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Foreign policy is the articulation of national interests, both material and ideational, and the means chosen to secure these interests. Narratives are critical to understanding and explaining the choices national leaders make in various policy areas. *Forging the World* is the second book focusing on strategic narratives by these three authors. In *Strategic Narratives: Communication and the New World Order* (2013), the authors identify strategic narratives as a powerful tool used by leaders to shape and understand politics among states. Since the publication of *Strategic Narratives*, discussions about the importance of narratives have proliferated in policy and academic debates about domestic politics as well as foreign policy. In their 2013 study, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle provide a detailed and useful definition of strategic narratives for both the sophisticated researcher and the student of international relations. In *Forging the World*, they repeat the definition in the introduction of this collection of essays: “strategic narratives are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (p. 6). Each of the eleven essays carefully and consistently apply the core definitions to critical contemporary international relations issue areas. More important, the authors challenge some of the core assumptions of traditional realist and neorealist international relations. The authors confidently and appropriately claim that this collection of essays “shows that the study of material power is in itself not sufficient to understand the emerging international order and that communicative processes matter” (p. 322).

In the preface, the editors make a compelling case for the importance of narratives as “sense-making devices” and they argue that strategic narratives can “forge shared meanings” among policymakers and world leaders (p. viii). The preface also includes an impressive list of scholars and policymakers who have contributed to the work in this volume. The editors and authors include academics interested in an intellectual debate and diplomats who are involved in the formulation and evaluation of strategic narratives.

Often collections of essays from specialists in various fields do not closely follow the intellectual goals of the lead authors or editors. This is not the case with this book. The editors’ introduction clearly presents definitions and frameworks that are used carefully by the authors of each chapter. The editors refer to their 2013 book in defining strategic narratives as instruments used by political actors to “extend their influence” and “change the discursive environment in which they operate” and thereby creating a shared understanding of a given issue, event, or international condition.[1] It is in this chapter that the editors identify three main forms of strategic narratives: narratives about the international system, narratives employed by political actors to shape the formulation of policy, and narratives that allow actors to project their identity. Part of the guidance given to the authors of the chapters was to explore how the narratives are formed by political actors and how they are projected and then received by third parties.

In the introductory chapter, the editors emphasize
the importance of understanding media ecologies. This provides an important addition to traditional international relations studies, including foreign policy analysis. Here communication and media studies scholars help international relations scholars understand how information and knowledge are spread through a society. The editors describe three phases of media ecology that shape international relations. The first was the national and satellite broadcast era that governments used to their own advantage. The second phase was defined by the Internet, when traditional sources of media lost much of their control and power. This was described as a "Wild West" moment. Currently, in the third phase, professional media and policy actors have regained control and are using the media ecology to serve their interests.

In chapter 2, "Strategic Narratives: Methods and Ethics," O’Loughlin, with Miskimmon and Roselle, introduces the reader to four possible explanations of the role of communications in international relations. They discuss in detail rationalism, communicative action, and reflexive and poststructural theoretical approaches that are used by scholars to understand the formation, projection, and reception of strategic narratives. The authors of this chapter offer an adequate description of the traditional debates in social science research. The authors provide evidence that policymakers are using the same methods academics are using to measure the effectiveness of their strategic narratives.

Roselle focuses on the changes of great power identity as the Cold War ended in chapter 3, "Strategic Narratives and Great Power Identity." Here we finally get to some analysis of speeches and media messages that reveal the strategic narratives of Russian and US leaders. Roselle does an excellent job looking at the formation, projection, and reception of the strategic narrative of the George H. W. Bush administration during the Gulf War and the George W. Bush administration’s 2003-4 war with Iraq. In her analysis of George H. W. Bush, four strategic narratives seem to be in conflict: a new world order, the coalition of armed forces, patriotism, and great power politics. The strategic narrative that was projected by George W. Bush was the great power narrative and that dominant narrative even survived the public criticism of the war. The author then turns to Russia and the first and second Chechen wars. Here the narratives also differ. Russian president Boris Yeltsin, who was a pragmatist and a nationalist, sought to internationalize the first conflict. By doing this, he successfully created a domestic politics and reform internationalist narrative that projected Russia as a normal country going through some dramatic changes. Meanwhile, Russian president Vladimir Putin, who was in power at the time of the second Chechen war, promoted more of a great power strategic narrative.

