-sociological framework for understanding the structural persistence of global inequality. He theorizes the modern world-system as a tripartite hierarchy—comprising core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones—wherein power is concentrated through material extraction and sustained through ideological reification. Core nations dominate economically, militarily, and ideologically, while peripheral countries are structurally subordinated and economically dependent. Importantly, Wallerstein stresses that this hierarchy is not merely material, it is justified and perpetuated through cultural and ideological means. The hierarchical structure of the world-system is sustained by means of cultural and ideological integration through the state machinery and national cultures.

Political rhetoric, in this approach, plays a central role in legitimating the dominant position of core powers and rationalizing the marginalization of other countries. It functions as a mechanism for hegemonic naturalization, framing the marginalization of peripheral states as an inevitable byproduct of civilizational or stability-oriented imperatives. By casting core powers as architects and models of civilization, such narratives sanitize systemic exploitation. Global dominance is recast as the protection of a desirable global order. This was the case with the international liberal order.

While Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory provides a macro-structural approach to global stratification, Velitchkova's (2023) global citizenship caste order theory highlights the personal dimensions and individual experiences in the context of a global hierarchy. In Velitchkova's (2023) formulation, citizenship functions as a caste marker determining one's structural position within the international order. Citizenship is an ascriptive, largely immutable status that dictates a person's differential access to mobility, rights, security, and recognition. The "first-class" citizenship enjoyed by core-nation subjects is maintained through state-sanctioned closure mechanisms, including passports, borders, and exclusionary immigration policies. The resulting regime of legalized discrimination produces durable distinctions between "valuable" and "devalued" lives and related national identities.

In Velitchkova's framework, political rhetoric is involved in the process of creating caste-like distinctions among citizens of different nation-states. Political rhetoric is used to ascribe symbolic value or deficiency to entire populations based on national origin. The caste-like distinctions of the global citizenship order, in a sense, become the very justification for global inequalities. Racialized devaluation, according to this approach, can support the production of the lowest castes in the global citizenship order (cf. Du Bois 1947).

By synthesizing Velitchkova's and Wallerstein's frameworks, this study conceptualizes political rhetoric as a medium through which global hierarchies are constructed, reinforced, or resisted. Political rhetoric does not merely reflect geopolitical relationships; it helps constitute them by defining the moral worth and global standing of nations and their citizens. The next section elaborates on the role of political rhetoric in constructing global symbolic boundaries and hierarchies.

Political Rhetoric and Global Boundary Making

In a globalized world, the words of political leaders travel rapidly across borders and shape how nations and the people associated with them are imagined, evaluated, and ranked on the world stage. Political rhetoric does not merely describe international relations; it can actively produce symbolic boundaries and symbolic hierarchies that influence who is treated as legitimate, valuable, or expendable in global social life.

Symbolic boundary scholarship offers insights into how political rhetoric is involved in the production and reproduction of symbolic hierarchies, a crucial dimension of the (re)production of global inequality. Discursive practices can help construct social boundaries on both the national and the international scale. Wimmer, for example, suggests that cultural closure, in the form of adopting a national language and developing historical narratives can be used to include some in the national citizenry and exclude others (2002). Institutionalization of such practices, in Wimmer's view, can lead to social hierarchies within nation-states (2002). Wimmer's later work highlights the dynamism of social boundary development and identifies mechanisms by which social boundaries can be transformed, namely by

expanding or contracting who belongs to the in-group, and by blurring, shifting, or re-evaluating boundaries between groups (2013).

Hofius and Kranke (2025) examine the notion of “boundary work” (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002, 2013) at the global level, specifically in international relations. They argue that boundary work is an organizing principle of global politics that involves continuous practices of making, maintaining, and unmaking symbolic and territorial boundaries. A crucial aspect of Hofius and Kranke’s (2025) argument is that boundary work is not unidirectional, as in creating more boundaries, but can also involve cooperation that stretches national sovereignty. This argument implies that national leaders have a choice in the kind of boundary work they can engage in. The symbolic equality between nation-states established by the UN Charter represents a blurring of the symbolic boundaries between nation-states, in Wimmer’s terms (2013). This is why the reintroduction of symbolic boundaries between nation-states that U.S. President Trump initiated is so significant.

