

Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers

Steven Ward



"This book is a worthy addition to the growing literature on how status concerns, especially combined with power transitions, shape international politics. By combining theory with historical case studies, Steven Ward contributes to our understanding of radical revisionism by showing how the psychological effects and domestic political repercussions of status immobility can lead to attempts by rising powers to overturn the existing international order. This study is a must-read for dealing with China and Russia today."

Deborah Welch Larson, *Professor of Political Science,
University of California, Los Angeles*

The rise of China and other great powers raises important questions about the persistence and stability of the 'liberal international order'. This book provides a new perspective on these questions by offering a novel theory of revisionist challenges to international order. It argues that rising powers sometimes seem to face the condition of 'status immobility', which activates social psychological and domestic political forces that push them toward lashing out in protest against status quo rules, norms, and institutions. Ward shows that his theory illuminates important but often-overlooked dynamics that contributed to the most significant revisionist challenges in modern history. The book highlights the importance of status in world politics, and further advances a new understanding of this important concept's role in foreign policy.

Steven Ward is an Assistant Professor in the Government Department at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

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Steven Ward is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Government at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He holds an M.A. in Security Studies and a Ph.D. in Government from Georgetown University, Washington, DC, where he won the Harold N. Glassman Award.

This book is dedicated to my grandparents.

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Introduction

One of the most deeply rooted insights from the study of international politics and world history is that the rise of new powers has the potential to cause geopolitical earthquakes.¹ Rising great powers pose deep challenges to international order, which can provoke hegemonic wars and dramatic changes in the balance of power and the normative and institutional character of international politics. This notion drove Thucydides' narrative of the Peloponnesian War; it animated E.H. Carr's analysis of the "twenty years' crisis"; it was at the core of Robert Gilpin's understanding of the engine of change in world politics; and it explains current trepidation about the consequences of the rise of China for the future of the American-backed liberal international order.²

Yet this widely held conventional wisdom is puzzling. Over the past two hundred years, every attempt to overthrow the international order has ended with the defeat (and in some cases subjugation) of the challenger. Taking this kind of risk only makes sense for a rising power that is deeply dissatisfied with its stake in the status quo. Uncovering the causes of geopolitical earthquakes thus involves explaining why rising powers occasionally adopt deeply revisionist foreign policy objectives.

Unfortunately, revisionism is a poorly understood concept. It often serves as little more than an ad hoc explanation for otherwise inexplicably aggressive behavior. At the same time, it is a central part of any account of how power transitions work in theory and how the rise of China will play out in practice. The debate over whether China will challenge the

¹ The geopolitical "earthquake" metaphor was popularized by Krasner (1982a) as a way of distinguishing between the realisms of Waltz and Gilpin.

² Thucydides (1972); Carr (1946); Gilpin (1981). For recent work on the rise of China, see Christensen (2015); Pillsbury (2015); Goldstein (2015); Friedberg (2015), (2011); Steinberg and O'Hanlon (2014); Kupchan (2014a); Luttwak (2012); White (2012); Ikenberry (2011); Mearsheimer (2010); Jacques (2009); and Goldstein (2005). Of course, the even greater trepidation (at least at the moment) about the consequences of the Trump administration's approach to foreign policy for the international order serves as an important reminder that the rise of new powers is not the *only* source of geopolitical earthquakes.

US-backed liberal order – whether the rise of China will provoke a geopolitical earthquake – comes down to a disagreement about the causes of revisionism in rising states. That such a critical question hinges on such a murky concept demands renewed attention to the nature and sources of variation in satisfaction with the status quo among rising powers.

This book offers a novel conceptualization of revisionism and a new theoretical explanation for the sort of dissatisfaction that causes geopolitical earthquakes. I disaggregate the concept and distinguish between two dimensions of revisionism. The first – distributive dissatisfaction – describes a desire to acquire *more* of something: more influence, more territory, more wealth, more status. The second – normative dissatisfaction – describes a desire to protest, delegitimize, or overthrow the rules, norms, and institutions of the status quo order. Distributive dissatisfaction can lead to conflict and war, but it does not in itself cause geopolitical earthquakes because it can often be satisfied within the boundaries of the broader order. But when distributive dissatisfaction is combined with normative dissatisfaction, it produces *radical* revisionism. Radical revisionists not only seek to adjust the distribution of benefits and resources in the system, they also positively value taking steps that signal protest against, delegitimize, or aim to overthrow the status quo order's norms, rules, and institutions. This is the kind of revisionism that helped produce the geopolitical earthquakes that were World Wars I and II: foreign policy in Wilhelmine Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany combined commitments to adjusting the distribution of resources in their favor with commitments to overthrowing the normative and institutional foundations of the status quo orders within which each rose to power. Radical revisionism made these three rising powers particularly dangerous because it meant that their drives to expand were relatively unconstrained by a countervailing urge to communicate restraint.

Radical revisionism is as puzzling as it is significant. Rising powers have incentives to signal that they plan to abide by the rules, norms, and institutions that constitute the status quo order even as they seek to increase their power, wealth, territory, and status. Doing so allays the fears of other states and reduces the likelihood that the rising power will face a countervailing coalition. Leaders in China have understood this logic since the time of Deng Xiaoping – and leaders in Wilhelmine Germany, Imperial Japan, and interwar Germany understood it as well. Yet, in the latter three cases, leaders ultimately ignored the logic of institutional restraint and instead took provocative steps that signaled deep dissatisfaction with the foundation of the order. This is the puzzle at the core of this book: why do rising states, which have compelling

reasons to signal restraint, sometimes instead pursue policies that communicate a determination to reject and challenge the status quo order – policies that raise the risk of geopolitical earthquakes?

The Argument in Brief

My argument, like Gilpin's, revolves around the idea that *thwarted ambitions* create forces that push the rising state to grow deeply dissatisfied with the status quo. But while Gilpin and other realists emphasize the material benefits of overthrowing the old order, my argument acknowledges that these are rarely worth the costs and risks, especially for a rising power. A satisfying explanation for the pursuit of policies aimed at overturning – as opposed to reforming or expanding within – the status quo order thus has to go beyond rational calculations of material self-interest.

Instead, I argue that obstructed *status* ambitions unleash social psychological and domestic political forces within rising states that push them to reject and challenge the status quo order. Individuals care about the status of their state for the same reason that they care about the status of their hometown baseball team or their alma mater: social identity and its influence on self-esteem. As states become more powerful, their foreign policies often express not only a desire for more power and wealth, but also – in response to demands from nationalist individuals and groups whose social identities are invested in the state's standing – ambitions for higher status. The drive for international status takes the form of policies aimed at acquiring markers of high status – like advanced technology, military victories, and institutional reforms – along with demands that other states behave in ways that recognize the rising state's new position and the rights and privileges it entails.

Sometimes, established powers seem persistently unwilling to do so, which may convince individuals within the rising state that their status ambitions are incompatible with the international order. This constitutes a condition that I call status immobility – the belief that the state faces a status “glass ceiling” – which has two critical consequences for the rising state's foreign policy. First, it contributes to demands from some individuals and groups that the state pursue policies that reject – as opposed to integrate within or reform – the status quo order. The logics that link the perception of an international status “glass ceiling” to a demand for policies that reject the international order are similar to those that motivate disadvantaged social groups *inside* states to protest or secede when they lack an effective legitimate avenue for redressing grievances. Status immobility prompts demands for rejectionist policies both out of a consequentialist drive to remove the perceived obstacle to the state's

status ambitions and out of a social psychological need to avoid ratifying an unjust order and prevent the state from participating in its own humiliation. Second, prominent discourses and widespread beliefs about the presence of an unjust, insoluble obstacle to status satisfaction produces political resources that advantage hardliners over moderates in domestic contests over the direction of foreign policy.

In sum, status immobility unleashes forces that undermine the ability of rising states to pursue policies aimed at reassuring established powers that their ambitions are limited. It does so by motivating and incentivizing behavior that lashes out in protest against the status quo order, not necessarily because there is anything material to gain by doing so but rather because defying or attempting to overthrow an unjust order seems more attractive than meekly accepting the rising state's place within it.

Status in International Politics

Apart from proposing a new explanation for an important form of revisionism, the book's most significant contribution is to expand our conception of the role that status plays in international politics. There is nothing new about suggesting that status concerns affect the way states interact. This is a claim that goes back to Thucydides, is an important theme in the work of twentieth-century classical realists and early constructivists, and has generated two modern periods of sustained scholarly interest, one that began in the early 1970s and petered out by the end of the next decade, and the current literature that took off just after the turn of the twenty-first century.³

Both of these literatures have focused primarily on how states seek status. This is sensible, and has generated important advances in our knowledge of the way international relations work. For example, scholars have established that states sometimes fight wars in order to achieve higher status, and that they often build weapons not for security reasons but because doing so is a way of performing a claim to membership in a status club.

But status matters in ways that go well beyond its current role as an objective that states pursue strategically. This book suggests two new ways of thinking about status: as the source of a largely non-instrumental demand for revolt against the status quo order, and as a political resource that influences domestic contests over foreign policy.

³ The earlier literature was primarily quantitative and focused on the relationship between status inconsistency and war (Galtung 1964; East 1972; Wallace 1971, 1973; Gochman 1980). The modern literature is more diverse (see Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014; and Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014 for overviews).