Christopher Hill, The National Interest in Question: Foreign Policy in Multicultural Societies


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European foreign policies have been transformed since the end of the Cold War with most states in the region now pursuing ‘activist’ agendas within and beyond Europe. Moreover, activism seems to be guided by an understanding of the national interest putting as much emphasis on spreading the norms and values of the state as it is informed by the wish to defend the core values, institutions and territory of the state. Over the same period, most European societies have become increasingly multicultural. Whereas immigration and multiculturalism have provoked fierce debates and changes in Europe’s political landscape, few have attempted to tackle the complex relationship between multiculturalism and foreign policy.

Christopher Hill’s The National Interest in Question: Foreign Policy in Multicultural Societies is an important and ambitious attempt to systematise and explain the dynamics of foreign policy in multicultural societies. The aim is not to construct and test a new model for explaining foreign policy or to engage in a gladiatorial battle over which theoretical paradigm is the ‘better’ one. Rather, Hill explicitly eschews the construction of hypotheses and testing on the subject for methodological as well as practical reasons. Instead, he draws on a vast number of primary and secondary sources to activate the insights of six specialist literatures: political philosophical and sociological discussions on the nature of multiculturalism, migration studies, comparative European foreign policy, comparative multiculturalism studies, terrorism studies and European Union studies. Obviously, Hill can only draw on select aspects of each literature and none of them gives a full picture of how and why multiculturalism and foreign policy relate. However, his argument is that each of them adds one or more pieces to the puzzle thereby enhancing our understanding of the changing nature of (foreign) policy in European societies today.

This is a book, which engages with the complexity of politics rather than seeking to simplify it. Hill writes in a traditionalist and European tradition shared with among others classical realists and adherents of the English School seeking to understand and discuss rather than to test and explain. However, he shares with most contributors to the political science literature an ambition to systematise and – at least to some extent - generalise political and societal developments. A key move for him to do so is to organise his analysis of European societies into multiculturalist, integrationist and parallel societies. In the first type of society, multiculturalism
is viewed as a desirable way of handling multiculturality. The primary European examples are Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden. In the second type of society, civic nationalism is emphasised and no group is granted special status within society. In effect, this sometimes comes close to a strategy of assimilation as the rules and norms of the majority are used as the baseline for any newcomers. The primary European examples are France, Denmark and Greece. Finally, the third type of European society experiences major changes in the composition of its society as a result of immigration and diversity but without any clear or coherent strategy on how to manage this. European examples include Germany, Spain and Italy. This part of the book documents how practices on handling multiculturality vary widely within Europe, although some kind of social liberal democracy serves as the starting point for all of the approaches.

Following these three chapters analysing the different approaches to handling migration and diversity and their potential impact on security and foreign policy, Hill turns his attention to the political dilemmas of multiculturality. They include predominantly domestic issues such as the challenges and potential of multiple identities, and the changing nature of loyalty and democracy in an era where transnational issues of ethnic, religious and national communities beyond the national states have increased their salience in political and societal life. They also include predominantly externally driven issues such as military intervention and the development of the EU. However, one important point is that multicultural societies’ domestic politics are rarely purely domestic and the sources and consequences of foreign policy rarely purely – and sometimes not even predominantly – external to the state.

In general, the direct influence of minorities on foreign policy is less than one might expect. One reason is that a proportion of some minorities have not achieved full rights of citizenship. Another reason is that the minorities have focused on special diaspora-linked issues rather than the form or content of foreign policy in general. A third reason, somewhat underplayed by Hill, might be that religious or ethnic affiliations do not necessarily define how one thinks about politics or foreign policy. Members of any religious or ethnic minority (or majority) might think of themselves as Liberals, Conservatives or Socialists or as internationalists, pro-European or Atlanticist. Indeed, in countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands some of the harshest criticism of radical Muslims has come from moderate or secular Muslim immigrants defending classical liberal values more vigorously than most national politicians. However, Hill adds an important and mostly ignored observation on the influence of minorities on foreign policy: ‘the ghost of a lost minority’. In Germany, Italy and the Netherlands the treatment of the Jewish community during the Second World War still casts a shadow influencing policies, in particular in regard to Israel, despite growing Muslim communities in each of the countries.

The book makes three important, and somewhat controversial, contributions to understanding foreign policy – broadly interpreted – in Europe today. First, it documents the resilience – even the return – of the importance of the state in European politics. As the European Union has been unable to bring together its member states in more than minimal agreement on either migration or foreign policies, multiculturality is strengthening rather than weakening the state in Europe. Minorities turn to their national governments to the extent that they wish to influence foreign policy, not the European Union. And anger – such as that directed against
Denmark from several Muslim communities within and outside the Middle East in the so-called cartoon crisis – is directed at the state rather than at Europe or the West in general, although the former might be viewed as an example of the latter.

Second, although the nation state remains (or perhaps returns to) its traditional status as the nexus for domestic and foreign policymaking, the national interest may be transformed as a consequence of immigration and diversity. Who ‘we’ are and what ‘we’ want is less self-evident than in the past. A more diverse society leads to different communities within the state identifying their own red lines and makes it increasingly difficult to define what is in the interest of the whole society. This challenge is intensified, because there is more room for activist foreign policies, including international interventions, than during the Cold War. This calls for more careful considerations and consultations with societal actors over foreign policy in order to facilitate that those who feel passionate about certain issues – in particular in times of potential war and military conflicts – have opportunities to be heard, and to ensure that domestic concerns across society are reflected in national foreign policy.

As noted by Hill, we have long discussed the domestic analogy in international relations, that is, an international society providing opportunities for order and the promotion of the good life known from national societies, but multicultural societies may fruitfully provoke us to think about an ‘international analogy’ of a model for managing diversity among different communities within the states.

Finally, this leads to a potential reconfiguration of how foreign policy is made and who makes it. Foreign policymaking was always the privilege of the national elite. In many countries, it was for centuries the prerogative of the monarch, and diplomacy was initially conducted by the nobility and only gradually professionalised and democratised. Even today, the government and select members of parliaments have access to sensitive information and therefore full information on international developments that might be decisive for decisions on going to war, and the foreign service remains a job opportunity reserved for those with degrees from the best universities. In combination, this limits the possibility for real influence on foreign policy to a very small segment of society, often sharing an internationalist outlook and social liberal values. As noted by Hill, the changing nature of the national interest in multicultural societies may lead to an overdue democratisation of foreign policy.

However, the outcome of an increasingly democratised – and potentially politicised – foreign policy may produce one which is less conducive to peace and development than present foreign policies or – perhaps more likely – simply lead to inaction as different communities within the state succeed in stopping the initiatives of others but fail to provide a coherent alternative. Thus, perhaps the greatest foreign policy challenge of multicultural societies is not so different from that of any society: to define a coherent, legitimate and workable definition of the national interest. *The National Interest in Question* provides us with a rich and fascinating analysis of how this is attempted in Europe today, and why it remains difficult.