Starting with the first Trump administration, U.S. foreign policy took a dramatic turn (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024), which only accelerated in the second Trump administration. Instead of global cooperation, the Trump administration has advanced an “America First” rhetoric. The foreign policy establishment questioned the legitimacy of such populist rhetoric in international relations and sought to restore U.S. global leadership in promoting global symbolic equality by framing Trump’s “America First” agenda as a deviation from internationalist norms (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024). With the second Trump administration, the “America First” rhetoric has returned with a vengeance. Barely recovered from the trauma of the first Trump administration (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024), the U.S. foreign policy establishment was dismantled during the first year of President Trump’s second administration. With it went the liberal international order discussed at the beginning of this piece. The U.S. President’s rhetoric regarding foreign nations during this period thus represents an unadulterated form of his and his administration’s views of the world, namely as a symbolic hierarchy.

President Trump's foreign policy stance has a domestic origin. President Trump's rhetoric in the international arena is a populist tool aiming at creating a sense of crisis to maintain domestic support (Hall 2021). President Trump's radical foreign policy discourse consists of constructing international "enemies" rhetorically to produce a sense of perpetual crisis domestically (Hall 2021). This discourse, rooted in MAGA ideology, establishes symbolic boundaries between a righteous "America" and threatening outsiders, reinforcing national sovereignty while diminishing global interdependence.

Accounts of the MAGA movement emphasize its grievances, expressed in rhetoric of loss of honor and status (McVeigh and Estep 2019; Koenig and Mendelberd 2025). In an ethnographic study of the MAGA movement, Koenig and Mendelberd (2025), for example, find that President Trump's supporters seek to reclaim dignity and honor by drawing sharp moral boundaries between "real Americans" and elites and foreign others. MAGA activists are hostile to others because they feel symbolically excluded and seek to reify symbolic boundaries that preserve the status of white, "real Americans."

A hostile and exclusionary foreign policy rhetoric is a logical extension of populist domestic politics rooted in a sense of permanent crisis and threat to status, domestically and internationally. As a reaction to perceived symbolic exclusion and devaluation, the MAGA movement and its leadership reassert a desire to return to "previous" greatness. The symbolic classification asserted by President Trump in his foreign policy pronouncements during the first year of his second administration represent a distilled version of contested global hierarchies of worthiness. His foreign policy discourse is an effort to reinforce these hierarchies of worthiness by drawing symbolic boundaries in the interest of the MAGA movement, on behalf of the U.S. as a global hegemon in crisis.

The empirical portion of this study, to which we turn next, examines the features of the symbolic hierarchies constructed and contested through international political rhetoric initiated by U.S. President Trump in 2025. Based on world-systems theory, we expect President Trump's rhetoric to reflect the tripartite structure of the world-system, with the U.S. at the center of the core. Based

on the theory of citizenship as a global caste marker, we further expect that people's symbolic position in the President's symbolic classification would be based on their national citizenship. Racialized devaluation would be reserved for the lowest citizenship castes globally. To reiterate, rhetorical practices particularly from core powers like the U.S. do not merely describe global relationships; they actively construct them by assigning value, status, and legitimacy to different nations and their citizens.

Methodology

Research design

This study uses a qualitative, theory-informed thematic analysis of political rhetoric to examine how U.S. presidential speech produces symbolic hierarchies of belonging and exclusion based on citizenship in global discourse. The empirical focus is President Trump's publicly reported statements made in 2025 regarding multiple countries and geopolitical issues, analyzed alongside documented responses from foreign governments and publics. Rather than treating political speech as merely descriptive, we analyze it as performative: rhetoric is approached as a form of symbolic power that can legitimate intervention, devalue targets, and provoke contestation across borders.

Data sources and corpus construction

We constructed a corpus of widely reported cases of rhetorical engagement by President Trump regarding different countries and reactions by governments and the public in these countries in 2025. For each case, we compiled: (1) direct, attributable quotations from President Trump, excerpted from publicly available political statements made in 2025, and (2) responses directly addressing those statements, where available (e.g., foreign government statements, official spokesperson remarks, or widely reported public backlash). Materials were drawn from publicly accessible sources such as official remarks, social media posts, and reputable news reporting that reproduces direct quotations and contextual details (date, venue, and immediate political context). Each case was assembled into a standalone

document file to maintain traceability between quotes, context, and attribution.

