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Roundtable Review 16-3

Rohan Mukherjee. *Ascending Order: Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781009186810 (hardcover, \$99.99).

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Introduction by Lora Anne Viola, Freie Universität Berlin

Over the last decade or so, the International Relations (IR) literature has increasingly turned its attention to the crucial role of status and status-seeking in influencing state interactions and the shape of international order. Recent real-world politics has only underscored the importance of thinking about status given that, on the one hand, the international order seems to be reeling from the destabilization of existing hierarchies while, on the other hand, these shifts appear to be opening opportunities for challenging embedded social and political positions. In this context, Rohan Mukherjee's *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions* offers both a theoretically innovative and empirically relevant intervention into thinking about how the politics of status plays out in the international system.

Ascending Order examines the dynamics of status seeking by rising powers within international institutions. The point of departure is a set of puzzling observations: why do rising powers sometimes challenge international orders that favor them and why do they sometimes accept a disadvantageous order? It argues that a materialist understanding of status fails to grasp these anomalies and suggests, instead, an approach that draws on social psychology and Social Identity Theory. This approach, which Mukherjee terms Institutional Status Theory (IST), seeks to explain the choice of strategies that rising powers use to attain or maintain status within international institutions over time. The theory defines status in terms of the desire for "symbolic equality," understood in terms of institutional openness (high/low) and procedural fairness (high/low) (6). Whether rising powers will challenge, cooperate with, expand, or reframe an international order depends on their perceptions of institutional openness and procedural fairness (19). The book considers historical cases of the US, Japan, India, and China. Beyond the historical cases, the book speaks to current debates on the extent to which China's status aspirations ought to be read as challenging or reinforcing the so-called Liberal International Order.

As the reviews in this roundtable make clear, *Ascending Order* is a theoretically innovative contribution to a growing literature that is interested in how rising powers negotiate status within international institutions.¹ The reviewers all highlight and praise several important contributions of the book, three of which are especially worth underscoring here. First, while many contributions to status-theorizing fall either into a realist/materialist or a social constructivist camp, *Ascending Order* has its conceptual foundations in psychological constructivism, drawing much more explicitly on social psychology to explain the motivations for status-seeking in the first place, which in turn creates room for thinking about a range of

¹ See, for example, Marina Duque, "Recognizing International Status: A Relational Approach" *International Studies Quarterly* 62:3 (2018): 577-592; Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Phillip Y. Lipsky, *Renegotiating the World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Andreas Kruck and Bernhard Zangl, "The Adjustment of International Institutions to Global Power Shifts: A Framework for Analysis" *Global Policy* 11:3 (2020): 5-16. See also the special issue in *Global Policy* 11:3 (November 2020) on "Global Power Shifts: How do International Institutions Adjust?"

strategies. In this sense, the book joins recent literature on topics such as emotions, diplomacy, intentions, and decision-making that looks to psychology for insights into international relations.²

Second, by considering a varied set of strategies available to rising powers, the book highlights both a more nuanced understanding of status politics than appears in many materialist accounts and also centers the agency of rising powers in choosing and managing their pursuit of recognition. Especially given the general emphasis on structural accounts of status in international order, the book's focus on showing rising power agency at work is a significant and welcome addition to the literature.

Third, while many accounts of status focus on struggles between recognized great powers and unrecognized great powers, *Ascending Order* shifts the focus to an earlier stage of rising power status aspirations. Thinking about the temporality of rising powers provides new leverage on theorizing status-seeking strategies. The book compellingly argues that the period early in a state's rise is crucial in shaping its satisfaction with the order and also its strategies within that order. By providing an explanation of status politics at an early stage in the power shift, the book provides a foundation for theories that focus primarily on the later stages of the power shift. This temporality can also shed light on when and why status-seeking happens within international institutions versus outside of them.

Of course, the reviewers also pose questions to the book's argument and suggest how some points of contention provide openings for future avenues of research. One set of questions raised by all the reviewers revolves around the notion of symbolic equality. According to the argument, a rising power's status ambitions are met when they achieve symbolic equality with great powers within institutions. Michelle Murray points out that "not all symbolic equality is made equal in terms of conferring recognition to a rising power." It is unclear, for example, how nominal procedural equality in the face of actual inequality would satisfy the desire for symbolic equality. Ian Hall makes a similar point, noting that "stated rules for great powers are not in fact the *actual* rules for great powers." Manjeet S. Pardesi further notes "an undercurrent of tension" in the argument since "all great powers are not equal" (2). In my own work, I argue that club logic drives a dynamic by which extensions of membership and procedural equality incentivize powerful actors to create new forms of exclusion, such that achievements of equality always go hand-in-hand with new forms of exclusion and stratification.³ Ian Hall, in a similar point, distinguishes between "the desire to be recognized as an equal" and "the desire to be recognized as *superior* to most others," arguing that the book focuses on the first but has less to say about the second. Hall notes, for example, that it "is not clear that Beijing is striving for mere equality, which in so many ways it already has

² See, for example, Karl Gustafsson and Todd H Hall, "The Politics of Emotions in International Relations: Who Gets to Feel What, Whose Emotions Matter, and the 'History Problem' in Sino-Japanese Relations" *International Studies Quarterly* 65:4 (2021): 973-984. Brian C. Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations: Evolutionary Ethics, Moral Revolutions, and the Nature of Power Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). Marcus Holmes, *Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Social Neuroscience and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³ Lora Anne Viola, *The Closure of the International System: How Institutions Create Political Equalities and Hierarchies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

attained.” This suggests that great power status might be defined by the attainment of *unequal* social positionality, defined by the ability to constitute order over others and to except oneself from the rules of the order.

Second, the reviewers have questions about the role of agency versus structure and, relatedly, psychology versus social construction in the theory. IST traces the rising power’s desire for status to basic individual psychological human need for self-esteem and positive recognition. While Murray appreciates that IST allows rising powers some degree of agency in deciding how they will pursue recognition, she also notes that IST is distinguished “from fuller social constructivist approaches that hold social interaction as key to state identity formation.” Even if the desire for status is psychological, she sees “the struggle for status as a purely social phenomenon” that is ultimately dependent on the structures that constitute and reproduce international hierarchies. Given existing social structures, she questions how much agency is possible. Hall notes that despite “evenly distributed group-psychological needs,” not all states are driven by a desire for great power recognition. He suggests that to get at the variation between a drive for equality and a drive for recognition of greatness, an account of why states assume different roles is necessary. In line with Murray, he suggests this might come from “a shift back into social constructivism.” As all note, this is not a problem for the theory given its compatibility with social constructivism.

Third, the reviewers raise the issue of alternative explanations. R. Lincoln Hines suggests that greater consideration of alternative explanations might further sharpen the argument about both the sources of status ambitions and the choice of status strategies. In particular, Hines emphasizes how domestic politics (e.g. leaders or bureaucratic politics), historical narratives, or relative power and threat perceptions might be important to explaining the politics of status strategies. This raises at least two avenues for future development: further theorizing the intersection of domestic and international levels for understanding status politics, and reconsidering the interaction of social and material explanations rather than seeing them as competitors.

Finally, although all the reviewers value the policy-relevance of the argument, they suggest it is worth reflecting on the book’s implications for thinking about the role of China in the international order. Mukherjee argues that rising powers are content not to challenge the order, and that China can be accommodated with offers of symbolic equality and social mobility. As Hines comments, this “sanguine interpretation of contemporary policy implications” is not so different from earlier arguments for engagement and accommodation made by liberal internationalists. But as Hall points out, it is not “obvious that if China were to achieve the symbolic equality, its leaders would be satisfied.” A crucial consideration, Hines reminds us, is “the vast economic and military power differentials between China and other rising powers” that may make China a different category of actor than those content not to challenge the order.

In conclusion, not despite but precisely because of the room for debate and for future research opened up by the book, the reviewers are unanimous in their evaluation of the importance and relevance of *Ascending Orders*. After all, capturing the serious engagement of readers is one of the best forms of academic recognition.

