

ECPR Joint Sessions Workshop: Interpreting Foreign Policies

Outline

The workshop aims to explore the fruitfulness of an interpretive approach to the study of foreign policies. The interpretive approach concentrates on the beliefs of various policy actors, and, crucially, explains these beliefs and the policies they shape by locating them in historical traditions and as responses to dilemmas. Generally, it seeks thereby to highlight the contingency, diversity, and contestability of the narratives, traditions and expertise that inform political action and practices.

Workshop papers should examine aspects of the foreign policies of major states – major decisions, key policies, or core practices – in terms of the beliefs and traditions that inform them, as well as the dilemmas to which they respond. The papers should focus on the post-Cold War era, but will aim to situate this analysis against a broader historical background. They should examine the ruling political narratives and technical rationalities, drawn from social scientific research, that shape policy. They should highlight the connections between the beliefs of policy actors and their practices, and aim to explain the development of those practices in terms of beliefs, traditions and dilemmas.

We welcome papers that use this interpretive approach to the foreign policies of particular states at particular times or in particular circumstances. They may analyse a decision, a policy area, a crucial dilemma and the modifications made to traditions, policies and practices as a consequence, or to changing practices of foreign policy over time. They should focus not just on public or intellectual debate, but also on the beliefs of policy actors and the theories and expertise they employ. We would especially welcome papers that will explore the foreign policies of states beyond Europe and North America, and a focus on the Asia-Pacific region would be advantageous.

Relationship to existing research

The interpretive approach concentrates on the beliefs of various policy actors, the meanings of their actions, and, crucially, explains the beliefs by locating them in historical traditions and as responses to dilemmas. It highlights the contingency, diversity, and contestability of the beliefs, narratives, and expertise that inform political action. This interpretive approach is widespread in the study of governance and domestic policy (Bevir 2010; Bevir and Richards 2009; Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006, and 2010; Bevir, Rhodes, and Weller 2003; Bevir and Trentmann 2007; Clark and Gaines 2007; Finlayson 2008; Jose 2007; Morrell 2006; Orr 2005; Orr 2009; Orr and Vince 2009; Rhodes, Hart, and Noordegraaf 2007; Richards and Mathers 2010; Richards and Smith 2004; and for earlier critical discussions in this journal see Finlayson 2004; Marsh 2008). However, the interpretive approach has not yet had much impact on studies of foreign policy.

While the practice of foreign policy is rapidly changing, mainstream scholarship on the subject has largely stood still. Foreign policy analysis continues to appeal to capabilities, structural determinants, or the attributes of leaders to explain why states behave as they do. There are surprisingly few attempts to explore either the increasing messiness of policy making or the diverse actors involved with their varying beliefs and desires. The focus remains on reified capacities and structures or on the 'operational codes' or psychologies of leaders. Realists argue that foreign policy is a function of the distribution of capabilities – that all states seek power, that strong states aim either for a stable balance of power between great powers or for hegemony, and that weak states ally or bandwagon depending on which gains them security (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). By contrast, institutionalists

concentrate on other kinds of structural constraints, notably constitutional forms, bureaucratic politics or organizational processes (Allison 1971). Lastly, some analysts of foreign policy have focussed on the 'belief systems', 'operational codes', 'national role conceptions', or the psychologies of individuals (George 1969; Jervis 1976; Goldstein and Keohane 1993).

While mainstream foreign policy analysis may appear to have stood still, recent years have seen the rise of various constructivist, critical and poststructural approaches in the subfield of International Relations that have spilled over into studies of foreign policy. These emphasise the role of identities and discourses in shaping foreign policy preferences. Constructivists have alighted on conceptions of national identity and on the effects of norms on political behaviour. They argue that inter-subjectively generated ideas and norms rather than capabilities and institutions shape foreign policy behaviour (e.g. Wendt 1992; Laffey and Weldes 1997; Finnemore and Sikkink 1999). Critical theorists and poststructuralists, by contrast, concentrate on the deconstructions of discourses that they argue form the background to foreign and security policy decision-making (Campbell 1998; Fierke 2007).

These approaches are concerned with interpreting the meaning of identities and discourses, but – like earlier studies of 'belief systems' and 'operational codes' – commonly appeal to *structures* to explain why political actors behave as they do. Constructivists recognise that identities and norms are generated inter-subjectively, but often imply that once they are generated, they function as constraints or even as determinants of political behaviour (Wendt 1992). Critical theorists also argue that social structures determine behaviour, but in many cases they also appeal – at least implicitly – to materialist explanations of political action. For many critical theoretical and poststructural students of foreign policy, deconstructing dominant discourses is a means of exposing these underlying structures (George and Campbell 1990).

The interpretive approach often runs parallel to the constructivist and post-structuralist approaches that are increasingly common in the study of foreign policy. Although the interpretive approach echoes constructivism and poststructuralism in eschewing positivism and focusing on meanings, it also differs from them (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: 25-80). The interpretive approach is avowedly humanist and historicist, emphasising agency rather than structure. Interpretivists do not necessarily deny the existence of institutions, fields, power/knowledge, or discourses. They recognize that there are patterns in contingent human activity, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong about calling these patterns 'institutions' or 'discourses'. The issue is whether these patterns explain anything. Even when constructivists and poststructuralists acknowledge the importance of ideas and agency, they are still tempted to ascribe explanatory power to institutions and discourses. They thus drift towards reification and determinism. They begin to reject humanist and historicist explanations for formal ones. Their explanations appeal to the alleged logic of institutions or the internal relations among the signs of a discourse.

The interpretive approach instead favours aggregate concepts that clearly reflect a humanist and historicist perspective. They conceive of individuals not as the passive supports of institutions or discourses but as agents who can modify inherited norms and languages for reasons of their own. Equally, interpretivists conceive of agency as inherently situated. Agency always occurs against a particular historical background that influences it. Interpretivists thus explain actions and practices by reference to traditions and dilemmas. A tradition captures the historical inheritance against the background of which individuals act. A dilemma captures the way people are capable of modifying this inheritance to incorporate novel experiences or ideas.

Likely participants

We anticipate that the likely participants will be drawn from politics and international relations departments across Europe and outside it. Our objective is to appeal to as diverse a range of participants as possible. We would especially welcome participants who wish to focus on the foreign policies of states in the Asia-Pacific region.

Type of papers

We would welcome proposals for papers that address any aspect of any major state's foreign policy in the post-Cold War period that engages with the interpretive approach we wish to explore, but a focus on the Asia-Pacific would be ideal. This might include papers that look just at one particular episode of foreign policy decision-making, papers that compare foreign policy traditions, or indeed papers that address interpretive theory, using a state's foreign policy as an example in order to advance the approach.

Biographical notes

Mark Bevir is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. His research fields are political theory and public policy, including the philosophy of social science, interpretive analysis, and qualitative and mixed methods research. His most recent books are *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton University Press, 2011), *Democratic Governance* (Princeton University Press, 2010) and *Interpretive Political Science*, 4 vols. (Sage, 2010).

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