Interests, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations by Helen Milner
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a most welcome and important study of a region that is so crucial to international prosperity and security yet remains so unstable.


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It is easy to tell an anecdote showing that domestic politics matters in international relations. It is much harder to explain in a systematic fashion how, why, and when domestic forces matter. International relations theorists have been squeamish about taking this step, in part because of the complexity of the task. What aspects of domestic politics are important? Interest groups? Institutions? Public opinion? Bureaucracy? It is not surprising that most scholars duck behind Kenneth Waltz's warning of reductionism and tread no farther.

In this ambitious book, Helen Milner enters the breach and constructs a fully developed model of the interaction between domestic and international politics to explain the pattern of international cooperation. What is truly extraordinary about Milner's approach is that it encompasses practically every facet of domestic politics without sacrificing parsimony or clarity. Milner argues that nation-states are polyarchies of institutional and societal actors, each with a distinct set of preferences. For her model, the relevant actors are the executive, the legislature, and interest groups that act as "endorsers," supplying the legislature with information about the proposed agreement if the executive withholds it. Her game consists of two parts. First, the executive and the foreign country negotiate along a unidimensional space. If an agreement is reached, the executive presents it as a take-it-or-leave-it offer to the legislature for ratification. From this beginning, Milner varies the convergence of interests between the actors, the degree of information held by each actor, and the ability of each actor to set the agenda, amend, veto, and make side payments. Milner's formal model allows her to pinpoint exactly when and how domestic politics matters. For example, a legislature that is more dovish (preferences closer to the foreign country) than the executive will have no effect on international cooperation. A hawkish legislature, by contrast, acts as a strong constraint on the terms of the final agreement.

Milner comes to three central conclusions. First, systemic approaches to international relations, including realism, have exaggerated the extent of international cooperation. Relative to the state-as-unitary-actor approach, the introduction of domestic politics never improves the chances of cooperation. As the legislature becomes more hawkish, the increasingly divided government becomes less capable of cooperating with other states. Furthermore, any agreement reached will reflect legislative rather than executive preferences. To some extent, this undercut claims made by Thomas Schelling and Robert Putnam that a recalcitrant legislature increases the executive's bargaining power in the international arena. Second, interest groups are important not because of their ability to apply political pressure, but, consistent with McCubbins and Schwartz, because they can transport information to uninformed actors. Contrary to most game-theoretic approaches, Milner argues that imperfect information, rather than imperfect cooperation, makes it more likely. Legislatures will rely on endorsers at different ends of the political spectrum to signal the content of the agreement. Thus, no endorsements lead to rejection, whereas multiple endorsements lead to ratification. Third, changes in the ratification procedure (i.e., a popular referendum rather than a legislative vote; a supermajority rather than a majority vote) made after an agreement has been signed will scuttle the chances for ratification. Executives will negotiate an agreement to target the support of a median legislator; a change in the institutional process shifts the location of the median voter, making ratification more difficult.

Milner's approach represents a large step forward for two reasons. First, it moves beyond a plethora of rather stale debates in international relations. With one model, Milner has addressed the literatures on strong and weak states, presidential versus parliamentary systems, and the importance of societal actors versus political institutions. Her framework represents a theoretical advance because it incorporates these disputes and much more. Second, the model specifies the precise causal mechanisms through which legislative and societal actors influence foreign policy. Executives anticipate the preferences of legislators and endorsers prior to negotiating with other countries. Thus, legislators do not influence international relations through active measures but by letting leaders and interest groups do their work for them.

The flaws in this book emerge when one turns from the theoretical to the empirical chapters. Milner tests her model on four paired sets of cases. She looks at Anglo-American negotiations during the 1940s on exchange rates and trade, oil, and aviation; Franco-German negotiations on the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Defense Community; and, more recently, NAFTA and the Maastricht Treaty. I found the testing strategy unsatisfactory. On the one hand, the hypotheses are specific enough to have permitted some statistical tests. On the other hand, the case studies are incomplete and not sufficiently detailed to show the causal mechanisms at work. For example, Milner asserts that President Truman could not get the International Trade Organization charter ratified in the late 1940s because of the Republican-dominated Congress. All well and good, but she fails to explain why it did not pass when the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress during the 1948–1950 session. This is an example of the tendency to assert rather than delineate the causal evidence. The limited scope of the case studies also prevents the author from seriously assessing alternative explanations to international cooperation. Milner refers to realism and liberal institutionalism at various points, but she admits that "they are not systematically tested in this book" (p. 23). For one case, Milner dismisses the epistemic community argument with one sentence.