Contributors:

Rohan Mukherjee is Assistant Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His book, *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions* (Cambridge University Press), received the 2024 T.V. Paul Best Book in Global International Relations Award from the International Studies Association (ISA), the 2023 Hedley Bull Prize from the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), and the 2023 Hague Journal of Diplomacy Book Award.

Lora Anne Viola is Professor of Political Science at the John F. Kennedy Institute at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her research centers on questions of international organization, especially inequalities in global governance. Her book *The Closure of the International System: How Institutions Create Political Equalities and Hierarchies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) received the 2021 ECPR Hedley Bull Prize, ISA's 2021 Chadwick Alger Best Book Award, ISA's 2021 Diplomatic Studies Best Book Award, and an honorable mention from APSA's 2021 Jervis-Schroeder Prize.

Ian Hall is a Professor of International Relations at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, and an Academic Fellow of the Australia India Institute at the University of Melbourne. His research focuses on India's international relations. His most recent book is *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* (Bristol University Press, 2019).

R. Lincoln Hines is an Assistant Professor in the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology. His research has been published in *Research & Politics*, *Space Policy*, and the *Washington Quarterly*.

Michelle K. Murray is Associate Professor of Politics and Chair of the Social Studies Division at Bard College. Her research interests include: international relations theory; security studies; the politics of recognition among states; international history, especially pre-World War I Europe; and global governance and international organization. She is author of *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism and Rising Powers* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Manjeet S. Pardesi is Associate Professor of International Relations in the Political Science and International Relations Programme, and Asia Research Fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. His research interests include historical International Relations, Great Power politics, Asian security, and the Sino-Indian rivalry. He obtained his PhD in Political Science from Indiana University, Bloomington. He is the co-author of *The Sino-Indian Rivalry: Implications for Global Order* (with Sumit Ganguly and William R. Thompson, Cambridge University Press, 2023). He is currently working on a book project titled *Worlds in Contrast: Hegemonic and Multiplex Orders in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean* (with Amitav Acharya, forthcoming with Yale University Press).

Thirty-odd years ago, Francis Fukuyama famously asked if the apparent triumph of liberal democracy heralded the end of history.¹ It certainly seemed to be the case, he suggested. Authoritarianism in its various forms looked bankrupt. No alternatives to democratic forms of government and liberal economic principles commanded broad support. In that sense, we might have witnessed the end of history, or at least the end of the ideological contests that defined the twentieth century.

Fukuyama's explanation for why we might have reached that point was as idiosyncratic as his conclusion was controversial. Liberal democracy won out, he argued, not just because of its superior capacity to satisfy material needs and wants. The real secret of its success—or at least the current appearance of success—lay in its ability to manage the struggle for recognition. This struggle, Fukuyama argued, taking cues from Socrates and Hegel, is a product of what the Greeks called *thymos*: the “spiritedness” in human nature which compels us to demand that other people recognise our humanity, even if we must risk our lives in the process. More than tussles over material things, *thymos* is the real motor of history. It fuels the struggles we see, over and over, between the oppressed and their oppressors, as the former compel the latter to recognise their dignity and rights.² For Fukuyama, the eclipse of authoritarianism and the rise of liberal democracy in the late twentieth century showed *thymos* at work: long-oppressed peoples were striving to replace dictatorships with polities that promise the respect and recognition for which we all yearn.³

In the excellent *Ascending Order*, Rohan Mukherjee argues the struggle for recognition plays a role in the relations between states akin to the one Fukuyama perceived between social groups. Rising powers, Mukherjee suggests, “care about status, or their position in the hierarchy” (4). They are “willing to pay significant costs” (4) in the search for “symbolic equality” (6) with existing great powers. These struggles play out in many places but are clear within international institutions—sites where hierarchy is pervasive, and status is acknowledged by the extension of membership and procedural fairness to those states which are allowed to join the great power club.

States are “obsessed” by status, Mukherjee writes, even though status “cannot ensure survival”—even though, in other words, symbolic equality cannot supplant material power, and can only at times augment it (36). Like individuals, states are compelled into status competition when their leaders assume a particular social identity and perceive that their state's identity is not properly acknowledged by peer-states (41-44). In the case of rising powers, of course, that social identity is “great power,” and the recognition they seek involves both club membership and equitable treatment according to club rules (44-50). States that desire these status markers will, Mukherjee suggests, go to considerable lengths to attain them (82). And just as

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

² Fukuyama, *End of History*, 162-170.

³ Fukuyama, *End of History*, 171-180.

importantly, thwarted aspiring great powers will challenge or undermine international institutions if they do not attain the status they seek.

The significance of *Ascending Order* lies not so much in this argument as in Mukherjee's use of his Institutional Status Theory (IST) to explain why states select certain status-seeking strategies over others and how those selections change over time.⁴ At the outset, he predicts the selection of these strategies is determined by two variables: the openness of the institutions to rising powers and the procedural fairness they encounter within those institutions. If rising powers find that an institution is open and fair, they will cooperate within it; if they find that institution to be neither open nor fair, they will challenge it. Moreover, if rising powers find an institution closed but fair, they will seek to expand its membership or supplement it with a similar organisation, and if they find it open but unfair, they will seek to reframe the rules and their enforcement (67-72).

Mukherjee tests these hypotheses with four finely crafted cases: the struggle of the United States (US) to shape European-set maritime law from the 1820s until the 1860s; Japan's experience with the constraints imposed by the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty; India's shifting relationship with the Cold War nuclear order; and China's interactions with the "Liberal International Order" (LIO). In the first, he argues that the US encountered an institution that was largely closed, but with rules that American leaders initially conceived as fair and worth following, but which grew less fair by the 1850s. In the second, a slightly different story unfolds. At the outset, Japan found an open and fair institution, with which it duly cooperated, but in the 1930s, Tokyo convinced itself that the Washington System had become closed and unfair, and resolved to challenge it. In the third case, something similar occurred: India cooperated up with the great-power managed nuclear order for as long it remained open and fair, then challenged it with nuclear tests when New Delhi perceived it was not. And in the last, Mukherjee suggests that IST better explains China's apparently paradoxical relationship with the LIO than other theories, accounting for why Beijing makes costly commitments to certain institutions while challenging others that it considers to be closed or unfair.

From these cases, Mukherjee draws several lessons that have implications for both policy and theory. Perhaps the biggest is the contention that rising powers can be restrained if great powers are "attentive" to their "status aspirations" (287). This is because "symbolic rights matter," Mukherjee argues, even where a rising power has neither the capacity nor the will to immediately realise them, and because rising powers can and do change their strategies in response to the actions of existing powers (288-289). He also finds that domestic politics may affect bids for status equality, but exactly how they do this is unclear, necessitating further research (290-291). Mukherjee observes too that struggles for recognition with institutions can have big consequences for international security, as thwarted states challenge the great powers in other domains

⁴ Similar arguments have been made, as Mukherjee notes, in Stephen Ward's *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) and Michelle Murray's *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relation: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

(291-292). Finally, in terms of theory, he argues that IST augments existing accounts of hegemonic stability by better explaining the sources of rising power dissatisfaction (292-299).

Like all really good studies, *Ascending Order* throws up as many questions as it does answers. One is foundational, about what drives states to compete for a place in the great power club in the first place. In contrast to Fukuyama, who grounds his account of the struggle for recognition in unfalsifiable assertions about human nature, Mukherjee's explanation for this phenomenon draws on well-established findings from social psychology. Research in that field shows that individuals draw some of their self-esteem, he notes, from their membership of groups.⁵ For that reason, they concern themselves with how their group is esteemed by others. If their group is not appropriately respected, they may push it to compete with others for symbolic and material gains, challenge the "status hierarchy" by claiming a higher ranking, or even reframe the terms of hierarchy (57).