To support comparative analysis, each document was organized around the same internal structure: a brief contextual note, a set of dated quotations attributed to President Trump, and any corresponding reactions or rebuttals reported in relation to those quotations. This standardized formatting allowed us to compare rhetorical patterns across cases while preserving the specificities of each case (e.g., border security, sanctions, war, trade, migration).

Cases were organized by country/topic file (e.g., Mexico, Venezuela, China, Iran, Ukraine, Somalia, Lesotho) and by broader slogan-based discourse (e.g., “Make America Great Again”). The primary unit of analysis was the meaningful rhetorical segment, defined as a discrete statement (or short cluster of sentences) that expressed a coherent claim, justification, evaluation, or demand. In practice, this usually corresponded to one direct quotation or one paragraph-length segment in which a position was articulated. When a longer passage contained multiple rhetorical moves (e.g., both devaluation and intervention justification), the text was segmented into separate excerpts to ensure analytic precision.

Analytical framework

The analysis operationalized a three-theme framework designed to capture how political rhetoric constructs global hierarchy and citizenship boundaries. These themes were theoretically informed and applied consistently across cases:

1. **Paternalistic Interventionism:** rhetorical moves that frame the United States as protector, disciplinarian, manager, or moral guardian of other nations, often presenting control or intervention as responsibility, security, or “help.”
2. **Hierarchical Devaluation:** rhetorical moves that symbolically lower the status of nations or populations through ridicule, stigmatization, criminalization, delegitimation of sovereignty, or claims of inferiority/irrelevance.
3. **Global Resistance and Contestation:** rhetorical moves in which targeted states, publics, or international actors reject,

rebut, retaliate, or otherwise contest the hierarchy implied by U.S. political speech, often through sovereignty claims, moral counter-framing, or policy responses.

This framework was used to analyze not only what was said, but what the speech act accomplished socially—especially how it reproduced or challenged symbolic boundaries between “deserving” and “undeserving” nations, “legitimate” and “illegitimate” political subjects, and “core” and “peripheral” positions in global status order.

Project organization, coding procedure, and analysis in ATLAS.ti
We organized our data and conducted the qualitative analysis using the software ATLAS.ti. ATLAS.ti provides a transparent environment for organizing documents, creating coded excerpts, and retrieving evidence systematically across cases.

All case files were imported into a single ATLAS.ti project. Documents were grouped by case (country/topic) to enable cross-case comparisons. This step ensured that later outputs (e.g., tables and excerpt reports) could be filtered by case and used to support comparative claims. Coding was conducted in three iterative steps.

Coding began with segmentation and quotation creation. We first identified analytically meaningful segments and created quotations in ATLAS.ti for each segment. Segmentation prioritized rhetorical coherence rather than length; most quotations consisted of one statement or one short paragraph.

Second, thematic coding was conducted. Each quotation was coded with one primary theme from the three-theme framework (Paternalistic Interventionism, Hierarchical Devaluation, or Global Resistance/Contestation). To preserve interpretive clarity and avoid code inflation, we applied a one-quotation/one-theme rule. When a passage contained multiple themes, it was split into separate quotations and coded accordingly.

Finally, we refined codes and categories and checked for consistency. After initial coding, we revisited coded excerpts to check for internal consistency, especially in borderline cases where devaluation and intervention framing overlapped. Code definitions were refined in code comments to document

inclusion/exclusion rules and improve stability of interpretation across the dataset.

Throughout coding, analytic memos were used to record emerging patterns (e.g., recurring logics of “protection,” common devaluation strategies, or typical forms of rebuttal). These memos functioned as a running record of interpretive decisions and helped connect empirical excerpts to the paper’s theoretical argument.

Analytic outputs

ATLAS.ti tools were used to generate and verify cross-case patterns in two primary ways. First, for theme-by-case comparisons. Document-based comparisons were used to examine how frequently and in what contexts each theme appeared across cases. This supported claims about variation (e.g., which contexts most often produced devaluation versus paternalism, and where resistance emerged most explicitly). Second, for excerpt retrieval for writing. We produced theme-based quotation reports (all excerpts coded under each theme) to build the Findings section transparently. This ensured that interpretive claims were grounded in traceable textual evidence and that quotations could be selected systematically rather than opportunistically.

