

## REVIEW ESSAY

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# Status Matters in World Politics

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This article explores the burgeoning literature on status in world politics. Toward that end, it reviews three recently published books. The three books are representative of the different theoretical perspectives that have come to dominate status research in international relations. Renshon's *Fighting for Status* offers a rationalist–instrumental approach; Larson and Shevchenko's *Quest for Status* draws on insights from social identity theory; and Murray's *The Struggle for Recognition* is informed by constructivist theory. The article contrasts and compares the three works. Moreover, it identifies shortcomings and limitations in each book and, based on this discussion, suggests areas for further research. In particular, it is argued that scholars should devote more attention to competitive theory testing through process tracing; incorporate domestic politics more systematically into approaches of status seeking; develop case-specific explanations that fuse insights from the various perspectives; and examine how the interplay of material and ideational factors shapes states' status aspirations.

**Keywords:** status, international relations theory

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Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko. *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019. 352 pp., \$40.00 hardback (ISBN: 978-0300236040).

Michelle Murray. *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 280 pp., \$74.00 hardback (ISBN: 978-0190878900).

Jonathan Renshon. *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. 328 pp., \$29.95 paperback (ISBN: 978-0691174501).

### Introduction

In the past decade, status-based analyses of world politics have attracted a great deal of attention. Scholars have advanced status-based explanations for

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important phenomena, such as the acquisition of weapons systems (O'Neill 2006; Ross 2009; Murray 2010; Pu and Schweller 2014), power transitions (Jones 2014; Onea 2014; Wolf 2014; Pu 2017; Ward 2017a; Glaser 2018; Greve and Levy 2018), wars and military interventions (Lebow 2008, 2010; Kim 2004; Barnhart 2016; Darwich 2018; Tamm 2018; Butt 2019), participation in and formation of international organizations (Suzuki 2008; Pouliot 2014; Heimann 2015; Dal 2019), the foreign policy of small states (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015; Mohammadzadeh 2017; Schulz 2017; Pedersen 2018; Røren 2019), and the international behavior of rising and re-emerging powers (Nayar and Paul 2003; Deng 2008; Forsberg, Heller, and Wolf 2014; Freedman 2016; Røren and Beaumont 2019; Esteves, Jumbes, and de Carvalho 2020).<sup>1</sup>

This article engages with the burgeoning status literature by examining three recently published books: *Fighting for Status* by Jonathan Renshon (2017), *Quest for Status* by Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko (2019a), and *The Struggle for Recognition* by Michelle Murray (2019). I have selected these books not only because they have been written by leading scholars in the field, but also because they represent the different theoretical approaches that now dominate the study of status in international relations. Renshon offers a rationalist–instrumental approach, Larson and Shevchenko draw on social identity theory, and Murray puts forward a constructivist-inspired framework.

In the next three sections, I contrast and compare these works by addressing a set of basic questions: (1) What is status? (2) Why do states want status? (3) How do states seek status? Moving beyond a stocktaking, I also identify theoretical and conceptual shortcomings. These shortcomings direct us to several paths for future research, described in the paper's penultimate section. In particular, future research should devote more attention to competitive theory testing through process tracing; incorporate domestic politics more systematically into approaches of status seeking; develop case-specific explanations that fuse insights from the various perspectives; and examine how the interplay of material and ideational factors shapes states' status aspirations. The final section concludes.

### Renshon: A Rationalist–Instrumental Perspective

A number of scholars argue that states' desire to attain status is driven primarily by instrumental considerations (Volgy et al. 2011; Pedersen 2018; Butt 2019; Khong 2019). The perhaps most well-known advocate of this perspective is Renshon. In *Fighting for Status*, he provides a series of theoretical and empirical explorations into the strategic nature of status seeking in world politics.

#### *What Is Status?*

According to Renshon (2017, 33–35), status in international politics refers to a state's standing relative to others in a deference hierarchy. This means that one state can move up the status ladder only if another moves down. Renshon recognizes that status also can be a so-called club good, referring to membership in a certain group (the “great-power club,” for instance). Still, he emphasizes that positionality remains critical. The reason for this, according to Renshon (2017, 34), is that “every additional member of the group inevitably lessens the value associated with it (being a ‘major power’ becomes less meaningful the more major powers

<sup>1</sup> Arguments about the role of status in world politics have an old pedigree that can be traced back to the writings of scholars such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau (for an overview, see Markey 1999). Previous international relations scholarship on status, which had its heyday in the 1970s, focused mainly on the relationship between status inconsistencies and levels of international violence (e.g., Galtung 1964; East 1972; Wallace 1971; Gilpin 1981). The recent wave of status research, which has been inspired by Wohlforth's (2009) and Larson and Shevchenko's (2010) pioneering articles, is broader in scope and more diverse in theoretical and methodological terms.

there are).” Moreover, states jockey for higher positions within clubs. For Renshon, therefore, international status is an inherently positional good.

At the same time, he highlights that status does not derive automatically from the possession of power resources; it is dependent on recognition from others. This means that status is a perceptual and social phenomenon; it comes into being only intersubjectively (Renshon 2017, 35–37). States usually seek status recognition from a specific group of peers, rather than from other states in general. In other words, states make self-evaluative judgments about their standing, not by comparing themselves with every country in the world, but through an assessment of their relative status vis-à-vis “significant others” (Renshon 2017, 140–48).

To measure relative status, scholars in the rationalist–instrumental perspective usually rely on diplomatic exchange data such as the number of diplomats that a state receives. Refining this approach, Renshon (2017, 116–35) also considers the rank of diplomats and the status position of the sending state. The higher the rank of the diplomats and the higher the international standing of the sending state, the more status attributed to the receiving country (see also Duque 2018).

