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Rising great powers want others to recognize their greatness. They don’t always get what they want. Leading states sometimes welcome their arrival in a very elite club, satisfying their desire for status on the world stage. At other times, however, the status quo powers are unwilling to offer recognition. Much rests on such decisions, as Michelle Murray argues in *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*. Accommodating the status claims of rising great powers may help let the air out of great power competition. Rejecting them can have the opposite effect. Frustrated powers redouble their efforts, spending more on conspicuous military forces that are supposed to symbolize their growing might and risking more adventurous and confrontational foreign policies. But such actions are more likely to cause anxiety than approval, and established leaders will increasingly treat rising great powers as dangerous revisionists. What follows is spiral of fear, mistrust, and hostility.

The reviewers in this H-Diplo|RJISSF forum applaud Murray’s contribution to theory, history, and current policy debates. Her theory adds to a growing body of literature on status in world politics, informed by constructivist theory on the role of identity. Murray presents a “social tragedy of great power politics,” as Joshua Freedman puts it, by focusing on the critical process of recognition. Great powers have choices that go beyond the material balance of power. Rising great powers want more than wealth and security; they want to be seen as international leaders. How they do so is an open question. They can be provocative or patient, insistent or relaxed. Status quo leaders likewise have choices to make. Do they assume that rising powers are latent threats and work to suppress them, or do they accommodate status desires and treat them as equals?

The interplay between aspiration and recognition opens many questions for international relations theorists, who are likely to find inspiration in Murray’s book. MacDonald emphasizes its careful discussion about what recognition entails, what it means in practical terms to acquire a “major power identity.” This discussion makes it possible for researchers to identify cases of recognition, misrecognition, and nonrecognition, and to further probe the causes and consequences of each outcome. Such additional theorizing is necessary, the reviewers note, because Murray’s book begs so many good questions. Why are some rising powers satisfied with recognition as regional powers while others want to be world leaders? Why do status quo leaders ever reject rising aspirations, given the risk of triggering a dangerous spiral that might lead to conflict? And to what extent are decisions about recognition contingent on one’s own status? Does granting status to others mean sacrificing a bit of one’s own prestige? Is great power status a zero-sum game?1

Murray explores the issue of recognition through the pre-World War I experiences of rising Germany and the United States. Freedman calls these “strong and contrasting case studies: Germany’s destabilizing rise, which led into the First World War, and America’s peaceful rise, aided and abetted by an Anglo-American rapprochement.” These episodes are familiar to International Relations (IR) theorists and historians, of course, and placing them under Murray’s theoretical framework proves helpful in illustrating the importance of status and identity. Yet the chronology of the cases is also puzzling. Britain snubbed Germany in 1904 and 1912, yet the effect on relations with Berlin was different in each case. Anglo-American also goodwill evolved in fits and stops. “Why do some acts of recognition have durable and far-reaching effects,” MacDonald asks, “while others are limited and transitory?” Freedman also suggests that the cases were interconnected: Britain’s rapprochement with the United States might have made it less willing to accommodate Germany’s imperial

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aspirations. For a country that had cultivated its own global status for so long, recognizing two new rising
powers might have been more than it could bear.

These historical questions demand attention, and Murray’s theoretical approach can help. It also may shed
light on current controversies. Some see Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as evidence of its frustrated desire for
recognition as the leading power in the region; US leaders have explicitly rejected its claims to a sphere of
influence. The book also speaks to the debate over how the United States should deal with China’s rise. Not
so long ago, Washington sought to enlist China as a responsible stakeholder in the international order, as
MacDonald notes. Today it calls China a strategic competitor. Whether this reflects a social tragedy of great
power politics, and whether it leads to open conflict, remains to be seen.

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Politics* was published by Oxford University Press in 2014.
In 2021, satellite images revealed that China was building over one hundred nuclear silos, renewing once again a long-running debate over Beijing’s intentions and the inevitability of a great-power clash between China and the United States.\(^1\) This is the world that Michelle Murray identifies and seeks to explain, one where social uncertainty over what states are and how they are seen “is at the center of the ‘tragedy of great power politics’” (8). While the book largely focuses on the great power politics of the turn of the twentieth century (its cover depicts the battle of Jutland during the First World War), it is fundamentally written for this decade and the next. As the United States’ global relative position declines, while China’s is rising, the question is whether this transition can be managed peacefully (20). Murray argues that it can (26), but the wealth of empirical evidence laid out throughout the book details something much more tragic: rising and established powers often fall victim to social dynamics that make insecurity, hostility, and conflict between them more, not less, likely.

