

Mukherjee, Rohan (2022). *Ascending order: Rising powers and the politics of status in international relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Hbk. 324pp. ISBN: 978-1-0091-8681-0. Can\$114.95.

Some of the most interesting and influential interventions on status, hierarchy, and stratification in the discipline of International Relations have come from the Cambridge Studies on International Relations series. Rohan Mukherjee's *Ascending Order* is a brand-new title that also meets that description. It is a theoretically ambitious and empirically jam-packed contribution that explains why rising powers in global politics "sometimes challenge an international order that enables their growth, and at other times support an order that constrains them" (Abstract). There is indeed a clear, growing category of literature dedicated to social-psychological explanations of status and status-seeking behaviour. *Ascending Order* is a welcome addition to that category. As a scholar with a different entry point into the status literature, this book effectively challenged how I think about institutional structures, cooperation, competition, and change in IR.

Through the book, Mukherjee introduces readers to a theory he calls Institutional Status Theory, using it to make sense of the puzzle at hand. In doing so, he convincingly shows how IST can "explain the conditions under which rising powers will engage in different strategies to attain or maintain status in the international order" (p. 5). With the goal of explaining conditions comes a variable-driven approach to IR. IST's two variables are *procedural fairness* and *institutional openness*. The first describes whether higher and lower status states are treated equally or not. The second describes the number of barriers to states seeking to join the leadership of the institution. Both variables can be measured as "high" or "low"; some institutions are more open than others and some are fairer than others. As such, when constructed as a 2x2 matrix, IST presents four strategies for how states may navigate an international order in seeking status: cooperation, expansion, reframing, or challenging. Ultimately, Mukherjee clearly and convincingly demonstrates that international institutions matter in shaping the status politics of rising powers across a variety of international order conditions. IST's novelty lies in its introduction of new variables to the social-psychological approach and the very detailed conceptual work Mukherjee has done in explaining them.

Following clearly laid out and well-crafted chapters on the conceptual foundations of the book and the theoretical scaffolding of IST, *Ascending order* unfolds with four empirical chapters. Three of these chapters make use of IST in historical perspective; the final chapter does so in contemporary perspective. Beginning with an examination of the United States and the Atlantic System (British leadership in international order) in the 19th century, Mukherjee explains that in response to the Atlantic System's changing institutional openness and procedural fairness, the United States used three status-seeking approaches: cooperation, expansion and challenging. The second empirical chapter examines Japan in the interwar period in relation to the Washington System, wherein the United States, Britain and Japan "agreed to a system of limitation on naval armaments and resolved a number of geopolitical controversies" (p. 136) at the Washington Naval Conference in 1921-1922. In this case, Japan pursued the status-seeking strategy of cooperation initially and then moved to a strategy of challenging international order. It is this chapter that uses "previously unseen archival evidence: English-language translations of secret telegrams sent and received by the Japanese embassy in Washington in the 1920s, which were intercepted by US intelligence" (p. 138). The biggest strength of this book is indeed the breadth, depth, and novelty

of the archival material, undoubtedly completed through extensive and meticulous labour (the appendix also makes this clear).

In the third empirical chapter, Mukherjee examines India and its status aspirations during the Cold War. Focusing particularly on India's nuclear choices and strategies, he explains, using IST, how India pursued expansion first, cooperation second, and challenge third. Finally, Mukherjee turns to China in the post-Cold War so-called "liberal" international order (notably, Mukherjee does not claim to debate the liberal-ness of such an order, rather simply uses it as a shorthand). This chapter is particularly interesting because, as he notes, it is an examination across issue-areas of international politics. Further, where other scholars of IR are conditioned to see the potential for conflict or be unnecessarily hawkish toward China, Mukherjee's level-headed approach uses IST to explain China's varied choices with regards to international order, which are often quite cooperative. This is a useful view, especially in the American IR context.

As any reader will notice, there is an exceptional amount of research in this book. Consequently, it is understandable that any gaps or questions that remain may be unaddressed due to space constraints. However, constructive engagement through such remaining questions is what keeps the wheels of future writing, research questions, and reflection turning. Research is a collaborative endeavour and always a work in progress. From that view, I would love to see further engagement from Mukherjee with the broader project on historical International Relations. Reflection on *how* and *why* he used archival material in the way he did would be of interest especially if it were to make a different methodological contribution than those of other theoretical orientations. Moreover, while there was a section on justification of case selection in the book, it focused primarily on the Political Science tenets of case selection rather than engagement with history both as the empirical objects of his research and something with theoretical and methodological tenets of its own (some of which are discussed in the debates on historical IR). For example, he references the contributions of historians at various points, such as on American isolationism in the 19th century, but the intellectual work of historians and the meta view of history's engagement with IR is left unexamined.

On a similar note, while the contribution of IST to social-psychological approaches to status is extremely clear, the epistemological and ontological understanding of what makes up "the social" is also left unexamined at points. While the psychological and social foundations of IST are discussed clearly in the Conceptual Foundations chapter, questions remain about what strings together the social nature of status and actors. Mukherjee points out – by quoting Vincent Pouliot – what IST is *not*: that is, in IST's view, status seeking is not 'constituted by the basic fact of sociality'"(p. 70) – but does not explain what does constitute status seeking instead. His account is *not* constructivist but it sometimes is not clear what its psychological approach *is* when it comes to the constitution of the social. Further reflection on what actors are, their logics of action, and how they exist in relation to one another would be welcomed in situating IST among other theories of status, as well as thickening the discussions of the concept of recognition. Finally, such future engagement may also help illuminate how he makes sense of the claim that states are *rational* but also pursue things like *symbolic equality*. Symbolic equality may strike many as a particularly *irrational* desire for states; it may well be compatible, but that compatibility would be much clearer with a thicker epistemological and ontological reflection on what states and their desires are. In

John Ruggie's words, "what makes the world hang together?" Any account of status can always benefit from this question, regardless of theoretical orientation.

Ultimately, these remaining questions do not take away from the quality of the book and there is likely opportunity to engage them in future work and discussion with other scholars. Engagement with the book could come from the community of scholars that studies small states. Like many other scholars of status, Mukherjee has examined rising powers in depth. Of course, it is interesting to think about how theories of status – especially this one – may be applicable to states smaller than those rising to the very top of a hierarchy. Scholars of small states are interested in how small (and medium) states – the global majority – may behave within an international order, cooperating, challenging, reframing, or expanding. As there are published books on the status behaviour of small states, engagement of small states and status with Mukherjee's theoretical contributions is an exciting opportunity.

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