

*Book Review*

## Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers by Steven Ward

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017. ISBN 978-1107182363. Pp. x, 282. Hardback, £75.00.

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Throughout history, rising powers have contested their role and place within the world order and sought to recreate that structure. Germany under both Wilhelm II and later Adolf Hitler, and Imperial Japan are prime examples of nations that shook the earth with their ambitions. One century after the conclusion of the Great War and several decades after the end of the Second World War, we still struggle to understand these geopolitical earthquakes (p. 3). More pressing still, new rising powers such as China are once again challenging the very foundations of our world, leading many to make eerie predictions of the future. Yet, what do we really know about rising powers and how can we use this knowledge to understand the world when it is shaking at its core? Much of the confusion stems from the uncertainty that accompanies the rise of great powers. This timely book by Steven Ward offers important contributions to our understanding of rising powers, their (dis)satisfaction with the world and the evolving policies such states pursue.

Steven Ward is Assistant Professor of Government and Associate Director of the Judith Reppy Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. The present title aims to enrich our understanding by broadening the concept of revisionism and by exploring the role of status ambitions of rising powers. Indeed, it is important to understand the level of dissatisfaction that such powers hold towards the historical world orders in which they find themselves. Yet, as is the case with other IR concepts, studies on revisionism suffer from its loosely defined nature. Indeed, mired by ambiguity and fluid time horizons, the revisionist tendencies of rising powers often appear as a conceptual enigma. As a solution, Ward makes a clear distinction between 'distributive' revisionism ("demands for limited changes in the status quo [...] while signalling support for status quo rules, norms, and institutions," p. 33) and 'normative' revisionism ("the

desire to protest, delegitimize, or overthrow the rules, norms, and institutions” of that status quo, p. 2). A combination of the two then forms ‘radical’ revisionism, which posits a revolutionary challenge to the status quo (p. 22).

This desire for a higher status within the world’s social hierarchy and the consequences of the immobility when these demands are not met, is the central focus of this work. Status is defined as an intangible and external commodity for rising powers and as such, it is different from the pursuit of security and wealth, which can be produced unilaterally. Most importantly, status is based on the logic of recognition by other states. It is interesting to note the pursuit of high status markers, such as advanced technologies or victory in war, in order to receive that recognition (p. 3). Where more traditional taxonomies of status-seeking include mobility, creativity and competition, Ward argues that such a classification is incomplete. When the existing world order itself is perceived as an obstacle to the ambitions of a rising power, such a state will seek to remake that very order either through hegemonic war or a gradual undermining of its foundations. As Ward demonstrates, thwarted or obstructed ambitions (p. 3) unleash psychological and political forces within the rising power that make it possible for hard-line rather than moderate policies to be pushed forward. From this perspective, status denial is the *casus belli*.

Interestingly, Ward observes rising powers as states “in which growing material capabilities produce rising status ambitions and expectations, but, simultaneously, incentives for caution in foreign policy” (pp. 65-66). Consequently, a policy combination that leads to a shift towards radical revisionism is described as both puzzling and dangerous (p. 11). Indeed, Ward argues, concerns for higher status run counter to incentives for preserving the status quo and its stability. However, a state’s perception of unjust treatment by the international community combined with domestic legitimization politics give preference to more aggressive policy shifts. As such, the desire for a higher status is disconnected from those “rational calculations of material self-interest” (p. 3) concerning the state’s security and wealth. As a result, studying the consequences of status immobility provides interesting insights into the logic of restraint, but also into the reason why rising powers may risk the cost of war. While the present title zooms in on this radical revisionism, Ward offers an equally interesting framework of ideal-type policy combinations (Table 1.1, p. 18). These policies stretch along a continuum between the status quo and revisionism, by acceptance or rejection of the existing order (p. 11).