At the book’s core, Murray constructs an argument rooted in the social dynamics of power transitions (6). Rather than locate the source of revisionism within the material structure of international politics, or alternatively, as a function of states’ unit-level characteristics, Murray argues that revisionism is primarily “a social and structural phenomenon” (20). Rising powers are either recognized as revisionists and challengers to the status quo, or they are not. This perception colors how they are treated by the established powers of their day, and thus how they react in turn as they are granted, or denied, entry to the major power club. This recognition does not just validate a rising state which aspires great power identity: it is the very vehicle that legitimizes its rise as unthreatening to the status quo, serving as an important circuit breaker to conflict (69).

The social tragedy of great power politics develops, as Murray explains, because state identities depend on recognition, and yet the social uncertainty of international anarchy is such that recognition can rarely be fully assured or automatically expected (30). This uncertainty compels major powers to ground their identity-claims in concrete material practices that are meant to signal who they are and how they should be treated. The tragedy is that such acts often appear threatening; sometimes they endanger the physical security of others (17). The more a rising state tries to play the role of a major power, the more its behavior may be misinterpreted as increasingly aggressive and destabilizing for international order. China’s nuclear silos are just one more iteration of such a dynamic, making clear just how enormous the stakes are in the struggle for recognition in international relations, and therefore how important Murray’s book is.

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Cases

The book is grounded in two strong and contrasting cases: Germany’s destabilizing rise, which led into the First World War, and America’s peaceful rise, aided and abetted by an Anglo-American rapprochement. Why America rose peacefully and Germany did not is the major empirical question underlying Murray’s book, and the thread used to develop a coherent theory on recognition and great power politics. While the chapters are largely framed as separate cases with contrasting outcomes, there are grounds for considering these events as part of one much longer case arc.

Why should we do this? While Murray devotes a lot of attention to American and German motives and behavior in order to concretely show how both centered the pursuit of recognition, in both cases it is Britain’s discretionary recognition power that appears to have driven events. In the theoretical framework, Murray acknowledges this agency, detailing how it is often the rising power who “is made to bear a disproportionate burden in facilitating the conditions necessary for cooperation” (79). The major stated question is why Britain shifted this burden much more onto Germany, than it did the United States (122). A question given only partial attention, however, is how these cases might actually relate to each other, and how this interaction may explain the stark difference in outcomes.

I use the term partial because Murray does anticipate this question, but only in one direction, addressing scholars who locate the cause of Anglo-American rapprochement in Germany’s rise, and Britain’s need to strategically “reduce its commitments to the Western Hemisphere” (184). The late nineteenth century chronology does not support these claims. As Murray points out, the Venezuelan Crisis of 1895, which kickstarted the Anglo-American rapprochement, occurred nearly three years before Germany initiated its own naval program (185). But what about the other direction? In a world system where status is positional, perhaps Britain’s willingness to recognize the United States in 1896—and accept the positional costs this entailed—made it less willing to also facilitate Germany’s rise several years later. If Germany’s naval build-up and the 1904 Moroccan Crisis had preceded the Venezuelan Crisis, would we expect Britain’s reaction to have been the same?

This is an especially valuable thought experiment, in my view, because the very social premise of Murray’s book suggests something really counterintuitive about how these cases relate to each other. Where neorealists might see the Anglo-American rapprochement as something that made Britain more secure, by allowing it to free up material resources for the looming German threat, Murray’s book plausibly suggests the opposite. It recognizes that America’s rise came at the cost of Britain’s own self-identity, but that this was a cost that Britain was willing to shoulder at that specific moment, especially when filtered through a racialized Anglo-Saxon collective identity (160). It is not unreasonable to think that because of these decisions, however, Britain entered the twentieth century more socially insecure than it otherwise would have been, and in this context Germany’s rise appeared far more threatening to its social position than it might otherwise have been.

