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Joslyn Barnhart. "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa." *Security Studies* 25:3 (2016): 385-419. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1195620>

Review by **Brian Blankenship**, Columbia University

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International relations scholars have long recognized the importance of status concerns in motivating state behavior.¹ However, surprisingly little work has disentangled status from its association with the distribution of power in the international system to identify clear conditions under which status dissatisfaction will be more or less salient. In this article, Joslyn Barnhart addresses both questions directly, presenting a theory which argues that humiliating events drive states' efforts to assert their status through competitive behavior. She then supports her argument using evidence from French and German colonial expansion in Africa during the early 1880s. Importantly, these status concerns can occur regardless of the relative power between the state sender and receiver of the humiliation, and regardless of whether the states in question are rising or declining powers. In this way, Barnhart's article contributes to a growing literature

¹ Discussions of status considerations in international politics date back to the works of classical realists, and even to Thucydides. See, for example: Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, Sixth edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), esp. ch. 6; and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

which seeks both to explain and identify the effects of variation in the salience of status insecurity in international relations.²

Barnhart defines humiliation as the belief that a state's "position has been lowered in the eyes of others and that this lowered estimation will result in a future decline in respect and deference" (390), and can be the result of either intentional or unintentional behavior on the part of another state. She specifically focuses on territorial conquest as an avenue for status competition, and posits that humiliation triggers a desire to take new territory for two reasons. The first is purely emotional; the feeling of disrespect triggers anger that leads the humiliated party to behave more aggressively and seek revenge. The second is partly socio-psychological and partly instrumental; states will seek to counterbalance the humiliation with an act of strength in order to avoid being seen as weak. In her theory, states ideally prefer to enact revenge against the party that humiliated them, but when this is impossible due to inferior capabilities, humiliated states will assert their status at the expense of third parties' territory.

This dynamic, Barnhart argues, is what best explains French and German behavior in the early years of what became the 'Scramble for Africa.' Barnhart studies the French decisions to expand into Tunisia in 1881 and Congo in 1882, as well as the German colonization of Cameroon, Togo, and Angra Pequena in 1884. She shows that humiliation drove expansion in each case—France's at the hands of Germany 1870-1871, and then again by Britain in 1882, and Germany's at the hands of Britain in 1883-1884.

After its 1871 defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, France sought to reassert its status as a great power, and colonizing Tunisia represented a way for it to do so, as revenge against Germany was impossible due to their asymmetry in capabilities. Barnhart ties its subsequent expansion into the Congo in 1882, in turn, to Britain's unilateral occupation of Egypt that year, which violated France's view of itself as the predominant power in Egypt. Though Barnhart does not delve as deeply into the Congo case, she argues the expansion "was in all other ways rash" (409) and lacked a compelling economic, strategic, or domestic rationale aside from status considerations. Finally, the root cause of Germany's expansion into Togo and Cameroon was Britain's refusal to take seriously its request to expand its holdings. After the British denied his request to assert territorial control in Angra Pequena, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck reacted by colonizing not only Angra Pequena, but also Togo and Cameroon.

To make her case, Barnhart relies upon a variety of primary and secondary historical sources which suggest that French and German leaders felt humiliated at how they had been treated, and explicitly tied their humiliation to their perceived need for colonial expansion as a means of reasserting their status as great powers. Additionally, the sequence of events in each case suggests that the humiliations Barnhart points to were indeed the proximate causes of French and German behavior. The evidence she provides indicates that policymakers were at best skeptical of the merit of expansion until their respective humiliations.

² See Jonathan Renshon, "Losing Face and Sinking Costs: Experimental Evidence on the Judgment of Political and Military Leaders," *International Organization* 69:3 (July 2015): 659-695, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818315000107>; and Jonathan Renshon, "Status Deficits and War," *International Organization* 70:3 (July 2016): 513-550, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818316000163>. For a review of existing literature on status and reputation, see Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 371-393.

The partial exception is Tunisia. While she does imply that the delay between humiliation by Germany and expansion into Tunisia was partly the result of the 1870s being “a period of withdrawal and retrenchment for France” (399), and while she does present evidence suggesting that skeptics of colonization such as Prime Minister Jules Ferry were persuaded to reverse their positions by status-based arguments upon taking office, it is not clear that Barnhart’s theory can account for why it took France longer than a decade to respond to its humiliation.

