Gunther Hellmann and Knud Erik Jørgensen (eds), Theorizing Foreign Policy in a Globalized World  

Reviewed by Benedikt Erforth  
Sciences Po, Paris

Theorizing Foreign Policy in a Globalized World, published as part of the Palgrave Studies in International Relations series, interrogates the links between Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), IR theories, and processes of global transformation. The book provides a critique of classical (systemic) IR theories based on their failure to predict any of the major global events that have occurred in recent times. With reference to the end of the Cold War, 9/11, and the more recent global financial and economic crisis, the volume’s editors Gunther Hellmann and Knud Erik Jørgensen highlight the weaknesses of structural explanations of international affairs, and instead make the case for process- and actor-oriented analyses. The volume’s ten contributors all contemplate the agency-structure debate, setting this subject at the heart of the book. Further questions reflect on “how abstract and/or parsimonious IR theory and/or foreign policy theory ought to (or must not) become” (p. 6).

Gunther Hellmann opens the agency-structure debate by analysing the link between foreign policy agency and systemic transformation. Heavily influenced by structurationist theory, Hellmann highlights the interrelatedness of structure and agency. However, nuanced differences between Giddens’ and Carlsnaes’ interpretation of structurationist explanations are emphasised and the reader is invited to conceive social reality as mainly a result of historical contingencies and individual freedoms. For Hellmann, “socialized individuals re-create society as a collective force through contingent acts of freedom” (p. 17). Whilst the author does not offer a novel way of theorising the relationship between foreign policy agents and systemic transformation – for which he sees no need (p. 36) – he develops a Deweyan notion of causation to argue for a problem-solving approach that requires adaptable and flexible methods (p. 32).

1 John Dewey (1859-1952) is associated with the philosophy of pragmatism and widely acknowledged as the intellectual force behind an “activity-based, problem-centred, or hands-on approach to education” (Richard S. Prawat, “The Two Faces of Deweyan Pragmatism: Inductionism versus Social Constructivism” Teachers College Record Volume 102, No. 4 (2000) pp. 805-840.)

resemblance to Carlsnaes’s (1992) approach to FPA (p. 23). Given the author’s goal to offer “cogent description and explanation” and to advance pragmatic solutions to these long-standing debates, the contribution would have benefitted from more conceptual clarity.

In the next chapter, Iver B. Neumann ponders the impact of globalisation on the changing face of foreign policy. This largely empirical chapter provides the reader with a brief historical narrative on the changing role of the state and foreign ministries in an increasingly globalised world. Globalisation, understood as a process of de-territorialisation, challenges the very notions of the state and of foreign policy, which both rely on an inside/outside dichotomy. Rapid dissemination of information and a plethora of new agents are identified as the two principal challenges to traditional foreign policy. Despite numerous efforts to adapt to a changing environment, the state according to Neumann is unlikely to “monopolize the term of foreign policy for much longer” (p. 56).

In the following chapter, Stephan Keukeleire and Simon Schunz broach the disciplinary segregation of IR theory and FPA, and aim to contribute to existing bridge-building efforts by bringing together the literature on FPA and on global governance. The authors argue that FPA thinkers, whilst acknowledging the emergence of new actors in world politics, have remained overly statist in light of “the significant transformation that foreign policy as a social practice is undergoing” (p. 74). Keukeleire and Schunz posit that “a confrontation of the FPA literature with the body of research on global governance can … lead to synergies that will benefit FPA” (p. 61). The concept of global governance is described as a useful tool to reconcile the multitude of new actors and the multi-level character of foreign policy-making. According to the authors, introducing global governance in an FPA framework enables FPA to account for shared forms of authority (p.70) and to explain the “co-existence of many complementary or competing forms of governance arrangements” (p. 72). Yet the claim that a re-conceptualisation of FPA through the prism of global governance will lead to novel ways of theorising foreign policy still needs to pass the empirical application test.

The following chapter, by Albert and Stetter, draws on world polity theory in sociological institutionalism, in order to demonstrate that FPA and IR “are complementary ways of generating knowledge on how the problem of order in the world political system is solved” (p. 82). In their contribution, the authors primarily focus on the emergence of actors intending to show that IR and FPA are simply “different modes of observation of world politics” (p. 97). The chapter’s three parts are concerned with the construction of actorhood, the emergence of actorhood, and the evolutionary dynamics of actorhood in international society. The focus on the emergence of actorhood (or agency) does add interesting and new insights to the debate, which until now has mainly been concerned with the relationship between structure and already established agency. In particular, the contribution shows “that established forms of actorhood in world politics are not natural givens but outcomes of processes of recognition and norm diffusion in the world political system” (p. 94). However, the link between the construction of actorhood and the idea that IR and FPA are different modes of observation remains underdeveloped.

Benjamin Herborth discusses how the idiosyncratic nature of individual states limits our capability to generalise across cases. His answer to the question of whether or not we need 195 different theories of foreign policy is a qualified no.
Acknowledging the benefits of a single-country focus in FPA, the author brings forth the idea of nested foreign policy as a form of inquiry to analyse “both the foreign policy of individual states and the relationship between (transformations of) foreign policy and (transformations of) global order” (p. 121). In support of his claims, Herforth introduces a series of reflections on German foreign policy. However, the link between the theoretical and the empirical part of this essay could have been established more clearly.