Murray ends the German case by acknowledging that the ratcheting up of Anglo-German hostilities before the First World War was “in many ways, unnecessary” (139). Misrecognition did not have to happen, making clear what is “tragic” about the social uncertainty and insecurity of anarchy. What is important to ask, however, is whether this tragedy was heavily predetermined not only by Germany’s own insecure social position, but also by a British status insecurity that had been fundamentally shaped by earlier concessions on the Western Hemisphere.
Power

Murray’s book hinges significantly on the power of recognition: both to do harm through misrecognition, but also to potentially stabilize identities and in turn stabilize the social insecurity and uncertainty that is “an ineliminable feature of anarchy” (48). In Murray’s articulation of a grand theory of international order that is rooted in the power of recognition, however, I am driven to ask; who actually wields this power? This may seem self-evident given that there are actors who seek recognition, and significant others who grant it or withhold it, but this implies something about recognition and agency that deserves greater scrutiny.

Much of the German case, for example, hinges on the Moroccan Crisis as a real moment of humiliation and disrespect for Germany, and one which drove a lot of its subsequent aggressive behavior (103). This reaction contributed, in turn, to the perception of German revisionism, and the further deterioration of Anglo-German relations (105-110). In response to all of this, Murray offers an interesting counterfactual detailing how Britain might have recognized Germany, and thus avoided this spiral of social insecurity. Perhaps “offering Germany a coaling station on Morocco’s Atlantic coast” may have placated German recognition, a proposition which Murray explains was briefly considered by British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey (111).

Underlying all of this are major premises on not just the power of recognition, but also on who wields that power. Just as Britain is presented as the social agent who had the power but lacked the will or insight to recognize Germany, Germany is presented as an almost passive victim of its social fate. What this ignores, however, is German elites’ own decisions to elevate Morocco into a litmus test of their country’s great power status. Indeed, we might ask whether Germany’s exclusion from Morocco was an “objective” denial of recognition, or whether we should only care that Germans interpreted it as such? This is important because much is made of the social construction of revisionism, while no less significant is the social construction of misrecognition by those who are allegedly misrecognized.

My aim here is not to suggest that Germany deserves more blame for the way these events unfolded than Britain does, but rather to suggest that there is a tension in how we are meant to interpret the power of recognition, and the power to recognize. On one hand, neither Britain nor Germany had power because both were beholden to the social dynamics of international anarchy, much the same way no actor really has power or agency in the midst of the security dilemma. On the other hand, perhaps the power of recognition is held as much by recognition-seeking actors, as it is by their significant other. It is the former, after all, who can decide for themselves when an act rises to the grievance of misrecognition, and when it does not.

If a rising power will interpret anything less than full capitulation on all major issues as an affront to their recognition, who and what is really determining the trajectory of unfolding events? Murray writes that “when power is legitimate, the rising power is authorized to play the role of major power in international society, and as a result its foreign policy actions are interpreted to be appropriate by the established powers and allowed to go forward unhindered” (192). This lends significant power to recognition, as an act that does or does not determine “legitimacy,” while seeming to sidestep that some acts are more or less legitimate than others, and therefore deserving of recognition. While this perhaps shifts uncomfortably into a normative debate on the nature of legitimate action, ignoring this fact might cause us to give outsized importance to recognition at the expense of the decisions, behaviors, and practices which might legitimately warrant recognition’s absence.

Conclusion

“Only by accepting China’s recognition-claims,” Murray writes, “can the United States facilitate China’s peaceful rise” (28). The notion that great-power politics is fundamentally shaped by a recognition game that it
is incumbent on the players to properly discern and understand, in order to avoid calamity, is convincing. And yet, after being equipped with this information it is less clear whether states are any better at avoiding the major pitfalls of anarchy. Does the tragedy lie in the fact that the United States does not know that China is playing a recognition game, or rather that it does know this, and prefers the certainty and terms of a strictly material worldview instead? The United States does bear a responsibility here, as the significant other, but so does China if it hinges its great power status on policy areas and goals that the United States cannot meaningfully accommodate while preserving its own status and core interests.\(^3\) Perhaps more worrisome is that misrecognition—or its perception—will depend on some other underlying “compatibility” (195). Race drove recognition in the Anglo-American case (160),\(^4\) just as racial exclusion was so central to Japan’s dissatisfaction with the international order in the decades preceding World War Two (199).\(^5\) In these terms, we should be much more worried about what causes misrecognition, and its perception, than we should about the events that put misrecognition into motion, suggesting the politics of recognition is secondary to a much deeper rot at the core of international order.\(^6\)