This account goes a long way toward explaining why states might, in general, compete for the recognition of states as equals. But it arguably falls a bit short of explaining why certain states might compete to be recognised as great powers. Using Fukuyama's terms, Mukherjee's account tells us a lot about *isothymia*—the desire to be recognised as an equal—but perhaps less about *megalothymia*—the desire to be recognised as *superior* to most others, which is surely what being a great power is all about.⁶

Part of the difficulty here may be the case-study selection: *Ascending Order* discusses unusually large and powerful mostly post-colonial powers—the US, India, and China—with Japan a possible exception, as a state that was forced into a subordinate role by the European powers, and that was keen to escape it. All four states were convinced of their greatness at an early point and bore (and for one, at least, still bears) significant grudges against the existing great powers.⁷ If we look more broadly, we see that most states—even relatively powerful and wealthy ones—are content merely to be recognised as nominally sovereign and independent states with equal rights and obligations. Taken together, this suggests that the drive for recognition as a great power might have more to do with the peculiar characteristics and circumstances of a subset of states than with evenly distributed group-psychological needs. To explain great power status competition, then, we may need to return to social psychology for an explanation, or to shift back into social constructivism, which can usefully account for why states assume different roles. An answer might lie, for example, in what some psychologists call "social dominance theory," which (among other things)

⁵ See, for example, Heather J. Smith and Tom R. Tyler, "Choosing the Right Pond: The Impact of Group Membership on Self-Esteem and Group-Oriented Behavior," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 33:2 (1997), 146-170.

⁶ Fukuyama, *End of History*, 182. One measure of this superiority is the assertion or possession of "special responsibilities"—see Mlada Bukovansky, Ian Clark, Robyn Eckersley, Richard Price, Christian Reus-Smit and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷ See, *inter alia*, Manjari Chatterjee Miller, *Wronged by Empire: Post-Imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), and Shogo Suzuki, "Japan's Socialization into Janus-faced European International Society," *European Journal of International Relations* 11:1 (2005), 137-164.

tries to explain why certain groups come to believe they are superior to others and deserving of special recognition.⁸

Another question is whether all existing and rising great powers have the same understandings of what a great power is and what great power entails. In particular, do the leaders of rising powers perceive the rules of the great power club in the same way as existing members? These are theoretically and empirically salient issues. If, for example, a rising power finds on admission that the rules do not function as it had expected, it may see to challenge that institution, regardless of whether (or not) the rules are, in fact, fair.

There is some evidence to suggest, for example, that the present frustration of China and Russia with Western-led institutions is rooted not so much in lack of recognition, but in straightforward misunderstanding. Both have long thought that the *stated* rules for great powers are not in fact the *actual* rules for great powers. One result is the now-ubiquitous charge of hypocrisy levelled by Beijing and Moscow at the US: how dare Washington hold them to principles to which the US, they think, has never really been bound, regardless of what Americans say? For China and Russia, professions of support for a “rules-based order” are mere cant. The *real* rules of the club—to which the US actually adheres—permit great powers to carve out spheres of influence and interfere in the affairs of weaker neighbours with the acquiescence of their peers.⁹

Last, there is the question of why existing great powers are not more “attentive,” to use Mukherjee’s term, to what rising powers see as their “symbolic rights,” when such attentiveness apparently costs little (287-289). Or to put it another way: given that thwarting the aspirations of rising powers has detrimental effects and recognising “symbolic equality” can lead to co-optation, and that enhanced status does not necessarily lead to enhanced power, why do the club members not admit more members? *Ascending Order* suggests that part of the answer is that great-power club membership is a “positional good—its supply is socially scarce” and there are therefore social incentives for existing great powers to keep the club small (48). Elsewhere in the book, Mukherjee also suggests that prejudice can and does play a part: Japan was alienated and effectively denied membership in the interwar years due to ingrained racism on the part of the Western powers (185-190). Similarly, the pervasive view during and after the Cold War that India was not a power to be taken too seriously likely contributed to the neglect of its arguments and interests in nuclear non-proliferation negotiations (230-234).

Other explanations are also plausible. Research on hierarchy in international relations focuses on the social practices of diplomats who work within institutions and how they create inequalities. Vincent Pouliot argues that international pecking orders are formed at least in part according to the perceived “practical

⁸ Felicia Pratto, Jim Sidanius and Shana Levin, “Social Dominance Theory and the Dynamics of Intergroup Relations: Taking Stock and Looking Forward,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 17:1 (2006), 271-320.

⁹ See, *inter alia*, Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21:2 (2005), 132-158 and Suisheng Zhao, “A New Model of Big Power Relations? China-US strategic rivalry and balance of power in the Asia-Pacific,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24:93 (2015), 377-397.

mastery” and “diplomatic competence” of state officials.¹⁰ States with the more professional and capable diplomats get to play more prominent roles in institutions; states that are perceived to have less able officials are relegated to lesser positions. Some explanations are more pointed. Mukherjee is surely right to argue that China is now far more engaged in international institutions than it was thirty years ago, and that it can and does act cooperatively and constructively within those contexts, even where it may not gain obvious material advantages (265-269).¹¹ But for many, Beijing’s changing domestic politics and unclear strategic intentions cast a shadow over this “long march through the institutions,” making the US and its partners reluctant to open other forums to China’s influence, regardless of the potential gains that the granting of symbolic equality might bring.¹² It is not clear that Beijing is striving for mere equality, which in so many ways it already has attained. Nor is it obvious that if China were to achieve the symbolic equality, its leaders would be satisfied.

Of course, this situation could change. And one of the greatest strengths of *Ascending Order* is the emphasis Mukherjee rightly places on the dynamic nature of status competition between rising and great powers. His rigorous account of strategy-selection in response to barriers to recognition is a significant contribution to our understanding of the behaviour of rising powers. This is an important book and a very good one, which has set a new standard for work in this field.

¹⁰ Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹¹ A similar argument is made in Courtney J. Fung, *China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹² Michal Parizek and Matthew D. Stephen, “The Long March through the Institutions: Emerging Powers and the Staffing of International Organizations,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 56:2 (2021), 204-223. See also Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Ascending Order makes a valuable contribution to scholarship on status, rising powers, and international institutions while providing fresh insights into issues in contemporary world politics, such as China's approach to international institutions.¹ Drawing on archival evidence and a diverse set of cases, including the rise of the United States in the nineteenth century, the rise of Japan in the interwar period, India's rise during the Cold War, and a more contemporary case that focuses on China's engagement with the liberal international order, Rohan Mukherjee shows that concerns over equality influence the ways in which rising powers approach international institutions.

Mukherjee's book joins a rapidly growing body of scholarship on status in world politics by examining how status concerns influence the approach of states to international institutions.² Similar to the work of other scholars of status, *Ascending Order* builds off the microfoundations of Social Identity Theory (SIT) following the pioneering work on SIT and status by Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko.³ Building upon these foundations, Mukherjee effectively argues that states intrinsically desire greater status—and that rising powers seek symbolic equality with higher-status actors. Mukherjee then argues that institutions serve as the sites wherein states contest their status and where status hierarchies are formalized (for example, via voting rights or membership).

Ascending Order distinguishes itself from the broader status scholarship by focusing on international institutions. Whereas other scholars have examined the role of status concerns in violent conflict, Mukherjee's work focuses on an earlier period when status competition was still occurring through institutional mechanisms.⁴ This focus on institutions is highly relevant to today's international system, which is much more institutionalized than it was in earlier historical periods and where the costs of violent revisionism are considerably higher due to the existence of nuclear weapons. This focus on status concerns

¹ For example, see Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 34:4 (Spring 2010): 63-95; *Accommodating Rising Powers: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. T.V. Paul (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2016); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2012).

² For examples of recent work on status in world politics, see Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2019); Courtney Fung, *China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 2019); Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2017). Steven Michael Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2017); Joslyn Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation: Anger and Status in World Politics*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2020); Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

³ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers."

