

Review 4

Title: How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics. By Robert Jervis (2017). 299 p. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey. ISBN 978-0-691-17505-8

Reviewed by: Jessica Jansen (University of Antwerp, Belgium).

Political psychology is known to be a complex field in terms of defining its expertise due to its interdisciplinary nature. Jervis, however, has accomplished to link a broad range of theories and subdisciplines into a remarkable study of international politics in his book *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics*. As suggested by the title, Jervis aims to illustrate ‘how statesmen think’ and achieves this by focussing on both the internal and external aspects of decision making in an international context. For scholars and readers who already possess a good understanding of political psychology this book will be a refreshingly engaging read offering new insights into infamous theories illustrated by historical examples. Additionally, readers with less background knowledge will benefit from the broad coverage of basic political psychology theories discussed in relation to specific real-life examples. In fact, the main quality of this book is arguably Jervis’ ability to bring together a great quantity of theory by simplifying its complexity and therefore making the reader understand the subject on a deep level.

The book consists of twelve essays, which are grouped into four major parts. The first part offers a broad overview of key concepts and arguments within the field of political psychology that are applicable to international politics. This part is especially interesting to readers who have little knowledge of political psychology since it explains the basic dynamics of defining what beliefs are and how they come to be. The main problem while researching where and how beliefs originate is related to their contradicting and inconsistent nature. On top of that, the Drunkard’s Search draws attention to the fact that people tend to value simplistic information and therefore create a pattern of dividing up problems by isolated solutions. This division often results in conflicting policies, as later chapters discuss more thoroughly.

The second part focuses on heuristics and biases. Jervis begins by commenting on the statement that people tend to rely more on representativeness than base rates while making assumptions. However, he also questions this theory since its testing is mainly conducted within laboratory settings. In fact, he argues that there is no significant evidence for this theory when it comes to natural situations. Further on he tackles one of political psychology’s most significant theories: the prospect theory. According to the prospect theory actors are likely to be risk-averse when it comes to gains yet risk-acceptant for losses. Although this theory does fit within some of his comparisons to the Cold War, he

continues to question its significance due to the laboratory settings in which most of the research is conducted. In relation to International Politics the prospect theory would, in fact, explain that both sides in a conflict believe they are defending the status quo.

The third and fourth parts have a more direct approach towards the main subject of international politics by focussing on policy and crisis. When it comes to discovering 'how statesmen think' attention needs to be drawn not only to how they think of themselves or their own nation but also their perception of the 'other side'. This perception is made by signals sent by the other party that, however, do not always arrive the same way it was intended. In fact, Jervis states that besides political psychology there is an important element in international relations that often gets overlooked, namely game theory. The existing limitations can be attributed to the relationship between political psychology research and foreign policy practise, which brings both difficulties and opportunities. However, Jervis is optimistic and believes it is not impossible to bring the fields together.

The final part draws together the aspects and theories that were initially discussed separately by tackling national security, accompanied by direct examples from history such as the Cold War. In this part Jervis comes closer to answering the overall question of 'how statesmen think' by offering a more specific overview of all psychological dynamics that influence decision making for national security. In short, the main issue seems to be the difficulty of predicting perceptions and future actions of the 'other side' meanwhile nearly all decisions that are made are based on that kind of assumptions. Both self-fulfilling and self-denying prophecies are causes of these effects and illustrate the limits of human capacity to accurately predict out-groups.

Although Jervis makes some strong arguments regarding existing research, such as his comments on the realist theory, he consistently admits that current research tools are not sufficient to prove or disprove any of the theories. This contributes to the overall style of the book as it aims to put theories into context and make new connections rather than proving a specific argument or theory. The fact that laboratory research does not necessarily reflect potential effects in natural settings is a common issue within political psychology, yet Jervis' optimism to improvements in the future is refreshing. Additionally, the focus on different deceptions of both sides within a conflict illustrates that both groups live in their own worlds and are convinced that their information and way of seeing the world is the only way. In fact, this could arguably be the common denominator with international conflict situations and might hold part of potential improvement in the future.

The main weaknesses of this book are simultaneously its main strengths. Firstly, the quantity and stretch of theories discussed are incredibly broad. This qualifies as a strength especially for readers who want to learn about political psychology, specifically on international politics. It offers an insight into the various interconnected disciplines that are related to political psychology and therefore illustrates the complexity of the field. However, due to the richness of theories there is some lack in depth on certain subjects. For example, the chapter that discusses why intelligence and policy makers clash builds on a few theories that are discussed earlier in the book but mainly stands on its own. In fact, the chapter could have been embedded within several of the chapters to clarify its direct relations to the theme.

Lastly, the main strength of the book is the usage of examples to illustrate theories. For readers with little knowledge on political psychology this offers an opportunity to un-

derstand the discussed themes and materials much clearer. However, it is notable that this review does not address any of the examples in detail. This is due to the excessive amount of examples used within the book, most of them aimed at the same conflict (such as the Cold War) and some to other conflicts such as World War 1 and 2. The issue lies within the lack of clear relations of those independent examples. Although some are aimed at the same conflict, there are no direct correlations or actual effects that link the examples to one another. Contrary to Jervis' approach it might have been a better idea to stick to a single example, preferably the Cold War, and let the overall case of the conflict guide the book's structure. It seems fair to mention that Jervis himself admits that the path to writing this book came from several independent projects and interests and therefore it is understandable that the overall structure might not have been set out before the creation started.

Besides a few spelling and grammar mistakes the quality of writing in the book is very strong, especially when it comes to style. Adding to that its original structure and approach and I dare to conclude that *How Statesmen Think* is a beneficial read for everyone in the field as well as curious minds who want to learn about the complexity of political psychology with an international focus.