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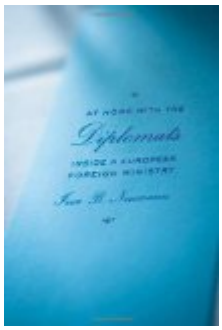

Iver B. Neumann. *At Home with the Diplomats: Inside a European Foreign Ministry.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012. x + 216 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-7765-2.

Reviewed by Mai'a Cross

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

At Home with the Diplomats is a welcome addition to the field of diplomatic studies. From a political science perspective, it is groundbreaking for its ethnographic methodology, insiders' perspective on the work of diplomats, and contribution to the study of feminist international relations. On a detailed, anthropological level, Iver Neumann addresses the question of what it is like to be a diplomat, both at home in the foreign ministry and abroad in overseas embassies. He does an excellent job of drawing out the various tensions that exist in this unique profession, and concludes the book with a kind of typology for understanding the various identities diplomats embody.

In the first two chapters of the book, Neumann reflects upon what the historical development of diplomacy can tell us about diplomatic practices today. Specifically, he corrects a number of misconceptions that have emerged in the traditional account of the origins of modern diplomacy, including the assumption that foreign and domestic policy have always had a clear distinction, that the Italian Renaissance was the first time that permanent diplomacy emerged, and that Europe is the only birthplace of diplomacy as we know it today, among other things. He is right to remind us of these nuances and caution against too much of a Eurocentric view, although he may overstate the case at times. For example, in acknowledging that there was some continuity between the Renaissance and the preceding time period, it is still important to recognize the extent to which the Renaissance and the years shortly thereafter did result in a substantially more codified and normalized system of diplomatic practice. Moreover, the traditional view generally acknowledges the various historical roots of diplomatic ideas and norms, somewhat more than Neumann gives it credit.

After providing this important historical background, the book then delves into one of its central arguments, that there is a pervading "bureaucratic mode of knowledge production" that stifles creativity and innovation within foreign ministries (chapter 3). Through years of personal experiences in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign

Affairs (in addition to being a scholar) and careful observations of practices, Neumann outlines the process by which each text, document, or speech that the Norwegian foreign ministry produces closely resembles each one that came before. The reason for this is that the bureaucratic process of knowledge production stems from reaching consensus through painstaking teamwork within the ministry. Every department that could conceivably have a stake in an issue must vet any official statement. Neumann convincingly argues that foreign ministries care much more about the internal process of finding agreement among the various departments than they do about the purpose, audience, mode of delivery, or external context of the speech or text. This argument represents a very critical view of the role of foreign ministries in general, and the Norwegian foreign ministry in particular. Neumann details his own uphill battle of trying to include even a small degree of innovation or analysis in his speech-writing tasks while he served in the ministry. If the effort defies bureaucratic protocol, it will simply be rejected. He concludes that it is basically impossible to change the system unless there is an intervention from external politicians who force change.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the empirical heart of the book, and in my opinion, the best chapters. Neumann delves into vivid ethnographic detail, mainly drawing from his experiences. These chapters expose a number of narratives that characterize the diplomatic lives and trajectories of male and female diplomats. As Neumann argues, there is a "feedback loop between diplomatic practices and diplomatic discourse" (p. 122). These stories are instilled in professional diplomats in the early years of their training, through exposure to the discourse of how to be a diplomat. At the same time, however, there are numerous tensions across these stories. Primarily, the "everyday story" of conformity within the bureaucracy of the foreign ministry is difficult to reconcile with the "hero story" of making a difference as an elite member of international society who has political access, high status, and distinctive expertise. In addition, diplomats experience a very different life abroad than they do at home, and they regularly feel the big gap between these two roles as they alternate between being abroad and at home. They do not see themselves as bureaucrats, and yet, when they come home between missions in other countries, they inevitably must serve in this role. To be successful, they cannot over-fulfill or under-fulfill these roles by either appearing too ambitious in climbing the hierarchy to become the "diplomat hero," or disappearing into the bureaucratic system with no remarkable qualities. Neumann suggests that in trying to fulfill both the hero and everyday stories, a third narrative has emerged: the self-effacing mediator. Because of his or her status, a successful diplomat must be prepared to offer advice, but only when a politician asks for it. Presuming to offer policy advice at each opportunity will harm a diplomat's reputation, but so will having no opinion when one is expected.

As if this were not difficult enough, Neumann explains why female diplomats have an even more challenging task. The hero diplomat, and the practices that go along with this image (the diplomat in a dark, pin-stripe suit with a glass of champagne in hand), is assumed to be male. Thus, women tend to either adopt the narrative of "woman-first-diplomat-next" or "diplomat-first-woman-next." In chapter 5, Neumann provides an excellent account of the historical development of women's role in the European diplomatic service, and features three case studies of the first women to serve in the Norwegian foreign ministry. The point made earlier about change being forced from outside of the foreign ministry still holds. The impetus to employ women did not come from within the ministry, but from external political decisions. The chapter also describes the challenges for men who joined the Foreign Service from rural or working-class backgrounds, and the difficulties they faced in trying to fit in with the already

established practices of the traditional, civil-servant class.

Although the book focuses on the Norwegian case study, the author does a good job of drawing out parallels and comparisons to other European diplomatic services, making this a revealing study of what it is like to be a diplomat within foreign ministries in Europe. The book demonstrates the clear value of ethnographic approaches in understanding the diplomatic profession, or indeed any profession. For those who are optimistic about the peaceful and mediating role of diplomats in international relations, the takeaway message of the book might be somewhat disappointing. Neumann portrays these professionals as mainly conformists, who tend to perpetuate the status quo, stifle innovation, and only in exceptional circumstances, exercise agency of their own. If diplomats are truly so uninspired as a group, this book may actually serve as a warning. It would be valuable to compare this work to ethnographies of other foreign ministries, and especially to diplomats in multilateral settings, to determine the extent to which this path dependence Neumann describes is actually a mainstay of today's diplomacy. I would suggest that the venues in which professional diplomacy shines are multinational, such as in the case of the European Union, where they are called upon, and indeed expected to, forge new policy in uncharted territory.

Overall, *At Home with the Diplomats* makes a particularly strong contribution to diplomatic studies. With his expertise in both political science and anthropology, Neumann offers a fresh perspective and new insight into the practices and professional norms of diplomats, which should be very well received in both academic and policy circles.

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