The Making of International Status

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How Do Countries Achieve Status?

With great power rivalry on the rise again, many worry that struggles for status among states could lead to war. Questions of status lie at the root of international order: as Gilpin notes, governance in international politics is partly a function of the hierarchy of prestige, which determines which states will exert authority in the international system.[1] It is no surprise that states care deeply about status. In fact, bilateral relations between the United States on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other, have reached a low point in part because of disagreements about status. Acting out of a perception that it does not receive the respect it deserves from other countries, Russia has adopted increasingly confrontational policies toward the West—from sponsoring cyber attacks and election interference campaigns against Western targets to ultimately invading Ukraine in 2022.[2] And when president-elect Joe Biden pledged to convene a global summit for democracy during his first year in office, Chinese and Russian leaders reacted with skepticism, suggesting that the U.S. should address problems at home before lecturing other countries.[3] Such disagreements can be dangerous. As a growing scholarly consensus indicates, status-dissatisfied states are more prone to conflict.[4] And historically, most hegemonic transitions have been violent: unable to reach an agreement about their relative status, established and emerging powers often resort to arms.

[1] Gilpin 1981, 33-34.

[2] *Financial Times*, "Biden warns cyber attacks could lead to a 'real shooting war,'" 27 July 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/5bbaa89b-2e85-4c5f-b918-566e6712d273; *BBC News*, "Russia-Ukraine border: Why Moscow is stoking tensions," 27 November 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59415885.

[3] *New York Times*, "As Biden Plans Global Democracy Summit, Skeptics Say: Heal Thyself First," 31 January 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/31/us/politics/biden-democracy-summit.

[4] Barnhart 2020; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014; Lebow 2010; Murray 2018; Renshon 2017; Ward 2017.

But whether states are satisfied or not with their status, a fundamental question remains: how do states achieve status? There was scant research about status in International Relations (IR) during the twentieth century, as scholars privileged material factors over intangible ones when developing theories and choosing research questions. During this period, status appeared in two strands of research: in classic theories of international politics developed by realist scholars, and in early quantitative studies of the relationship between status dissatisfaction and war.[5] In the 1980s and 1990s, however, interest in status reached a low ebb as the discipline made a shift toward rationalism, emphasizing individual choice and material factors to explain political phenomena.[6] Only at the turn of the twentieth-first century did a few studies eventually give rise to the current wave of research on status.[7] Drawing from diverse traditions, studies in this wave provide overwhelming evidence that the search for status motivates state behavior and may even cause wars.[8] But while existing research focuses on the actor level, showing that actors want status and do things to achieve status, it neglects the question of how countries ultimately achieve status.

Even though scholars rely on status to explain important phenomena in international politics, such as hegemonic wars and the foreign policies of emerging powers, we still understand little about the sources of international status. Scholars traditionally assume that status is a function of the qualities of states, especially their military and economic capabilities—such that the richer or stronger a country is, the higher its standing should be. However, theories of status that begin and end with state attributes leave important questions unanswered. First, because most studies assume that status depends on a state's material capabilities, they cannot explain why status and material capabilities often mismatch in practice. Second, we still lack a general framework to explain why certain state attributes (but not others) matter for status recognition. Third, even if we assume that state attributes evoke international recognition, we still understand little about how they are converted

[5] See, respectively, Gilpin 1981; Morgenthau 1948; and Doran, Hill, and Mladenka 1979; East 1972; Gochman 1980; Midlarsky 1975; Ray 1974; Wallace 1973.

[6] See Markey 1999, 130-32; Wohlforth and Kang 2009, 1.

[7] Larson and Shevchenko 2003; Markey 1999; O'Neill 2001; Schweller 1999; Volgy and Mayhall 1995.

[8] Barnhart 2016; de Carvalho and Neumann 2015; Gilady 2018; Lanoszka and Hunzeker 2015; Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Lebow 2008; Lindemann 2011; Murray 2010; Musgrave and Nexon 2018; Onea 2014; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014; Ringmar 2002; Wohlforth 2009; Wolf 2011.

into status—or, more broadly, about the relationship between attributes and status. As a result, we still have a poor grasp of the processes through which states ultimately achieve status.

Perhaps most importantly, although status is a relational concept, existing research does not study it relationally. Existing studies adopt an individualistic approach, treating status as a function of the qualities of states. In particular, existing research tends to treat status as a function of a state's material capabilities or the things that it has. But because status is insufficiently differentiated from material capabilities, it is not clear why we need the concept of status in the first place. As a result, status remains in the background in IR theories: When some aspect of international politics cannot be explained using traditional theories based on security or survival, status is called upon to fulfill the task. IR scholars are thus caught in a conundrum: they claim that status is a fundamental element of international relations, but ultimately render it a residual category.

Moreover, the supposed relationship between state attributes and status is assumed rather than tested; as such, it remains unverified from an empirical standpoint. To be sure, the assumption that status is a function of an actor's qualities makes intuitive sense, since it is consistent with how most of us experience status in our everyday lives, as actors rather than researchers. Such an assumption is also convenient to researchers, since it allows us to estimate status based on visible factors that can be easily measured, such as economic and military capabilities. However, IR scholars usually fail to examine this assumption systematically: they assume that certain state qualities influence its status, but rarely conduct empirical tests to assess this relationship.[9] The assumption that status depends on the qualities of states thus remains like a commonsense or folk theory of status—an explanation, based on practical and contextual understandings that people employ in their everyday lives, which is taken to be true even though it has not been put to the test.[10]

In this book, I adopt a consistently relational approach, from both a theoretical and an empirical standpoints, to investigate the sources of international status. Drawing on an interdisciplinary body of research, I develop *a network theory of status*—a theoretical framework that captures the

[9] Notable exceptions are Duque 2018; Miller et al. 2015.

[10] See Boudon 1988; Watts 2011, 2014. As these authors note, commonsense or folk theories tend to be taken for granted rather than explicitly articulated. As a result, these theories often remain unchanged even after people have reasons to question their logical consistency or empirical validity.

fundamentally social nature of status. I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than on the qualities of states. To explain how states achieve status, I theorize the underlying relational effects that drive recognition in the international system. In particular, I argue that the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment. Status reinforces inequality, independently of material conditions, because it involves cumulative advantage: the higher standing a state enjoys, the more it tends to attract additional recognition simply by virtue of its position. Moreover, the relevance of a given state attribute for status recognition is socially defined: an attribute becomes relevant for status recognition not because of its intrinsic properties, but rather because of its symbolic value—which depends on the social context, and especially on who the great powers are and what they do.

My theoretical framework offers new answers to the fundamental questions about status that existing approaches insufficiently address. First, I argue that we should not expect status to go hand in hand with a state's material capabilities—or, more broadly, with its attributes—because status depends on a state's social position, rather than on its qualities or the things it has. Second, I argue that a given state attribute becomes relevant for status recognition when actors share the belief that it symbolizes state competence. Status evaluations are based on prevailing conceptions of state competence that change over time, depending on who the great powers are and how they behave. During critical junctures like the aftermath of major wars, the model of statehood put forward by the victorious state(s) shapes the standards that will be used to evaluate state competence thereafter. That is, besides updating the international pecking order, major wars also serve to update the standards that inform status recognition among states. Finally, I argue that state attributes play only an indirect role in the process of status recognition: they impact recognition because of their symbolic value, which can only be understood in the context of state relations.

My theoretical framework implies that, to investigate how countries achieve status, we need to examine *the configuration of state relations*, rather than merely ranking states based on their attributes. Therefore, I adopt an empirical strategy that is consistent with the social nature of status. Because status depends on recognition, I investigate empirically the factors that produce such recog-

nition. Since embassies express recognition among states, I use embassy exchange data as a proxy measure of status recognition. But instead of measuring status at the state level, like previous studies do, I use a relational unit of analysis: the network of embassies. This choice of unit enables me to use information about the structure of diplomatic relations that existing studies discard—and, therefore, to investigate the relational patterns that drive status recognition. To that end, I use social network analysis tools uniquely suited to the empirical study of status. These tools enable me to examine how the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment. Using network analysis, I detect relational patterns of status recognition that previous studies mention in passing but do not examine empirically.

This book contributes to existing scholarship from both a theoretical and an empirical standpoints. Although we are hitting a critical mass of research on status in IR, we still lack a basic understanding of fundamental questions related to status. In this context, this book makes four distinctive contributions to existing scholarship. To begin, while existing research treats status as an actor motivation, this book is the first to address the question of how countries achieve status, focusing on international relations rather than on the state level. In addition, I develop a theoretical framework that highlights the social nature of status and, accordingly, use social network analysis tools ideally suited to the empirical study of status. By integrating interdisciplinary insights to develop a consistently relational approach to status, this book brings research on status in IR in line with research in the social sciences more broadly. And given its innovative approach, this study offers new lessons in areas that have drawn increasing scholarly interest in recent years—such as international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions—but that are still rarely linked to status. By showing that status is a distinctive phenomenon both conceptually and empirically, this book aims to move status from its current position as a residual category in IR to its rightful place as a concept central to the study of international politics.

1.1 What We (Don't) Know

IR scholars traditionally assume that status is a function of the qualities of states or the things that states have. Conventional approaches define status as a state's ranking based on certain traits or attributes, especially material attributes like economic wealth and military capabilities. One of the most commonly used definitions of status in IR, for example, describes status as "collective beliefs about a given state's ranking in valued attributes (wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, demographic position, sociopolitical organization, and diplomatic clout)."[11] Other popular definitions of status likewise emphasize state attributes, positing that status "refers to attributes of an individual or social roles, especially those attributes related to position in a deference hierarchy"[12] or that status is "based on a group's standing on some trait valued by society."[13] Although recent research tends to list a broader range of state attributes when defining status, the current wave of research thus carries forward the tradition initiated by early realist studies, which define prestige as a state's reputation for power—or more precisely, as a state's reputation for military strength.[14]

According to the conventional approach, then, international status is a function of a state's qualities: the larger a state's share of certain attributes, the higher its standing should be. In particular, existing research mentions two types of state attributes as symbols of international status. Most often, scholars list as status symbols material resources—which typically include economic, military, or technological capabilities; as well as nuclear weapons.[15] In addition, some scholars also consider as symbols of status certain nonmaterial factors—more precisely, certain fundamental values such as political system or ideology, culture or civilization, or "moral superiority."[16]

The conventional approach is therefore consistent with two assumptions commonly adopted in

[11] Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 7.

