Robert Jervis, How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics

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It is a pleasure to review a book by Robert Jervis, one of IR’s most notable scholars. The book assembles 12 publications in political psychology he authored along the years. Jervis, as always, is the master of deep, counter-intuitive, hard-to-observe, insights. He makes arguments and skillfully turns them upside down. He demonstrates and explains in a highly engaging manner how reality can be so contrarian to our expectation and how well-established theoretically-observed patterns can easily break. Jervis is a great teacher of critical and theoretical thinking irrespective of the political psychology focus. One cannot read this book without reconsidering his or her views on major IR events and theories as well as epistemological views. Thus, the book can be useful to any social scientist, practitioner as well as the general public.

As a compendium of select publications, the book presents numerous specific arguments. However, its overall theme is an approach, a language and a way of thinking and looking into IR. Jervis presents and explains known, yet highly elusive, key concepts: beliefs, emotions, perceptions, biases and identity. Then he skillfully utilizes them in various settings while deepening our understanding of these concepts as well as their interesting and often surprising role and impact. In particular, he shows how various psychological needs shape our beliefs and perceptions and how limited and ‘irrational’ is our thinking process (thus, crucial to explore). Too often, we opt for shortcuts in our thinking and “look for the keys under the lamp.”

At times, the underlining argument challenges ‘elegant’ economics-derived approaches, rather than presenting a full stand-alone parsimonious alternative. In Jervis’ words: “standard notations of rationality are not so much incorrect as insufficient” (p. 3). Specifically, Jervis takes issues with Thomas Schelling and two of his highly influential books: “The Strategy of Conflict”¹ and “Arms and Influence”.² Jervis argues in the introduction chapter that he finds political psychology as a via media between parsimony and complexity. He both recognizes the need to look for patterns and generalization, while being fully aware of their grave limitations.

Interestingly, in chapter five: “Signaling and perception: projecting images and drawing inferences”, Jervis explores the possibility of combining signaling and game

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theory, usually identified with economics and broadly used in IR, with perceptions and political psychology more generally. While exploring various patterns that supposedly should have made certain signals clear, he shows how in reality they can be completely misunderstood.

Throughout the book, statesmen appear in all sizes and shapes; though they often face similar situations, they often react very differently. Accordingly, Jervis’ book title is: “How statesmen think: the psychology of international politics” (rather than “How a statesman thinks.”). Jervis does not present one model that explains more generally who a statesman might be and how he or she is different to ‘ordinary’ people. This is perfectly in line with his arguments.

Nevertheless, few chapters find certain patterns characteristic of statesmen, their needs, and the situations they face. Chapter seven explains “Why intelligence and policymakers clash,” while chapter ten, “Psychology and crisis stability”, notes the difficulties which statesmen have to tackle while dealing with a nuclear crisis.

Moreover, Jervis does not deal exclusively with statesmen. In fact, many of the psychological insights are relevant to ordinary people not only in the realm of IR or even politics more generally. Specifically, the first two parts of the book, “Political psychology” and “Heuristics and Biases”, as well as chapter five, “Signaling and perception: projecting images and drawing inferences”, though giving many examples grounded at the realm of IR, are highly instructive beyond it.

“How Statesmen Think” complements, updates, and strongly relates to several other major books (and articles) published by Jervis. First and foremost, the book adds to Jervis’ political psychology magnus opus, “Perception and misperception in international politics”. Psychology in general and political psychology more specifically have made great strides since the book was first published. Specifically, the research on emotions and their role has become more dominant. Additional books such as “Why intelligence fails: lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War” or “Psychology and deterrence” (and many more) resonate well with “How Statesmen Think”. As a result, it hard to truly disentangle his previous work not presented in the book from the pieces he chose for this book.

Jervis has lightly edited, shortened and updated his publications. It makes them better building blocks, somewhat reducing repetitions. At times Jervis added references of one chapter to another as well as contemporary examples etc. He often utilizes a few main empirical cases through the book (for example, the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003); this enables the reader to see how different insights shed light on the same case study. Still, an extensive introduction chapter helping to aggregate the different publications into a more unified outcome would have benefitted the book. After all, the book is highly dense with brilliant observations; at times, too many for its own good. The introduction could have elaborated on many important issues. For example: How to approach the book? Who is its designated audience? And, most crucially, how this book relates to his other major publications?

In the same vein, Jervis does not offer a concluding chapter to tie the knots, at least partially, and reflect on his impressive body of work. Granted, the book encompasses so much that wrapping it is possibly not a realistic or even a worthy goal. Possibly, its main goal is to be “food for thought”, an ‘appetizer’ leading to other publications. However, Jervis could have addressed various issues. Maybe he got something wrong in the contributing publications and wishes to reflect upon it (it could have been great to learn on his work process). It might have been helpful to aggregate different directions for future research mentioned through the book in one place, and suggest how the discipline should go forward (partially and unofficially, as will be discussed below, Jervis is doing that in the last chapters). Similarly, in the book Jervis occasionally suggests how certain insights directly relate to contemporary policy issues. It could have been beneficial and highly engaging to review the relevancy and applicability of the various chapters to contemporary issues more systematically, preferably in one place. Possibly, Jervis is doing just that in his latest book: “Chaos in the liberal order: the Trump presidency and international politics in the twenty-first century”.

