Sonja Zmerli and Ofer Feldman (eds.), Politische Psychologie: Handbuch für Studium und Wissenschaft
(Political Psychology, Handbook for Students and Scholars)\(^1\)

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In Politische Psychologie (political psychology) Sonja Zmerli and Ofer Feldman bring together 29 authors to create the first German-language handbook on political psychology, aimed at students and scholars alike. Several of the 20 chapters are of particular interest for the field of international studies, since political psychology deals with questions about conflict resolution, political violence, conflict escalation, war, political ideology, intergroup relations, foreign policy, leadership, (elite) decision-making, personality, socialisation, opinions and beliefs, politically and religiously motivated radicalisation, ethnocentrism, genocide, etc. (pp. 18, 21, 27–28).

This handbook complements, and distinguishes itself from, other English-language introductory works such as Introduction to political psychology by Martha Cottam et al. or The Oxford handbook of political psychology edited by Leonie Huddy et al., by presenting for the first time in German basic notions, concepts and theories as well as major findings of political psychology, by focusing less on examples based on the United States, but including international and often German cases and by adding a whole chapter on culture. The authors are German and international researchers coming from different disciplines, such as political science, psychology and social psychology. The book can be divided into three broad parts. Chapters i–iii present general overviews, chapters iv–xi focus on the individual level, and chapters xii–xx deal with aspects linked to groups, international relations and conflict – representing the breadth of the field of political psychology. With approximately 15 pages each chapter gives an overview of the state of the art in the respective subfield and presents major theories and findings, directed at readers without specific prior knowledge.

The first part starts with a presentation of the book by the editors in chapter i and continues with Peter Suedfeld and Rajiv Jhangiani giving a broad overview of the field of political psychology, insisting on the interaction between both the person and their environment to explain human behaviour (p. 20), and observing the difficulty in defining political psychology, since there are no clear borders to the field, situated between psychology and political science (p. 21). Furthermore, not all political psychologists are pure psychologists, “many representatives of [political psychology] see themselves as political scientists, sociologists, economists, historians, literary

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\(^1\) All translations are the reviewer’s.
critics, psychiatrists, media experts, jurists, political analysts or military strategists” (p. 19). The first part ends with Franziska Deutsch and Klaus Boehnke reviewing the historical development of political psychology and its German institutional context since the beginning of the 20th century in chapter iii.

The second part – focusing on the individual – can be used in international studies for those research projects where individuals play a role, e.g. leadership, foreign policy analysis, decision-making, etc. This part starts with a chapter by Christian Kandler and Rainer Riemann on personality and politics which highlights the link between certain Big Five character traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism), and conservatism or international cooperation and non-violent foreign policy (pp. 55–56). In chapter v, Susanne Rippl, Christian Seipel and Angela Kindervater elaborate on the role socialisation plays for political orientations. The following chapter, written by Michael Meffert, looks into information processing and decision-making and concludes that political opinions and behaviour are neither completely informed and rational nor purely random, but somewhere in between, based on “a complex interaction of external information and internal predispositions and opinions, which under certain circumstances lead to a certain perception, opinion or decision” (p. 102). Sascha Huber and Markus Steinbrecher describe in chapter vii how findings from political psychology help in better understanding voting behaviour and the formation of voters’ opinions.

Chapter viii, by Tobias Rothmund and Kai Arzheimer, deals with political ideologies and their links to personality traits, psychological needs and motives as well as to the processing of social information. In the following chapter, Christian Seipel, Susanne Rippl and Angela Kindervater go back to Adorno et al.’s Authoritarian personality, discuss the role of socialisation, personality and group relations and point to current societal changes which, if seen as increasing uncertainty, favour authoritarian attitudes. Chapter x, by Henrik Gast, deals with the heterogenous research on political leadership and compares Big Five personality traits and motives, but insists on the importance of the systemic context, the situational circumstances and the role expectations of followers. In the final chapter in the second part, Rainer Riemann and Christian Kandler present research on biological foundations of political behaviour and orientations, such as neuroscientific work linking certain brain structures (in connection with experiencing fear or dealing with uncertainty) to political beliefs (p. 185), but caution against assuming automatic causality.