[12] Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014, 373.

[13] Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 69.

[14] Gilpin 1981, 30-31; Morgenthau 2006, 89-90. See also Wohlforth 2009, 39. These scholars tend to favor the term "prestige," sometimes using the terms "status" and "prestige" interchangeably—as I do in this chapter. But in the rest of the book, I use the term status, which is more in line with contemporary research in the social sciences more broadly.

[15] Art 1980; Gilpin 1981; Larson and Shevchenko 2003, 2010; Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014; Luard 1976; Neumann 2008, 2014; O'Neill 2006; Schweller 1999; Thompson 2014; Wohlforth 2009.

[16] Larson and Shevchenko 2003, 2010; Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014; Luard 1976; Neumann 2008, 2014; Schweller 1999; Thompson 2014; Wohlforth 2009.

IR. First, while the notion of inequality is not new in the study of international politics, IR scholars typically chalk it up to differences in the qualities of states. In other words, scholars usually rely on an *individualist framework* to account for inequalities among states. Based on this framework, actors differentiate themselves into unequal positions in a social hierarchy because they differ in salient qualities.[17] As such, differential access to privileges among actors results from disparities in their qualities. This assumption resembles the idea of meritocracy, according to which actors obtain differential access to resources or influence on the basis of their individual talent, ability, or effort. An individualist framework thus explains social outcomes based on the properties of actors. This framework is commonly used not only in IR, where it is sometimes called reductionism, but also in the social sciences more broadly.[18]

Second, the conventional approach usually ascribes inequality, in particular, to the uneven distribution of material capabilities among states. That is, IR scholars often combine an individualist framework with a *materialist approach* to status, assuming that the possession of material resources largely determines a state's standing. According to realist scholars, for example, certain states become great powers—enjoying special rights and responsibilities in the international system—because their material capabilities surpass those of other states.[19] And while the criteria used to identify great powers sometimes remain implicit, scholars from different research traditions typically mention military and economic capabilities as fundamental attributes (often, necessary conditions) for major power status.[20] Coupling an individualist framework with a materialism approach, most scholars thus treat status as a function of disparities in the qualities of states, and especially in their material capabilities.[21]

[17] See Gould 2002, 1144. As I explain below, an individualist framework contrasts with a structural framework, which accounts for inequality based on the positions actors occupy in a social system, rather than based on the qualities of individual actors.

[18] As Goddard and Nexon note, "The majority of theories in the social sciences adopt a reductionist approach to the Hobbesian problem, explaining social order—international or otherwise—with reference to the properties and interactions of its component parts." Goddard and Nexon 2005, 12. See also Jervis 1997, 12-13; Waltz 1979, 18-19.

[19] Morgenthau 1948, Ch. 25; Waltz 1979, 88, 109.

[20] See, for example, Bull 2002, 195; Levy 1983, 9-16; Buzan 2004, 69-72; Neumann 2008; Schweller 1993. Far from unique to realist approaches, materialism is a common assumption in IR research. As Gilpin notes, for example, realist and marxist approaches share this assumption. See Gilpin 1981, 93-94; Wallerstein 1984, 5. See also Baldwin 2002.

[21] As Wendt notes, this approach stems from the view that, because no supranational authority stands above states,

But as I discuss next, theories of status that begin and end with state attributes leave important questions unanswered.

1.1.1 Why Do Status and Material Attributes Often Mismatch?

To begin, the assumption that status is a function of a state's material capabilities contradicts important empirical patterns. When examining the historical record, we find prominent examples of countries with high levels of material capabilities that nonetheless failed to achieve the desired international recognition. Wilhelmine Germany is a case in point. At the turn of the twentieth century, Germany's material capabilities—including its manufacturing output, share of world trade, and land forces—rivaled those of neighboring countries like Britain, France, or Russia.[22] In addition, Germany's growing colonial possessions and naval capabilities were increasingly perceived as a potential challenge to British hegemony. And yet, despite marked improvements in Germany's material conditions, German decision-makers continued to feel that they received less than their "fair share" of international recognition.[23]

Similarly, significant ink has been spent on Russia's dissatisfaction, since the time of Peter the Great, with the recognition it receives from other states, especially European or Western powers.[24] During the twentieth century, for example, Russia had at its disposal conventional forces large enough to cover half of Europe by the end of the Second World War. During the Cold War, Moscow exerted enough influence to institute pro-Soviet regimes throughout Eastern Europe; in addition, it acquired a sizable nuclear arsenal and often led the space race against the United States. And yet, despite repeated showings of military strength, Russian decision-makers felt throughout this period that Western countries did not recognize Russia as an equal.

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international relations resemble a competitive, self-help system. See Wendt 1992, Wendt and Friedheim 1995, 78. Yet, this assumption persists even in studies that treat international relations as hierarchic rather than anarchic. The measure of hierarchy most widely used in IR, for example, disaggregates hierarchy into two dimensions: (1) security hierarchy, measured by troop deployments and alliance portfolios; and (2) economic hierarchy, measured by exchange rate regimes and diversification in trade partners. See Lake 2009, Ch. 3. As such, most scholars treat international hierarchy as a ranking of states along certain attributes or issue areas, especially military and economic.

[22] Onea 2014, 144-51.

[23] Renshon 2017, 182-220. See also Barnhart 2016; Murray 2010.

[24] Clunan 2009; Larson and Shevchenko 2003, 2010; Neumann 2008; Ringmar 2002.

In fact, multiple studies indicate precisely that material capabilities are not a sufficient condition for international recognition. The mismatch between material capabilities and status is well documented, for example, in studies of the relationship between status dissatisfaction and war.[25] These studies show that states dissatisfied with their status—or that receive less recognition than their material capabilities would warrant—are more prone to conflict. That is, despite assuming a causal link between material capabilities and status, existing research deals precisely with states' difficulties in converting their material capabilities into status. The assumption that material capabilities determine status thus goes against the very research that applies it.[26] In addition, studies drawing on the Hegelian notion of the struggle for recognition emphasize the disjuncture between a state's material capabilities and the recognition it receives. These studies highlight precisely that, even though decision-makers from states like Wilhelmine Germany or Soviet Russia felt that their country deserved more recognition as its material conditions improved, other countries refrained from recognizing either country as a great power.[27]

Other cases that illustrate well the disjuncture between status and material capabilities. Take the example of North Korea. Even though IR scholars usually think of nuclear weapons as one of the accoutrements of great power status, the acquisition of these weapons consolidated North Korea's status as a pariah state, rather than earning it the status of a great power. North Korea may receive attention, and even gain leverage in negotiations, because of its weapons. But the attention given to North Korea is best described as the attention given to a low-status actor who misbehaves, rather than the attention given to a major power who shapes the contours of the international order.[28] Great powers do not invite North Korean leaders to sit at the main table and help manage international

[25] Doran, Hill, and Mladenka 1979; East 1972; Gochman 1980; Maoz 2010; Midlarsky 1975; Ray 1974; Renshon 2017; Volgy and Mayhall 1995; Wallace 1973.

[26] The mismatch between material capabilities and status is sometimes explained away in this literature as a problem of perceptual bias or incomplete information about material capabilities. However, there are neither an explicit theory about this nor empirical tests to confirm that perceptual bias or incomplete information is indeed the mechanism at work in these cases.

[27] Murray 2018, 87-140; Ringmar 2002, 127-29.

[28] Although high status often commands attention, we should not conflate status with attention. As Magee and Galinsky note, the two constructs operate at different levels of complexity. As a process related to actor perception, attention is a more basic phenomenon than status. Giving attention to an actor is the same as taking notice or interest in them. But in and of itself, attention does not imply high status; in fact, low-status actors sometimes receive considerable attention, as the North Korean example illustrates. See Magee and Galinsky 2008, 360-61.

relations. In fact, repeated U.S. administrations even denied North Korea a bilateral summit until 2018, when the heads of government from each country held their first-ever face-to-face meeting.[29] Besides Donald Trump, no other head of state or government from a Western country participated in a bilateral meeting with a North Korean leader. And since Xi Jinping became president in 2013, even the high-level visits between North Korea and China, traditionally considered one of North Korea's closest allies, have reached a historical low.[30]

And yet, France received precisely this invitation—to sit at the main table and help manage international relations—in 1945, as it became a permanent member in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) despite having just been liberated by the Allied powers from years of German military occupation. By any metric, France was materially weak at the time:

> France's resounding defeat by the German army, its humiliating surrender, and its occupation were clear evidence of the final descent of what once had been Europe's dominant power. Materially, France lay in ruins in the aftermath of liberation, with nearly its entire heavy industry destroyed or looted by the Germans. Militarily, France was a 'virtual pygmy'. The French army was reduced to eight divisions, equipped entirely with American weapons. Its economy was shattered and its institutions in chaos. (...) The French nation in 1945 was deemed to be 'internally divided, economically ruined and institutionally feeble'.[31]

Based on material factors alone, few would have expected France to acquire the privileges it did in the post-war international order. And in fact, the military occupation by Nazi Germany would not be France's last military defeat during this period. When fighting without help from its allies during the twentieth century, France would sustain unexpected losses in subsequent conflicts against smaller adversaries, both in Indochina (1954) and Algeria (1962). Yet historically, France is not alone in achieving an international standing disproportionate to its material capabilities in the

[29] *Council on Foreign Relations*, "Timeline: North Korean Nuclear Negotiations, 1985-2019," https://www.cfr.org/timeline/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations, accessed 3 November 2021.

[30] *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, "Dataset: China-North Korea High Level Visits Since 1953," https://beyondparallel.csis.org/china-dprk-high-level-visits-since-1953/, accessed 3 November 2021.

[31] Heimann 2015*b*, 185-86. See also de Gaulle 1956, 81-82.

aftermath of a major war. Other countries—like China in 1945, or Italy and Japan in 1919—have similarly punched above their material weight during constitutional moments of the contemporary international order.[32] Moreover, we observe a similar trend in the Concert of Europe: as Morgenthau notes, countries like Portugal, Spain, and Sweden were accorded the diplomatic rank of great powers in the Congress of Vienna (1815) only "out of traditional courtesy," rather than because their material capabilities justified such recognition.[33]

So what explains the observed mismatch between a state's material capabilities and the international recognition it receives? If status is not a direct function of a state's material capabilities, how do states ultimately achieve status?