In chapter 4, "Finding a Unified Voice? The European Union through a Strategic Narrative Lens," Miskimmon provides an excellent overview of the difficulty of forming and projecting a coherent narrative in regional and international organizations. Although he focuses on the Euro crisis, his discussion and analysis offer incredibly useful insights into the current debates over what role the European Union and its members should play in international affairs. Is the EU simply an economic actor? Is it a human security and humanitarian actor or should it play a more active role in traditional power games? As Miskimmon argues, the refugee crisis, the Iran nuclear deal, and the election of US president Donald Trump may call into question the idea that the EU offers a "distinct vision of international affairs that is both progressive and inclusive" (p. 87). The author correctly points out that the EU has "a paradoxical track record in developing a shared meaning of international politics" (p. 102). However, recent "white papers" coming out of the EU suggest that a new foreign and security policy will be forthcoming and that the EU will become a more vocal advocate of the liberal world order. Additionally, the alliance of German chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Emmanuel Macron may help to revitalize the EU progressive narrative described by Miskimmon. The election of Trump and his illiberal policy choices and the actions of new EU members like Hungary to restrict refugees and to refuse to accept EU resettlement targets introduced a new challenge to the EU narrative.

In chapter 5, "The Power of Strategic Narratives: The Communicative Dynamics of Chinese Nationalism," Ning Liao discusses the role of history in shaping strategic narratives. In the case of China, Liao focuses on historical narratives in Mao Zedong’s China and the post-Tiananmen Square period. The chapter successfully "investigates the formation, projection, and reception of Chinese nationalist discourse" over both periods (p. 111). At times the chapter gets a bit confusing with the author mixing historical information with theoretical points, but the major argument is that national leaders can often create strategic narratives that conflict and prevent the state from achieving its new goals as the international system evolves.

In chapter 6, "Beyond Neoliberalism: Contested Narratives of International Development," J. P. Singh
presents a thorough and very accessible discussion of the strategic narratives of the various actors who have defined the development decades and the more recent focus on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In a useful table, Singh reviews the main narrative for the primary development agencies, such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations Development Program, and UNESCO. The chapter includes excellent sections on "human development" and an especially interesting section on "participatory development and culture." Singh discusses the role of UNESCO in the promotion of cultural policies and the struggle to include culture in debates on economic development and poverty alleviation. The chapter ends with a discussion of the MDGs that have now been replaced by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Singh calls the MDG narrative synthetic because it "pulls together various strands of development thinking" and grand because it seeks to "galvanize the entire international development community" toward achieving the stated goals (p. 157). Referencing Jean-François Lyotard's *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), Singh calls the promotion of the MDG strategy a "metanarrative of change" and that can certainly be applied to the more recent SDGs strategy (p. 157).

Chapter 7, "Public Diplomacy, Networks and the Limits of Strategic Narratives" by Robin Brown, asks and effectively answers a very important question: why do strategic narratives become influential? The answer is that the state has developed organizations to tell the national stories. The author links the practice of public diplomacy to more traditional views of international relations by invoking E. H. Carr's definition of power that included influence over public opinion. Brown presents two excellent case studies that track the development of public diplomacy from the Allied narrative to encourage US intervention in World War I and more recent examples of the formation and implementation of strategic narratives used by Russia in the 2013-14 Ukraine crisis and those formed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Brown states that the strategic narratives tend to mobilize preexisting networks of sympathizers and the impact on broader publics is difficult to measure. This is because, as the author states, in all of the cases presented the narratives deployed by political actors were met with counternarratives. Brown also asks the reader to consider if strategic narratives are more important in this digital age and urges academics and policymakers not to overestimate the significance of the changes in the media ecology.