⁴ For example, see Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*; Renshon, *Fighting for Status*.

in institutional competition is highly relevant to contemporary debates in international politics regarding the motives behind and the nature of China's engagement with the international system, as well as policy debates about China's creation of alternative international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank.⁵

Chapter 3 explains how status concerns shape how states approach international institutions. As noted above, Mukherjee develops a theoretical framework he calls Institutional Status Theory (IST), which assumes that rising powers seek equality with higher status actors in international institutions. The choice of strategies that rising powers adopt for approach international institutions depends on their perceptions of institutional openness and procedural fairness—and, thus, on their ability to satisfy their status ambitions. Drawing from scholarship on SIT, Mukherjee argues that perceptions of institutional openness and procedural fairness lead states to pursue the following strategies: cooperate, challenge, expand, and reframe.⁶ Institutions perceived as having high levels of institutional openness and high levels of procedural fairness are likely to generate strategies of cooperation, while high levels of institutional openness and low levels of procedural fairness are likely to drive strategies of expansion. In addition, institutions that are perceived as having low levels of openness but high levels of fairness are likely to result in strategies of expansion, while perceptions of both low procedural fairness and low institutional openness are likely to cause rising powers to challenge existing institutions. After developing the theoretical framework, Mukherjee then uses a series of in-depth cases on how rising powers interact with international institutions, using process-tracing and within-case variation to test theoretical expectations from IST against rival material-based explanations.

In chapter 4, Mukherjee examines how status concerns influenced the United States' approach to the Atlantic system during the nineteenth century. He finds that although status aspirations and material interests initially led the United States to support the maritime laws of war, US leaders viewed the 1856 Declaration of Paris as constraining American status aspirations (owing to US exclusion from deliberations

⁵ For example, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International Security* 44:1 (Fall 2019): 9-60; G. John Ikenberry and Darren J. Lim, "China's Emerging Institutional Statecraft: The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Prospects for Counter-Hegemony," Project on International Security at the Brookings Institution, April 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/chinas-emerging-institutional-statecraft.pdf>; Mira Rapp-Hooper, Michael S Chase, Mataka Kamiya, Shin Kawashima, Yuichi Hosoya, "Responding to China's Complicated Views on International Order," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Alliance Policy Coordination Brief, 10 October 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2019/10/responding-to-chinas-complicated-views-on-international-order?lang=en>.

⁶ Henri Tajfel, "The Psychological Structure of Intergroup Relations," in Tajfel, ed., *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, (London, UK: Academic 1978): 27-98; Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in William G Austin and Stephen Worchel, eds., *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole 1979): 33-47.

surrounding the Declaration). Consequently, the United States sought to undermine the Declaration by supporting an alternative treaty (which ultimately failed).

Chapter 5 examines Japan's early support for and later rejection of the Washington system, which was based upon the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty, during the interwar period. While status aspirations led Japan to even initially support constraints on its naval armament, Japanese leaders increasingly viewed the Washington system as denying Japan equal status. Japanese leaders considered racist policies such as the US Immigration Act of 1924 to be duplicitous as well as proof that the Washington system would never accept Japanese equality, which bolstered the position of treaty opponents to support leaving the Washington System. This explanation for Japan's approach and late withdrawal from the Washington system complements existing work on status and revisionism in world politics. For example, Steven Ward shows how Japanese perceptions of status mobility influenced domestic actors who were advocating for revisionism.⁷ Mukherjee's case corroborates these findings and sheds light on the period before revisionism, focusing on Japan's approach to institutions.

In chapter 6, Mukherjee draws upon primary sources to examine India's approach to nuclear disarmament and its non-proliferation goals, showing that India's status concerns led it to be supportive of nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament goals when Indian leaders perceived that India was treated symbolically as an equal. However, when the drafting of the Non-Proliferation Treaty solidified existing status hierarchies by no longer recognizing newer nuclear powers such as India, India began testing nuclear weapons. While this case effectively illustrates the utility of the IST framework, the case of India does not fit the description of a rising power in a similar fashion as the canonical cases that precede it or the case of China that follows it. This is not necessarily a problem for IST. Still, it does raise questions about the sources of India's status ambitions at the time: whether they were reflective of those of a rising power or whether they stemmed from domestic sources of nationalism or the leadership of individual leaders such as Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Following these case studies, chapter 7 probes the plausibility of the IST framework for the contemporary case of China's rise and its approach to the Liberal International Order (LIO). Like Alastair Iain Johnston, Mukherjee disaggregates the LIO into distinctive issue areas, finding that China cooperates with certain aspects of the international order but not others.⁸ Although this chapter provides supportive evidence for the IST framework, it would be more compelling if it had been put into conversation with prominent and contemporary alternative arguments such as that offered in Rush Doshi's *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. Doshi's argument, for example, provides a more cynical account of China's approach to international institutions, viewing it as part of a coherent grand strategy driven by

⁷ Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2017); Ward, "Race, Status, and Japanese Revisionism in the Early 1930s," *Security Studies* 22:4 (2013): 607-639.

⁸ Johnston, "China in a World of Orders."

perceptions of US threat and relative power.⁹ Likewise, a further test of the IST framework could contrast its hypotheses with more prosaic explanations, such as those focused on bureaucratic politics, or compared to other domestic or internally focused explanations.¹⁰

The book concludes with the sanguine interpretation of contemporary policy implications that “the empirical evidence since the end of Cold War suggests that rising powers such as China, India, and Brazil are content *not* to challenge the LIO, despite their varying levels of dissatisfaction with it” (296). At the aggregate level, this claim broadly captures how these powers interact with the international order. Yet whether China, India, and Brazil should be grouped in the same category—despite their grouping in the BRICS—is debatable, especially given the vast economic and military power differentials between China and other rising powers, in addition to the considerable consternation that China’s rise is sparking for in US defense communities.¹¹

Mukherjee goes on to argue that rising powers today are adopting “free-riding” strategies as opposed to directly challenging the international order (296) and suggests that ensuring continued peace and stability will require “institutional innovations that enable social mobility for rising powers” (298). This implication is consistent with John Ikenberry’s argument about the durability of the LIO depending on its ability to allow for a greater voice for rising powers—akin to providing greater voting rights to shareholders in a corporation.¹² Yet what makes Mukherjee’s work distinctive is that it unpacks this concept of institutional voice, showing not only the material considerations but also the powerful role of status concerns driving symbolic concerns over equality.

Although the book focuses on the behavior of *rising* powers, the theoretical mechanisms discussed here likely apply more broadly to a wider range of states in the international system. Rising powers attract considerable attention because of their potential to marshal material and social power to revise and challenge the international order; historically, power transitions have been notably turbulent and violent.

Opening the aperture on the universe of states driven by status and problematizing the sources of status ambitions will likely generate important scholarship and insights into state behavior in the international system. For example, while the process of rising can raise public and elite perceptions about a state’s appropriate position, it is not the only means by which status expectations are generated. For example, Jack

⁹ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 2021).

¹⁰ For a domestic-level explanation of China’s shifting approach to the international system, see Susan L. Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 2023).

¹¹ Jim Garamone, “DOD Is Focused on China, Defense Officials Say,” U.S. Department of Defense, 9 February 2023: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3294255/dod-is-focused-on-china-defense-official-says/>.

¹² G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2012).

Snyder's *Myths of Empire* demonstrates how domestic logrolling coalitions drive myths of expansion.¹³ Reference points for comparison may similarly derive from historical comparisons. Joshua Freedman shows how Chinese history, as opposed to an external reference group, informs Chinese conceptions of appropriate reference points.¹⁴ Perceptions of rise and decline are socially constructed, stemming from a state's domestic politics and history.¹⁵ Robert Ralston, for example, demonstrates that "opposition brokers" often drive narratives of declinism.¹⁶ Narratives of American exceptionalism and declinism (i.e., "Make America Great *Again*" [emphasis added]) are heavily influenced by domestic politics and narratives as opposed to a careful calculation of the United States' relative material and social power in the international system.

The synthesis of Mukherjee's findings on status concerns and institutional behavior with scholarship on domestic sources of status perceptions will open new avenues for scholarship and potentially resolve important empirical puzzles regarding the behavior of leading or dominant powers in the international system. For example, from an institutional perspective, it is puzzling why the United States under the Trump administration engaged in revisionist behavior against international institutions in which the United States has benefitted the most. Such an approach would suggest that declinist narratives have led US leaders to view leading international institutions as inimical to American status ambitions. As this example suggests, Mukherjee's pathbreaking work opens many new lines of scholarly inquiry.