Finally, Barnhart provides evidence to discount alternative explanations, showing that economic, strategic, and domestic political considerations did not motivate French and German expansion. Neither French nor German policymakers expected significant material benefits from the new colonies; moreover, expansion into Africa distracted both countries from their primary concerns on the European continent. France still prioritized counterbalancing German power in Europe and taking back Alsace and Lorraine, while Bismarck’s consistent opposition to colonies stemmed from his view that they were a drain on resources that could otherwise be used to maintain Germany’s position in Europe. Finally, Barnhart shows that French domestic opinion was so opposed to the Tunisian expansion that voters threw Prime Minister Ferry’s government out of office shortly thereafter as a result. Similarly, few domestic audiences within Germany clamored for colonization, aside from a handful of insignificant business interest groups.

The article’s efforts to theorize the conditions under which status concerns are salient are a valuable contribution to the literature on status and reputation in international politics. The theory’s causal logic, in tandem with the evidence Barnhart provides, raise at least four questions which could be fruitfully examined in future research.

The first regards what types of events produce feelings of humiliation, and whether they can be recognized and anticipated *a priori*. Barnhart’s evidence convincingly suggests that status considerations motivated Bismarck’s expansion into Togo and Cameroon after Britain’s perceived humiliation of Germany. However, it is not clear why Britain, in turn, did not feel humiliated by Germany’s expansion, which contradicted its prior claim that German colonization in Angra Pequena would run counter to Britain’s “legitimate rights” (412). Indeed, on the contrary, British policymakers apologized profusely for the slight. Second, how long do the effects of humiliation last, and how much territory must be taken to satisfy the grievance? These questions are of particular importance for policymakers seeking to avoid a spiral of hostility and adapt to the status concerns of other states, as they may provide insight on how to avoid unintentional humiliation, as well as how much concession is necessary to repair humiliation—and thus, perhaps, how to distinguish aggression aimed at redressing humiliation from opportunistic aggression motivated by material gain.

Third, at what level of analysis does humiliation take effect? Barnhart suggests that leaders are likely to care more about status than domestic audiences, who tend to focus narrowly on revenge, and shows that the French public cared little for African expansion and instead preferred directly focusing on Germany. But there may be conditions under which the public will be more concerned with status, particularly in light of arguments emphasizing the role popular nationalism can play in driving states to behave competitively.³

³ See, for example, Stephen van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security* 18:4 (1994): 5-39.

Fourth, to what extent is status distinct from reputation? Barnhart argues that the mechanisms by which humiliation produces status competition are partly emotional and socio-psychological. This distinguishes “humiliation” from instrumental motivations for “saving face,” which include the ability to use a reputation for toughness to achieve objectives cheaply through threats rather than through force.⁴ Indeed, her theory and evidence suggest that cheap conquest may be a way of asserting status—in contrast to rationalist arguments on reputation, which might suggest that only costly or unexpected signals of resolve or military power would be informative about the state’s intentions or capabilities.⁵ Thus, further research could parse the extent to which the socio-psychological and emotional motivations for status-seeking can be separated from instrumental motivations, as well as the conditions under which one mechanism is more or less likely to operate than another.

In this valuable analysis, Barnhart pushes the agenda of the literature on status in international politics forward with her effort to directly address the causes and consequences of status competition, her thoughtful use of historical evidence, and her attention to explicitly identifying both the mechanisms which trigger status insecurity and those which channel concern over status into aggressive international behavior.

Brian Blankenship is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at Columbia University, studying international relations. His publications have appeared in *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* and *The Journal of Intelligence History*. His research interests are in international security, and his current work focuses on alliance politics, U.S. foreign basing, and signaling and reassurance.

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⁴ The seminal works on the relationship between reputation for toughness and coercive success are: Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); and Robert L. Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). On the relationship between status and reputation, as well as the instrumental versus cognitive roots of concern with status and reputation, see also Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, “Reputation and Status as Motives for War,” 373-375 and 376-381, respectively.

⁵ James D. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41:1 (1997): 68-90.