1.1.2 Why Do Certain Attributes Matter for Status?

In addition, the conventional approach leaves a second question unanswered: Even though existing research assumes that status depends on state attributes, we still understand little about why certain attributes become relevant for status recognition. Why do certain state attributes (but not others) symbolize status? On the one hand, IR scholars often emphasize material capabilities as status symbols. Behind this perspective is the often implicit assumption that material capabilities matter for status recognition because of their functional value—that is, because they increase a state's ability to coerce other states. This assumption is formulated most explicitly by Gilpin, to whom the value of prestige lies in allowing a state to compel or deter others without having to use force.[34] Gilpin posits that the value of prestige (defined as a state's reputation for material capabilities) lies in determining bargaining outcomes short of war, and sometimes even short of explicit threats of violence. Similarly, Morgenthau claims that the Cold War "was fought primarily with the weapons of prestige," as the U.S. and the Soviet Union sought to assert their relative superiority without paying the costs of war.[35] Following this line of reasoning, the higher a state's reputation for military strength, the less

[32] See Buzan 2004, 62; Heimann 2015*b*, 186; Murray 2018.
[33] Morgenthau 1948, 270.
[34] Gilpin 1981, 31.
[35] Morgenthau 2006, 92.

other states will be willing to take disputes with it to the battlefield. By signaling a state's coercive capabilities, prestige thus dissuades weaker states from challenging stronger ones.

That is, the connection between material capabilities and status recognition relies on the traditional assumption that, because no supranational authority stands above states, force serves as the last resort in international relations—reflecting the maxim from Thucydides' Melian Dialogue according to which "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."[36] In fact, this very assumption is present in Gilpin's work. While some parts of *War and Change* stress the similarity between domestic and international politics, tracing a parallel between authority and prestige, other parts of the book echo the conventional view of anarchy as the distinctive feature of international politics. As Gilpin claims in the introduction, "International relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy."[37] He thus conjectures in the conclusion that, were Thucydides to be "placed in our midst, he would (following an appropriate short course in geography, economics and modern technology) have a little trouble in understanding the power struggle of our age."[38] According to this view, military capabilities provide the ultimate measure of state power under anarchy.

However, the assumption that material capabilities matter for status recognition because of their functional value—or because they allow a state to compel or deter others without having to use force—contradicts two important findings from existing studies. First, scholars typically notice that countries have acquired military equipment to "swagger," in an attempt to achieve prestige, precisely because such equipment provides little strategic utility to the owner.[39] Status-seeking countries often forgo strategic utility to buy military equipment. Wilhelmine Germany, for example, built a

[36] Thucydides 1951. This assumption is perhaps elaborated most explicitly in Waltz's work. To begin, Waltz posits a sharp distinction between domestic politics, where authority is the main ordering principle; and international politics, where anarchy is the main ordering principle. To explain how order results in the absence of a central authority, he then proposes an "analogy to microeconomic theory," which "describes how an order is spontaneously formed from the self-interested acts and interactions of individual units." See Waltz 1979, 88-89. When no central government can settle disputes, Waltz argues, force becomes the coin of the realm: "there is then constant possibility that conflicts will be settled by force." See Waltz 1959, 188. Wars reveal information about military capabilities, telling apart the weak from the strong; and in a self-help system, states that fail to balance against threats risk falling by the wayside. See Blainey 1973; Waltz 1979, 112-18; but see also Fazal 2004.

[37] Gilpin 1981, 7.

[38] Gilpin 1981, 211; see also Gilpin 1981, 227-228.

[39] See Art 1973, 23-24, 36-37; Art 1980, 10-11; Morgenthau 1962, 303.

"luxury fleet" against its security interests in continental Europe.[40] More recently, China directed vast resources into aircraft carriers despite their limited strategic use.[41] And as Gilady notes, countries like Brazil and France have spent a sizable portion of their naval budgets to acquire one aircraft carrier each, even though at least three carriers are typically needed to ensure that one carrier will be operational at any given time. Carrier owners usually lack the resources to properly maintain a carrier or to make it fully operational. Outdated and poorly equipped, most of the existing carriers today are unable to project power commensurate with their costs.[42] Status-seeking states invest scarce resources in actions that provide little strategic utility, from developing space programs[43] or nuclear weapons[44] to buying fighter jets.[45] If status-seekers do not make choices based on strategic utility or functional value, why do they invest in certain attributes?

In addition, the assumption that material capabilities matter for status recognition because of their functional value contradicts a second important finding from previous studies: status symbols comprise not only material attributes but also nonmaterial ones. Fundamental values—such as political system, ideology, or culture—also symbolize international status. Some studies indicate, for example, that high status nowadays requires adopting fundamental values such as liberal democracy.[46] Similarly, Morgenthau argues that the policy of prestige became particularly important during the Cold War era, when the struggle for power between Washington and Moscow turned largely into a struggle for the minds of people around the world. In his words, "the Cold War [was] fought primarily in terms of competition between two rival political philosophies, economic systems, and ways of life."[47] And yet, materialist approaches cannot explain why certain nonmaterial attributes become relevant for status recognition; unlike material capabilities, nonmaterial factors do not increase a state's ability to coerce other states. In other words, there is no direct correspondence between a state's fundamental values and its coercive capabilities.

[40] Art 1973; Murray 2010. See also Herwig 1980.
[41] Ross 2009; Pu and Schweller 2014, 152-59.
[42] Gilady 2018, 69-88.
[43] Gilady 2018; Kinsella and Chima 2001; Musgrave and Nexon 2018; Paikowsky 2017; Van Dyke 1964.
[44] Hecht 2009; Hironaka 2017; Kinsella and Chima 2001; Miller 2014*a*; Sagan 1997.
[45] Eyre and Suchman 1996; Martin and Schmidt 1987.
[46] Neumann 2008, 2014; Pouliot 2014.
[47] Morgenthau 2006, 92.

Alternatively, some scholars argue that certain state attributes, like nuclear weapons, symbolize status because they are costly or hard to obtain. By acquiring rare or costly attributes, a state thus signals its superior military or economic capabilities. Based on this logic, high-status states have an incentive to restrict access to status-symbolizing attributes: If such attributes become widespread, they would no longer be informative as signals of high status.[48] But again, while this logic seems to apply well to certain material attributes like nuclear weapons, it is less applicable to nonmaterial attributes like liberal democracy. Much to the contrary: Rather than restricting access to nonmaterial symbols, dominant countries often attempt to diffuse their own values among the subordinate. As Gilpin notes, "every dominant state (...) promotes a religion or ideology that justifies its domination over other states."[49] In the contemporary era, for example, repeated U.S. administrations have adopted a policy of promoting democracy abroad. Rather than restricting access to democracy by other states, Washington has spent significant resources on promoting democratic values.[50] This historical pattern suggests that, in and of itself, scarcity is insufficient to explain why certain state attributes become relevant for status recognition.

So why do actors consider nonmaterial attributes—or fundamental values like democracy, economic liberalism, or human rights—as symbols of international status? More broadly, why do certain state attributes (but not others) become relevant for status recognition?

1.1.3 How Are Attributes Converted into Status?

Finally, we still understand little about how state attributes are ultimately converted into status. Even if we assume that a state's attributes determine its status, it is not clear how different attributes would combine to produce status. Multiple attributes are considered relevant for status recognition. So what is the status of states that rank differently across dimensions? For example, does a country like Germany or Japan—which is wealthy but invests relatively little into military capabilities—rank higher or lower in status than a country like Russia, which has less than half of the respective gross

[48] See Gilady 2018; O'Neill 2006.
[49] Gilpin 1981, 30.
[50] See Gordon 2020; Owen IV 2010.

national products of Germany and Japan but outspends either country in the military area? Similarly, while alliances and trade flows may reflect states' positions in the military and economic arenas respectively, it is not clear how these positions would combine to produce status.

Existing studies usually provide one of two answers to this question: either (1) they use certain criteria (that often remain implicit) to aggregate states' attributes or positions across dimensions; or (2) they compare states based on each dimension separately. However, either answer relies more on personal taste than on theoretical considerations or empirical evidence. To begin with the former, the aggregation of rankings across dimensions depends heavily on assumptions about the relative weight of different rank-dimensions that seem hard to justify a priori. The same limitation afflicts the latter strategy, as the decision to compare states based on a given dimension likewise depends heavily on the researcher's assumptions about which dimensions matter for status recognition. Yet, such assumptions seem hard to justify a priori, in the absence of clear theoretical considerations and empirical evidence. Waltz himself warns against the dangers of this approach—which tends to rely on the researcher's biases, rather than on the facts on the ground.[51] And as I discuss below, this approach goes against relevant research in related fields, which demonstrates that people form impressions about individuals and social groups based on multiple dimensions (or traits) simultaneously, rather than based on a single dimension separately.

In sum, a preliminary analysis suggests that the conventional approach of treating status as a function of state attributes, though intuitive, is not empirically tenable. In particular, theories of status that begin and end with state attributes leave four important questions unanswered. First, why is there a consistent mismatch between states' material capabilities and the international recognition they receive? Second, why do certain state attributes (but not others) become relevant for status recognition? Third, how are state attributes converted into status? That is, what is the relationship between state attributes and international status? Fourth, and more broadly, if status is not a direct function of states' qualities, how do states ultimately achieve status?

[51] Waltz 1979, 130.

1.2 Why It Matters

The question of how countries attain status matters for several reasons. To begin, questions of status lie at the heart of international order. In any society, hierarchies of status have major political implications, providing an answer to the fundamental question of "who gets what, when and how." As research across the social sciences shows, status is a fundamental aspect of life in society, which shapes relations among actors and groups.[52] Ubiquitous in social contexts, status hierarchies impact valued outcomes: in social environments, actors typically differentiate themselves into social positions that imply unequal expectations, rewards, and obligations. Within countries, for example, we observe durable inequality among groups despite socioeconomic change.[53] Even in developed democracies, women and racial minorities tend to earn lower incomes, get less prestigious jobs, and attain lower levels of education—outcomes that cannot be explained based on individual merit alone, in spite of what the negative stereotypes about these groups might imply.