Ascending Order provides a valuable and timely contribution to the study of status and institutions in international relations theory. It has useful insights for policymakers who seek to understand the prospects for China's engagement and cooperation with international institutions. Understanding the status motives that shape the approaches of rising powers to international institutions is crucial for US policymakers who are working to manage and channel the United States' growing competition with China. Moreover, *Ascending Order* opens fruitful areas of research on the study of international institutions. It will be of great use to scholars at the frontier of scholarship on status and institutions in international relations theory.

¹³ Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1993).

¹⁴ Joshua Freedman, "Status Insecurity and Temporality in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 22:4 (2016): 797-822.

¹⁵ For an example of scholarship on domestic sources of status ambitions, see: Anne Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests*, (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press 2009)

¹⁶ Robert Ralston, "Make Us Great Again: The Causes of Declinism in Major Powers," *Security Studies* 31:4 (2022): 667-702.

Review by Michelle Murray, Bard College

Rohan Mukherjee's *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions* makes an important contribution to the growing literature on status in international relations.¹ Institutional Status Theory (IST) explains the conditions under which rising powers will engage in different strategies in order to secure their status in the international order. At the center of IST is an enduring puzzle about rising powers and international order: rising powers often act in ways that are a disadvantage to their material interests. For example, historically, rising powers have challenged the very orders that enabled their rise, or, conversely, have accepted a disadvantageous order that would have been easy to disregard or challenge. To make sense of these puzzling patterns, Mukherjee cogently argues that we need to understand that rising powers will sacrifice their material interests to satisfy their desire for status within the international order. A rising power's status ambitions are met when that power achieves symbolic equality with the established great powers in meaningful international institutions. As a result, the characteristics of the international order—its procedural fairness (equal treatment within the institution) and institutional openness (can new powers join)—and how easily it is able to offer symbolic equality to an emerging great power, determine when and how a rising power might challenge the status quo. This rich theoretical argument is supplemented with a set of meticulously researched case studies that vividly illustrate the argument, show the author's empirical reach, and highlight the contribution of the book.

Ascending Order offers many contributions to the literatures on status, rising powers, and international order. First, as Mukherjee notes early on in the text, most studies of rising powers and status focus on the problem of war and/or military-based security competition.² This undue focus on war distorts the process by which rising powers in fact rise to become peer competitors, and flattens the variety of strategies they may use to secure symbolic equality with the established great powers. In contrast, IST centers the long and politically contentious period whereby the “great powers seek to preserve their privileges within an international order and rising powers seek a greater role” (16). Despite the fact that this period of time is a crucial factor in shaping a rising power's satisfaction with the terms of the international order, it is often left unexamined in studies of rising powers. Indeed, it will be hard for one to come away from reading *Ascending Order* without reconsidering entirely what it means to study rising powers.

Second, and related, *Ascending Order* makes clear that international institutions have been and continue to be a prime forum through which struggles for status emerge and are resolved. Also, membership in these

¹ Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism and Rising Powers* (Oxford University Press, 2019); and Joslyn Barnhart, *The Consequence of Humiliation: Anger and Status in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

² See especially Renshon, *Fighting for Status*; Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* and Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition*.

venues offers the same, if not more, symbolic power to a rising power as investments in particular military capabilities. Thus, IST widens our view to see that rising powers seek a broad range of symbolic goods in their quest for status *and* that over time the way in which these struggles evolve shapes whether or not a power transition ends in war. In this regard, the chapter on China's rise is illuminating and important, not just for scholarly IR debates, but for policymakers as well. Mukherjee offers a genuinely new way to interpret China's rise and understand some of the seemingly contradictory dimensions of its foreign policy.³ Thus, if we take China's desire for status seriously, and use IST as a framework through which to interpret its struggle for status, we quickly see that there are multiple aspects of the international order that provide China with symbolic equality and recognition. As such, there is no a priori reason to believe that as China grows more powerful, it will be a maximally revisionist state bent on overthrowing the entire international order.⁴ What is more, IST offers policymakers a new toolkit through which to conceptualize American foreign policy vis-à-vis China and highlights new avenues through which China's status ambitions might be partially satisfied.

Finally, *Ascending Order* offers an important contribution to the constructivist literature on status, recognition, and rising powers.⁵ Some of the most vexing questions for theorists of international recognition are: what does it mean to recognize a rising power? Why don't established great powers simply recognize rising powers, thus satisfying their status ambition and avoiding conflict? The answers to these questions are often unsatisfactory. There is a vague sense that recognition involves language, representations, and equality in interaction. But how these concepts are operationalized is not fully theorized, and instead is treated instead as an empirical question contingent on particular historical moments. IST usefully operationalizes status as symbolic equality in international institutions, which "obtains when core institutions of the international order recognize a rising power's claim to equal club membership" (67-68). When an institution has relatively open leadership ranks and fair procedures governing the rules of the institution, a rising power is more likely to have its status claims recognized. These are all characteristic that can be measured and generalized across cases and time periods. While not all struggles happen in the context of international institutions, IST goes a long way to clarify the pathways by which a rising power can obtain recognition.

As is clear, *Ascending Order* offers a range of valuable insights about status and international order. Here I want to explore more carefully the relationship between recognition and identity formation in Mukherjee's framework. IST represents a kind of "psychological constructivism" that "probes the effects of social interaction on a rising power's pursuit of fundamental human motives such as status, belonging, and

³ See also Rohan Mukherjee, "China's Status Anxiety: Beijing Fights to Be Treated as America's Equal on the World Stage," *Foreign Affairs* 19 May 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/united-states-china-status-anxiety>.

⁴ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War?," *The Atlantic* 24 September 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

⁵ Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition*; Erik Ringmar, "The Recognition Game: Soviet Russia Against the West," *Cooperation and Conflict* 37:2 (2002): 115-136; Thomas Lindemann, *Causes of War: The Struggle for Recognition* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2011).

fairness” (41). In this view, a rising power’s desire for status is fundamentally psychological, and connected to the basic individual human need for self-esteem and the positive recognition of their distinctiveness within a society. Which identities confer status, and thus are understood to be desirable by states for this purpose, is a social question related to the shared meanings that organize international society. Within this process, the innovation that Mukherjee highlights is that while interaction is crucial to sustaining an identity, ultimately states retain a considerable amount of agency to shape their identities, even in moments where their own self-image conflicts with how others recognize them. This distinguishes IST from fuller social constructivist approaches that hold social interaction as key to state identity formation.

On the one hand, it is important to understand that rising powers are not simply passive receptors of other states’ representations of them, and thus have some ability to manage and author the meanings of their identities in international society. Or, at the very least, rising powers have some degree of agency in deciding how they will pursue recognition. When engaging a dynamic institutional environment where symbolic equality, and therefore status, are at stake, a rising power may choose to cooperate, may choose to reframe or expand its position and claims, or may choose to challenge the established powers over a perceived status denial. Put differently, as the details of the international order change, so too does the rising power’s status-seeking strategy and orientation toward the status quo. We see this dynamic clearly in Mukherjee’s analysis of India’s relationship to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. As India perceived changes in the relative openness of the nuclear nonproliferation regime to its status vis-à-vis the recognized nuclear powers, its attitude toward those nonproliferation institutions changed, from detonating a nuclear weapon in 1974 and 1998 to demonstrate its symbolic equality with the recognized members of the nuclear club, to emphasizing its status as a “de facto nuclear power,” that deserved the “same benefits and advantages as other states” in agreements with the United States (244). We see this same pattern in the other case studies: rising powers do not simply follow a linear path of increasing revisionism until war breaks out. Rather, their rise is often marked by a varied and circuitous path of waxing and waning dissatisfaction with the status quo. Indeed, this is the pattern Mukherjee draws out in all of the case studies and is a valuable contribution to the literature on rising powers.