Analytic rigor and ethical considerations

Several strategies were used to strengthen analytical rigor. First, the corpus construction process prioritized verifiable public statements and clear attribution (date, venue, and source context). Second, coding followed a documented codebook with stable definitions and memo-based justifications for key interpretive choices. Third, we conducted iterative recoding and consistency checks on earlier segments after later insights emerged, reducing drift in code application. Together, these practices created an audit trail linking raw statements to themes and ultimately to analytic claims.

All analyzed materials are publicly available statements and public reactions reported in the public record; the study does not involve human subject recruitment, private data, or interventions. Ethical emphasis therefore centered on accurate attribution,

careful contextualization, and avoiding decontextualized quotation.

Limitations

This study analyzes a curated corpus of public statements and reported reactions rather than the full universe of political speech. As such, the analysis emphasizes interpretive depth and theoretical contribution over exhaustiveness. Additionally, reliance on publicly reported quotations means the dataset reflects both the speaker's rhetoric and the media/official documentation through which that rhetoric is circulated. These limitations are addressed by transparent sourcing and by treating the corpus as evidence of globally circulating political discourse rather than a complete record of all utterances.

Findings

Using qualitative discourse analysis, we examined President Donald Trump's 2025 public statements referencing foreign countries, as reported in official transcripts, press interviews, and widely circulated news media, alongside official reactions from foreign state leaders and international organizations. Employing the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti for analyzing our data, we revealed three central rhetorical themes across the political discourse: (1) paternalistic interventionism, (2) hierarchical devaluation, and (3) discursive contestation. This analysis applies Velitchkova's (2023) model of citizenship as a global caste-like marker and Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems framework to understand how President Trump's rhetoric performs classification work that reinforces global stratification.

Paternalistic Interventionism

A first dominant theme in President Trump's 2025 rhetoric is paternalistic framing: the United States appears as the deciding authority, moral guardian, or "manager" of other nations' futures. In this framing, U.S. action is presented as inherently rational, necessary, and beneficial even when coercive and while the agency of other countries is minimized. This is not merely a policy stance; it is a classificatory stance. By speaking as if U.S. preferences are synonymous with security, order, and freedom,

President Trump asserts a global symbolic hierarchy in which American standards and actions define legitimacy. In world-systems terms, it is a discursive mechanism through which a core actor normalizes domination as responsibility (Wallerstein 1974). In global caste terms, it is a symbolic status claim: high-status citizenship (core citizenship) is portrayed as naturally entitled to supervise lower-status polities (Velitchkova 2023).

A paternalistic posture is visible in Trump's recurring treatment of Canada as an entity that should be absorbed under U.S. authority. In a nationally televised interview aired during the Super Bowl preshow, Trump stated that he was serious about wanting Canada to become the 51st state, explicitly justifying annexation through U.S. economic "loss" narratives and claims that Canada benefits disproportionately from American protection and trade (Associated Press 2025). The rhetorical move is paternalistic because it frames absorption not as domination but as rational "fixing" of an imbalanced relationship: the United States appears as the adult correcting an arrangement that allegedly enables Canadian dependency. This logic works through symbolic boundary-making: Canada is not treated as a peer sovereign with equal standing, but as a near-domestic subordinate whose existence is acceptable only insofar as it aligns with U.S. interests (Associated Press 2025).

Paternalism becomes even clearer when President Trump's talk of annexation is paired with coercive economic tools. On March 4, 2025, President Trump's tariffs against Canada took effect and triggered immediate retaliation, with Canada's prime minister calling the policy "a very dumb thing to do" and describing the U.S. justification as false (Reuters 2025b). Trump's narrative surrounding tariffs repeatedly casts the U.S. as correcting others' failure especially around border security and fentanyl thereby presenting punitive measures as parental discipline rather than interstate dysfunction or conflict (Reuters 2025a; Reuters 2025b). The United States appears as the only legitimate judge of compliance, and other states appear as actors who must "do better" under U.S. supervision. This is paternalistic interventionism in symbolic, and the right to discipline becomes a marker of rank in the global order.