Next, in her post-structuralist take on identity in IR and Foreign Policy Theory, Ursula Stark Urrestarazu proposes a multidimensional model of the concept of ‘identity’. In so doing, Stark Urrestarazu not only acknowledges the complexity inherent to the notion of identity but also reminds us how this very complexity can be considered an analytical advantage. By introducing the three dimensions of identity (performance, emotions, and narration), the author claims to have developed new solutions to two central debates in IR and FPA. She contends that this multidimensional understanding of identity leads to the co-constitution of structure and agency, where the individual’s identity within her structural frame affects foreign policy decisions. While the contribution does not provide any significant new insights to the structure-agency debate that would go beyond the well-established claim that social reality is co-constituted, the author should be recommended for proposing a model that has a great potential in operationalising the abstract, multifaceted, and complex concept of identity in FPA and IR.

Similar to Stark Urrestarazu, Frank Gadinger and Dirk Peters attempt to bring FPA and IR closer together and to propose a set of answers both to the agency-structure debate and to the discussion on continuity and change in IR and FPA. The chapter’s innovation lies in the introduction of a “cybernetic research agenda in IR and FPA” (p. 153). According to the authors, a focus on the basic ideas of cybernetics “enables researchers in IR and FPA to have a clear methodological entry-point to trace complex relations between agency and structure”. It also “provides the opportunity to tap into the rich traditions of IR theorizing, integrating insights from FPA into the analysis and at the same time adds to these perspectives by focusing on change, highlighting the importance of indeterminacy and complexity” (p. 170–1). Following the theoretical elaboration of their argument, which stresses the importance of feedback loops as a link between the international context and foreign-policy decision-making processes, the chapter applies these insights to the Global War on Terror. Against the backdrop of this case study, the chapter proposes a refreshing and new take on the structure-agency debate. It is no exaggeration to argue that, in this contribution, theory finally achieves one of its core purposes: providing tools that help us to understand a highly complex and multifaceted reality.

Like Keukeleire and Schunz’s contribution, the chapter by Ulrich Roos “is fuelled by hope for a stronger and more appropriate conceptual conjunction of foreign policy analysis and global governance research” (p. 177). To do this, the author proposes to reflect on the basic models of interrelation between actors and structure, the levels of analysis, and the conceptualisation of change (p. 177). Starting with the assumption that global governance research has become increasingly important, Roos argues that alongside this, the “meaning of human beings and their transnational communication and interaction becomes more and more emphasized” (p. 178) necessitating the return of human agency into the IR debate. To do so, Roos proposes a pragmatist framework that “analyse[s] world politics on all thinkable levels” (p. 179). Such a
framework is said to avoid IR’s old orthodoxy of methodological nationalism and to incorporate at least three levels of analysis (human actors, SCPs [structures of corporate practice (rules to address a specific problem)] and world politics). While the author should be commended for his insightful use of changing loyalties as a means of analysing change, several other aspects, such as the aspiration to provide a convincing solution to the actor-structure question and the levels-of-analysis issue, warrant further elaboration.

Starting from the assumption that FPA thus far has largely ignored the question of ethics at the global level, Dan Bulley then asks “how ethics can be theorized more effectively in the realm of foreign policy by making the case for a critical approach” (p. 200). Bulley examines critically the exercise of power and its contestation, seeking “transformation but without a settled idea of what emancipation could mean” (p. 200). The author makes the case for ethics being considered political, and considers the ethics constitutive of foreign policy: “both ethics and foreign policy are about how we constitute and relate to otherness, the foreign, even if that otherness appears as part of the ‘self’” (p. 212). The ensuing debate on the role of ethics in FPA is then developed using the example of European neighbourhood and European enlargement policies. When put into practice, Bulley’s approach expresses a high degree of idealism and normativity that can be easily challenged; one reason for which mainstream constructivism has remained reluctant to engage with morality thus far.

The last chapter of this work juxtaposes European and American attitudes and experiences towards war making. “First in Freedom” addresses the “theoretical puzzle of American martial liberalism” (p. 245) since the War of independence. To solve this puzzle, Daniel Deudney and Sunil Vaswani apply historical sequencing. The core argument proposes “divergent historical patterns” (p. 246) to explain the divisions between Europe and the United States. For a long time, liberal values and war making have gone hand in hand as an integral part of American identity, while in Europe liberal democracies emerged only after war making had been left behind. This contribution is informative and empirically rich. The core argument convincingly explains the differences in liberal perceptions in Europe and the United States, although the European reader cannot help but recognise a certain appreciative bias that reads like a eulogy on American values and the US’s supremacy in world politics at times.

In sum, the compiled and edited volume, which is the printed result of a workshop that was organised by the editors in 2010, offers the reader a multifaceted tableau of some of the current theoretical debates in FPA. It aims at advancing the disciplinary discourse and helping FPA find its rightful place in the field of IR. Several themes are recurring and lie at the heart of almost all ten contributions. First, all authors agree that one of the most fundamental changes in world politics is due to the increase in the number of actors: the emergence of a post-Westphalian international system is fully acknowledged. This makes the level-of-analysis issue quintessential and further fuels the long-standing structure-agency debate, to which the volume proposes less innovative answers than one may have hoped. Last but not least, the book emphasises the need to take change in IR seriously and to reflect upon how change can be explained in foreign policy and world politics. In this context, Gadinger and Peters’ as well as Roos’ contributions particularly stand out and open up new agendas for further research. Overall, the volume would have benefitted from
a more coherent structure and a more precise overarching argument against which the reader could position her/himself. A conclusion tying together the different contributions would have been beneficial in this regard. Nevertheless, the book remains an interesting read for members of the FPA community who wish to see a more thorough theoretical basis to their discipline.