#### *Why Do States Want Status?*

Insights from sociology and related fields show that high status often provides material benefits to its holder. Transferring this insight to the realm of world politics, Renshon (2017, 47–50) argues that states want to enhance their international standing to advance their power and influence. As he puts it, “States seek status (. . .) because it is a valuable resource for coordinating expectations of dominance and deference in strategic interactions” (Renshon 2017, 33).<sup>2</sup> More specifically, scholars in the rationalist–instrumental perspective have identified—and anecdotally demonstrated—two ways in which status translates into power and influence.<sup>3</sup>

First, high international rank often entails certain rights and benefits—for example, a privileged role in international organizations. This, in turn, provides high-status states with opportunities to shape political, economic, and security arrangements in the world, in accordance with their own interests. Second, high international status can induce behavioral deference from lower ranked states. This means that higher ranked states have to rely less on coercion to achieve their goals. As Khong (2019, 120) puts it, “the state at the top of the prestige [status] hierarchy is able to translate its power into the political outcomes it desires with minimal resistance.” Of note, scholars within the other theoretical perspectives seem to agree. For instance, Larson and Shevchenko (2019a, 233) acknowledge in passing, “Great power status carries with it the expectation that (. . .) smaller states, especially within its region, will defer to its wishes on foreign policy. Great powers usually exploit such privileges to gain material and strategic benefits.” In a similar vein, Murray (2019, 5) notes that high status “allows the hegemon to realize its interests without having to use force.” Status, in this sense, can be understood as an influence multiplier.

#### *How Do States Seek Status?*

Renshon’s empirical analysis suggests that both initiation and victory in international conflicts bring substantial status benefits (Renshon 2017, 158–62). This aligns well with a large body of international relations scholarship, which holds that success in war is the ultimate way to boost a country’s international standing. For example, Gilpin (1981, 32) famously argued that status and prestige<sup>4</sup> are “achieved

<sup>2</sup>At the outset of his study, Renshon (2017, 2–3) leaves room for intrinsic motivations of status seeking. In his theoretical and empirical explorations, however, he focuses squarely on the instrumental dimension of it.

<sup>3</sup>I use the word “anecdotally” here because, to the best of my knowledge, there exists no *systematic* exploration of whether, and to what extent, heightened international status actually translates into tangible benefits.

<sup>4</sup>On the fine differences between “status” and related concepts such as “prestige,” “honor,” “authority,” and “reputation,” see Renshon (2017, 37–40); see also Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth (2014, 13–17) and Wolf (2019, 1189–97).

(. . .) primarily through victory in war. The most prestigious members of the international system are those states that have most recently used military force or economic power successfully.” Likewise, [Wight \(1978, 48\)](#) observed that “[g]reat power status is lost, as it is won, by violence.” In a more recent study, [Onea \(2014, 134\)](#) similarly concluded, “Throughout history a great power’s credentials were revealed not through its hoarding of capabilities, but by surviving the crucial test of war against an already acknowledged great power.”

Building on, but also going beyond this body of literature, [Renshon](#) lays out the underlying logic that makes conflict initiation an effective strategy for states to enhance their international status. “Since beliefs about status require some consensus in the international community,” he argues, “events are not likely to change a state’s position unless they are highly public (visible to all actors in the community), dramatic, or salient (in order to capture the attention of potential observers), and convey unambiguous information” ([Renshon 2017, 154](#), see also 57–59). Given that international conflicts are public, dramatic, and salient events, they are likely to garner attention among the diplomats and politicians of other countries. Moreover, the initiation of conflict demonstrates a country’s military prowess and willingness to use force. Thus, according to [Renshon](#), conflict initiation likely brings significant status gains.

Of course, states do not always seek to assert their international standing through war. To account for this, [Renshon \(2017, 52–54\)](#) develops a theory of status dissatisfaction. The gist of his argument is that states are likely to initiate conflicts if there is a gap, or mismatch, between the status a state believes it deserves and the status that others confer upon it. In other words, states that are denied the standing to which they feel entitled are likely to resort to military force. Thus, it becomes essential to know how states define their status aspirations. [Renshon \(2017, 54–55\)](#) posits that states define their status aspirations largely based on the possession of material capabilities, such as economic and military resources. This means that a state’s capabilities are the baseline for its status aspirations. In essence, when the distribution of material power is out of synch with the extant deference hierarchy, status “underachievers” likely initiate conflicts to improve their standing.

#### *Limitations and Shortcomings*

*Fighting for Status* represents a major advance in our understanding of status seeking in world politics, but it is not without limitations. One weakness is that [Renshon](#) offers no proposition about why dissatisfied states will use conflict initiation rather than other status-seeking policies (e.g., hosting the Olympics, building an aircraft carrier, or starting a major space program). He acknowledges that states can engage in a wide variety of activities to achieve their preferred status, but he does not elaborate on the relative utility of policy options ([Renshon 2017, 261–62](#)). This is a problematic limitation, especially for a rationalist perspective. A rationalist perspective needs to rank-order the range of available status-seeking policies—and their associated costs and risks—to determine the most cost-effective way for a state to enhance its international standing in a given situation. However, [Renshon’s](#) theory does not consider alternative means of status assertion. By implication, his theory can say little about the relative utility of initiating conflict (compared to other means) to enhance one’s international standing.

A second and related problem is that conflict initiation appears to be an extremely risky way for states to boost their status in contemporary world politics. To be sure, [Renshon \(2017, 173–75\)](#) explicitly addresses and refutes the potential objection that going to war in today’s world lowers, rather than increases, a country’s status.<sup>5</sup> Still, he does not address the larger issue, namely, that the material costs and

<sup>5</sup> For example, [Onuf \(1989, 281\)](#) noted, “The paradox (. . .) is that military capability, as a crucial measure of standing [status], should not be treated as an asset, to be expended in the pursuit of some other interest like security,

risks associated with great-power conflict have significantly increased in the last century. Indeed, there is a rare consensus among international relations scholars of various theoretical stripes that normative, technological, and economic developments since 1945 have greatly increased the costs of major power warfare (e.g., [Jervis 2002](#); [Väyrynen 2006](#); [Freedman 2019](#)). In particular, nuclear weapons, through mutually assured destruction, have made large-scale wars between great powers virtually unwinnable. [Renshon \(2017, 166–71\)](#), however, stresses that dissatisfied states tend to initiate “winnable wars” to improve their relative status. This raises questions about the theory’s scope conditions, specifically whether it can apply to status dynamics among great powers in the nuclear age. Unfortunately, Renshon does not address this issue.