A second strong illustration of paternalistic interventionism is President Trump's discourse on Greenland. In 2025 reporting, Trump is quoted telling Greenland that the United States would "make you rich," and insisting the U.S. would acquire it "one way or another" (Reuters 2025c). The logic is overtly hierarchical: the U.S. frames itself as the benefactor offering wealth and security, while Greenland is positioned as an object to be acquired rather than a polity with its own self-determination. Even when couched as an "offer," the rhetorical structure is paternalistic because it assumes U.S. decision-making authority over another territory's future. Domination is framed as generosity, and coercion is framed as inevitability justified by higher purposes, an ideological move consistent with core power behavior in the world-system (Wallerstein 1974; Reuters 2025c).

Paternalistic framing also appears in President Trump's approach to war and diplomacy, where he positions the United States as the principal architect of "solutions" that others must accept. For example, Reuters reporting on March 11, 2025, describes Trump expressing hope Russia would accept a ceasefire plan developed by American and Ukrainian officials and indicating Zelensky would be invited back to the White House (Reuters 2025d). This is not simply a peace initiative; it is a staged narrative of U.S. managerial authority. The story is told in a way that places the U.S. at the center designing the plan, inviting leaders, and shaping acceptable outcomes while the sovereignty and priorities of the directly affected country (Ukraine) become secondary to the U.S. performance of brokerage. In symbolic terms, the U.S. speaks as the actor with the power to convene legitimacy. In world-systems terms, it is the core presenting itself as the indispensable political center (Wallerstein 1974; Reuters 2025d).

Finally, paternalistic framing appears in Trump's rhetoric regarding Venezuela, where coercive measures are justified through claims of global security and moral policing. In December 2025, Trump announced what Reuters describes as a "total and complete blockade" of sanctioned oil tankers entering or leaving Venezuela, justifying escalation through allegations of terrorism, trafficking, and criminality linked to the Maduro government (Reuters 2025e). Here, paternalism operates through

the language of protection: the U.S. frames itself as safeguarding international order and moral security, implying that Venezuela's sovereignty is conditional and can be overridden by U.S. definitions of threat. Even when the policy is materially coercive, the rhetoric asserts legitimacy by positioning the U.S. as the guardian enforcing proper global conduct. Within the caste-like global citizenship system, higher-status states can more easily present coercion as "responsibility," while lower-status states are framed as objects of discipline (Velitchkova 2023).

Hierarchical Devaluation

A second major theme is hierarchical devaluation, where President Trump's rhetoric ranks countries as irrelevant, dirty, criminal, or beneath respect thus producing a symbolic hierarchy of national worth. If paternalistic framing is "we know what's best," hierarchical devaluation is "you do not matter / you are inferior." These statements do not merely insult individual leaders; they attach stigma to entire national populations and treat some nations and their citizens as naturally disposable. In a caste-like global order, stigma "sticks" to citizenship status, shaping how entire groups are imagined and treated as "impure" (Velitchkova 2023). These rhetorical moves also create symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002) by defining who belongs to the category of "serious" nations and who is cast outside it.

A widely reported example occurred in President Trump's address to Congress, where he mocked foreign aid by referring to funding for the African nation of Lesotho and adding that it was a place "which nobody has ever heard of," prompting laughter (Reuters 2025f). The sociological significance is not simply that the line is dismissive; it performs global ranking. Lesotho is positioned as so low in world importance that it becomes a punchline. This is a core leader treating a peripheral state as inherently insignificant, an ideological gesture that mirrors material inequality and contributes to symbolic marginalization (Wallerstein 1974; Reuters 2025f).

Hierarchical devaluation also appears through racialized and impurity-coded language that frames some nations as contaminated sources of disorder. Reuters reporting from

December 11, 2025, describes President Trump calling Somalia “filthy, dirty, disgusting, ridden with crime,” and adding that “the only thing they’re good at is going after ships,” invoking piracy (Reuters 2025g). This is not a neutral description; it is symbolic boundary-making through moral contamination. By describing an entire national origin group in terms of dirt and disgust, Trump invokes rhetorical impurity, a mechanism that casts populations outside the moral community of legitimate, “clean,” or “civilized” membership. In citizenship politics, such metaphors historically justify exclusion, punishment, and social closure (Wimmer 2002; Velitchkova 2023). Within the caste-like global order, impurity discourses help stabilize rank by making inequality appear like common sense (“of course they are inferior; look how they are described”) (Velitchkova 2023).

