

## **BOOK REVIEW**

# The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers

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# The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers

**Michelle MURRAY**

*Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 280 pages, ISBN: 978-0190878900*

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Will global power transitions be peaceful or bloody? This question frequently comes to the fore as to the consequences of the possible power transition between China and the USA. *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* provides both a theoretical and empirical framework based on the 'struggle for recognition' to understand the social dynamics of power transitions. Michelle Murray examines the rise of the United States and Germany against Britain at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Using these examples, Murray questions why some power transitions occurred peacefully and others ended in conflict. While Murray brings together status studies and power transition theory within the framework of 'constructivist theory', the epistemological foundation of her book is still based on positivism. She evaluates the relationship between identity, social uncertainty, and the material world from a Hegelian perspective, using the master-slave dialectic. This approach offers a different perspective on how states manage their intersubjective identities in anarchic social uncertainty. By contributing to the literature with this unique perspective, Murray offers a philosophical explanation of the process of individual identity formation to international relations theory.

The book consists of eight chapters. After explaining the aim, subject, main arguments, and plan of the book in the first chapter (*Introduction: The Problem of Rising Powers in International Politics*); the theoretical background is detailed in the second (*The Struggle for Recognition: State Identity and the Problem of Social Uncertainty in International Politics*) and third (*The Social Construction of Revisionism: (Mis)Recognition and the Struggle for Major Power Status*) chapters. In the fourth (*Weltpolitik: The German Aspiration for World Power Status*) and fifth (*Recognition Refused: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition before the First World War*) chapters of the book, Murray examines how Germany's struggle for recognition, defined as taking its 'place in the sun' at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was built as a revisionist motivation due to its misrecognition. In the sixth (*Looking Outward: The American Aspiration for World Power Status*) and seventh (*Recognition and Rapprochement: America's Peaceful Rise*) chap-

ters, she explains the peaceful rise of the USA to world power status in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the last chapter (*Conclusion: Rising Powers and the Future of the International Order*), Murray discusses the contribution of the 'struggle for recognition' approach to international relations theory and provides predictions about the rise of China after the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

By stating that rationalist-materialist arguments ignore social factors, Murray emphasizes that the 'struggle for recognition' approach explains the social dynamics of power transitions. Against the classical arguments in power transition theory, she questions why all power transitions are not revisionists and why all power transitions do not lead to war. According to Murray, rising powers try to gain recognition from established powers - the Other - and thus gain ontological security in order to secure their intersubjective constructed identities through social interactions in an anarchic social uncertainty (p. 11-18). When the aspirant identity of the rising powers is recognized, it is accepted that they have some 'certain special rights and duties' in the functioning of the international order and their status is seen as legitimate (p. 66-70). Thus, a peaceful power transition *can* take place. However, they can also be construed as a revisionist states that pose a threat to the international order by the established powers due to 'misrecognition.' According to Murray, this happens in four steps: 'misrecognition by the established powers', 'the experience of disrespect', 'identification or securitization', and 'the social construction of revisionism' (p. 71-80).

In the book, Murray draws on numerous primary sources from international relations, history, and social psychology to support her claims. She develops an original theoretical model as an alternative to rationalist-instrumental and social-psychological approaches on the rising powers' status-seeking and power transition theory. Murray's theoretical model provides a simple and understandable framework for how the rising power can be constructed as revisionist. While this framework seems logical and coherent, it has a few shortcomings.

First, this approach is not generalizable to many examples of power transitions that have occurred throughout history. Although Murray claims that this approach can be adapted to different cases, such as Russia and Japan, or to issues like nuclear weapons, it may not be as straight forward. Her framework has been isolated, abstracted and conceptualized through the examples of Germany and the US. Unfortunately, the reasons why she chose these two cases, when there are other examples, were not clearly explained. Next, Murray focuses on social interactions between rising and established powers, while neglecting to highlight interactions with other actors in the structure. Finally, she argues that the rising power was constructed as revisionist because of misrecognition, but it is not clear why some are misrecognised, while others are recognized and seen as legitimate. Murray makes clear how Germany was misrecognised, but the reason for confrontational power transition is difficult to understand in this context. When it comes to the Anglo-American power transition, she refers to the importance of Anglo-Saxonism, which is a shared identity between the US and the UK, and recognitive speech acts. But the question could be asked why Anglo-Saxon identity is decisive. Why do countries fall back on their Anglo-Saxon identity during a massive global power transition? Murray focuses on the structural level, but offers an explanation through the process of intra-state identity formation. In sum, Murray's argument could have been stronger if she had included contradiction and harmony in her understanding of the international order.

Theoretical arguments are an effort to explain the present, not just past examples, as Robert Cox succinctly expressed, they are ‘for someone and for some purpose.’<sup>1</sup> Providing her own unique arguments, Murray was publishing at a time when theoretical discussions about a possible power transition between the US and China were intensifying. The course of relations between the US and China will have a great effect on the functioning of the international order. Whether the pending power transition will be peaceful or confrontational will continue to be discussed well into the future. Therefore, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*, can be considered a timely theoretical and empirical contribution to this discussion.

Murray’s book provides an alternative study that contributes to the understanding of power transitions, which will shed light on future studies.

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1 Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory”, *Millennium*, Vol. 10, No 2, 1981, p. 128.