The author points to several methodological pitfalls that are expected when testing his theoretical framework. Indeed, because of its very nature, the concept of ‘status’ is difficult to quantify. Furthermore, there is not always a direct link between ‘status immobility’ and a shift in foreign policy of rising powers. These

limitations are combined with the dynamics of domestic politics, where political elites of both moderate and hardliner camps vie for power. Instead, Ward demonstrates that one ought to study the discourse within a rising power's political leadership during a certain period of time to discern the causality between concerns about status immobility and a shift towards rejectionist policies. Here, the author employs insights from social psychology and other related fields, while combining these with the domestic politics of legitimation. Instead of solely treating states as individuals (pp. 6-7), Ward brings into play these dynamics within a rising power. Mapping out several pathways to policy change (Figure 2.1; p. 34), the author shows how a "concrete shift away from moderate, distribute revisionist policies toward radical revisionist policies" can take place (p. 67).

At the same time, Ward draws attention to the fact that these different pathways do in fact rest upon other variables such as the government's "exogenous political vulnerability," that is the pressure felt by the political leadership from other domestic actors or interest groups (pp. 58-61). This emphasis on the international dimension of domestic politics is one of this work's greatest strengths. Ultimately, these internal struggles are reflected on the level of global governance. Here, the norms and rules together with institutions compose both the "normative and distributive elements of order" that is the status quo (pp. 14-17). Institutions such as the League of Nations and later the United Nations are created to limit "conflicting interests and ambitions" that threaten certain members within or the system itself (p. 24). However, these institutions themselves can easily become the main battleground of "delegitimation, protest, or overthrow" (p. 24). From this perspective, the present title is extremely valuable as it shows how to discern the escalation from distributive dissatisfaction to normative dissatisfaction and possibly radical revisionism.

To test his theoretical framework, Ward has selected several cases from modern history, based on their character as "paradigmatic examples of rising power revisionism" and because of their prominence in studies of international relations (p. 66). Indeed, Wilhelmine Germany (pp. 70-99), Imperial Japan (pp. 100-128) and Interbellum Germany (pp. 130-158) all provide rich testing material. At the same time, the book also includes the Anglo-American power shift (pp. 159-181) as a negative example and concludes with the contemporary rise of China (pp. 181-203). Here, Ward questions whether and how new rising powers showcase similar tendencies to those that went before it. As such, the present title offers fresh perspectives on both the First and Second World War, but also the brewing power shift towards Asia. Ward's arguments are compelling, putting status concerns at the centre of interstate conflicts.

Other accounts of these armed conflicts do not seem to give as much importance to status ambitions, instead arguing that rational calculations for material growth

guide the behaviour of great powers. Interestingly, Ward argues that the “logic of identity management” relates to status as much as grand strategy relates to the pursuit of material security and welfare (p. 49). However, it is status immobility that posits the gravest, yet often ignored danger to the world. Here, Ward argues that status denial risks drastically changing a rising power’s perception of the existing order (pp. 183-187). It is but a small surprise that many comparisons can be drawn between Germany on the eve of the First World War and China today, since both countries are pursuing a “place in the sun” worthy of their name (p. 79). This volume offers a novel look at the debate surrounding accommodation or containment of a rising power, thereby offering insights into the policies pursued on the eve of major conflict and thereafter. To those interested in the events that shaped the 20th century, the present title has much to offer. China watchers and those people concerned with the future relationship between America and China will as well find much of interest in this work.

Steven Ward has written an excellent guide to discern at what point reasonable requests for reform of the world order shift towards an outward rejection of that system. Here, Ward places much emphasis on how to understand the consequences of such a changing dynamic. To do so, Ward offers a framework of revisionism which is based on a spectrum of (dis)satisfaction that ranges between acceptance and rejection. By differentiating between distributive and normative revisionism, the present volume presents a tool to make better judgements about the different phases of escalation between great powers, and what effect a rising power’s dissatisfaction has on a given world order. In a world fraught by the gloomy predictions of Thucydides’ Trap, the present title is a most welcome contribution. However, the emphasis this work puts on status immobility risks obscuring developments within a rising power that are not directly linked to constraints imposed by the world order. In the context of China’s rise, questioning whether it is the rising power itself that has changed is an important element for further study.

### **Bio**

Axel Dessein is a doctoral candidate at the War Studies Department of King’s College London and a Senior Editor at the department’s Strife Blog and Journal. Having been awarded the Leverhulme Trust Scholarship “Interrogating Visions of a Post-Western World” in August 2018, his research focuses on the implications of China’s rise on the current world order. Originally from Belgium, he completed his BA and MA in Oriental Languages and Cultures at Ghent University.