Another major site of hierarchical devaluation in 2025 is President Trump’s rhetoric about trade partners and transnational crises, especially fentanyl. Reuters reporting on March 4, 2025, describes tariffs on Canada and Mexico alongside increased duties on China, framed as pressure to address fentanyl flows into the U.S. (Reuters 2025a). Even when the policy debate is technical, the rhetorical structure implies moral ranking: other states are blamed as negligent or complicit actors whose failures justify U.S. punishment. In this framework, the U.S. is portrayed as a victim of others’ wrongdoing, while targeted countries become morally downgraded as irresponsible suppliers of danger. This moral narrative reinforces global stratification by associating legitimacy with the core and instability or threat as distance from the core increases (Wallerstein 1974; Reuters 2025a).

Hierarchical devaluation is also visible in the language of illegitimacy directed at the Venezuelan state. Reuters reporting on the seizure of a sanctioned oil tanker describes Trump confirming the seizure and the episode escalating tensions with Caracas (Reuters 2025h). This public confirmation of seizure followed by rhetorical escalation helps transform material coercion into a moral story in which Venezuela is framed as an illegitimate actor outside normal rules. The country becomes symbolically classified as criminal and thus as a legitimate target for exceptional treatment. This classification stigmatizes Venezuelan citizenship itself, marking it as unworthy of

protection and thereby justifying a global caste distinction in rights and recognition (Velitchkova 2023; Reuters 2025h).

Overall, these forms of hierarchical devaluation do not merely reflect existing inequalities, they (re)produce them. They create a global common sense in which some countries are laughable, some are contaminating, and some are disposable. These rhetorical hierarchies normalize global stratification and consolidate the core-periphery distinction central to the modern world-system (Wallerstein 1974; Velitchkova 2023). Racialized impurity rhetoric is reserved for those ranked lowest in the global symbolic hierarchy (cf. Du Bois 1947).

Discursive Contestation

The third theme is discursive contestation: public resistance by foreign leaders, ministries, and international organizations that reject President Trump's classificatory hierarchy. Contestation matters because global symbolic stratification is not merely imposed; it is also interpreted, negotiated, and at times challenged by the very actors it aims to subordinate. In a world-system marked by uneven power, discursive pushback offers a window into how the ideological dimensions of core-periphery dominance can be confronted (Wallerstein 1974). At the same time, Velitchkova's (2023) framework helps reveal how actors positioned as holders of "lower-caste" citizenship can reject the stigma attached to them and assert dignity, autonomy, and equal standing.

Canada's reaction to the March 2025 tariffs illustrates contestation as both discourse and countermeasure. Reuters reporting documents Trudeau calling the tariffs "a very dumb thing to do," announcing retaliatory tariffs, and describing Trump's fentanyl justification as untrue (Reuters 2025b). Canada also pursued institutional contestation through global trade mechanisms, including WTO consultation requests (Reuters 2025i). These acts reasserted equal standing through the language of international law, reciprocity, and the rules-based order. Rather than accepting the legitimacy of U.S. paternalism, Canadian leaders classified the move as irrational and unjustified, effectively rejecting the United States' attempt to act as global disciplinarian.

A parallel form of contestation appears in the European Union's response to U.S. tariffs. Reuters reports EU leadership vowing "firm and proportionate countermeasures," explicitly rejecting unilateral U.S. authority to impose hierarchical trade discipline (Reuters 2025j). The European Commission also issued a formal statement emphasizing that unjustified tariffs would not go unanswered (European Commission 2025). Here, contestation affirms the EU's status as a co-equal actor in global economic governance and challenges the implied paternalistic and devaluating stance of U.S. dominant rhetoric in global trade. These statements do not simply express grievance; they offer a counter-claim to legitimacy within the world-system.

Discursive contestation is also evident in responses to insult-based devaluation. Reuters reporting on Lesotho notes officials expressing offense and defending the country's legitimacy after Trump's remark that "nobody has ever heard of" the country (Reuters 2025f). The insult operates as an attempt to symbolically erase a peripheral nation from the imagined community of global actors. The response thus becomes a struggle over visibility and worth, an insistence that Lesotho's sovereignty and recognition are not contingent upon U.S. acknowledgment.