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In her important and interesting new book, Michelle Murray argues that the rise and fall of great powers in world politics is what states make of it. When established powers recognize the status claims of rising powers, this can promote cooperation and peace. When they refuse to accept rising powers’ status claims, in contrast, this can set off spirals of mistrust and security competition. Whether power transitions end in strife, in other words, has less to do with clashing interests or shifting military balances than it does with more fundamental “struggles for recognition” (11). Murray illustrates this argument through careful case studies of the United States and Imperial Germany at the turn of the twentieth century. She contrasts Britain’s successful accommodation of America’s status demands with its rejection of Germany’s claims, which sparked a naval arms race, multiple geopolitical crises, and ultimately, war.

Murray’s book joins an expansive literature that explores how the pursuit of status and prestige influences world politics. It also contributes to a growing constructivist literature that traces how rhetoric, legitimacy, and social identities shape great power politics. Her book could not be better timed. Just a decade ago, there was a vibrant debate among American policymakers about whether China was a rising revisionist power or a “responsible great power.” Today, there appears to be a bipartisan consensus that China is instead a “strategic competitor” to the United States. Given the speed and seeming irreversible character of this shift, Murray’s warning that Sino-American competition could become a self-fulfilling prophecy itself appears prophetic (213).

There are a number of things that distinguish Murray’s approach from that of others who have examined the intersection of status and great power competition. First, she places particular stress on the concept of “recognition” (40). Status is not just an attribute that a state possesses or a resource it draws on; rather, it is a “recognized identity” (46). Established states must acknowledge and accept the status claims of other states for status to have any meaning. Because recognition is so crucial, the moments when established states withhold recognition to a rising power, when they “misrecognize” it as a social inferior, are ripe for conflict (73). A rising power that is denied recognition experiences this humiliation acutely, and responds by engaging in “forceful contestation with the established powers” to “compel these states to recognize its aspirant status” (74).

Second, Murray does an excellent job laying out the expectations that come attached to “major power identity” (54). She describes how major powers assume that they will have “voice” in international politics and will be consulted on major diplomatic issues of the day (58). She illustrates the importance major powers attach to “exemplary military power”—such as battleships, aircraft carriers, or nuclear weapons—capabilities that symbolize their advanced position atop the international pecking order (60). She also shows how major powers lay claim to “spheres of influence” within which they have exclusive rights and responsibilities (63).


3 For a lengthier discussion of this literature and Murray’s place in it, see Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “The Status of Status in World Politics,” World Politics, 73:2 (2021): 358-391.
Paradoxically, Murray argues that rising powers that are denied recognition strive harder to attain these markers: they will demand greater voice, they will invest more heavily in exemplary military assets, and they will extend claims to even wider spheres of influence. Behaviors that major powers accept as a normal part of their own power political interactions are rebranded as dangerous and revisionist when adopted by social outsiders (79).

Murray’s argument is clear and straightforward, and her case studies raise interesting questions about how to use theories of status to understand power political competition. One concern is how much recognition is enough to satisfy rising powers. One of the curious features of the Imperial Germany case, for example, is that Berlin was arguably well established on all three of the main dimensions of major power status. In terms of voice, Germany had hosted multiple great-power conferences to adjudicate important issues ranging from the scramble for overseas colonies to the future of the Ottoman Empire. In terms of exemplary military capabilities, Germany possessed what was widely seen as the most professional army on the continent, a model for military reformers around the world. In terms of spheres of influence, Germany had built a globe-spanning empire with territorial claims in China, the Western Pacific, and across sub-Saharan Africa. Murray acknowledges that Germany was accepted as a major power, but argues that the Kaiser and his confidants instead aspired to “world power status” (81). This shift in terminology, however, raises all sorts of theoretical questions: Why are some great powers satisfied with their position, while others want to be world powers? Do all rising powers inevitably believe that they should be accepted as world powers or was Germany an outlier? And what are the status markers that distinguish a world power from a major power?