Yet in domestic societies, state authority somewhat attenuates the effects of status hierarchies. Within states, a central government adjudicates disputes among actors, monopolizing the legitimate use of force. Actors share a system of norms, typically embodied in the state's constitution and enforced by those that occupy formal positions of authority. In addition, governments usually establish a system of redistribution—including policies aimed at improving social welfare, providing public access to education, or even promoting affirmative action. Left to their own devices, many citizens might oppose redistributive policies for fear of losing status.[54] But under state authority, redistribution assumes a mandatory character regardless of individual political preferences: as the old saying goes, nothing is certain but death and paying taxes.[55]

When it comes to relations among states, matters of status take on particular importance. In international relations, no clear authority stands above states. Shared norms and institutional structures are much weaker than in domestic societies. To the extent that foundational treaties like the

[52] Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Veblen 2007; Weber 1978.
[53] Ridgeway and Walker 1995; Ridgeway 2014; Tilly 1998.
[54] See McClendon 2018; Thal 2020.
[55] Except, of course, for the very rich.

UN Charter have a constitutional quality, no independent court with universal jurisdiction can enforce them. With few exceptions like the UN Security Council (UNSC), states rarely occupy formal positions of authority. And although the UNSC had an unusual period of activism in the 1990s, it has since reverted back to the gridlock that characterized most of its history. In the absence of a supranational authority to settle disputes, states often resort to more informal coordination channels, like the Group of Seven (G7), or to unilateral action. As such, the policies that could attenuate the impact of status hierarchies in world politics, like providing foreign aid or granting asylum to refugees, are not consistently enforced by a central authority. Rather, such policies are implemented at the discretion of each state, in a piecemeal fashion if at all.

Under the circumstances that characterize international relations, status becomes much more important in determining who gets what, when, and how. When no central authority can settle disputes, states might resort to the use of force (or its threat) to get what they want. However, major wars are increasingly costly, especially since the advent of nuclear weapons; and happen only rarely.[56] And in the aftermath of wars, status hierarchies determine the ensuing distribution of privileges among states. To the extent that shared norms and institutional structures exist in international politics, they are strongly influenced by those at the top.[57] High-status states play a key role during critical junctures like the aftermath of major wars, shaping the institutions that they will use to manage international relations thereafter.[58] As such, most of the time in international politics we are arguably in the realm of status—where actors adjudicate disputes based on social esteem and voluntary deference, rather than based on the use of force or its threat. As Gilpin puts it, status is the "everyday currency of international relations, much as authority is the central ordering feature of domestic society."[59] While authority ensures that commands will be obeyed in domestic politics, in international politics "both power and prestige function to ensure that the lesser states in the system will obey the commands of the dominant state or states."[60]

[56] Brooks 1999; Mueller 1989; Sagan and Waltz 1995.
[57] Hurd 2017; Kupchan 2014; Pitts 2018.
[58] Ikenberry 2001; Schroeder 1986.
[59] Gilpin 1981, 31.
[60] Gilpin 1981, 30.

In this context, it is not surprising that states and leaders care deeply about status. As Morgenthau notes, prestige "is as intrinsic an element of the relations between nations as the desire for prestige is of the relations between individuals."[61] Accordingly, overwhelming evidence indicates that states and leaders value status, sometimes to the point of fighting wars for the sake of recognition. Drawing on a wide range of theoretical traditions and empirical methods, numerous studies show that status is a fundamental motivation behind foreign policy behavior. These findings are consistent with a rich tradition of research in related fields, which places status as a fundamental human motivation with important implications at the social or group levels.[62]

In fact, actors care so deeply about status that they may be willing to compromise other fundamental goals—such as survival, security, or profit—for the sake of status. Following the humiliating loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Prussia in the late nineteenth century, for example, France initiated a scramble for colonial territory in Africa at the expense of its continental security, even though its colonial exploits provided little material benefit.[63] Motivated by a desire for recognition as a great power, Germany pursued naval ambitions at the turn of the twentieth century at the expense of its continental security, risking a security dilemma with Britain in the lead up to the First World War.[64] And during this war, status considerations motivated the Entente powers to reject Germany's peace overtures, unnecessarily prolonging the conflict.[65] Cumulative evidence indicates that actors care so deeply about status that they may sacrifice blood and treasure for the sake of recognition. As research from different traditions shows, states who receive less recognition than they think they deserve[66] or than their material capabilities would warrant[67] are more prone to conflict.

[61] Morgenthau 2006, 83.

[62] As Ridgeway notes, "people care about status quite as intensely as they do about money and power." See Ridgeway 2014, 2. In psychology, numerous studies using experimental methods indicate that people value status (or social esteem) independently of material gain. See Fiske 2011; Huberman, Loch, and ÖNçüler 2016; Tajfel and Turner 1979; and Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015; Cheng, Tracy, and Anderson 2014 for reviews. Likewise, recent studies in American and comparative politics find that status motivates political behavior at the individual level, shaping preferences toward redistribution in domestic societies and driving support for right-wing populism in developed democracies. See, respectively, McClendon 2018; Thal 2020; and Gidron and Hall 2017; Mutz 2018.

[63] Barnhart 2016, 2020.

[64] Murray 2010; Murray 2018, 87-140.

[65] Lanoszka and Hunzeker 2015.

[66] Lindemann 2011; Murray 2018; Ringmar 2002; Ward 2017; Wolf 2011.

[67] Maoz 2010; Renshon 2017; Volgy and Mayhall 1995.

The question of how states achieve status matters especially today, when the future of the international order is uncertain. After a period of optimism following the end of the Cold War, great power rivalry is on the rise again. While Western powers initially harbored hopes of assimilating China and Russia into the liberal international order, such hopes have since subsided.[68] As Tooze observes, "In December 2017, the US issued its new National Security Strategy, which for the first time designated the Indo-Pacific as the decisive arena of great power competition. In March 2019, the EU issued a strategy document to the same effect. The UK, meanwhile, performed an extraordinary about-face, from celebrating a new "golden era" of Sino-UK relations in 2015 to deploying an aircraft carrier to the South China Sea."[69] If U.S.-China relations during the Trump administration were marked by bravado and trade disputes, they have improved little in the Biden administration.[70] And when Biden hosted a Summit for Democracy in 2021 to rally more other countries against the autocratic models of China and Russia, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin held their own meeting to express mutual support, in Xi's words, "on issues concerning each other's core interests and safeguarding the dignity of each country."[71]

But to understand whether a potential power transition will be peaceful—or whether the established powers will recognize the emerging powers' claims to status as legitimate—we need to understand the sources of international status. As Clunan notes, "The question of peace and stability in the twenty-first century may (...) depend to a great extent on international status politics—the international social construction of criteria for status recognition, the status desired by rising powers (...) and the ability and willingness of others to grant these desires."[72] Existing research on status examines the foreign policies of emerging powers with the goal of accounting for hegemonic wars. But to adequately answer this question, we need to understand how states achieve status. Status-

[68] Sarotte 2021; Tan 2021.

[69] Adam Tooze, "Has Covid ended the neoliberal era?" *Guardian*, 2 September 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/sep/02/covid-and-the-crisis-of-neoliberalism.

[70] *Economist*, "Talks between Xi Jinping and Joe Biden do not herald a thaw," 18 November 2021, https://www.economist.com/china/talks-between-xi-jinping-and-joe-biden-do-not-herald-a-thaw/21806328; *New York Times*, "Tense Talks With China Left U.S. 'Cleareyed' About Beijing's Intentions, Officials Say," 19 March 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/19/world/asia/china-us-alaska.html.

[71] *New York Times*, "Putin and Xi Show United Front Amid Rising Tensions With U.S.," 15 December 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/world/asia/china-russia-summit-xi-putin.html.

[72] Clunan 2014, 274.

seeking states may adopt different strategies to achieve recognition. But what determines whether status-seekers will be satisfied with their status? When should we expect the established powers to recognize an emerging power as an equal—or instead to deny it the desired recognition?

1.2.1 Limitations from Existing Approaches

Pressing as these questions may be, the conventional approach hinders our ability to tackle them. Because this approach treats status as a function of the qualities of states, it ultimately neglects the distinctive feature of status—its social nature. To be sure, the conventional approach does not deny that status is social. Larson and colleagues, for example, observe that status "cannot be attained unilaterally; it must be recognized by others"[73] and that status "reflects *collective* beliefs, transcending individual state perceptions."[74] Similarly, Dafoe and colleagues consider status to involve second-order beliefs (or beliefs about what others believe) and to depend on the recognition of others.[75] But despite acknowledging the social nature of status, existing studies do not explore this aspect in depth. Because the conventional approach treats status as a function of state attributes, it is inconsistent with its own acknowledgement of status as a social phenomenon.

In particular, theories of status that begin and end with actor attributes impose three limitations. First, the conventional approach leads to what Elster calls *generalized fetishism*—the act of mistaking social relations for actors' properties.[76] By treating status as a function of state attributes, IR scholars equate status with the possession of status symbols. However, status is not reducible to symbols. A symbol is an entity that stands for another entity, but should not be mistaken for it.[77] For instance, even though a flag represents a country, no one would claim that it *is* the country. In fact, the symbolic value of a given state attribute depends on the social context. A given attribute only matters for status recognition if actors share the belief that it symbolizes status.[78] Status symbols are part of

[73] Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 10.
[74] Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 8. See also Renshon 2017, 21.
[75] Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014, 374-76. See also O'Neill 2001, 193.
[76] Elster 1976, 252.
[77] Dittmar 1992, 6; Goffman 1951, 294-95.
[78] Dittmar 1992, 6, 79; Goffman 1951, 294-95.

a social, communicative process: they work as symbolic mediators in the relation between self and other.[79] By conflating status with symbols, however, the conventional approach neglects to specify the causal mechanisms whereby state attributes are converted into status. In doing so ignores the relational processes that drive status recognition among states.

Second, the conventional approach leads to *material reductionism*, since it often equates status with the possession of material resources. Influential scholars in the realist tradition define prestige as a state's reputation for military strength.[80] Based on the same notion, scholars in the status inconsistency tradition define status dissatisfaction as a mismatch between a state's material capabilities and the international recognition it receives.[81] This perspective reduces status dissatisfaction to a problem of perceptual bias or incomplete information about military capabilities. While some might claim that this perspective involves a social element, since it assumes that military capabilities are estimated collectively, such an element is treated as a nuisance rather than as an object of substantive interest. In this perspective, status refers to military capabilities plus an error term; if military capability estimations were accurate, the concept of status would no longer be needed. Moreover, such an element is more cognitive than social per se, as it focuses on subjective perceptions at the actor level rather than on social processes that take place among actors.