On the other hand, the variation in dissatisfaction with the status quo highlights the significance—and perhaps primacy—of recognition to the status seeking process and identity formation in international society. IST argues that ultimately a rising power’s “status (dis)satisfaction is a function of institutional features pertaining to permeability and legitimacy,” which in turn shape the strategies that rising powers pursue to achieve symbolic equality with the established great powers (60). This dimension of the argument casts the rising power as a reflexive actor that can “name itself,” altering the roles it has been cast into in ways that align with its identity. All of this is true. But none of this is incompatible with a more socially grounded constructivism, and indeed may rely on one. To highlight the social dimensions of identity formation is not to render states as passive receptors of the roles that more powerful actors cast them into, nor to reduce its significance to defining the categories that confer status. Rather, it is to highlight that identities only matter when they are instantiated in practice, and for that to happen in any kind of meaningful way, states must be able to *act* in ways that are consistent with their self-image. Thus, even if the desire for status is psychological, I see the struggle for status as a purely social phenomenon that

is ultimately dependent upon the routinized relations of recognition that international institutions can provide.⁶

This observation raises a related set of questions: what is the relationship between international institutions and the status hierarchy at the center of the international order? Are international institutions simply an outgrowth of the international order's deeper role structure? These questions are important because they speak to how much agency a rising power has to shape its identity. One of the core responsibilities of great power status is the management of the international order, which includes the creation of the international institutions that are the focus of IST.⁷ These institutions not only serve to uphold the rules and norms of the international order (which presumably suit the great powers' interests), but also reproduces the status hierarchy of the order itself by providing structures through which routinized relations of recognition exist. From an identity formation perspective, then, institutions are important because they provide venues where state identities can be instantiated in practice, and through particular role structures, social hierarchies are maintained. If this is the case, then I wonder if a rising power really does have the ability to "name itself" and be in control of its identity. In other words, it could be the case that not all symbolic equality is made equal in terms of conferring recognition to a rising power. And if this is the case, how do we separate out the signal from the noise in the struggle for status?

To conclude, *Ascending Order* offers a thought-provoking, challenging, and provocative engagement with a set of questions and debates that could not be more important in our contemporary political moment. I learned a great deal from reading this book, which opened for me new ways of understanding and thinking about global phenomena that I thought I understood. As policymakers in the United States look to repair the institutions that lie at the heart of the liberal international order that the US has led since the end of the Second World War, and contemplate a future with China as a peer atop the international status hierarchy, they would be well-served to consider the insights of Institutional Status Theory.

⁶ Karl Gustafsson, "Routinised Recognition and Anxiety: Understanding the Deterioration in Sino-Japanese Relations," *Review of International Studies* 42:4 (2016): 613-633.

⁷ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

Status matters in international politics, especially for rising powers. In this theoretically innovative book, Rohan Mukherjee asks two interrelated questions. First, why do rising powers sometimes challenge the very international order that enables their rise to begin with? Second, and relatedly, why do rising powers sometimes accept a disadvantageous international order—disadvantageous in terms of security and/or wealth—instead of challenging or disregarding it? Mukherjee answers these questions by superbly demonstrating that symbolic rights matter.

Mukherjee has developed an original theory, the Institutional Status Theory (IST), to explain the choices of a rising power “to attain or maintain status in the international order” (5). More specifically, he focuses on the international order’s “core institutions” (5) and introduces two original variables: institutional openness and procedural fairness. His central argument is that rising powers are supportive of institutions that are open to new members, especially if they treat the rising power fairly. Membership of these institutions grant the rising power “symbolic equality with the great powers” (6), and he explicitly defines “status” in terms of this symbolic equality (16).

In his highly sophisticated analysis, Mukherjee draws upon the literature on status in international relations, club theory in economics, and social identity theory in psychology, to explain the behavior of rising powers.¹ Mukherjee conceptualizes institutional openness and procedural fairness as either “high” or “low,” thereby providing us with four distinct strategies available to rising powers: cooperate, challenge, expand, and reframe. This is noteworthy simply because doing so allows him to explain why a rising power may be satisfied or dissatisfied with the extant order in the first place. According to Mukherjee, other theories tend to gloss over this fact; for him, therefore, the answer to whether or not rising powers are satisfied or dissatisfied with the extant order “lies in their experiences with international order, or the rules and institutions that they encounter early in their rise” (5). Doing so allows Mukherjee to demonstrate that the simplistic binaries of “revisionism” and “status quo orientation” are not enough to characterize the choices facing rising powers since the institutional context matters.

Mukherjee tests his theory (IST) on three historical cases: the United States in the British Atlantic System in the nineteenth century, where the core institution was the 1856 Declaration of Paris on the maritime laws of war; Japan and the Washington System of the interwar years in the first-half of the twentieth century, where the core institution was the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty; and India in the Cold War, where the core institution was the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Additionally, in the fourth case he looks at China in the so-called America-led contemporary Liberal International Order (LIO)—a plausibility probe

¹ T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

according to Mukherjee—where he works to demonstrate the validity of his IST across several issue areas and institutions.

Through a wide range of archival sources across time and space, from nineteenth-century America to Cold War India, including “evidence from previously unseen secret cables exchanged between senior Japanese officials in Tokyo, Washington, London, and a handful of European capitals” (21), Mukherjee demonstrates that his IST provides us with a better explanation of the choices and strategies of these rising powers compared to competing materialist explanations. Furthermore, his detailed historical cases also provide us with original case/historical insights (in addition to making the case for his IST). For example, the American case shows that the leaders of the United States harbored great-power ambitions from the very early stages in that country’s political history even as the political science literature tends to characterize early America as isolationist. In fact, his reading of the Japanese case even leads him to posit a tantalizing counterfactual (288): what if the Washington Naval Treaty had granted the Japanese symbolic equality given that Japan lacked the resources to actually build a naval fleet as large as that of Britain and the United States?

Mukherjee’s contribution is undoubtedly a noteworthy addition to the growing literature on status in world politics. However, his analysis also raises some important questions. First, Mukherjee’s emphasis is on a rising power’s symbolic equality with the extant great powers because “rising power’s value symbolic ends” (18). For him, membership in the core institutions of the great power club in any extant order is representative of that symbolic equality. However, there is also an undercurrent of tension in his argument for all great powers are not equal. After all, the great power club itself is a stratified one.

For example, the Washington Naval Treaty fixed the relative naval strength in battleships and airplane carriers of the United States, Britain, Japan, France, and Italy at a ratio of 5:5:3:1.67:1.67.² According to Mukherjee’s coding, the United States, Britain, France, and Italy were the four great powers of the interwar period (302). However, his Japan case study privileges the United States and Britain as “Great-Power Sponsors” (308). In other words, Japan of the interwar years aspired to equality not just as a great power (*vis-à-vis* France and Italy for example); instead, Japan sought equality with the leading great powers of its era, Britain and the United States. This raises the issue of what William R. Thompson has referred to as Status with a big “S” or position/rank in a hierarchy, versus status with a small “s” that focuses on other dimensions.³ Future research must identify the conditions under which these distinct dimensions of S/status matter as well as their consequences.

² Notably, “Italy and France...received far less attention in studies dealing with the Washington Conference.” See “Introduction” in Erik Goldstein and John Maurer, eds., *The Washington Conference, 1921–22: Naval Rivalry, East Asian Stability, and the Road to Pearl Harbor* (London: Routledge, 1994): 2.

³ William R. Thompson, “Status Conflict, Hierarchies, and Interpretation Dilemmas,” in T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 219–245.

Second, what are the differences between the following three categories of states: rising powers, rising great powers,⁴ and great powers? Mukherjee argues that his is a theory of a rising power in “the early stages” of its rise “when it is relatively weak compared to the great powers but still hungry for recognition” (15). This sets his analysis apart from other studies, which tend to focus on “rising *great* powers, that is, states on the threshold of systemic influence” (8). While these distinctions are crucial and they do make implicit sense, they make for an awkward empirical reading. Was Japan just a “rising power”—in the early stages of its ascent—in the interwar years, or was it indeed a “rising great power” by the 1920s? Notably, other scholars tend to define Japan as a full-fledged member of the “great power” club as early as 1905.⁵

Similarly, Mukherjee’s coding rules classify China as a great power during the Cold War after 1974 (302). However, China is then treated as a “rising great power” as well as a “rising power” in the post-Cold War period (248, 305).⁶ To be fair, Mukherjee is clear that his IST “does not assume *longue durée* change in the nature of order” (15), thus implying that we must analytically approach his four orders separately.⁷ However, it becomes somewhat difficult not to wonder about the change in China’s *status* after the end of the Cold War because the author also notes that “there is a good deal of continuity between the Cold War and the LIO” at the institutional level (246).