Moreover, as noted above, Renshon uses diplomatic representation to measure status attribution. This enables him to test his model against alternative explanations through a variety of qualitative and quantitative research techniques (including network analysis, large-*N* analysis, and case studies). The multi-method approach is one of the strong points of Renshon’s study; however, using diplomatic representation as a proxy for status is not without its problems. For one thing, materially powerful states tend to have the largest diplomatic services. The United States and China, for instance, have embassies in almost every corner of the world, not because they want to attribute status to others, but to look after their own interests ([Ward 2017a, 62](#)). In addition, countries that serve as hubs for international organizations, such as Belgium or Switzerland, receive a disproportionately high amount of diplomatic attention and representations, which has little to do with status attribution ([Røren and Beaumont 2019, 434](#)). Finally, states occasionally expel diplomats as a way of registering official displeasure with another country. This practice does not mesh well with the argument that one can measure status attribution via diplomatic representation. After all, from a status-seeking perspective, expelling diplomats is counterproductive. All of this severely problematizes the use of diplomatic representation as a proxy for status.

Another issue that requires further explication is the interplay of material and social factors. Renshon holds that status attribution is perceptual and social. At the same time, he argues that states’ material capabilities determine their status aspirations. This means that states possessing similar amounts of material resources—but with different historical and cultural backgrounds—should develop similar status expectations. A quick look at the real world casts significant doubt on this proposition. Compare, for example, the different status ambitions of materially powerful states like Germany, India, and Russia. Given this divergence, material capabilities—or “asset levels,” to use Renshon’s terminology—are unlikely to be the sole determinant of states’ status aspirations.

Finally, it remains unclear in Renshon’s framework why and when states grant status to others. Renshon notes, for instance, that Wilhelmine Germany, through its *Flottenpolitik* and belligerent crisis diplomacy, was able to “coerce other states into ceding status” ([Renshon 2017, 259](#)). This conclusion is problematic, for two reasons. First, as discussed below, [Murray \(2019\)](#) examines the same case—and indeed the same empirical material—but comes to a different conclusion: Germany did not receive its sought-after recognition as a world power. This raises, once again, the question of how one can measure status attribution in world politics. Second, given that status attribution is both perceptual and social, as Renshon himself stresses, it is unclear how one state can force others to recognize its self-ascribed standing or rank. After all, you cannot “bomb” someone to respect you. This, again, speaks to the need to explicate more thoroughly the interaction of material and social factors.

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because its depletion will adversely affect one’s standing.” For Onuf, in other words, status gains come not from winning tests of violence but from possessing military and other resources. In this view, wars—even if won—work to states’ status disadvantage.

### Larson and Shevchenko: A Social-Psychological Perspective

Another group of scholars employs insights from social identity theory (SIT), a well-known approach in social psychology. The principal advocates of this view are Larson and Shevchenko, who have introduced SIT to international relations (Larson and Shevchenko 2003, 2010, 2014a, 2014b; see also Bezerra et al. 2015; Miller et al. 2015). In their recent book, *Quest for Status*, they offer the most encompassing application of SIT to world politics to date.

#### *What Is Status?*

According to Larson and Shevchenko, status refers to both a club good and a positional good. “Status is similar to prestige,” they write, “with the additional connotation of rank order in a hierarchy. Just as a group’s status depends on traits valued by society, so a state’s international stature depends on its ranking on prized attributes, such as military power, economic development, cultural achievements, diplomatic skill, and technological innovation” (Larson and Shevchenko 2019a, 3). At the same time, they stress that “groups can be evaluated on multiple traits,” which implies that “comparisons among them need not be directly competitive” (Larson and Shevchenko 2019a, 4). This stands in contrast to the rationalist–instrumental perspective, which emphasizes the zero-sum nature of status dynamics in world politics. Moreover, unlike the rationalist–instrumental perspective, Larson and Shevchenko provide no objective measure, or metric, by which one can gauge a state’s status position. Instead, they rely on the views and perceptions of policymakers—a point to which I return below.

#### *Why Do States Want Status?*

Psychological research has firmly established that humans care deeply about their standing as individuals and about the social standing of the groups with which they identify (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Simply put, people want to feel good about themselves and their group; it is a basic source of self-worth, pride, and overall well-being. Transferring this insight to the realm of international politics, Larson and Shevchenko argue that policymakers, but also ordinary citizens, care deeply about their country’s standing in the world. After all, at least since the inception of the modern state system and the rise of nationalism, most individuals feel attached to their state.

To be sure, Larson and Shevchenko leave room for an instrumental component of status seeking. They acknowledge that higher status confers certain rights and tangible benefits, but these, they argue, are merely side benefits. The central driver of states’ ambition to obtain high status is the near-universal desire of humans for self-esteem. States (via the policymakers acting on their behalf) will strive for status even in the absence of instrumental gains. Status is an end in itself, rather than a means to an end.

#### *How Do States Seek Status?*

Drawing on SIT, Larson and Shevchenko distinguish between three different strategies that states can employ to enhance their international standing: social mobility, social competition, and social creativity. Social mobility means that a lower ranked state accepts the existing status assessment criteria and seeks to imitate the higher ranked states to join their ranks. This can entail, for instance, the emulation of governance institutions and practices of relevant others. A prominent case is Meiji Japan’s efforts to adopt not only Western technology and military practices, as a neorealist would emphasize, but also Western legal codes, fashion, and even

table manners. By doing so, the Meiji elite sought to attain Japan's recognition as a full-fledged great power from its perceived European counterparts (Larson and Shevchenko 2019a, 6–7).

Through social competition, a lower ranked state tries to equal, or outdo, higher ranked states in areas on which their claims to superior status rest. According to Larson and Shevchenko (2019a, 7–11), this often entails geopolitically competitive forms of behavior, such as arms races, the establishment of exclusive spheres of influence, and military interventions. In a critical extension of SIT, Ward (2017b, 824) astutely points out that, in principle, this need not be the case. If existing ranking criteria in a particular historical era stress resources or characteristics that are not geopolitically significant, such as democratic governance practices or human rights, social competition among states is unlikely to trigger geopolitical competition. In such situations, social competition is difficult to distinguish from a social mobility strategy.<sup>6</sup> However, at least with regard to great-power status, geopolitically significant resources and activities usually play a role in international politics. Hence, social competition among major and emerging powers often leads to some form of geopolitical competition in practice.