From a theoretical standpoint, this approach is dissatisfactory for two reasons. To begin, the observed mismatch between status and material capabilities is substantively important: as many studies indicate, states are more prone to conflict when they receive less recognition than their material capabilities would warrant. But by assuming that status is a function of material capabilities, scholars cannot explain why the two factors often mismatch in practice. Existing research treats cases in which material capabilities fail to evoke the corresponding recognition as empirical anomalies, rather than as information about how the world actually works. And by assuming that status refers to a state's military capabilities plus an error term, this perspective advances a concept of status that

[79] Dittmar 1992, 9.

[80] Gilpin 1981, 31; Morgenthau 1948, 52, 55; Wohlforth 2009, 39.

[81] East 1972; Midlarsky 1975; Renshon 2017. While the two strands of research (early realist studies and studies of the relationship between status dissatisfaction and war) differ in their methodological orientation, they share common assumptions—emphasizing state attributes (and especially material capabilities) in their treatment of status.

does not differ enough from material capabilities to prove analytically useful. Because scholars insufficiently differentiate status from military capabilities, it is unclear why we need the concept of status in the first place.[82] In fact, a term like "estimated military capability" would be more accurate than status in this case. The act of reducing status to material capabilities thus strips away the very aspects that make the concept useful analytically. Once stripped of its distinctive feature—its social nature—the concept of status has limited usefulness for IR theories.

Last but not least, the conventional approach incurs a *fallacy of composition*, since it assumes that we can study status in the international system simply by examining the system's component parts (states) and their interactions, especially at the dyadic level.[83] In the study of status, this fallacy most often involves the assumption that we can understand how countries achieve status either (1) by examining the qualities of high-status states, and especially the things that they have; or (2) by examining the behavior of status-seeking states. On the one hand, the fact that high-status states often have a large portfolio of certain attributes is often taken as evidence that status depends on these attributes. As Tilly notes, "individualistic analyses of inequality ... lend themselves nicely to retroactive rationalization; confronted with unequal outcomes, their user searches the past for individual differences in skill, knowledge, determination, or moral worth that must explain differences in rewards."[84] From this perspective, status achievement becomes an autonomous act, which depends on the individual merit of a given state rather than on the social environment. On the other hand, the fallacy of composition likewise afflicts those approaches that explain status attainment based on the behavior of status-seeking states. The key finding from status inconsistency studies—that states are more prone to conflict when they receive less recognition than their material capabilities would warrant—is often taken as evidence that status depends on material capabilities. That is, because some actors think that status *should be* based on military capabilities, scholars conclude that status *is* in fact based on military capabilities. In other words, this perspective makes the faulty assumption that outcomes follow from actors' intentions—even though in complex systems like international

[82] Clunan 2014, 274.

[83] See Jervis 1997, 12-13.

[84] Tilly 1998, 33. Tilly's point refers more specifically to the analysis of inequality among groups in domestic societies, although it applies well to the study of inequality among states.

politics, actions often have unintended consequences.[85]

In sum, the conventional approach limits our understanding of international status and, consequently, the concept's usefulness for the study of international politics. Even though status is a social concept, existing studies treat it as a function of the qualities of states. This approach substantively conflates social relations with actors' qualities, leads scholars to reduce status to the possession of material resources, and reduces social outcomes to the behaviors or attributes of actors—ultimately diminishing the usefulness of status for IR theories. Notwithstanding its importance, status resides in the background in IR theories: When some aspect of international politics cannot be explained using traditional theories based on security or survival, status is called upon to fulfill the task. As such, scholars rely on status to explain a limited set of phenomena, focusing on instances of state behavior that cannot be explained based on traditional factors. Based on the conventional wisdom, it would seem that status can make only a limited contribution to our understanding of international relations. Scholars are thus caught in a conundrum: they posit that status is a fundamental aspect of international politics, but ultimately render it a residual category.

Far from new, this conundrum can be traced back to early studies of status in IR. Even though Morgenthau wants to highlight the importance of prestige for international politics, he ultimately renders it a residual category. At the outset, Morgenthau deems the policy of prestige "an indispensable element of a rational foreign policy" and one of the "basic manifestations of the struggle for power on the international scene."[86] Yet, IR scholars neglect the policy of prestige because they usually (1) privilege "the material aspect of power in the form of force" over intangible aspects like prestige;[87] (2) associate the policy of prestige with the diplomatic world and its archaic traditions; and (3) treat the policy of prestige as a means to achieve other ends, rather than as an end in itself. However, Morgenthau ultimately reinforces precisely these trends, as (1) he treats prestige as a function of material capabilities, asserting that "military strength is the obvious measure of a nation's power" to later define prestige as the reputation for power;[88] (2) his discussion of diplomacy

[85] Jervis 1997, 61-68; Schelling 1978.
[86] Morgenthau 2006, 83, 92.
[87] Morgenthau 2006, 83.
[88] Morgenthau 2006, 89-90. Other work on international status from this period echoes this notion. See, for

includes mostly anecdotes about how diplomatic practices express prestige;[89] and (3) he treats prestige as a means to an end, claiming that "only foolhardy egocentrics are inclined to pursue a policy of prestige for its own sake."[90] That is, Morgenthau reinforces precisely the aspects that lead IR scholars to neglect the fundamental role of prestige in international politics.

We observe a similar trend in Gilpin's work. At the outset, Gilpin deems prestige a fundamental aspect of international politics, positing that governance among states is partly a function of the hierarchy of prestige, which determines which states will exert authority in the international system.[91] Moreover, he acknowledges the intangible nature of prestige, comparing it to what E. H. Carr calls "power over opinion"—a form of power that involves persuasion, propaganda, and the use of rhetoric.[92] Like authority, Gilpin argues, prestige has both moral and functional bases: less powerful states accept the leadership of a dominant state not only because they perceive the existing order as useful and predictable, since dominant states typically supply public goods; but also because they perceive the existing order as legitimate, since dominant states typically promote an ideology to justify their domination. Therefore, Gilpin concludes, "numerous factors, including respect and common interest, underlie the prestige of a state and the legitimacy of its rule."[93] And yet, Gilpin ultimately argues that "the hierarchy of prestige in an international system rests on economic and military power."[94] This argument implies that authority in the international system depends primarily on coercion, while legitimation is rendered epiphenomenal.[95] As a result, Gilpin allows only a limited scope for status: that of signaling coercive capabilities. Though initially acknowledged, the intangible aspects of prestige ultimately get lost in his argument.

The conventional approach to international status contrasts with research in the social sciences

example, Lagos 1963, 131-32.

[89] While Morgenthau claims that states pursue a policy of prestige via diplomatic ceremonial and the display of military capabilities, his discussion of the former includes mostly anecdotes about how diplomatic practices express prestige. By contrast, his discussion of the latter includes specific examples like the acquisition of nuclear weapons and the development of navies with global reach, providing a clear intuition that future research could (and would) explore.

[90] Morgenthau 2006, 91.

[91] Gilpin 1981, 34.

[92] Carr 1981, 120-130; Gilpin 1981, 14.

[93] Gilpin 1981, 30.

[94] Gilpin 1981, 30.

[95] See Gilpin 1981, 10-11, 30, 34, 199.

more broadly, which understands status as fundamentally social. The premises that usually guide IR research contrast with the premises adopted in related disciplines that traditionally study status. On the one hand, status does not fit well with a materialist approach: as Ridgeway notes, "status, in contrast to resources and power, is based primarily in *cultural* beliefs rather than directly on material arrangements. That is, status is based on widely shared beliefs about the social categories or "types" of people that are ranked by society as more esteemed and respected compared to others."[96] Neither does status fit well, on the other hand, with an individualist framework: as Ridgeway notes, "these cultural status beliefs work their effects on inequality primarily at the *social relational level* by shaping people's expectations for themselves and others and their consequent actions in social contexts."[97] Coupled with inadequate assumptions, the concept of status remains a residual category in the discipline's lexicon and in the theories that apply it. Scholars' reliance on conventional assumptions results in ad hoc accounts that often miss the distinctive features of status—or in what Goddard and Nexon call "inconsistent and arbitrary explanatory frameworks."[98] As a result, the implications of status for international politics remain obscured.

In this project, I address these limitations by drawing on an interdisciplinary body of research to develop a network theory of status, which adequately captures its social nature. I couple the concept of status with assumptions that reflect its distinctive features: its relational and intangible aspects. Status inequalities depend on processes that take place among states and groups of states, rather than being a matter decided at the individual or the bilateral levels. Moreover, status recognition involves primarily intangible or symbolic aspects, rather than material ones. To adequately capture what status is and how it matters for international politics, we need to focus on relational processes and symbolic factors. By highlighting the distinctive features of status both analytically and empirically, this book aims to move status from its current position as a residual category in IR to its rightful place as a concept central to the study of international politics.

[96] Ridgeway 2014, 2-3.
[97] Ridgeway 2014, 3.
[98] Goddard and Nexon 2005, 13.

1.3 The Argument

In this book, I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than directly on the qualities of states or the things that they have. To understand how international hierarchies of status form, I trace their roots back to key transformations that magnified global inequality in the nineteenth century. As Europeans made a turn to imperialism, they increasingly relied on a self-proclaimed standard of civilization that distinguished between "civilized" Europeans entitled to indivisible sovereignty on the one hand, and "uncivilized" non-Europeans unable to govern themselves on the other hand. Status distinctions thus served to legitimate and stabilize inequality, drawing a boundary between those states deemed competent—and therefore deserving of privileges like indivisible sovereignty—and the rest. Once established, moreover, status distinctions have reinforced inequality, independently from material conditions, via cumulative advantage mechanisms: the higher standing a state enjoys, the more it attracts additional recognition. It is no coincidence that, to this day, status evaluations rely on values associated with the West.

My argument involves three new propositions about the relationship between status and inequality. First, I argue that status does much more than signal a state's coercive capabilities to other states; crucially, status *legitimates* inequality.[99] As Tilly notes, unequal relations based purely on coercion are inherently unstable, as they ultimately give rise to contention or struggles between dominant and subordinate actors.[100] Even an exploitative relationship like colonization cannot be sustained based on coercion alone, since such an arrangement would render domination too costly for the colonizers in the medium or long run. To become durable, inequality requires some form of legitimation. Status distinctions play an important role in this context: they involve not only categorization, or the drawing of a boundary between a group and outsiders; but also legitimation, or the establishment of a relation of superiority and inferiority between these types of actors.[101] Based on status distinctions, certain types are presumed to be "better" or superior to others.