In other words, did China *lose* status after the end of the Cold War from a great power to a rising power? Or was China already a great power during the Cold War that has now become a rising great power—a great power in advanced stages of its ascent that may be entering into a big “S” Status rivalry with the United States? If it is the former, then post-Cold War China is operating in the domain of losses compared to its Cold War status. If it is the latter, then contemporary China is in fact operating in the domain of gains with respect to its Cold War status. After all, we are told that “major-power identity” matters as states “seek recognition of this identity in the design and functioning of the order itself” (18). Therefore, according to prospect theory,⁸ contemporary China’s choice of strategy—including risk-propensity—towards the extant order will also depend upon the domain (of gains/losses) it finds itself operating in vis-à-vis its prior Cold War status in addition the institutional openness and procedural fairness of the extant LIO.

⁴ Mukherjee refers to both “rising *great* powers” (8) and “*rising* great powers” (248). It remains unclear whether or not they are distinct categories and what that distinction might be. However, his analysis seems to suggest that these powers have not yet risen to be full-fledged members of the great power club.

⁵ To be fair, while using 1905 as the date for Japan’s entry into the great power club, Levy notes that the “timing but not the fact of Japan’s entry into the Great Power system is open to question.” See Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1983): 42.

⁶ Mukherjee refers to China as a “rising power” (248), a “rising great power” (281, 305), and as a “*rising* great power” (248). He acknowledges that China is in more advanced stage of its ascent.

⁷ The four orders being the Atlantic System, the Washington System, the Cold War, and the LIO.

⁸ Janice Gross Stein, “Prospect Theory in International Relations,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias (Politics)*, 26 September 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.531>.

These quibbles notwithstanding, Mukherjee has provided us with a stimulating book that emphasizes that we should seriously look at status/symbolic considerations when it comes to rising powers because “survival” is rarely at stake, especially in the early stages of a state’s ascent (281). Mukherjee has convincingly demonstrated that the strategies of ascent that are available to rising powers are far wider than those posited by purely materialist explanations.

 Response by Rohan Mukherjee, London School of Economics and Political Science

I am immensely grateful to Ian Hall, Lincoln Hines, Michelle Murray, and Manjeet Pardesi for reading *Ascending Order* in ways that reveal valuable new research directions while engaging deeply with concepts, theory, and alternative explanations. I address these three lines of inquiry in my response below.

On concepts, Pardesi rightly points out that the distinction between great powers, rising powers, and rising great powers, while theoretically sensible, is empirically complicated. How are we to know when a state occupies one or the other category?

The book identifies *great powers* as meeting a high threshold on two of three criteria: capabilities, interests, and recognition (302). A state meets the capabilities' criterion if it has at least 80 percent of the most powerful state's capabilities—this is the conventional measure of power parity.¹ Capabilities are also important for identifying rising powers, since increasing capabilities are a precondition for power shifts. *Rising powers* are therefore steadily growing states that exceed a minimum level of capabilities—to exclude states rising from a very small power base—and possess less than 80 percent of the leading state's capabilities (303). By corollary, a *rising great power* is a state that has crossed the 80 percent threshold and continues to grow in power relative to the leading state. At some point, a rising great power may itself become the leading state in terms of capabilities (though not necessarily interests or recognition).

Consistent with the book's categorization, applying these criteria to the cases of interwar Japan and Cold War/post-Cold War China, which Pardesi cites, shows that the former is a rising power while after 1974 the latter is a rising great power. Interwar Japan's capabilities never exceeded one-third the capabilities of the leading state, the United States. A great power in this sense is what Daniel Geller and J. David Singer call a "global contender," and according to the few lists of global contenders available, interwar Japan does not qualify.² China during the Cold War meets the capability and recognition criteria of great power after 1974. From then on, its capabilities have never dropped below 80 percent of the leading state (the US); it was therefore a rising great power from then until well into the post-Cold War era (whether it has now surpassed the US in any meaningful sense or not is debated). As noted in the book, China during this period can be thought of as a late-stage rising power, and although such states are not the focus of Institutional Status Theory, it nonetheless offers a plausible account of China's post-Cold War approach to international order as well (249).

Hines notes that India during the Cold War does not fit the description of a rising power as much as the book's other cases. This is addressed in the book's appendix on case selection, where India's economic

¹ Douglas Lemke and Suzanne Werner, "Power Parity, Commitment to Change, and War," *International Studies Quarterly* 40:2 (1996), 235-260.

² Daniel S. Geller and J. David Singer, *Nations at War: A Scientific Study of International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Vesna Danilovic, *When the Stakes Are High: Deterrence and Conflict Among Major Powers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 229.

growth rate during the Cold War is shown to be very similar to that of the US and Japan as rising powers in their respective time periods (307). In compound annual terms, India grew at the same rate of 4 percent from 1960–1990 as the US did from the 1820s to 1860s. Japan from the late 19th century till the outbreak of the Second World War grew at a lower annual rate of 3.3 percent. India also meets the further two criteria of self-perception as an important global actor, which extended well beyond Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in the Indian leadership, and growing recognition from other states (303).

In analytical terms, the choice of how many criteria states fulfill or of thresholds within criteria is naturally arbitrary. Measures of this sort nonetheless have heuristic value. They operationalize the intuition of the book’s case selection method, which is to identify states that grew in capabilities over long periods of time but were not members of the great power club. Relatedly, as Pardesi correctly observes, the status of being in the club is distinct from stratification within the club.³ As noted in the book, while a club of great powers managed the international order in each era, typically one or two states among them were first among equals and the order’s chief guarantors: Britain and France in the Atlantic system, the US and Britain in the Washington system, the US and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and the US after the Cold War (74). Other powers were not irrelevant, however. At the 1921–1922 Washington Conference, for example, Japanese delegates were satisfied to see their country included among the “Big Three” with the US and Britain partly because it placed Japan at a rank higher than great powers such as France and Italy (170).

Regarding the theorization of status, *Ascending Order* is consonant with Murray’s argument that while the desire for status may be psychological, the struggle for status is social (41–42). The book also conceptualizes institutions as Murray does, as vehicles for the reproduction of the broader status hierarchy of international order and venues where state identities can be instantiated in practice (50–54). Institutional rules and practices are a vital source of recognition that can align a rising power’s social identity of being a potential great power with the external roles that are ascribed or available to it. The difference between Institutional Status Theory’s “psychological constructivism” and Murray’s pure constructivism lies in whether states can manage their social identities, that is, categorize and name themselves in relation to other social categories (43–44). Murray argues that institutions maintain social hierarchy and therefore leave little room for states to manage their social identities. In other words, interactions within institutions—in addition to interactions with established great powers, which Murray highlights in her own work—straightforwardly construct states as revisionist or non-revisionist.⁴ A rising power misrecognized as revisionist is constructed as revisionist due to the denial of its major power identity.

Although this framework is valid, it struggles to explain the outcomes in the book. The core institutions of the nineteenth-century Atlantic system, interwar Washington system, and Cold War order did at times misrecognize the US, Japan, and India respectively, not as revisionists but as powers that were unworthy of

³ Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, “Reputation and Status as Motives for War,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17 (2014), 375.

⁴ Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

equal consideration. However, this did not in turn construct them as unworthy powers. Instead, it led them to reemphasize their social identity as potential great powers, which required revisionist behavior. They acted as revisionists in the absence of the misrecognition that would (in Murray's account) have constructed them as such. Equally, recognition did not construct them as cooperative powers. The US challenged the Atlantic system in the 1850s even though Britain had recognized it as a non-revisionist power in the 1820s.⁵ The rising powers covered in the book challenged their respective orders not because they were misrecognized as revisionist, but because the orders themselves turned closed and unfair, thus blocking their status ambitions. These acts of challenge *caused* the great powers to view these rising powers as revisionist to varying extents and with varying consequences. Institutional Status Theory thus explains the status politics of the earlier stages of a power shift, which lead to the struggle for recognition that marks the later stages that Murray and others have studied.