Finally, social creativity refers to attempts of lower ranked states to achieve a higher standing by inventing new assessment criteria. This means that states identify a new dimension of comparison in which they are superior vis-à-vis higher ranked states (Larson and Shevchenko 2019a, 11–14). Indeed, scholars of various theoretical stripes have noted that states are inclined to define achievements and qualities in fields in which they excel as status markers. For example, Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth (2014, 379) observe, “Motivated biases (. . .) may lead actors to make flattering or advantageous social comparisons or even ‘opt out’ of particular hierarchies in which they are lower-ranked in order to form new status hierarchies in which they are more competitive” (see also Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 22–23).

The question that remains is how states chose from the different types of status-seeking strategies. According to Larson and Shevchenko (2019a, 5–14), strategy selection depends mainly on the permeability of elite clubs and the perceived stability and legitimacy of the existing status hierarchy. If elite clubs are relatively permeable, states will pursue social creativity strategies to join their ranks. If, however, the existing status hierarchy is relatively closed and regarded as unstable and illegitimate, lower ranked states will engage in competitive status-seeking behavior. Finally, if the higher ranks of the existing status hierarchy are closed to new members but regarded as largely legitimate and stable, lower ranked states are likely to employ social creativity strategies. In short, Larson and Shevchenko suggest that the perceived permeability, stability, and legitimacy of the existing status hierarchy determines the way in which states pursue status. They test their theoretical model via two longitudinal case studies of Soviet/Russian and Chinese foreign policy from the seventeenth century to the present.

#### *Limitations and Shortcomings*

Although meticulously researched and containing an array of novel insights about status dynamics in world politics, *Quest for Status* has some weaknesses. To begin with, it is questionable whether insights from social psychology easily transfer to the realm of international politics. After all, individuals tend to operate in hierarchically

<sup>6</sup> Ward also criticizes Larson and Shevchenko's taxonomy of status-seeking strategies (mobility, competition, and creativity) in two other respects. First, he holds that a fourth strategy—rejection—also exists, which refers to situations in which states perceive the existing order as deeply unjust and externally imposed with little chance to change it. In these situations, states will adopt a rejection strategy to delegitimize and overthrow the existing international rules, norms, and institutions that define the status quo order (Ward 2017a, 48–55). Second, he argues that Larson and Shevchenko have misinterpreted SIT insofar as impermeable group boundaries influence only individuals and do not cause conflicts between groups (Ward 2017b). For a rebuttal, see Larson and Shevchenko (2019b).

organized political communities, whereas states operate in an international community best described as anarchic.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, SIT—as originally formulated—presupposes that groups have roughly equal material capabilities. In the international realm, however, states possess vastly different amounts of resources. As Wohlforth (2009) persuasively has argued, the distribution of power tends to affect the selection of tools and tactics with which states pursue status in the international arena. Recognizing this, Larson and Shevchenko (2019a, 242) note, “Whether or not states resort to military conflict to enhance their status depends on the criteria for status within that [international] context as well as on a state’s relative capabilities.” In other words, states must pursue status within the bounds of the existing distribution of economic and military resources. This is a logical extension of their argument. Unfortunately, Larson and Shevchenko do not further elaborate on that point. Thus, it remains unclear exactly how the distribution of power affects states’ status-seeking activities.

A second limitation has to do with the role of perceptions. Larson and Shevchenko’s framework suggests the *perceived* permeability and legitimacy of the existing status hierarchy affect state behavior. This raises the question: why do some government officials perceive the legitimacy and stability of international status hierarchies differently than others? Are their perceptions driven by systemic factors, domestic political influences, small-group dynamics, or their personal belief systems? In the book’s empirical chapters, Larson and Shevchenko seem to suggest that personalities and worldviews of individuals play a critical role. Consider, for instance, the following quotes: “The Sino-Soviet status competition was turbocharged by Mao’s and Khrushchev’s clash of personalities and their contest for personal prestige” (p. 115); “Khrushchev’s insecurity combined with his acute desire for great power status frequently led him to behave belligerently (. . .) when he felt insulted or humiliated” (p. 120). These assessments imply that individuals are crucial; other leaders might have defined their states’ status aspirations differently, which, in turn, would have resulted in divergent foreign policy choices. Indeed, in their theoretical discussion, Larson and Shevchenko (2019a, 14) briefly note, “Within a society, different groups may have differing perceptions of these variables, so that domestic politics—a change in leadership, ruling coalition, or regime—may precipitate the adoption of a new identity management strategy.” On the face of it, the inclusion of domestic-level factors and policymakers’ perceptions seems reasonable. After all, it is policymakers who make the decisions. What this means, however, is that changes in a state’s status-seeking behavior can be explained by reference to changes in the international arena, domestic political dynamics, or the idiosyncratic worldviews of government officials. Such a position makes the theory largely unfalsifiable in the social scientific sense—at least without further specification on the theoretical plane.

A third and final problem relates to the salience of status demands. As noted, Larson and Shevchenko focus on Russia and China. According to many observers, the cultural and historical backgrounds of these two countries make them extraordinarily status sensitive (e.g., Deng 2008; Tsygankov 2012; Wood 2013). Russia and China, then, are most likely cases for a status-based explanation. Recognizing this, Larson and Shevchenko (2019a, 14) characterize their study as a plausibility probe. At first sight, this makes good sense. On reflection, however, the fact that Russia’s and China’s status aspirations appear to be generated by historically shaped national self-understandings—rather than by social-psychological impulses—sits uncomfortably with the core argument of SIT. After all, SIT holds that all humans—and thus

<sup>7</sup> A large body of international relations literature suggests that social hierarchies are a prominent feature of world politics (for an overview, see Mattern and Zarakol 2016). That may be true, but the fact remains that there exists no overarching, recognized political authority in the international realm. In that sense, world politics is “anarchic” compared to the hierarchically organized and densely institutionalized environment that characterizes the domestic affairs of modern states.

all states—should be equally concerned about their status. The observation that some countries are especially concerned about their international rank does not square well with that logic. The lack of an explanation for why the salience of status demands varies among states emerges as one of the main gaps of SIT when applied to international politics.

