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Srdjan Vucetic

Greatness and Decline; National Identity and British Foreign Policy

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2021. 292pp. £24.99 (paperback)

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Books on foreign policy making tend to focus on politicians, institutions, nations and international organisations, and trends. Where the public do feature, they tend to be bit players in a process taking place elsewhere, trying to have their voices heard in the corridors of power. Vucetic takes a different approach here. He argues that the landscape of foreign policy making – what is acceptable and what is not – is decided by the public and reflected in their culture. This then informs policy makers on the parameters of their power. “Instead of framing British foreign policy orientations exclusively in terms of elite beliefs, I situate them in everyday discourses of national identity circulating in society as a whole. I do so because I believe in the critical importance of the discursive and cultural contexts within which politics take place” (1). Underpinning this approach is the view that the driving force behind Britain’s foreign policy objectives, in a fairly broad sense, is the public and that those in government simply reflect those desires back on their audience. The people of Britain *wanted* Britain to be great and *wanted* an Empire, so the governments of the time built them one. “My argument here is that Britain’s search for global leadership was always an expression not so much of bipartisan consensus, ruling-class interests, elite culture, or the ‘official mind’, but of everyday self-understandings circulating in British society as a whole” (13).

To argue his viewpoint, Vucetic splits his book into six chapters. These cover every decade from 1945 and the election of Attlee through to Blair. Each chapter is then presented in a similar format; “(1) a summary of the main findings; (2) a discussion of top British identity categories; and (3) provide a reconstruction of a topography of contemporary Britishness with select foreign policy events” (40). This structure works very well, perhaps because each decade has its own cultural distinctness or perhaps because each decade has its own foreign policy issues on which to focus. Either way, the chapters are compelling and Vucetic is clearly an excellent writer with a very readable writing style not always found in academic texts. While specific incidents and issues are discussed, the aim here is to discuss the wider context of foreign policy making rather than each individual incident. Vucetic argues that “many British foreign policy analyses now routinely incorporate identity, discourse and habits, they rarely attempt to recover these intersubjective structures inductively, much less over time and across the elite-mass divide” (40). I certainly think this is an approach with some validity. While individual events and circumstances clearly impact on the responses made to them, including the international attitude to action, often the response of any government or organisation is shaped by the norms of that institution and influenced by actions and responses taken previously. The “culture” of institutions and organisations matters perhaps more than anything else when considering their response to new issues and conflicts. They will often do what has worked before, or be motivated to avoid actions which

have proved to be problematic or ineffective.

I certainly enjoyed reading this book, as I had enjoyed reading Vucetic's papers on this book while he was writing it. He links popular culture with wider views on foreign policy making effectively and certainly makes a compelling argument for linking the two elements together. Where I perhaps differ from his conclusions is on the genesis of foreign policy norms and expectations. Vucetic argues that the public and cultural expectations provide a framework for foreign policy making. "I consider British foreign policy as a dynamic three-way interaction between decision makers themselves, discourses of British identity into which decision makers are socialized and within (or against) which foreign policy is made, and broader processes – generational, cultural and international – that confront decision makers with different challenges within this nexus" (24). I would argue that rather than being influenced by the public and cultural norms, influential politicians and decision makers create the framework of "acceptable behaviour" which the public then use to frame their views. While undoubtedly influenced by specific protests or incidents, the political class mould public opinion far more than they are influenced by it. Perhaps that is because the study of British foreign policy has made me cynical of the promises which politicians make of "listening to the public" or "reflecting their concerns". A cynic would argue that this is only done when it suits the purposes of those in power. However, Vucetic certainly makes a compelling counter argument, using some excellent cultural examples. I would certainly recommend this book to anyone writing on or studying British foreign policy. They may not always entirely agree with Vucetic's conclusions, although I am sure many will, but even those who question his conclusions will recognise the value and strengths of his arguments and this book. It makes a valuable contribution to the field.