The third part – leaving the individual level and focusing on groups, international relations and conflict – starts with chapter xi by Ofer Feldman on political rhetoric and its goal to persuade, in which the author presents different styles, compares diverging international contexts and discusses its effect. One comparative study for instance shows George W. Bush and Tony Blair using rhetorical elements creating fear and anger between 2001 and 2003 when their support started to decrease (p. 205). Jürgen Maier contributes the following chapter about mass media and its role in shaping public opinion and political behaviour, distinguishing between sender, message, medium and recipient, and presenting selected research findings in areas such as agenda-setting, priming or framing. In chapter xiv, Bernhard Leidner, Linda Tropp and Brian Lickel link psychology and intergroup conflicts. While focusing on violent conflicts between national, ethnic or religious groups, the authors examine concepts such as social identity, group polarisation, groupthink or the effect of escalation. They distinguish four types of threats ascribed to outgroups – realistic,
symbolic, distinction, esteem, and show the role emotions play regarding aggression in the intergroup relations between Serbians and Albanians (p. 243). Leonie Huddy, Raynee Gutting and Stanley Feldman point out in the next chapter that social categorisation can be useful and harmful, and distinguish three components of group-based judgments about other human beings: the affective/emotional component (prejudice), the cognitive component (stereotype) and the behavioural component (discrimination), adding that these can be both implicit and explicit. In international studies, these concepts as well as their conditions and effects can be applied to study intergroup relations, xenophobia and migration. In chapter xvi, Franziska Deutsch and Katja Hanke elaborate on the role of culture. Regarding intergroup conflict, the authors show how different social representations (i.e. collective knowledge as a cultural value) can lead to symbolic intergroup conflict, based on historical events and consider it as “crucial” for intergroup reconciliation to take into account “the historical, cultural and political context” (pp. 278–279). The following chapter, by Jerrold Post, on terrorism and violent extremism, distinguishes several types and analyses 20th century terrorism. Refuting the dated assumption that terrorists must be mentally ill, the author affirms that there is “not just one personality or psychopathology of terrorism” (p. 289). Since individual psychology is not sufficient as an explanation, there is a need to look at group/social psychology and collective identity. The author takes into consideration terrorists’ relations to their parents and shows for instance that many of Germany’s left-wing terrorists in the 1970s (RAF) came from broken homes, finding solidarity and security inside terrorist groups (pp. 298–299).

Chapter xviii, by Cornelia Frank, presents four psychological aspects of foreign policy analysis and leaders: Poliheuristic theory sheds light for instance on US decision-making in 1998/99 with regard to military intervention in Kosovo (pp. 313–314). An Operational code examines leaders’ cognitive character traits in the form of their political beliefs and their impact on foreign policy decisions. A comparative study shows that German chancellor Helmut Kohl and foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher had a considerably more cooperative image of the political universe and a stronger belief in their own ability to control than their international colleagues or German successors (p. 319). Leadership Trait Assessment evaluates leaders’ motivations and establishes leadership styles, linking Tony Blair’s decision on Iraq to his strong belief in his own ability to control, low conceptual complexity and great need for power (p. 323). Groupthink analyses (unconscious) psychological processes and pressure within groups, for example, in the US foreign policy decision-making process concerning the war in Iraq in 2003 (p. 325). The following chapter, also by Cornelia Frank, deals with international security and conflicts. Prospect theory helps us understand that states in the domain of gains are risk averse, while states in the domain of losses will accept risks more easily. Similarly, its loss aversion and endowment effect explain for instance Slobodan Milosevic’s diverging reactions to military threats; and in general loss aversion complicates peace negotiations in the form of concession aversion (p. 335). The Rubicon model explains why leaders enter into war despite low prospects of success, fear and uncertainty, overestimating themselves and the chances of an easy victory, believing that war is inevitable. A psychological view of the security dilemma will emphasise cognitive and emotional factors, heuristics (mental shortcuts), cognitive distortions/simplifications (intensifying the dilemma/conflict by contributing to
simplified stereotypes of the outgroup, p. 338), the mechanism of double standards (such as Richard Nixon believing that the Soviet Union must understand that the USA are not a threat while believing that the Soviet Union must be a threat, p. 339), and defence cognition, avoiding cognitive dissonance, that is the psychological need not to change one’s beliefs. A psychological view of deterrence points to Saddam Hussein underestimating in 1990 the credibility of the US’ deterrence threat to intervene (p. 340). Defence mechanisms such as dehumanisation, deindividualisation and depersonalisation can increase our understanding of (ethnic) conflict (p. 342). In the final chapter Soli Vered and Daniel Bar-Tal emphasise the importance not just of structural change, but also of socio-psychological change in post-conflict societies, reconciliation and forgiveness for sustainable peace. There is a need to change the society’s repertoire from promoting conflict to promoting conflict resolution and peace, which represents an enormous challenge: to change the society’s beliefs, motivations, goals, attitudes and emotions, to personalise and legitimise the enemy, to forget what one has believed in for years/decades only in exchange for an uncertain future in which the (former) enemy plays a role.

To conclude, aiming at the explanation of political behaviour, political psychology can be of great use for international studies. With topics as varied as shown above and methods stretching from quantitative and statistical to qualitative and narrative methods, including laboratory and field experiments, archival research, surveys, interviews, case studies, etc. (p. 19), political psychology is a very broad field, united in its critique of rational choice theory and pure cost-benefit calculations by a *homo oeconomicus*, suggesting instead a *homo psychologicus* and taking into account “the impact of cognition, character traits, motivations or emotions on political behaviour” (p. 309). Without claiming that all international political research needs to be psychological, especially in certain areas of international studies, such as research on individuals, leaders, elites, decision-making, foreign policy, groups, intergroup relations, intergroup conflict, migration, etc., the theories and concepts presented in this book can be highly beneficial. Political psychology certainly is an added value for international studies as this handbook clearly shows.