### Murray: A Constructivist Perspective

A third group of scholars analyzes status dynamics in world politics through constructivist lenses. They focus on the social construction of status categories and the ideational foundations of status claims (Ringmar 1996; Hopf 2002; Clunan 2009; Jones 2014; Pouliot 2014). In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Murray builds on these insights and develops a sophisticated theoretical model about the search for status, with a special focus on rising powers.

#### *What Is Status?*

According to Murray, a state's national self-image, or identity, generates certain expectations concerning its international standing. Accordingly, she defines status simply as "recognized identity" (Murray 2019, 46). That is to say, status can be either a club good or a positional good (or a combination of both), depending on a state's prevailing identity narrative. Whether a state has "high" or "low" status can be assessed only in relation to the country's national self-identity. For example, if Iran's prevailing identity narrative describes the country as an outpost against Western imperialism, and the United States in particular, the fact that Washington has no diplomatic relations with Tehran does not undermine—but rather reinforces—Iran's self-ascribed status as an anti-imperialist power (Maloney 2002; Moshirzadeh 2007). Status, in short, is conceptualized as recognized identity claims.

Moreover, Murray takes pains to stress that major-power status cannot be simply read or inferred from the distribution of material capabilities; instead, it is created through social interaction with significant others. In Murray's (2019, 46) words, "Despite a state's desire for and material capacity to take up a particular role in international society, it cannot simply assert its social status: only when recognized does it assume the authority it needs to secure the identity it seeks." In that regard, Murray's approach overlaps with the rationalist-instrumental and social-psychological perspectives, which also emphasize that status is contingent upon social recognition. Rationalist-instrumental and social-psychological approaches are socially thin, however, insofar as they suggest that status attribution is about a state's perceived rank on socially valued attributes, such as military capability, national wealth, and cultural influence. By contrast, Murray contends that status seeking is an inherent part of a state's identity formation process, which is never finished.

#### *Why Do States Want Status?*

Murray argues that ontological security considerations motivate national status aspirations. Ontological security refers to the basic need of social actors—be it individuals or states—to form a stable sense of self. Social actors need to feel secure in "who they are" and what social role they play before they can formulate their material interests (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). Gaining recognition of one's status position is part of the realization of one's self-identity. "Recognition," as Murray puts it, "gives a state confidence in the value of its particular social identity and provides it with the ontological security it needs to form a coherent set of interests and act on the

basis of those interests in the world” (Murray 2019, 191). In short, a state’s quest for status recognition is part of its quest for ontological security.<sup>8</sup>

#### *How Do States Seek Status?*

The fact that status is relational creates, according to Murray, some inherent social uncertainty in international politics. Other states cannot be coerced to recognize one’s status claims. In an interesting twist, she suggests that to reduce the ensuing uncertainty, states are likely to instantiate their status claims in recognitive material practices; that is, states try to assert their status through creating “facts on the ground” (Murray 2019, 46–52). More concretely, this means that aspiring great powers will seek to acquire certain assets and emulate particular forms of behavior that are constitutive of major-power status. Although Murray recognizes that markers of major-power status are historically and culturally contingent, she holds that three sets of practices have been—and still are—especially important: great-power voice, exemplary military power, and spheres of influence.

Great-power voice refers to the prerogative of major powers to be involved in the management of international crises and conflicts, and, more generally, to define the terms of the existing international order. Thus, aspiring great powers often insert themselves in international crises, either as a party to the conflict or as a mediator (Murray 2019, 58–59). In doing so, aspiring great powers seek to influence others’ perceptions about their standing in the world, but also and above all to prove to themselves that they are major powers.

Exemplary military power refers to the acquisition of advanced weaponry, such as battleships, nuclear weapons, or aircraft carriers (depending on the historical period). Indeed, a large literature in international relations suggests that states develop and procure military capabilities, not for their functional utility, but as status symbols (e.g., Eyre and Suchman 1996; O’Neill 2006; Pu and Schweller 2014). Importantly, Murray acknowledges that status seeking can also take more benign forms—hosting the Olympics or starting a space program, for example. She emphasizes, however, that military power remains “the sine qua non of major power status. The sophistication of these [military] capabilities makes them ‘positional goods’ and distinguishes major powers from other states in the international system” (Murray 2019, 61). Thus, the acquisition of modern weapons systems is an important way for aspiring great powers to reduce the social insecurity inherent in international politics.

The same goes for the establishment of spheres of influence, which refers to the practice of major powers to exert control over the strategic orientations, and sometimes even the domestic affairs, of smaller states in a certain geographical area. “The recognitive practice of establishing and maintaining a sphere of influence serves to constitute major power identity,” Murray (2019, 63) argues, “because it relies on asymmetrical recognition.” Smaller states implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the dominant position of the major power. This, in turn, creates a social hierarchy and, thus, “the illusion of an independent major power identity” (Murray 2019, 63).

The level of assertiveness with which aspiring great powers pursue the aforementioned practices depends on their level of social insecurity. “The more socially insecure the rising power grows, the more forceful and bellicose its adoption of these practices will be in an attempt to ‘prove’ its status and compel recognition from the established powers” (Murray 2019, 77). In other words, the bigger the gap between

<sup>8</sup> Apart from Murray’s work, I do not know of any study that explicitly links ontological insecurities and status seeking in world politics. Future research might exploit more fully the synergies between ontological security and status scholarship in international relations.

the status ambitions of an aspiring great power and the actual status accorded to it by the established powers, the more likely it is that an aspiring great power will employ geopolitically assertive tools and tactics to reduce its social insecurity. In the book's empirical chapters, Murray tests her model through a focused, structured comparison of the rise of Germany and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

#### *Limitations and Shortcomings*

The logic of Murray's argument is plausible and compelling, at least up to a point. One weakness is that the interaction between material and non-material factors remains underdeveloped. On the one hand, Murray emphatically stresses the social nature of status in international politics and the ontological security needs that lie behind status seeking. On the other hand, the focus on "rising powers" presumes the relevance of material capabilities in the formation of countries' status aspirations. Indeed, Murray argues that Germany's growing economic might at the turn of the twentieth century prompted policymakers in Berlin to demand recognition as a world power on par with Great Britain (Murray 2019, 87–89). Similarly, she holds that America's increasing wealth and military power during this time prompted US policymakers to strive for higher international standing (Murray 2019, 141–44). In other words, although Germany and the United States had different cultural and historical backgrounds, both developed similar status aspirations in response to rising material capabilities. Why this occurred is never really explained. Thus, Murray's seemingly social definition of status seeking brings material determinants through the back door, creating significant ambiguity in her theoretical framework.