Murray makes the further valuable point that “not all symbolic equality is made equal in terms of conferring recognition to a rising power,” making it difficult to separate out the signal from the noise in the struggle for status. Institutional Status Theory addresses this issue by focusing on formal and informal rules and procedures within the core institutions of an international order. This excludes conventions and customs, everyday interactions, and peripheral institutional environments that might be construed as noise. This is not to say that these latter aspects of order are unimportant. A steady accumulation of everyday slights can constitute a signal of status denial. However, the clearest signal from a rising power's perspective emanates from the rules that determine membership and standing within the core institutions of an order, where the stakes of global leadership are the highest and most visible.

Hall and Hines separately pose an important question that emerges from *Ascending Order*: what are the sources of status ambitions? The book answers this question in the case of rising powers only. Their growing power elicits greater deference from other states, which causes rising powers to develop a social identity centered on being major global actors, which in turn produces a desire for equal membership of the great power club. Hall suggests that the drive to be recognized as a great power cannot be rooted in the universal human drive for status, since to be a great power is to seek superiority over most other states and not equality with other states. The distinction is, however, one of degree and not type. Most states do not develop the social identity of being a potential great power because they are simply too far from that rank. Rising powers, by contrast, are growing steadily in capabilities and recognition to the point where they develop a social identity that induces comparison with the great powers. In other words, in hierarchical settings, social groups seek status equality with those who are higher up and superiority over those who are lower down. As noted in the book, rising powers seek membership of the great power club because it “gives them the same role status as other members *relative to non-members*” (49, emphasis in original). The same

⁵ On the latter, see Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), chapter 3.

universal drive for status can therefore explain the behavior of rising powers as well as other states—the main difference lies in their social positions.

Rising powers are of course not the only status-seekers. Status is a fundamental human motive that manifests differently across time and space.⁶ As Hines observes, outside the category of rising powers, these differences may be due to factors such as domestic preferences and politics, historical reference points, and narratives. These arguments are all well taken and highlight areas for future research on the status motivations of a much larger set of states in the international order. It will be important to specify precise causal mechanisms in this research. For example, do the domestic politics of interests, memory, and narrative have an independent effect on status-seeking behavior, or do these factors mediate the relationship between external causes and state behavior? *Ascending Order* finds limited evidence for the latter. State leaders often acted contrary to domestic interests and preferences. Outside the realm of power shifts, however, domestic factors can have strong independent effects.⁷

“Opening the aperture on the universe of states,” to borrow Hines’s helpful phrasing, also highlights potential alternative explanations for the phenomena studied in the book. For example, Hall highlights how rising powers may challenge an order not because of its institutional features but because they misunderstood the rules of the great power club. From the outside, the rules may seem a certain way, but upon admission into the club reality ends up being quite different. A disillusioned rising power may thus challenge the order on grounds of hypocrisy. While this is certainly plausible, questions of institutional openness and procedural fairness are germane to assessments of hypocrisy, and these assessments do not rest on any information asymmetry between those inside and outside the club. Outsiders know that the great powers are hypocritical—indeed, there is no other way to manage a system whose managers are the only check against themselves. The symbolic equality rising powers seek thus includes the privilege of acting hypocritically when it comes to international rules and law.⁸ An order that is closed and procedurally unfair denies this equality and is open to charges of hypocrisy or double standards.

More potential alternative explanations emerge regarding China in the post-Cold War order. Hines is right that the book does not address domestic political explanations for Chinese foreign policy, such as Susan Shirk’s account of ‘overreach’ starting under Hu Jintao’s collective leadership and accelerating under President Xi Jinping’s personalist leadership. Although Shirk paints Chinese foreign policy with a broad brush, neglecting any variation in China’s approach to different institutions that make up the post-Cold War order, new research in this area, by Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy L. Wallace, for example, has begun to systematically examine the domestic sources of variation in China’s approach to international

⁶ Cameron Anderson, John Angus D. Hildreth, and Laura Howland, “Is the Desire for Status a Fundamental Human Motive? A Review of the Empirical Literature,” *Psychological Bulletin* 141:3 (2015), 574-601.

⁷ Anne L. Clunan, “Historical Aspirations and the Domestic Politics of Russia’s Pursuit of International Status,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47:3/4 (2014), 281-290.

⁸ Rohan Mukherjee, “China’s Status Anxiety,” *Foreign Affairs* 19 May 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/united-states-china-status-anxiety>.

institutions.⁹ Read alongside *Ascending Order*, this research creates avenues for thinking about how international and domestic factors interact in influencing China's approach to international order.

In grand strategic terms, Hall suggests that China may not be satisfied with anything short of clear superiority over the US. Hines similarly suggests that China's 'long game,' as argued by Rush Doshi, may be to displace the US entirely from its hegemonic position in the international order. These types of arguments take a one-sided view of power shifts, eliding the role of the order itself in informing Chinese assessments. There may well have been a time when a rising China's status aspirations could have been accommodated. The evidence from China's approach to the nuclear order of the 1990s certainly suggests a willingness to cooperate to maintain the status of a responsible global actor.¹⁰ Over time, however, it became clear that to be a "responsible stakeholder" in the global order was to play permanent second fiddle to the US. As *Ascending Order* shows, this is an untenable position for a rising power.

The US itself showed scant regard for international order in the aftermath of the Cold War, riding roughshod over international law in the Global War on Terror and the 2003 Iraq invasion, outright rejecting institutions such as the Kyoto Protocol and International Criminal Court, and unilaterally imprinting its own priorities on existing institutions such as UN peacekeeping. If the Global Financial Crisis was a watershed moment in China's rise, it was not because the economic gap suddenly narrowed with the US. Rather, Western double standards seemed to peak around the crisis. States that had strongly advocated for detrimental austerity conditions in IMF lending in response to the Asian financial crisis now advocated the opposite for Europe.¹¹ When Beijing demanded IMF reform in return for providing its reserves to bolster the West's economic recovery, the US dragged its feet for years. When those reforms eventually arrived, they did little to diminish Washington's dominance of the institution.

Given this consistent denial, Beijing has experienced a strong measure of what Jonathan Renshon and others have called status dissatisfaction,¹² which makes China more likely to challenge US leadership of the international order. It is vital to note here that while China may seek to displace the US from its global leadership role, the order itself holds great value for Beijing since it has for decades contributed to Chinese prosperity and security. China values the so-called liberal international order and would like to lead it, or at least co-manage it as an equal. Assessments of China's "long game" overlook this important distinction between US foreign policy and the US-led order in China's worldview. Bilateral conflicts of interest begin

⁹ Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy L. Wallace, "Domestic Politics, China's Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order," *International Organization* 75:2 (2021), 635-664.

¹⁰ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: Social States: China in International Institutions 1980-2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), chapter 3.

¹¹ Leslie Elliott Armijo and John Echeverri-Gent, "Absolute or Relative Gains? How Status Quo and Emerging Powers Conceptualize Global Finance," in Thomas Oatley and W. Kindred Winecoff, eds., *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Monetary Relations* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2014), 159.

¹² Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

to look like threats to global order itself. When order is the central unit of analysis, however, the relevant question is not just how much China wants, but also how much of its great power privileges the US is willing and able to share. Getting order management right—through bargains premised on shared authority in return for cooperation—can insulate the foundations of international cooperation from the worst excesses of US-China relations, and potentially ameliorate the latter as well.

The above discussion throws up a critical question that emerges from the book, which Murray, Hall, and Hines all raise: why do great powers not accommodate the status concerns of rising powers more often? *Ascending Order* suggests that great powers have an incentive not to accommodate rising powers because status is a scarce good. Admitting new entrants to the great power club would dilute the position and privileges of those already in it. There are certainly other factors at play, including domestic politics within great powers and the degree of ideological distance between rising and established powers. How these factors interact with the politics of status in international institutions is an important area for future inquiry.

Once again, I am indebted to the participants of this roundtable for engaging so sympathetically with my work. I hope this exchange will meaningfully advance the very fruitful conversations to be had at the intersection of power shifts, international order, and status in world politics.