A second question is why established powers deny recognition to rising powers. It could be the case that established powers never recognize rising powers, because doing so would require them to sacrifice their own special privileges. Yet British recognition of American claims in the Western Hemisphere during the 1895 Venezuela Crisis suggests that established powers are not inherently intransigent (159-164). In her concluding chapter, Murray speculates that established powers will find it easier to recognize rising powers if they share a common identity and if they do not have to sacrifice a core part of their identity to do so. Thus, Britain could acknowledge American claims because of perceived bonds of “Anglo-Saxonism” (195), while it was unable to recognize Germany because “the concept of naval supremacy played a central role in British self-understandings” (196). Yet Britain also had sensible strategic reasons to maintain naval supremacy. As Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey observed, “If the German Navy ever became superior to ours, the German Army can conquer this country. There is no corresponding risk of this kind to Germany.”4 In seeking to preserve naval supremacy, Britain never denied Germany’s right to build a navy. Rather, it sought to negotiate an arms control agreement that would limit the naval arms race. What Britain could not accept was Germany’s demand that it remain neutral in a future continental war in exchange for German shipbuilding concessions.5 In other words, status concerns coexisted and intermingled with power political ones. How do we separate the impact of status from incompatible interests and strategic calculations in these cases? Were German attempts to out-build Britain and wedge apart the entente solely driven by status? Was Britain’s pursuit of naval supremacy exclusively a product of its particular identity?

A third question centers on the impact of either granting or withholding recognition. Murray does an excellent job showing how the struggle for recognition can have far-reaching consequences. Britain’s refusal to acknowledge German rights in the 1904 Morocco crisis, for example, soured Anglo-German relations for years (108-111), while Britain’s recognition of American rights in the Venezuela crisis laid the foundation for the so-called “great rapprochement” (164-165). Yet does misrecognition always and inevitably result in

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conflict? And is recognition alone enough to overcome all political differences? Murray notes that the 1912 Haldane mission, an attempt by the British war secretary to negotiate directly with his counterparts in Berlin, ended in failure and hurt feelings, yet was paradoxically followed by an improvement in Anglo-German relations (132). Indeed, by 1914, “relations between Britain and Germany were more cordial…than they had been for a decade.” Why did Britain’s refusal to recognize German rights ruin relations in 1904 but help repair them in 1912? Conversely, while Anglo-American relations were on an upward trajectory after the turn of the century, this did not result in the formal alliance that some British policymakers had hoped for. Why do some acts of recognition have durable and far-reaching effects while others are limited and transitory?

In sum, Murray has made the case for the importance of recognition in world politics and has illustrated how struggles for recognition can unwittingly set great powers down paths of rivalry and competition. The next step is to dig into the conditions under which recognition matters, exploring when rising powers seek different kinds of recognition, when established powers grant or withhold this recognition, and when granting recognition is enough to overcome deep wells of mistrust. Will China pursue world power status? Will the United States be willing to accept it as a superpower equal? Can Washington strike a balance between acknowledging Beijing’s claims and upholding broader principles of the liberal international order? As Murray has demonstrated, these questions are not orthogonal to power politics, but are increasingly central to it.

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Response by Michelle Murray, Bard College

I want to begin by thanking the team at H-Diplo | RJISSF, and especially Joshua Rovner for organizing this roundtable on my book and writing the introduction, and Diane Labrosse for guiding it to completion. It is a great privilege to have one’s ideas examined with such rigor, and I thank Joshua Freedman and Paul MacDonald for their thoughtful and serious engagement with my work.