A second limitation follows from the first. Domestic identity politics disappears. This stands in contrast to other constructivist-inspired work, which examines the link between a country's national identity formations and domestic-level dynamics (see, e.g., Katzenstein 1996). Furthermore, many constructivist-inspired studies emphasize that there are typically several identity strands within the same country, which often compete with one another. Depending on which identity strand eventually dominates the domestic marketplace of ideas, a state will hold different status aspirations. The argument is nicely summed up by Clunan (2014, 293), who writes, "States are not homogenous domestically; in China, for example, reformers find high status in China's openness, while nationalists see it as humiliating for the Middle Kingdom to depend on the outside world." Murray's analysis takes no account of these internal, ideational forces that shape a state's status aspirations. Ironically, similar to Renshon's rationalist approach, her account suggests that status aspirations are a reflection of material capabilities, neglecting altogether what is happening inside of states.

Third and finally, given that Murray examines two rising powers at the turn of the twentieth century, the question arises whether her theoretical approach is generalizable. Awareness of this potential limitation leads Murray to conduct a set of "mini-case" studies in the concluding chapter. These include Russia's foreign policy in the lead-up to the First World War, Japan's foreign policy in the lead-up to the Second World War, the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, and China's rise in contemporary world politics (Murray 2019, 197–202, 207–23). Although insightful, the larger methodological issue remains unresolved: what are the criteria and rationale for selecting these cases in the first place? It is unclear, for instance, whether her approach applies to all rising powers across space and time, including countries such as Germany and Japan during the second half of the twentieth century. Both were rising, but neither adopted the recognitive practices (i.e., great-power voice, exemplary military power, spheres of influence) identified in Murray's theory. This leaves the reader wondering whether such cases are theoretical

**Table 1.** Status in world politics: three perspectives

Theoretical perspective	What is status?	Why do states want status?	How do states seek status?	Major work
Rationalist–instrumental	Position in a deference hierarchy (social, perceptual, and relational)	Instrumental motivations	Conflict initiation	<i>Fighting for Status</i> (Renshon 2017)
Social-psychological	Positional and club good (social, perceptual, and relational)	Intrinsic motivations	Social mobility, competition, or creativity	<i>Quest for Status</i> (Larson and Shevchenko 2019a)
Constructivist	Recognized identity (social, perceptual, and relational)	Ontological security needs	Recognitive material practices	<i>The Struggle for Recognition</i> (Murray 2019)

anomalies, or whether they lie outside the theory’s scope—a scope Murray unfortunately never clearly delineates.

### Directions for Future Research

The three books reviewed in this article are likely to define status research in international relations for years to come. They not only offer meticulous empirical analyses, but also provide sophisticated theoretical models and conceptual tools for exploring status dynamics in world politics. Their main arguments are summarized in [table 1](#). At the same time, the previous sections have shown that each work has limitations. These limitations direct us to several paths for future research.

#### *Competitive Theory Testing*

Future research on status would benefit from competitive theory testing. As it stands, most status-based explanations contrast their findings with those of geopolitical, domestic, or normative accounts. As the foregoing suggests, however, various status-based approaches can—and often do—offer divergent explanations for the same international event or foreign policy decision. Take Germany’s *Weltmacht* ambitions in the early twentieth century. The authors of all three books agree that status ambitions drove Germany’s desire for a “place in the sun.” At the same time, they disagree on what underpinned those ambitions. [Renshon \(2017, 182–220\)](#) argues that Germany’s *Weltpolitik* was a conscious effort to assert the country’s international status for instrumental reasons. [Larson and Shevchenko \(2019a, 9\)](#) mention Germany’s *Weltpolitik* as an example of a country that decided to pursue a competition strategy to increase its international status because of social-psychological imperatives. [Murray \(2019, 87–112\)](#), in turn, holds that Germany’s *Weltpolitik*, and especially its fleet program, was an attempt to ground the country’s status ambitions in material practices to reduce social insecurity.

In other words, the three works (and the perspectives they represent) provide different interpretations about the root causes of Germany’s assertive bid for major-power status. Moving forward, scholars should revisit the case, with a more systemic application of the competing perspectives. More generally, applying different status-based theories to the same empirical cases would be illuminating, as it would provide further insight into the relative merits of the theories and their scope conditions.

To do so, one needs to tease out *divergent* testable implications from the different status perspectives. This is no simple task. All three perspectives hold that status

considerations drive state behavior; hence, it is insufficient to provide empirical material suggesting that status considerations shape foreign policy. Such evidence would be consistent with each perspective. To return to the aforementioned example of Wilhelmine Germany, pronouncements by Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bülow that they wanted to boost Germany's standing in the world can be (and have been) taken as empirical support for all three perspectives. Thus, to assess their relative explanatory power, researchers must examine the motives and driving factors that underpin a country's quest for status.