Reviewing the myriad of arguments made throughout the book is impossible. I simply cannot do justice to all of them. The foundations of his approach are discussed above. Thus, I will selectively and partially explore some of the chapters and arguments, while highlighting relatively less-known publications. Jervis uses the book as an opportunity to reintroduce such publications, often published as book chapters. While their topics and arguments are not completely new to Jervis, I find them helpful and interesting. These chapters appear in the third, and especially the fourth, parts of the book and account for much of its added value. This is the case not only because they are ‘new’ but also because they can be seen as feasibility studies into future research. Jervis sets certain paths to be followed by others. Moreover, they are more accessible than the theoretically based chapters and beautifully demonstrate the numerous insights in them.

Chapter eight, “Identity and the Cold War”, discusses the role of identity in the Cold War, mostly in bringing it to an end. While such arguments are not completely new, Jervis’ take on the issue is fascinating. He stresses the greater Soviet sensitivity to identity issues as compared to the American side. Soviet identity was formed as antithesis to capitalism. The USSR needed the US, to maintain its own existence. Thus, its demise was not an ‘objective’ outcome of material factors. However, more interestingly, a US identity did not really need the USSR. While the Cold War challenged US identity, it was only to a limited extent. One proof for that is that major changes in terms of identity taken place in the US during the Cold War were in the opposite direction than might have been expected given a major conflict. The US became more liberal, human rights improved and the US became more diverse. Of course, Jervis’ arguments need more research to be established. However, analyzing conflicts from a point of view of challenges in terms of identity is exciting.

Chapter ten, “Psychology and crisis stability”, takes an additional, highly informed, look at crises in general as well as the role of the security dilemma in particular. While this topic is extensively dealt with by Jervis along his career, in this chapter he utilizes fresh insight from psychology, unavailable to him when he

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published his 1976 book. The chapter focuses on crises in the nuclear age and the unique predicaments that go with that. As in any other crisis, decision-making is expected to be sub-optimal at best. A nuclear dimension will make it even worse. I found Jervis’ application of Prospect Theory (discussed in chapter four) to nuclear crises as particularly interesting and demonstrating the added value of various developments in psychology since 1976. One would expect leaders to be especially risk-averse in times of a nuclear crisis; however, counter-intuitively, leaders may be prone to taking risks. People tend to accept risk if the alternative to a gamble is certain defeat. Thus, a leader would be inclined to strike first. Crucially, as the baseline or reference for leaders would be the status quo when the crisis has begun, they will be willing to take unusual risks to compensate for their initial losses (people value losses more than gains according to Prospect Theory). Such risks would make a nuclear war more likely. Of course, one does not have to be a political psychologist to realize how counter-productive decision-making can be in such extreme situations. However, hopefully, understanding what exactly can go wrong is a first step towards better decisions.

Chapter eleven, “Domino beliefs” presents fascinating questions, highly relevant to the here and now, and, as Jervis admits, only few answers. Jervis thoroughly discusses Domino theories widely found in IR, held not only by academicians but by statesmen in different times and countries. However, Jervis concludes that we cannot really and fully know if and when such theories are true or false. However, they constitute powerful beliefs that affect policy until today (though not necessarily using the name ‘domino’). One may only wonder how many other IR theories cannot really be tested. However, Jervis suggests exploring these issues through the prism of beliefs, presented in the first chapter of the book. For example, why and when statesmen believe in certain theories, and rely upon them, or how such beliefs affect the mechanism through which domino takes effect? While giving partial and initial answers, there is a long and fruitful way to go.

Chapter twelve, “Perception, misperception, and the end of the Cold War”, reflects on the end of the Cold War through the prism of misperceptions on both sides. Jervis shows how the two sides lived in ‘different worlds’, no less. Jervis often refers to the canonical Japanese film “Rashomon” to describe how two sides have completely different accounts of the situations. The problem is way greater than not always having sufficient intelligence coverage of the other side. For example, it is hard for leaders to empathize with how the other side sees their country as this reflects on their self-perception and identity. It hard to see oneself from an angle that is not your own. The chapter demonstrates the great added-value of political psychology for one of the most-explored periods in IR. As such, it was probably not an accident that Jervis chose this with which to end the book.

To summarize, reading the book was a tantalizing experience. In my humble opinion, it is not an easy read but it is highly worthwhile. It is hard not take something from this book, not only on statesmen and political psychology more generally but also on how to approach research and critical thinking. Hopefully, the book would entice readers to read more of Jervis, political psychology and IR more generally. Alternatively, it would refresh many IR scholars who read “Perception and misperception” as well as other key classic publications on political psychology and would promote some cross-pollination between different approaches in IR.
However, following the sixth chapter, “Political psychology research and theory: bridges and barriers”, that deals with the relations between academia and practitioners, I wonder how all the complexity stemming from this book and potential cross-pollination will ‘go down’ in the ‘real world’ of practitioners. After all Jervis himself beautifully shows how too often decision-makers need clarity and simplicity from the experts advising them to make the best decisions.