[99] See Jackman 1994; Ridgeway and Walker 1995; Ridgeway 2014, 3-4.
[100] Tilly 1998, 86-91. See also Weber 1978, 213, Goode 1978, Ch. 6.
[101] See Lamont 2012; Lamont and Fournier 1992.

By creating categorical differences among actors, status distinctions serve to justify why certain types are entitled to privileges that other types lack. That is, status distinctions rationalize inequality, framing as logical—or even natural—the differential access to privileges among actors. In the nineteenth century, for example, the distinction between "civilized" Europeans and "uncivilized" non-European peoples served to legitimize the exclusive access of European states to the privilege of indivisible sovereignty. Colonial exploitation was rendered normatively acceptable by the belief that, because non-Europeans were unable to govern themselves, Europeans should take on the responsibility of socializing them into European norms and beliefs, thus stewarding their progress toward civilization. On the one hand, the presumption of European civilization implied that they had earned the privilege of indivisible sovereignty fairly, on the basis of their own merit. On the other hand, this presumption justified European intervention abroad based on the alleged inability of non-European peoples to meet European standards of governance.

Second, I argue that international status *stabilizes* inequality by shaping social perceptions and behavior. As Ridgeway notes, status distinctions shape social perceptions: "by transforming mere control of resources into more essentialized differences among "types" of actors, status beliefs fuel social perceptions of difference."[102] The creation of categorical differences leads actors "to focus on, exaggerate, and make broader, more systematic use of socially defined differences" during their interactions.[103] Moreover, status distinctions shape behavior: By drawing a boundary between those types perceived as superior and inferior, status distinctions create expectations about the ability of either type to exert authority in a given situation.[104] These expectations act as focal points, creating self-fulfilling prophecies—as an actor tends to act according to what is expected of its type, while expecting others to act according to what is expected of their type. At the same time, status distinctions generate backlash when behavior deviates from what is expected. In particular, high-status states tend to be wary of behavior by low-status states that may be perceived as challenging established expectations for authority in a given situation.[105]

[102] Ridgeway 2014, 4.
[103] Ridgeway 2014, 4.
[104] See Ridgeway 2014, 5-6; Berger and Webster 2006; Correll and Ridgeway 2003.
[105] See Bobo 1999; Ridgeway 2014, 7; Ridgeway, Johnson, and Diekema 1994.

Finally, I argue that, once status distinctions are established, status *reinforces* inequality, independently from material conditions, via cumulative advantage mechanisms.[106] To begin, consensus effects shape status recognition: the more a state receives recognition, the more others deem it worthy of recognition.[107] In addition, high-status states enjoy privileges that beget more status: they states act as standard-setters, shaping the criteria for status recognition, and as gatekeepers, shaping recognition decisions.[108] Finally, status distinctions involve social closure. On the one hand, high-status states differentiate themselves from outsiders by adopting a distinctive way of life, which is difficult to mimic.[109] On the other hand, high-status states share dense relations among themselves but sparse relations with outsiders. As such, status distinctions encourage solidarity among high-status states but undermine solidarity among low-status states. While well-connected states attract additional recognition, sparsely-connected states do not.

My argument couples the concept of status with assumptions that emphasize its distinctively social nature. In particular, I depart from the conventional approach in two ways. First, I develop theory using what Gould calls a *structural framework*—which ascribes inequality to the positions that actors occupy in a social arrangement, rather than to the qualities of actors.[110] Based on this framework, actors enjoy differential access to privileges in a social system to the extent that they occupy an advantageous social position. My approach contrasts with existing studies, which use an individualist framework. IR scholars typically assume that states differ in status because they differ in salient qualities—that is, on the basis of their individual talent, ability, or effort. By contrast, I argue that status depends on structural conditions beyond the control of any state. Status hierarchies are far from meritocratic systems: high-status states enjoy considerable advantages in status recognition, which result from their social position rather than from their attributes.

[106] See Smith and Faris 2015. Cumulative advantage is also known as positive feedback, the "Matthew Effect" (whereby the rich tend to get richer), or preferential attachment (whereby popular actors tend to receive more ties); in addition, it involves the dynamic of increasing returns that defines path dependence. See, respectively, Jervis 1997; Merton 1968; Newman 2001; Pierson 2000.

[107] See Betancourt, Kovács, and Otner 2018; Gould 2002; Salganik, Dodds, and Watts 2006.

[108] See Bourdieu 1993; Swartz 1997.

[109] Weber 1978, 932-33. See also Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont 2002.

[110] Gould 2002, 1144. This perspective is relatively more common in sociology. In IR, it is present in studies on hierarchical differentiation, as well as in relational or network analytic approaches. See Albert and Buzan 2013; Goddard 2009; Jackson and Nexon 1999; McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018; Nexon 2010; Oatley et al. 2013.

Second, my argument departs from the conventional approach because I focus on *symbolic or intangible aspects*, rather than on material factors, to account for status inequalities among states. While status distinctions may initially stem from material arrangements, as in the case of nineteenth-century imperialism, status involves primarily symbolic aspects. To begin, status distinctions legitimate inequality because they create a social boundary between types of states considered superior, and therefore deserving of exclusive privileges, and the rest. Moreover, status distinctions stabilize inequality because they set expectations about which types of states should exert authority in a given situation. And once established, status distinctions reinforce inequality, independently from material conditions, via cumulative advantage mechanisms. As such, analyses that focus on material arrangements result in a superficial understanding of status.

By coupling the concept of status with a set of assumptions that highlight the concept's distinctive features, this study offers new answers to fundamental questions about status that the conventional approach insufficiently addresses, as I discuss next.

1.3.1 Status Depends on Relational Processes

To begin, my theoretical framework addresses the first question that the conventional approach leaves unanswered: Why do material capabilities and status often mismatch? While the conventional approach treats status as a function of a state's attributes, and especially its material capabilities, I argue that status depends on a state's position in a social arrangement. Therefore, we should not expect status to go hand in hand with material capabilities (or, for that matter, with state attributes). Because status depends on social recognition, systematic social processes—which cannot be reduced to the qualities of states—influence status.[111]

In particular, three relational processes shape status recognition in the international system. First, status inequality results from a process of social closure—the establishment of a boundary between a status group and outsiders.[112] Social closure involves two aspects. To begin, social clo-

[111] Previous work suggests the existence of relational patterns in status relations, but does not systematically investigate these patterns. See, for example, Miller et al. 2015, 786-87.

[112] Weber 1978, 43-46.

sure involves connectedness: high-status actors share dense relations among themselves but sparse relations with outsiders.[113] Therefore, a state's existing relations influence its propensity to receive recognition. In addition, social closure involves commonality: high-status actors differentiate themselves from outsiders by adopting a distinctive way of life.[114] Therefore, the relevance of a given attribute for status recognition is socially defined, rather than intrinsic to that attribute.[115] Finally, the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status mobility. Because status depends on peer attribution, it is subject to consensus effects: the more a state is recognized, the more others deem it worthy of recognition.[116] In other words, popularity itself brings status.

These relational processes account for some puzzling cases from a conventional standpoint.[117] On the one hand, states at the margins of the international system struggle to earn recognition, even despite changes in their qualities. Despite acquiring nuclear weapons, for example, North Korea did not become a great power because it maintains only tenuous connections with other states—including most recently China, one of its traditional allies. Similarly, Taiwan receives less recognition than its material capabilities would warrant because, as the object of an intense diplomatic isolation campaign conducted by China, it maintains only sparse connections with other states. On the other hand, states at the core of the international system enjoy considerable advantage in gaining recognition. Even though its time as a major power passed long ago, Italy enjoys more recognition than its material capabilities would warrant because it maintains strong connections with other central states. Similarly, Egypt receives more recognition than its material capabilities would warrant. As a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement and a state at the crossroads between the Middle East and Africa, Egypt gets recognition from its relations with other states. As these cases illustrate, status depends on a state's position in a social arrangement. To understand why states achieve status, we thus need to examine the overall patterns of relations among states.

[113] Abbott 1995; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002.
[114] Elias and Scotson 1994; Merton 1972; Tilly 2005.
[115] Mark, Smith-Lovin, and Ridgeway 2009; Ridgeway 1991; Ridgeway and Correll 2006.
[116] See Correll et al. 2017; Ridgeway 2014.
[117] See Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3.

1.3.2 Symbolic Value Depends on the Social Context

In addition, my theoretical framework addresses a second question the conventional approach leaves unanswered: Why do certain state attributes become relevant for status recognition? Existing studies claim that state attributes matter because of their functional value; according to realists, for example, material capabilities confer status because they enable the owner to compel or deter others without using force. But in practice, status-seeking countries often invest in military equipment that provides little strategic utility. Moreover, status symbols involve not only material attributes but also nonmaterial ones, which have no clear functional value.

By contrast, I argue that certain state attributes become relevant for status recognition because of their symbolic, rather than functional, value. Although the two kinds of value may overlap, each has a different source. For example, while a weapon's functional value depends on its intrinsic features, its symbolic value depends on the social context. For a given weapon to symbolize status, actors need to share the belief that it represents a given social standing.[118] In fact, weapons with similar levels of strategic value may nonetheless acquire disparate symbolic meanings. As Wendt and Barnett argue, for example, Western countries treat nuclear weapons as a symbol of great-power status, whose owners form an exclusive club recognized in the Non-Proliferation Treaty. And yet, the same countries consider other weapons of mass destruction—biological and chemical weapons—as symbols of "pariah" status, whose owners lie outside the club of "civilized" states.[119]

As many studies indicate, military equipment often appeals to buyers because it carries symbolic meaning. Drawing from sociological institutionalism, some scholars suggest that advanced weapons like fighter jets symbolize qualities such as modernity, efficacy, and independence.[120] As Hironaka argues, the weapons consumed by the winners of the last war often become attractive not only for their strategic value, which is uncertain, but because they symbolize military power.[121] Similarly, Gilady notes that the consumption of military equipment provides states with symbolic

[118] See Dittmar 1992, 6, 79; Goffman 1951, 294-95; O'Neill 2001, 241.
[119] Wendt and Barnett 1993, 340.
[120] Eyre and Suchman 1996; Sagan 1997, 73-82; Wendt and Barnett 1993, 336-41.
[121] Hironaka 2017.

utility.[122] Because an aircraft carrier symbolizes great-power status, France and Brazil bought one carrier each, even though at least three carriers are needed to ensure that one carrier will be operational at any given time. The consumption of military equipment thus follows a "to have is to be" logic, whereby states express their identification through the things they buy.[123]

Building on these studies, I argue that state attributes become relevant for status recognition when actors share the belief that such attributes symbolize a latent quality: state competence.[124] To explain why certain state attributes matter for status recognition, we thus need to understand how prevailing conceptions of state competence form. In particular, it matters who the great powers are and what they do. Great powers act like standard setters, shaping definitions of state competence in a given era; and as gatekeepers, shaping group boundaries. Prevailing conceptions of state competence become malleable during critical junctures like major wars, when the way of life associated with the victorious state(s) shapes the standards that will be used to evaluate state competence thereafter. As such, critical junctures do more than establish a new pecking order: they also update the standards that inform status recognition among states.