A research technique well suited for adjudicating among rival hypotheses is so-called theory-testing process tracing. This involves the formulation of observable implications, along with a detailed content analysis of elite deliberations, internal government reports, and diplomatic cables (on theory-testing process tracing, see [Beach and Pedersen 2013](#), 56–60; [Ulriksen and Dadalauri 2016](#); [Zaks 2017](#)). For example, the realist–instrumental perspective suggests that leaders seek to advance their country's international standing to obtain material or strategic benefits, such as deference from other states and privileged rights in international organizations. Thus, one would expect that decision-makers publicly—but also, and above all, privately—make arguments along these lines. A social-psychological perspective suggests that decision-makers seek to improve their country's international standing to enhance national pride and self-esteem. Accordingly, one would expect to find repeated references to national pride and self-esteem in the political discourse. If such language appears only in public speeches, this would indicate that leaders use it instrumentally to rationalize their actions. If, however, decision-makers use a similar language in private conversations (i.e., not designed for public consumption), this would provide strong support for the thesis that social-psychological motivations play a central role. Finally, constructivist-inspired status theories suggest that decision-makers frame their status demands in ways reflective of the state's prevailing identity narrative. Here, one would expect to find less of a discrepancy between public and private statements, as constructivist-inspired theories highlight the importance of recognitive speech acts in identity formation processes.

In short, researchers need to examine the source material closely to determine whether the causal mechanisms the various status perspectives imply are present. If one detects empirical traces of several perspectives, researchers need to weigh the existing evidence, through a quantitative analysis (e.g., counting the frequency with which policymakers refer to instrumental, social-psychological, or identity-based motivations), a qualitative analysis (e.g., identifying key diplomatic moments and critical decision-making junctures), or a combination of both.

#### *Incorporating Domestic Politics*

Another aspect that deserves greater attention is the role of domestic politics. None of the three works systematically explores how domestic political factors and processes affect states' status-seeking policies. To be sure, Larson and Shevchenko refer in passing to factors operating at the unit level, but they fail to fully integrate those factors into their theoretical framework. Future research should try to fill that gap. In principle, one can identify at least three ways in which domestic factors interact with status dynamics in world politics.

First and most basically, if status considerations influence a country's international behavior, they must do so through domestic political processes and actors. As highlighted by SIT, many political leaders (just like the average citizen) identify themselves with their states. Moreover, as constructivist approaches note, many leaders have been socialized into the prevailing national identity narrative. Hence, they care greatly about their country's international standing. In some cases, however, leaders may not subscribe to the prevailing identity narrative—but pursue the country's status aspirations nonetheless. The logic of domestic politics helps to

explain why. Leaders cannot simply abandon a country's deeply ingrained international ambitions without risking substantial political damage at home. In the worst case, they will be removed from power—either through the ballot box or by violent means. In this sense, domestic political dynamics can serve as a transmission belt through which a country's status aspirations affect the calculus of decision-makers (Wolf 2012, 46–47; Ward 2017a, 36–38).

Second and relatedly, some governments may seek to consolidate domestic power by fostering nationalistic pride through the pursuit of international status. In such cases, governments self-consciously engage in status-seeking activities abroad to enhance their own position at home. For instance, several observers argue that the promise to restore China's "long lost" greatness has become the regime's principal source of legitimacy (along with economic performance). Since communist ideology has lost much of its appeal among the Chinese population, the leadership in Beijing has fallen back on nationalism as a legitimizing device; it seeks to earn the support of domestic audiences through the advancement of China's international position (Gries 2004; Deng 2008; Wang 2012). The larger point here is that, in some cases, regime-security considerations might motivate status-seeking behavior.

Thirdly, the causal arrow might run in the reverse direction, which is to say that international status dynamics affect domestic contests over foreign policy. Ward has convincingly argued that perceptions of status immobility—that is, "the belief that the state faces a status 'glass ceiling'" (Ward 2017a, 3)—tend to empower domestic actors with revisionist preferences. In effect, states whose status ambitions are permanently obstructed are likely to adopt a radically revisionist foreign policy. Ward shows, for instance, that race-based barriers in the early twentieth century prevented Japan from gaining recognition of its status as a full-fledged great power from Western states. In reaction to the experience of persistent status denial, highly nationalistic groups and individuals gained the upper hand in Japan's domestic marketplace of ideas, which set the stage for the country's turn toward revisionist militarism in the 1930s (Ward 2013; 2017a, 100–29). This is effectively a "second-image reversed" argument that focuses on how international status dynamics influence domestic contests over foreign policy. In sum, then, there exist at least three potential linkages between status dynamics and domestic politics. Future work should fledge out these linkages and test them empirically.

#### *Building Synthetic Explanations*

A third avenue for future research is to fuse insights from the different status perspectives. Indeed, there is a broad agreement among scholars of different theoretical persuasions about the essential features of status in international politics. Almost all scholars agree that status can be both a positional good and a club good, that status is a social phenomenon, that status markers are historically contingent, and that states assess their status relative to significant others. This agreement is remarkable given the diverse approaches that scholars employ. Thus, status can be described as a *transparadigmatic* concept that brings together insights from various, typically disengaged, theoretical perspectives.

In principle, many scholars recognize the value of synthetic explanations. For example, Larson and Shevchenko (2019a, 233) write, "In some sense, the distinction between material and intrinsic motivations for seeking status is artificial, because power, wealth, and status are often mutually reinforcing." Likewise, Renshon (2017, 8) stresses that status is a concept that "bring[s] together myriad approaches to international relations." In practice, however, few scholars have explicated *how* the factors and processes emphasized by different theoretical perspectives interact with each other (notable exceptions are Neumann 2014; Paul and Shankar 2014). Future research should put more emphasis on building integrative status accounts. Such accounts would contribute to the emerging body of analytical eclecticism in

international relations (e.g., [Sil and Katzenstein 2010](#); [Eun 2012](#); [Lake 2013](#)). To be clear, a unified framework that subsumes rationalist–instrumental, social-psychological, and constructivist status approaches is hardly possible or desirable. For one thing, the three perspectives rest on very different ontological assumptions that prevent a full-fledged synthesis. For another, all three have produced insightful analyses. Thus, it would be an intellectual loss to trade theoretical diversity for a unified perspective that informs any and all studies of status seeking. What is possible and desirable, however, is to combine elements of various perspectives in the exploration of a concrete case or problem at hand.