When writing The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations, I had three objectives. First, I wanted to show that the desire for recognition is an important motive of state behavior, even in the high-stakes realm of national security, and that the struggle to obtain recognition is a foundational logic of interstate behavior. As a principal state motivation, the pursuit of recognition can shape and undermine the material security environments states find themselves in. As such, the struggle for recognition highlights an inescapable relationship between the material and social dimensions of international relations. Second, I endeavored to show in detail that the struggle for recognition played a significant role in shaping the outcomes of important cases of great power politics. Here, I use the case of German naval ambition before the First World War to show the how the pursuit of recognition can come at the expense of physical security and precipitate a destabilizing arms race. In the case of the United States’ rise to world power status, I aim to show the difference that reciprocal relations of recognition can make in stabilizing great power politics. Finally, as an enduring feature of international relations, I contend that the struggle for recognition continues to play a central role in shaping contemporary international politics, and has implications for Sino-American relations in the wake of China’s rise as a great-power peer of the United States. The reviews each raise important questions in each of these three areas, and I appreciate the opportunity to engage with their ideas in this forum.

MacDonald and Freedman pose several important questions about the theoretical framework that have urged me to think harder about the argument and how it can be applied to instances of great power politics. MacDonald asks under what conditions rising powers are satisfied with their positions in the status hierarchy. Why are some states content to be great powers, while others aspire to world power, or superpower, status? In building the theoretical framework, I use the term “major power status” as a catch-all category that includes a variety of different positions atop the system’s status hierarchy. This allows the theory to move across time, addressing different configurations of power and varying role structures that characterize different international orders (e.g., great powers vs. world powers vs. superpowers). At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, there were the great powers, but above and beyond them stood the world powers. Imperial Germany was secure in its status among the former, and wanted to join the ranks of the latter.

My argument does not theorize, nor claim to theorize, the source or cause of a state’s aspiration for major power status, whatever that may be. The argument begins with a state’s self-understanding, which it then seeks to have validated through routinized relations of recognition with its significant other. Thus, for me the issue of when a rising power is satisfied with its recognized status is ultimately an empirical question, and the argument does not preclude domestic politics, the characteristics of leaders, or other domestic political considerations as the basis of where a state’s self-understanding comes from. What I am interested in is at the system-level, and how the social interactions of the major powers can (or cannot) sustain relations of mutual recognition that reflect the state’s self-understanding. Here, I can say that a state will be satisfied with its position in the status hierarchy if its self-understanding can be sustained in practice. In this sense, Imperial Germany was well-established on the markers of great power status, as MacDonald describes, but not on the markers of world power status, which is the role that it aspired to. As I aim to show in the book (102-112), Germany’s full inclusion (e.g. its voice) in great power conferences was inconsistent at best; it had a formidable army, but not rival naval power (the symbolic marker of world power status at the time); and felt limited in its quest to build a colonial empire by its late start relative to the established world powers. Taken
together, what this meant was that Germany could not sustain its aspirant identity as a world power in practice. It is this insecurity—provoked by a lack of recognition—that animated its dissatisfaction with the status quo, leading it to cling rigidly to the material practices constitutive of world power status.

MacDonald also poses a related question of why established powers deny recognition to rising powers, and how we separate strategic considerations from the social ones? These are simple, but surprisingly difficult, questions to answer. As I argue in the book, and as MacDonald notes in his review, it is possible for established powers to recognize a rising power and construct its power as legitimate and not threatening. Indeed, this is the reason I included the US case study in the book. Moreover, given the potential costs associated with the struggle for recognition, it would seem sensible for established powers to always try to recognize a rising power’s recognition claims. That being said, there are two points to be made in response to these questions. First, the possibility of recognition depends on the narrative structure of the established power’s own identity and the relationship that this biographical narrative has to the rising power’s recognition claims. In the case of the United States and Britain, clever statesmen were able to construct an American and British collective identity through the discourse of Anglo-Saxonism, which in turn articulated a common vision of the world and shaped each’s perception of the other’s power. Second, strategic considerations cannot be understood outside of the social environment in which they become intelligible. Thus, the relevant question is not how to differentiate strategic interests from social ones, but rather, how the strategic environment has been socially constructed through the process of the struggle for recognition. Put differently, we need to recognize that strategic interests are, in fact, inseparable from social processes. In doing so, we can understand the key incompatibility between Britain and Imperial Germany. Naval superiority was not just a strategic doctrine, but a central piece of how Britain understood itself and its role in the world. This made recognition of German status difficult. Likewise, we cannot understand Germany’s worsening security environment without thinking about the cumulative effect that the struggle for recognition had in constructing Germany as a threat (114-132). And so, Britain’s strategic decision to not accept German demands for neutrality in a continental war was the product of the struggle for recognition.