In sum, my theoretical framework departs from the conventional approach in two ways. First, I emphasize symbolic rather than material aspects. I argue that status depends on estimations of social honor that may be connected to any kind of symbol. As such, my argument accommodates both material and nonmaterial attributes as symbols of international status. Moreover, material capabilities impact recognition because of their symbolic value—what they communicate about state competence—rather than because of their functional value, or their coercive potential. Second, while the conventional approach suggests that the best strategy to achieve status involves acquiring certain attributes, I argue that status depends on structural conditions beyond the control of any state. In particular, status depends on prevailing conceptions of state competence that change over time, depending on who the great powers are and how they behave. As such, state attributes play a secondary role in the process of status recognition, as I discuss next.

[122] Gilady 2018.
[123] Pu and Schweller 2014, 143; Dittmar 1992.
[124] See Cuddy et al. 2009; Fiske and Haslam 2005.

1.3.3 State Attributes Play a Secondary Role

Finally, my theoretical framework addresses a third question the conventional approach leaves unanswered: What is the relationship between state attributes and status? That is, how are attributes converted into status? While scholars consider multiple attributes as relevant for status recognition, it is not clear how different attributes would combine to produce status. By contrast, my theoretical framework specifies the causal mechanisms whereby state attributes are converted into status. I argue that, because status depends on social recognition, state attributes play only an indirect role in the process of status attainment. The relevance of a given attribute for status recognition is socially defined: attributes become relevant for status recognition because of their symbolic value, which depends on the social context, rather than because of their intrinsic properties.

My argument has three new implications for the relationship between state attributes and status recognition in the international system. First, states tend to recognize those states that are similar to them—rather than the states with the largest portfolio of a given attribute, as argued by the conventional approach. Because status involves social closure, high-status states differentiate themselves from outsiders by adopting a distinctive way of life. As such, it is attribute similarity, rather than the possession of attributes per se, that drives recognition among states. Second, my argument implies that, to evoke status recognition, state attributes need to go well together. Because high status involves a distinctive way of life, observers consider status symbols in combination, rather than in isolation. Status evaluations are based on a way of life, rather than on separate attributes like nuclear weapons or aircraft carriers, which can be more easily acquired. Finally, my argument implies that the relevance of a given state attribute for status recognition changes over time, along with the prevailing conceptions of state competence in the international system. In particular, because the great powers of an era act like standard-setters and gatekeepers, the relevance of a given state attribute for status recognition depends on who the great powers are and how they behave.

1.4 Contributions

This book makes four distinctive contributions to existing scholarship. To begin, while existing research treats status as an actor motivation, this book is the first to investigate the sources of international status, focusing on international relations rather than the state level. As the first sustained, book-length effort to address the question of how countries achieve status, this book makes original contributions from both a theoretical and an empirical standpoints: it develops a theoretical framework that highlights the social nature of status and, accordingly, uses social network analysis tools ideally suited to the study of status. In doing so, this book aims to recast status as a concept central to the study of international politics. Integrating an interdisciplinary body of research, this book brings research on status in IR in line with research in the social sciences more broadly. Given its innovative approach, this study offers three new lessons in research areas that have drawn increasing scholarly interest in recent years, but that are still rarely linked to status—namely, international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions.

1.4.1 Investigating the Sources of Status

To begin, this book addresses a new and noteworthy question: How do countries achieve status? While existing studies show that status motivates state behavior, we still understand little about the sources of international status. This book is the first to investigate this question, focusing on state relations rather than the state level. Scholars traditionally assume that status is a function of state attributes like economic or military capabilities, but do not put this assumption to the test. By assuming that certain state attributes evoke recognition, the conventional approach imposes on observations the categories chosen by the observer, while neglecting other potential sources of status. As a result, it provides incomplete accounts of status, while possibly exaggerating the importance of the state attributes chosen by the observer. Empirically, this approach relies on restrictive assumptions about which state attributes determine status, typically emphasizing military and economic capabilities to the detriment of other factors. But by choosing certain state attributes a priori, schol-

ars cannot assess whether these attributes actually drive status recognition. So how can we know if decision-makers value the same attributes that scholars consider important for status recognition—or if state attributes determine status to begin with?

In this study, I move beyond ranking states based on attributes to test hypotheses about the sources of status. Rather than assume the determinants of status a priori, I test hypotheses about status attainment in the international system. To be empirically tenable, the sources of status need to be treated as an analytical category separate from the experiences of observers, and therefore subject to falsification. Instead of takings actors' claims to status at face value, I assess the validity of these claims using social scientific methods. The fact that states are more prone to conflict when they receive less recognition than their material capabilities would warrant, for example, tells us that these actors think that status should be based on military capabilities; however, it does not tell us that status is in fact based on military capabilities. The empirical investigation of status calls for an empirical strategy that moves beyond commonsense assumptions to test hypotheses about the sources of status. Because status is historically contingent, for example, scholars need to develop strategies to detect when the conditions for status attainment have changed. While researchers may have strong priors about which state attributes matter for status recognition, it is important to develop strategies to update these priors over time, as I propose in this project.

1.4.2 A Consistently Relational Approach

In addition, this book makes a second distinctive contribution to the study of international status. Rather than taking an individualistic perspective, this book adopts a consistently relational approach to the study of international status: it uses a relational empirical strategy in the service of a relational theory of status. By deploying an appropriate set of analytical and methodological tools, this study adequately grasps the distinctive feature of international status (its social nature). In doing do, this book enables us to move status from its current standing as a residual category in IR—insufficiently differentiated from material capabilities or assumed status symbols such as nuclear weapons—to its rightful position as a concept central to the study of international politics.

Although status is a relational concept, previous work does not study it relationally. Existing studies adopt an individualistic approach, treating status as the property of individual states. From a theoretical standpoint, these studies assume that status is a function of a state's attributes. In Tilly's words, they conjure an image of individual actors "with variable attributes who pass through a screening process that sorts them according to those attributes into positions that give them differential rewards."[125] According to this approach, states are sorted into social positions—such as great power or emerging power—based on their qualities or the things that they have. This kind of argument derives social outcomes (in this case, status inequality) entirely from the properties of individual actors. Moreover, it neglects to specify the causal mechanisms whereby state attributes are converted into status. As a result, this approach leads scholars to ignore the relational processes that drive status recognition in the international system.

From an empirical standpoint, scholars typically study status at the state level, as the property of states. Some studies measure status by ranking states based on attributes like economic or military capabilities. Another common (and similarly individualistic) approach to measuring status is based on the proportion of diplomatic representations a state receives. Even though diplomatic exchange is a type of social relation, scholars typically treat it like a state attribute: to measure status, they rank states based on the proportion of diplomatic representations received. By doing so, researchers discard information about the structure of diplomatic relations—such as who sends a representation to whom, what their previous history of relations (or lack thereof) is, and what ties they share with third parties. And without this information, it is not possible to examine empirically the relational effects that drive status recognition among states.

By contrast, I adopt a consistently relational approach to the study of status, from both a theoretical and an empirical standpoints. To begin, I develop a network theory of status. I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than on the qualities of states. To explain how states achieve status, I theorize the underlying relational effects that drive status recognition in the international system. In particular, I argue that the structure of state relations

[125] Tilly 1998, 21-22.

itself shapes the conditions for status attainment. Because status distinctions involve social closure (or the establishment of a boundary between a group and outsiders), a state's existing relations influence its ability to achieve status. That is, connectedness itself brings status. Moreover, consensus effects shape status recognition: the more a state is recognized, the more others deem it worthy of recognition. As such, popularity itself brings recognition. Finally, the relevance of a given state attribute for status recognition is socially defined: a given state attribute becomes relevant for status recognition because of its symbolic value—which depends on the social context, and especially on who the great powers are and what they do. My argument implies that, to understand how status hierarchies emerge, we need to examine the configuration of state relations, rather than merely ranking states based on certain attributes.

In line with my theoretical framework, I adopt a relational empirical strategy to investigate the sources of status. Since embassies express recognition among sovereign states, I use embassy exchange data as a proxy measure of status recognition. But instead of measuring status at the state level, like previous studies do, I use a relational unit of analysis: the network of embassies. This choice of unit enables me to capture information about the structure of diplomatic relations that existing studies discard and, therefore, to investigate the relational patterns that drive status recognition among states. To that end, I use social network analysis tools uniquely suited to the study of status. These tools enable me to examine how the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment. Using network analysis, I detect relational patterns that previous studies mention but do not examine empirically. In addition, my empirical approach provides the advantage of generalizability. Because my approach does not depend on assumptions about which state attributes symbolize status, it can be used to study status recognition during any historical period. This feature enables me to take a long-run perspective to examine status recognition in the international system since the early nineteenth century.

More broadly, this study contributes to existing knowledge by showing that status is a distinctive phenomenon both conceptually and empirically—and, as such, is a useful concept for theories of international relations. Although status appeared in two strands of research in IR during the

twentieth century, research on status eventually fizzled out. Insufficiently differentiated from material capabilities, status was ultimately reduced to a residual category. Compared to the first wave of status research in IR, the current wave seems to be at a lower risk of meeting the same fate, since it provides cumulative evidence that status motivates state behavior. At the same time, status has not reached its full potential in IR research yet. By studying status in its own right—as something analytically and empirically distinguishable from material capabilities and other state attributes—I hope to show why it matters for international politics. The concept of status can achieve its full potential in IR scholarship when we give due attention to its distinctive feature: its fundamentally social nature. By doing so, we can consider not only how status may increase a state's propensity for conflict, as many existing studies argue, but also how status plays a key role in international cooperation and the maintenance of international order, as I discuss below.