For illustrative purposes, consider the case of Russia's Syrian policy. Several observers have suggested that Moscow's military intervention was connected to status concerns—but they have failed to specify exactly how (e.g., [Lukyanov 2016](#); [Frolovskiy 2019](#)). Combining insights from the three perspectives might help to resolve the matter. From the constructivist perspective, one can draw on the insight that Russia's national self-image is inextricably bound up with great powerhood. That is, Russia wants to be respected and treated as an equal partner of the West, and the United States in particular—Russia's significant other ([Clunan 2009](#)).

From SIT, one can borrow the insight that states—Russia, in this case—will pursue competitive status-seeking strategies in response to perceived slights. Indeed, in the first half of the 2010s, Russia experienced a series of diplomatic setbacks and humiliations: it felt a sense of betrayal as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization used airpower to facilitate a regime change in Libya; the G8 group suspended its membership following the Ukraine crisis; and accession talks to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development stopped. To make matters worse, President Obama publicly dismissed Russia as a “regional power” with limited global significance ([Borger 2014](#)). The crisis in Syria offered Russia the opportunity to reassert its status as a major world power. Russia could demonstrate its ability to project power beyond its immediate region and, together with the United States, organize the Syrian peace process. Statements from government officials and public surveys suggest that this instilled many Russians with a sense of pride and accomplishment ([Larson and Shevchenko 2019a](#), 227–29).

Nevertheless, there were most likely also strategic status-seeking motives at play, as suggested by the rationalist–instrumental perspective. For example, by intervening on behalf of the Assad government, Russia could strengthen its status as a reliable security patron. Moscow effectively demonstrated that it stood by its clients, even in the face of strong Western pressure, and thus gained geopolitical influence not only in the Arab world but also among strongmen in the post-Soviet space ([Allison 2013](#), 815–18). A full-blown test of this synthetic argument obviously requires a more detailed study. This thumbnail sketch demonstrates, however, the potential of eclectic, status-based accounts to provide a fuller understanding of specific events and cases.

#### *Exploring Status Aspirations*

A final avenue for further study would be to explore the sources of states' status aspirations. The existing literature tends to emphasize either material factors or ideational structures and processes as major determinants. As the previous sections have shown, neither of these approaches are fully convincing and consistent with the existing evidence. A close reading of the extant literature suggests instead that status aspirations are co-determined by material factors and ideas.

On the one hand, there is a strong intuition that status aspirations are closely bound up with a country's national identity or self-image. A country's self-image, in turn, is strongly affected by the prevailing understanding of its history and specific cultural background. This is not to imply a form of cultural or historical essentialism, according to which national identities are simply the result of primordial traditions. As constructivist-inspired research has firmly established, national

identities are not fixed; they can and do change. The argument here is that a country's national identity is constructed with reference to its own historical-cultural experiences, which, in turn, shapes its status aspirations (Hopf 2002, 16–23; Clunan 2009, 22–52).

On the other hand, the prevailing material conditions in the international environment—particularly the distribution of power—are likely to affect the formation of status aspirations as well. For instance, countries such as China and India have developed more extensive status claims in recent years, as their relative material capabilities have increased. By the same token, as their relative material capabilities declined, former great powers such as Sweden, Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands adjusted their status aspirations downward. Thus, there is some *prima facie* evidence that changes in power bring about shifts in states' own self-conceptions. This aligns with Wohlforth's (2009, 37) observation that “decision makers are unlikely to follow identity-maintenance strategies that are demonstrably beyond their means.” To be sure, downward adjustment is not psychologically easy, but over time, states are likely to change their status aspirations. The reason is simple: status aspirations that sit well beyond the state's material means will lead to repeated foreign policy failures. These failures then create internal pressures that facilitate change. As Legro (2005) has shown, undesired outcomes tend to empower proponents (e.g., individuals, political parties, or grassroots movements) of alternative status conceptions in the domestic marketplace of ideas. Moreover, social psychologists have demonstrated that persons who constantly experience disappointing results adjust their self-perceptions. Thus, one can expect that repeated foreign policy failures will make politicians and ordinary citizens more susceptible to alternative national self-images and, by extension, status aspirations. The mutually reinforcing effect of domestic political dynamics and psychological pressures makes it likely that states will, over time, adjust their status aspirations to new material realities.

Importantly, to suggest that material factors matter is not to say that the distribution of power determines status aspirations. After all, states with similar capabilities often hold different ambitions. Rather, the argument developed here suggests that material factors set constraints within which states develop historically and culturally informed narratives about their place in the world. Admittedly, this is a broad-brush argument that needs to be refined and tested empirically, but it holds the promise of a more comprehensive understanding of why and when states change their status aspirations than a purely material or ideational account.<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

This article discussed the latest status scholarship in international relations. If anything, it demonstrates that no single status theory exists. Rather, there are a whole slew of status-based theories and explanations, differing from each other in important respects. At the most basic level, one can distinguish between three perspectives: rationalist-instrumental, social-psychological, and constructivist. As the name indicates, rationalist-instrumental approaches argue that states care deeply about their international standing because high status bestows certain rights and privileges on the holder. Social-psychological approaches, in contrast, emphasize that states pursue status because of the deep-seated human need for respect and self-esteem. Constructivist approaches, for their part, suggest that states seek status in international politics to realize their self-identities.

<sup>9</sup> The related question of status recognition—that is, when and why states recognize status claims by others—is equally important. It long received comparatively little scholarly attention, but this has changed in recent years. Ward (2020), Paul and Shankar (2014), and Murray (2019, 194–96) have explicated how security considerations, ideational influences, and domestic political dynamics affect the willingness of a state to accommodate others' status demands. It is noteworthy that all three put forward integrative perspectives, which align with the above-mentioned trend toward eclectic research in the field of international relations.

The books under review make original and important contributions to the respective status perspectives. At the same time, as any ambitious work in the field of international relations, they each contain several shortcomings or, perhaps better stated, display issues that need further attention. In particular, future research would benefit from competitive theory testing through process tracing. Scholars should also seek to systemically explore and incorporate the role of domestic political factors, and try to develop eclectic accounts that combine elements from the various perspectives to solve particular empirical puzzles. Finally, and related to the previous point, future work should explicate how the interaction of ideas and material factors shapes states' status aspirations. These would be important steps toward a more comprehensive understanding of status dynamics in world politics.

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