Somalia's response provides an even clearer illustration of how contestation targets the moral logic behind stigmatizing language. After Trump's remarks describing Somalis as "filthy" and "disgusting," Reuters reports Somalia's defense minister rejecting the characterization and urging Trump to focus on U.S. responsibilities instead (Reuters 2025g). Rather than internalizing symbolic impurity, the Somali response reclaims moral standing and re-narrates national identity in terms of resilience and dignity. Within Velitchkova's (2023) framework, this act directly challenges the caste-like stigma imposed on Somali citizenship by asserting equal human worth and national pride.

Venezuela's reactions show contestation framed in the language of sovereignty and international law. After the U.S. seized a sanctioned oil tanker, Reuters reports Venezuelan officials calling the action "blatant theft" and pledging to denounce it before international organizations (Reuters 2025k). In response to the announced blockade, Reuters similarly reports Venezuela condemning the move in anti-imperial terms and

highlighting its illegality (Reuters 2025e). These statements invert the moral classification embedded in U.S. discourse: instead of Venezuela being the deviant, the United States is recast as violating international norms. Legal scholars noted that the use of the term “blockade” raised serious questions under international law, further reinforcing the legitimacy of Venezuelan contestation (Just Security 2025; Reuters 2025e).

Across cases, discursive contestation does not dissolve the structures of global inequality, but it does expose the fragility of hierarchical narratives. States like Canada, Somalia, and Venezuela refused to passively accept devaluation and instead mobilized law, sovereignty claims, and dignity narratives to push back against symbolic demotion. Within a world-system marked by entrenched core-periphery inequalities, such acts of symbolic resistance remind us that global hierarchy is not a static structure; it is a site of ideological struggle and symbolic negotiation.

Conclusion

Our empirical analysis shows that, in 2025, the first year of President Trump’s second term in office, the President used political rhetoric aimed at reinforcing U.S. dominance on the world stage. This was a fundamental departure from the “pleasant fiction” (Davos 2026) of sovereign equality among nations and their citizens advanced by the UN Charter. However, this domineering rhetoric created backlash revealing the fragility of the country’s dominance. Through what we call paternalistic interventionism, President Trump presented the United States as a stern global caretaker, suggesting that other countries or territories, like Canada or Greenland, would be better off under U.S. control. Also, the President’s comments often involved hierarchical devaluation of other nations, praising those who fell in line and insulting or belittling others, like Lesotho or Somalia. Such international boundary work (Hofius and Kranke 2025; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002, 2013) supports a vision of the world, according to which the U.S. sits at the top. This discursive effort is consistent with Velitchkova’s (2023) theory of the global citizenship order as a caste-like system and with Wallerstein’s (1974) model of an unequal world-system. President Trump’s rhetoric serves to normalize a global caste

order where opportunities and recognition align with U.S. interests and where racialized devaluating discourse is reserved for the lowest global citizenship castes (Du Bois 1947; Velitchkova 2023).

President Trump's rhetorical strategy did not go unchallenged, however. His openly domineering rhetoric provoked strong responses, not only from other core countries, but also from less powerful countries in the global periphery. Recurring instances of discursive contestation from both traditional allies like Canada and the European Union and adversarial nations like Somalia and Venezuela demonstrate that global symbolic hierarchies are not static structures but sites of continuous symbolic struggle. Countries pushed back against their symbolic devaluation, defending their sovereignty and demanding equal treatment and respect. Canada rejected the idea of becoming a U.S. state. Leaders across Europe and Asia promised countermeasures against U.S. tariffs. Even small nations like Lesotho spoke out to defend their national dignity. In doing so, they all questioned President Trump's rhetorical claim to global superiority. Such reactions highlight the inherent volatility of symbolic power.

The evolving world-system appears to be a space of both profound inequality and persistent resistance. While the "America First" motto of President Trump's administration may have appealed to its domestic supporters, it backfired internationally. Paired with a broad dismantling of U.S. contributions to global, liberal infrastructures, it produced a counter-narrative of U.S. arrogance, weakening U.S. influence abroad. Ultimately, the symbolic struggles of 2025 illustrate how powerful world leaders can deploy political rhetoric to enforce a caste-like symbolic hierarchy globally, while targets of such classificatory efforts have agency to challenge the symbolic attacks on their legitimacy. The second year of the second Trump administration, 2026, the time of this writing, has seen escalation of global conflict and its expansion from the symbolic arena to the arena of interstate violence. President Trump appears to have realized that U.S. dominance cannot be maintained through belligerent rhetoric alone. What comes next is likely to be more conflict and more uncertainty.

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