1.4.3 An Interdisciplinary Approach

In addition, this book makes a third distinctive contribution to the study of status: it adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating strands of research that rarely come into dialogue. Existing research on status relies on assumptions that, though commonly adopted in the IR discipline, have limited usefulness for the study of status. Crucially, the assumption that status depends on the qualities of states contrasts with research in the social sciences more broadly, which understands status as fundamentally social. This study overcomes this limitation by building off research on status in the social sciences.[126] At the same time, I contextualize status in the international realm by integrating these interdisciplinary insights with research that examines key economic and cultural developments in international society since the nineteenth century.[127] The book thus brings IR research on status in line with research in the social sciences more broadly.

In other words, this study differs from previous ones in its rejection of *particularism*. The conventional approach in IR assumes that status depends on a state's qualities, especially its material

[126] Elias and Scotson 1994; Ridgeway 2014; Tilly 1998, 2005.
[127] Buzan and Lawson 2015; Hobson 2004; Keene 2002; Pitts 2005.

capabilities. Behind this assumption is the often implicit notion that, because of anarchy (defined as a self-help system), status attainment among states follows causal processes unlike those in any other social realm. As Tilly notes, particularistic accounts were also common in research on inequality within domestic societies, which initially assumed that inequality based on gender, race, or nationality followed processes unique to each area. As such, "Observers often ground explanations for each form of inequality separately in perennial but peculiar forces. Each one seems sui generis, constituting its own mode of existence."[128] As Tilly argues, however, "the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in all these cases have such striking resemblances. They must have more common causal properties than particularistic accounts suggest."[129] Following this insight, I argue that categorical inequalities among states result from mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that are remarkably similar to those observed in other social realms.

1.4.4 General Lessons

Finally, this book makes a fourth distinctive contribution to existing scholarship: it offers three new lessons for research on international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions respectively—areas that, despite drawing increasing scholarly attention in recent years, are still rarely linked to status. To begin with the first area, the book demonstrates that international hierarchies of status are far from meritocratic systems. By assuming that status is a function of states' qualities, existing studies suggest that status results from the talent or effort of individual states; as such, the best strategy to achieve status involves acquiring certain attributes. By contrast, I demonstrate that the established powers enjoy a cumulative advantage in status attainment, which derives from their social position rather than from their attributes. For emerging powers, this result implies that recognition is not simply a matter decided at the state level. Rather, recognition as a great power depends on the broader social environment, as it ultimately involves reconfiguring social arrangements or reshaping predominant conceptions of state competence.

[128] Tilly 1998, 16.
[129] Tilly 1998, 16.

In addition, this book demonstrates that the role of status in international politics is broader, and more complex, than commonly assumed. Existing studies tend to equate status-seeking behavior with aggressive behavior, showing that status-dissatisfied states are more prone to conflict.[130] But while status may exacerbate conflict, it can also promote global governance. Since fundamental values like liberal democracy shape status recognition, status hierarchies create structural incentives for states to adopt international norms. This carries with it important implications. Among them: status-seeking behavior may also be cooperative behavior—that is, status may contribute to the maintenance of international order, as status-seeking states have an incentive to adopt prevailing international norms. And while mainstream approaches posit that great powers maintain global stability using military or institutional instruments, this book demonstrates that great powers also lead by example, setting standards that other states adopt. As such, hegemony requires upholding existing standards not only internationally, but also domestically.

Finally, the book offers new insight on why disagreements about status can lead to hegemonic wars. Previous work argues that war can result when states receive less recognition than their capabilities would warrant, or when the established powers resist change. However, existing studies fall short of explaining why this happens. Why do the established powers treat some rising powers as legitimate but others as revisionist? My book suggests that disagreements about status emerge when the established and emerging powers have conflicting conceptions of state competence. This implies that, to assess whether hegemonic transitions will be violent, we should compare the models of statehood put forward by either side. If the hegemonic transition from Britain to the U.S. was peaceful, since both countries shared a similar conception of state competence, a potential transition from the U.S. to China is more likely to spell conflict—as China increasingly questions the liberal democratic foundations of the contemporary international order.

[130] Notable exceptions are de Carvalho and Neumann 2015; Gilady 2018, 90-120; Wohlforth et al. 2018, which argue that status may motivate pro-social or cooperative behavior among states.

1.5 Plan of the Book

This book is presented in ten chapters. To begin, Chapter 2 defines status as a concept at the intersection of identity and power. Drawing on the concept formation methodology in the tradition of Giovanni Sartori, I define status as an effective claim to social esteem that involves privileges. As such, the concept involves two necessary dimensions. First, status requires recognition: for an actor to achieve status, others need to recognize it. Second, status involves hierarchy: depending on an actor's social esteem, they acquire certain privileges. Compared to existing definitions, my conceptualization provides three advantages. First, it emphasizes the social nature of status, rather than reducing status to individual or material factors. Second, it differentiates status from related terms like material capabilities or hierarchy. Finally, it integrates research traditions in IR that rarely come into dialogue: the mainstream literature on status and conflict, which treats status as a means to an end; and the literature on recognition, which treats status as an end in itself.

Next, Chapter 3 develops a network theory of status. Drawing on the Weberian tradition, I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than on the qualities of states. To explain how states achieve status, I theorize the underlying relational effects that drive status recognition in the international system. I argue that the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment. Because status distinctions involve social closure, a state's existing relations influence its ability to achieve status. Moreover, status reinforces inequality, independently of material conditions, because it involves cumulative advantage: the higher standing a state enjoys, the more it attracts additional recognition. Finally, the relevance of a given state attribute for status recognition is socially defined: an attribute becomes relevant for status recognition not because of its intrinsic properties, but rather because of its symbolic value—which depends on the social context, and especially on who the great powers are and how they behave.

Chapter 4 then operationalizes the concept of status developed in Chapter 2, linking this concept to observations intended to capture its main ideas. Because status is a quality that cannot be directly observed, I use embassy exchange data as a proxy measure of status recognition. Under interna-

tional law, embassy exchange is a longstanding practice that signifies recognition among sovereign states and that creates social inequalities among states. Compared to other potential measures of status—those based on states' attributes, individuals' perceptions of the status of states, or states' positions in formal institutions—embassy exchange offers important advantages: it is relational, behavioral, and multidimensional; moreover, it covers all states over a significant period and avoids measurement bias. While embassy exchange data reasonably meet all of these operationalization criteria, alternative measures present limitations based on two or more of the criteria. Finally, I address potential concerns associated with my proposed measure, dispelling common misconceptions about embassy exchange and its use as a measure of status.

Next, Chapter 5 validates my proposed measure of status—the network of embassies—by examining its relation to my concept of status. Integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence, I conduct two types of validation: content validation and discriminant validation. Drawing from international law, network analysis, and cases involving countries like China and Israel, I first show that the network of embassies adequately captures both recognition and hierarchy, the two necessary dimensions of my concept of status. Next, I demonstrate that states' positions in the diplomatic network closely match scholars' qualitative assessments of status. At the same time, material capabilities cannot account for much of the variation in states' positions in the diplomatic network, in line with the analytical distinction I draw between status and material resources.

Chapter 6 presents the empirical strategy I use to investigate the sources of international status in Chapters 7 through 9. Rather than examine status at the state level, I use the network of embassies as my unit of analysis—treating the network structure itself as an object of substantive interest. First, I derive observable implications from my theory for embassy exchange. Next, I explain that, because of its ability to infer social structure by examining the patterns of relations among actors, social network analysis is uniquely suited to investigate the observable implications from my theory. This approach enables me to uncover underlying network dynamics that are not observable using conventional methods. The chapter ends with a presentation of my empirical analysis plan.

To kick things off, Chapter 7 examines the implications of my argument for the formation of ties

in the diplomatic network. Leveraging inferential network analysis, which enables me to directly test hypotheses involving network effects, I assess why states send embassies to certain destinations and not others. I show that my relational model performs much better than conventional explanations in theorizing the underlying dynamics of the diplomatic network. To begin, a state's existing relations affect its ability to achieve status: states prove more likely to recognize states that recognize them in return or that share diplomatic partners with them. Moreover, status is self-reinforcing: the more a state receives recognition, the more it attracts additional recognition. In addition, it is attribute similarity—rather than the possession of attributes per se—that drives recognition: states recognize those states that are like them, rather than the states with the largest share of attributes. And while traditional approaches emphasize material resources as symbols of status, I show that fundamental values like democracy also matter for recognition.

Next, Chapter 8 examines the implications of my argument at the structural level of the diplomatic network. I show that the network is highly centralized, both in its structure and in its use of status symbols. First, the network has a core-periphery structure—whereby states can be divided into a well-connected core, comprised mostly of Western or Western-aligned states, and a sparsely-connected periphery. States in the core are very likely to exchange embassies among themselves but not to send embassies to the periphery. By contrast, states in the periphery are more likely to send embassies to states in the core than in the periphery. As such, the core's size and composition remain stable over time, even as the number of states in the system increases. Second, core membership depends on a Western way of life that includes fundamental values like liberal democracy. Predominant conceptions of state competence thus involve not only the ability to fend for oneself under anarchy, but also a Western standard of civilization.

Chapter 9 examines the implications of my argument for the symbolic value of state attributes. Using a long-run perspective, I show that the relationship between state attributes and status depends on changing structural conditions, rather than on the intrinsic value of a given attribute. The symbolic value of a given attribute depends on who the great powers are and what they do: Acting as standard-setters and gatekeepers, the great powers of an era shape predominant conceptions of

state competence. First, I assess whether the acquisition of nuclear weapons increases the number of embassies a state receives using the synthetic control method. I show that, since the nuclear powers colluded to stigmatize the bomb in the 1960s and 1970s, the acquisition of nuclear weapons does not improve the owner's standing. Next, I examine the effect of joint democracy on embassy exchange using time-varying effect models. I show that, since 1900, democratic states are more likely to recognize one another—but only during periods of democratic hegemony.

To conclude, Chapter 10 offers three general lessons based on this study for research on international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions.