

Remembrance of Things Past

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Power in Concert, by Jennifer Mitzen. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 264 pp. Paperback. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-06011-8

The nineteenth century is back with a vengeance. Even as many societies return to pre-1914 levels of income inequality, Russia openly challenges an aging liberal international order by reasserting privileges in its historical sphere of influence. Thus is well-timed Jennifer Mitzen's *Power in Concert*, an original, sophisticated reconsideration of the Concert of Europe as a model of global governance.

Power finds the ghost in the machine of concerted collective action in a multipolar, non-liberal age, arguing that even “thin” institutions can “inject social purpose into the international political order.” Specifically, Mitzen argues that members of forums such as the Concert of Europe can constitute an “international public power” possessing “collective intentionality”—a joint will to preserve a desirable international order, which Mitzen describes as a macro-level phenomenon “closer to action” than individual preferences or social norms. Empirically, *Power* sketches the foundations of international public power in post-Westphalia Europe and its affirmation in the Congress of Vienna. Between 1815 and 1853, Mitzen argues, the Concert of Europe steered the great powers to collectively preserve the terms of the Vienna settlement, even when doing so meant sacrificing short-term individual interests—until the progressive decay of the Ottoman Empire ultimately proved impossible to manage within the Concert's framework.

Beyond its conversation with scholars of the Concert of Europe and concerts more generally, *Power's* deeply derived, complex framework engages a wide variety of IR and social theories. It stakes out territory covered by leading constructivists, considering the social purposes

of global governance (Ruggie 1982), the reinforcement of social practices through interaction (Wendt 1999), and the power of rhetoric and public reason (Risse 2000, channeling Habermas). Mitzen locates her work closer to Hedley Bull (1977) and the English School, emphasizing great power norms in international society—even as she asserts the greater action-orientation of these norms. While *Power*'s argument about the possibilities of global governance amid multipolar security competition pits it against realists, it more directly takes on liberal institutionalists like Ikenberry (2001), rejecting the notion that liberalism is an essential component of world order. From a more normative standpoint—and Mitzen is refreshingly straightforward about her inclinations—*Power*'s elucidation of joint public action fits between Slaughter's (2004) preference for global governance without hierarchy and Weiss's (2009) implicit preference for global government with hierarchy.

The potential implications of *Power*'s arguments are larger than Mitzen initially acknowledges. The book's introduction professes modest claims: that “there is an element of intentionality at the system level”; that evidence suggests “collective intention has some causal power”; and that her case narratives tell a “plausible story” about the Concert of Europe as an international public power. But Mitzen is tackling big questions here. Theoretically, she is addressing the perennial “agent-structure” problem, with her conception of collective intentionality attempting to bridge the chasm between states' preferences and systemic constraints. If collective intentionality can indeed be said to produce international public power, Mitzen has reopened the door to discussing world government whose closure Weiss lamented. Moreover, *Power* describes a mechanism of the internationalization of national “private property,” with forums transferring matters within individual great powers' spheres of interest to

the international sphere of interest. Such implications should have champions of sovereignty and markets arming for battle.

Indeed, Mitzen is overt about the animating spirit behind this project: “pushing back against the dominance of neoliberal thinking,” which she believes has had at least two undesirable consequences. First, it inhibits consideration of the normatively appealing aspects of the “visible hand” of international public power. Second, neoliberal theories’ ontological individualism denies states’ social nature—and thus the possibility of collective intentionality. These claims will have many sympathizers, yet there are gaps in *Power*’s engagement of the literature. While her heuristic contrasting the invisible (i.e., market) and visible (i.e., public intentionality) hands is illuminating, Mitzen might have explained its contribution beyond Oran Young’s (1982) classification of spontaneous, imposed, and negotiated orders. Indeed, Mitzen dismisses nearly the entire literature on global governance for its fixation on globalization and “the institutional preconditions for the invisible hand of the market to work beyond the state”—a claim that, if one looks beyond the open-economy politics approach influential in American IPE, is not particularly accurate.

Power’s refusal to be co-opted into a neoliberal framework has other consequences. It implies but avoids concepts prevalent in the rationalist literature—e.g., collective action problems, audience costs, shadow of the future—and controls for neoliberal arguments rather than testing them empirically. The scope conditions for Mitzen’s argument—“governance works when the parties want it” and “in situations where parties have mixed motives”—are indeterminate, requiring an articulation of states’ preferences that rationalist approaches do offer, if not necessarily satisfyingly. Ultimately, *Power*’s quarantine of neoliberalism reinforces the Kuhnian dilemma of noncommunication between competing paradigms.

Empirically, *Power's* reinterpretation of the Concert of Europe is both an engaging read and a welcome reassertion of the essential quality of historical context to explaining political outcomes. Yet the book's narrative method of examining stages of the Concert of Europe will be unsatisfying to some, as underspecification of the dependent variable and unclear evidentiary standards allow multiple possible interpretations of the same events. Again, Mitzen is modest in her empirical claims and acknowledges the limitations of small-N research, but might have said more up front about the utility of narrative analysis for what is, empirically, essentially a plausibility probe.

More significant is the question of generalizability. The Concert of Europe case is specific to an issue area (security), a space (Europe), and a time period (early nineteenth century). Mitzen plausibly argues that international security institutions are hard cases due to the dangers of anarchy, yet implicitly acknowledges they may be more amenable to collective intentionality because leaders enjoy greater autonomy from domestic political dynamics than in other areas. Mitzen also acknowledges Europe's possible regional exceptionalism, but elides its potentially unique distribution of power: multiple great powers of similar size. Might collective intentionality, like right, according to the Athenians, be "only in question among equals in power"? The book's conclusion also misses opportunities to apply the framework to early twenty-first century forums such as the UN Security Council, the Council of the European Union, and the Groups of 7, 8, and 20. Observers of recent events in Ukraine may ask why membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace, G8, and UN Security Council has not done for Russia what such forums are expected to do: "alienate participants from their private concerns."

Books sufficiently ambitious to break new ground necessarily raise objections, so one must keep these concerns in proportion. In *Power in Concert*, Mitzen has produced a

theoretically sophisticated, empirically rich reinterpretation that not only offers an original theoretical contribution to the global governance literature but also revivifies longstanding debates and challenges the reader to pick a side.

References

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