Book Review

Rohan Mukherjee, *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781009186810 (hbk), pp. 352.

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Rohan Mukherjee's *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Politics* is a theoretically sophisticated and empirically grounded contribution to the study of international order and power transitions. The book advances a novel framework—Institutional Status Theory (IST)—to explain why rising powers sometimes accept, sometimes seek to reform, and sometimes resist the very international orders that have enabled their material ascent. Against the dominant expectation that power shifts inevitably generate conflict, Mukherjee argues that rising powers are often willing to bear material and security costs in exchange for symbolic equality within core institutions of international order.

Viewed through a pluralist strategic culture approach *Ascending Order* emerges as both an important advance and a revealingly partial account. While Mukherjee convincingly demonstrates that status concerns are central to rising-power behavior, his framework implicitly assumes a relatively coherent, singular status aspiration at the state level. A pluralist strategic culture perspective, by contrast, emphasizes that states host multiple, historically layered, and often competing strategic cultures, each with distinct understandings of status, legitimacy, hierarchy, and appropriate international conduct. From this vantage point, Mukherjee's theory explains why status matters, but not fully how status is culturally constructed, contested, and prioritized within rising powers themselves.

Institutional Status Theory and the Reframing of Rising Power Politics

The central theoretical contribution of *Ascending Order* lies in its rejection of the revisionist/status-quo dichotomy that has long structured debates on rising powers. Mukherjee argues that existing theories—whether realist or liberal—tend to assume that dissatisfaction with the international order naturally increases with material power. Instead, IST posits that the key variable is whether international institutions provide credible pathways to symbolic equality for rising states.

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According to Mukherjee, two institutional characteristics are decisive: openness to leadership inclusion and procedural fairness. Where institutions signal recognition as peers rather than subordinates, rising powers are likely to cooperate, even at considerable material cost. Where institutions are closed, hierarchical, or discriminatory, rising powers are more likely to pursue reformist or revisionist strategies.

This is a powerful reframing. It directs analytical attention away from abstract distributions of power toward the micro-politics of recognition within international institutions. For scholars of Indian foreign policy, the framework offers a compelling alternative to explanations that reduce India's behavior to either principled idealism or raw material interest.

Pluralist Strategic Culture: A Different Theoretical Assumption

A pluralist strategic culture approach departs from IST at the level of ontology. Rather than treating the state as a unitary actor with a single status preference, pluralist strategic culture theory conceptualizes the state as a contested arena in which multiple strategic traditions coexist and compete. These traditions are historically sedimented, institutionally embedded, and ideationally distinct.

In this view, status is not a universal good with a stable meaning. One strategic culture may define status as institutional inclusion and recognition by existing great powers; another may associate status with autonomy, moral authority, or resistance to hierarchy. Crucially, these cultures do not merely react to international institutions—they interpret institutional signals through culturally specific lenses.

Ascending Order largely brackets out this internal pluralism. Status appears as a singular objective—symbolic equality within the existing order—rather than as a culturally mediated and politically contested concept. This abstraction allows for theoretical elegance but limits explanatory depth, especially in postcolonial and civilizational contexts.

Re-reading the Empirical Cases through Strategic Pluralism

Mukherjee's empirical chapters are among the book's strongest features, yet they also reveal the limits of a monist conception of status.

The United States and the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Order

Mukherjee's analysis of nineteenth-century American resistance to the Declaration of Paris convincingly shows that material interests alone cannot explain U.S. behavior. The United States rejected maritime law constraints not because they were economically irrational, but because they symbolized second-tier status vis-à-vis European great powers.

From a pluralist strategic culture perspective, however, this behavior reflects the dominance of particular stra-

tegic traditions within the United States at that historical moment. Anti-aristocratic republicanism, legalistic commercialism, and civilizational exceptionalism coexisted uneasily. American resistance was not simply a response to denied status, but the outcome of an internal cultural coalition that defined status as sovereign equality unmediated by European hierarchies.

Mukherjee captures the external logic of status denial, but not the internal cultural contestation that made resistance appear legitimate and even virtuous.

China and Institutional Accommodation

Similarly, China's willingness to cooperate in procedurally fair institutions of the liberal international order like the UNSC (P-5), WTO, NPT/CTBT, and the G-20 is explained in *Ascending Order* as a rational exchange of material disadvantage for symbolic recognition as a responsible great power. This explanation is persuasive but incomplete. A pluralist lens highlights that this outcome depends on the temporary dominance of an internationalist, technocratic strategic culture over alternative traditions emphasizing, for example, revolutionary autonomy or military self-reliance.

This matters analytically because it implies that accommodation is contingent and reversible—a point that IST, with its state-level abstraction, struggles to theorize.

India: Strategic Culture, Status, and the Value of Non-Recognition

The Indian case illustrates most clearly why pluralist strategic culture is indispensable. Mukherjee contrasts India's rejection of the CTBT with China's accommodation, attributing the divergence primarily to a different degree of institutional inclusion.

From a pluralist strategic culture perspective, this explanation captures only part of the story. Indian strategic culture has long been characterized by layered and competing traditions: Nehruvian moral internationalism, postcolonial anti-hierarchy, civilizational exceptionalism, and, more recently, pragmatic great-power realism. For some of these traditions, status was not something conferred by elite clubs but something affirmed through principled dissent.

India's rejection of the CTBT was therefore not merely a reaction to exclusion but an expression of a strategic culture in which non-recognition itself constituted status. This insight complicates IST's assumption that symbolic equality within existing institutions is universally desired.

Theoretical Implications

The principal limitation of *Ascending Order*, from a pluralist strategic culture standpoint, is its culturally thin conception of status. Status is treated as a positional good within institutional hierarchies, rather than as a historically constructed and internally contested idea.

A synthesis between IST and pluralist strategic culture would enrich both approaches. While IST offers a compelling account of how institutions distribute recognition, strategic culture explains why recognition is interpreted differently across—and within—states. Together, they could account not only for variation across rising powers, but also for shifts within them over time.

Conclusion

Ascending Order is an important book that significantly advances debates on rising powers and international order. Mukherjee's IST offers a powerful alternative to conflict-centric models and places institutions and recognition at the center of international politics.

From a pluralist strategic culture perspective, however, the book remains incomplete. By treating status as a singular objective pursued by unitary states, it underestimates the internal cultural pluralism that shapes how status is defined, valued, and pursued. Rising powers do not simply seek recognition; they argue about what recognition means.

Rather than diminishing Mukherjee's contribution, this critique highlights the book's generative potential. *Ascending Order* provides precisely the kind of theoretically rigorous foundation upon which a culturally pluralist theory of international order can be built.