Another way to answer MacDonald’s question about why established powers deny recognition to rising powers is to grapple with Freedman’s suggestion that the American and German cases, while framed as independent instances of power transition in the book, are in fact part of a single recognition story that centers on Britain, and that recognizing “America’s rise came at the cost of Britain’s own self-identity.” That is, although Anglo-Saxonism provided the discursive resources to construct a collective identity between Britain and the United States, this does not mean that British identity was unaffected by this act of recognition, and this may in fact be a crucial piece of the context in which Britain engages Germany’s recognition demands. I think this is an interesting and important observation, and highlights an important limitation of the book’s argument. I spend most of the time in the book examining and demonstrating the rising power’s aspiration for world power status and the insecurity it experiences during the struggle for recognition, without adequately examining the social insecurities that the established power brings to these interactions. In this way, the uncertainties of intersubjectivity that render social interaction so risky for the rising power, also do the same for the established power.

Properly theorizing Britain’s social insecurity has two implications for the architecture and argument of the book. First, the sequencing of the cases is backwards. I started with the German case because the lack of a strategic argument for the German fleet makes clear the importance of the recognition motive, and it really is the centerpiece of the book and the work I am most proud of. But Freedman is right that the conditions that make that case what it is are importantly connected to what happened in the American case. And so, the sequencing of the cases is not just a matter of them being out of temporal order, but also out of conceptual order. Second, as I suggest above, one of the important insights of the German case is that the strategic environment is importantly socially constructed through the struggle for recognition. Understanding and taking proper account of Britain’s social insecurity is an essential piece of that story, and inextricably linked to
its experience with the United States a decade prior. In this way, Britain’s insistence on maintaining naval superiority vis-à-vis Germany at all costs was not just a strategic necessity, but also a social necessity: Britain was clinging to the material practices constitutive of world power status as an antidote to social insecurity in just the same way Germany was.

Finally, Freedman also rightly notes an important silence in the book’s argument about the relationship between recognition and power. At first glance, the relationship seems clear: rising powers seek recognition from established powers. What this means is that the established power is able to recognize (or not) the rising power’s status claims, and thus a rising power’s status and ontological security is left at the mercy of the established power’s willingness to recognize. In this view, agency—the ability to recognize or not to recognize—seems to be located exclusively in the hands of the established power. But the rising power should also have agency, and has the power to decide whether any given social interaction is an act of humiliation and misrecognition. As MacDonald rightly notes, for example, Germany did have plenty of great power voice in the years leading up to the arms race. And if that is the case, why did Morocco amount to such an intolerable experience of misrecognition for Germany? My first reaction to this important line of questioning is to note that there is a social spiral dynamic at the heart of these interactions that is gestured at in the book, but not spelled out with enough detail in the theoretical framework. To do so, I think, would require paying more attention to the intersubjective nature of agency itself. While we often think of agency as a form of control (e.g., my action is what I intend it to be), the meaning of an act is also socially determined by other actors’ responses to it. And these responses are, in turn, often shaped by prevailing structures of (social) power that empower certain actors to have more influence in the politics of meaning making. I do claim that successful acts of recognition “authorize” rising powers to play certain roles in the international order. But the question of how recognition does this, and who gets to play what part in that process, is left implicit and undertheorized. What this suggests is that to understand how the struggle for recognition shapes the politics of power transitions we need to be clear about what kind of “recognition order” structures the international order that the rising power is ascending into. In this way, the struggle for recognition must be, first and foremost, a theory of international order.

In conclusion, I want to thank again Paul MacDonald and Joshua Freedman for their thoughtful and engaging reviews of my book, Joshua Rovner for his insightful introduction, and the editors of H-Diplo | RISSF for their generosity and patience in putting together this forum. Through this process I have come to see my work in a new light, and to better understand its extensions, implications, and limitations. These insights will undoubtedly influence my research going forward.