Amelia Arsenault, Sun-ha Hong, and Monroe E. Price explore the narratives that were primarily constructed externally to explain and understand the meaning of the Arab Spring in chapter 8, "Strategic Narratives of the Arab Spring and After." This chapter discusses how Syria and Libya failed to form strategic narratives about their future. The authors focus on strategic narratives that "originated from Western elites and were promoted through Western media" and which hurt both nations' international relations (p. 191). In my view, their goal seems to be to revise and extend the editors' understanding of how a narrative becomes strategic in the middle of a geopolitical crisis. In doing so, they propose a new definition of a strategic narrative that adds a "this must happen or else" dimension to the story. The authors state that narratives "about conflicts or crises are defined by their goal-oriented nature, a clear 'or else' clause must be identifiable" (p. 212). The "or else" clause adds a new dimension for evaluating the effectiveness of strategic narratives. These narratives must be judged by their "capacity to mobilize a consensual understanding of how things are, what must be done and by whom" (p. 213).

In chapter 9, "Narrative Wars: Understanding Terrorism in the Era of Global Interconnectedness," Cristina Archetti clearly presents valuable insights into the importance of narratives as a source of power and influence for policymakers working on counterterrorism and a valuable tool for terrorists aiming to gain support for their cause. Archetti succinctly makes the case for the narrative as a foreign and security policy tool: "The interest in narratives stems from the growing realization, in the post 9/11 context, that both terrorism and counterterrorism take place beyond the material and military dimensions, in the realm of communication, perceptions and persuasions" (p. 218). Archetti makes the point that being a member of a group means sharing a common collective narrative and simultaneously having an individual narrative that is compatible with the collective narrative. This coexistence of narratives helps explain the acceptance of extremist positions. In a final section of the chapter, Archetti discusses the "war of ideas against extremism" (p. 236). She argues for consistency in any counterterrorism narrative and urges leaders to abandon the idea that it is possible to stop or rewrite the terrorist narrative. Countries need to make their stories more appealing and must avoid policy actions that give the terrorist narrative credibility. The chapter ends with "four practical implications in countering radicalization," including the importance of community-based and local approaches to countering radical socialization (p. 239).
In chapter 10, "Filling the Narrative Vacuum in a Global Crisis," O'Loughlin examines the failure of the Japanese government to project a narrative that focused on key issues like energy security, the global economy, climate change, and the Japanese infrastructure. The author points out that this gap was filled by Japanese citizens and global media sources. The debates regarding the government failure to adequately respond and the battle of narratives and counternarratives are well covered in this comprehensive chapter. Cultural traditions and the relationship of the government to the people of Japan may have played a role in the failure to create a strategic narrative that provided a vision of Japan’s future and the way forward after the two natural disasters—the earthquake and the tsunami—and the nuclear reactor explosions. The author does point out how difficult it is to create a convincing narrative when the crisis is ongoing and the future seems uncertain. After reading the chapter, one may be convinced that it is better to say something and control the message than to wait for better times and let others fill the gap.

The final chapter, “Understanding International Order and Power Transition” by Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, is not as comprehensive as the title suggests but offers some interesting insights into how the study of strategic narratives might help scholars understand power transitions and the pursuit of international order. The authors are critical of neorealist and power transition theorists suggesting they fail to look at more ideational interests and social dynamics of international relations. This may be true, but what about various liberal and critical theories? Where do they fit, or better yet, where does the strategic narrative theory fit in the landscape of international relations theoretical arguments? Here might be a good place to reconnect with methods discussed in chapter 2.

This is an excellent collection of essays that are constructed around very solid research. They certainly add a different dimension to the study of foreign policy and in many ways elevate the status of communication studies and public diplomacy in the study of both international relations theory and global policy.

Note


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