Although the evidence is consistent with Milner's approach, there are some puzzles that do not quite jibe with the model's assumptions or predictions. In many cases, the negotiated agreements are supported by centrists but rejected by groups on both extremes. This is inconsistent with her characterization of actors' utility functions. The problem may be that several of the issues under negotiation have more than one dimension. What is also striking is the number of times executives are able to buy off endorsers with side payments and thereby win ratification. What is surprising is why the executive fails to make these payments in cases in which agreements are not ratified. One possible explanation is that side payments are easier to make in cases of economic agreements as opposed to security agreements. An industrial lobby can be satiated with a trade exemption; a military that sees its autonomy undercut is less likely to be mollified by an increased defense budget.

The empirical problems do not undermine the strengths of this book. Milner has created an elegant and useful model of
how domestic politics affects the ability of nations to cooperate with one another. It has more sophistication and precision than any other theory of how domestic politics influences international relations. It will be the benchmark on the subject well into the next century.


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I keep in my mind one picture of Saddam Hussein's gassing of his own Kurdish people—a mother curled around her child, both of them frozen in death by chemical weapons. Other images of warfare lurk there as well: victims of napalm, land mines, mortar shells, and nuclear weapons. Each weapon exacts its own horror. Yet, thus far, only chemical and biological weapons have sustained nearly universal condemnation for the past hundred years. Why these and not others? Many weapons, condemned when introduced into warfare, have gained acceptance over time. The abhorrence of chemical weapons, however, has endured.

Many authors have sought to explain the persistence of this condemnation. One line of thought posits that the human reaction to the use of chemical weapons is universal, perhaps genetic, certainly centuries old, mysterious, and maybe unexplainable. Among its roots is the ban against the poisoning of wells. In The Chemical Weapons Taboo, Richard M. Price has articulated an opposing position: The prohibition against the use of chemical weapons is a political construct that has evolved throughout this century, growing stronger over time, even as it has sustained some serious violations in World War I and the Iran-Iraq war. Price supports his position by tracing the political genealogy of the chemical weapons taboo from its international political birth at the Hague Conference of 1899 to the entry into force of the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention in April 1997. In doing so, he follows the construction of the norm, the tempests that it has weathered—albeit not entirely intact—and its reinforcement following such storms.

Price does more than piece together the lineage of the taboo. In original and valuable chapters, he confronts the common understanding that the taboo was shattered by the extensive use of gas warfare during World War I and ignored by Iraq in the Gulf War. He carefully compiles evidence to build the case that in these instances the use of chemical agents in warfare was carried out in recognition of the taboo. In both instances, the users of chemical weapons did so only after a period of restraint, and then only with an explanation that attempted to justify the step. Germany claimed that it used chemical weapons in response to French use, while Iraq maintained that chemical weapons were needed to counter the Iranian “human waves” invading Iraq. Although the taboo was weakened in these two cases, the international community responded by strengthening the political and legal constraints upholding the norm.

Equally important, Price revisits effectively and thoroughly the nonuse of chemical weapons in World War II. There were a few cases of chemical weapons use in the interwar period: Italy in Ethiopia in 1935–36 and Japan in its war with China. In striking contrast to World War I, however, none of the major belligerents in World War II used chemical weapons. Price concludes that the burden of providing a justification for breaking the taboo was substantial enough to forestall the preparations necessary to undertake a chemical weapons assault and ultimately a decisive factor preventing their use. He builds a convincing case of the important role of individual heads of state and adds flavor to his narrative by contrasting the positions of Roosevelt, an ardent opponent of chemical weapons, and Churchill, who had many fewer misgivings.

Price’s inclusion of the philosophical as well as the political basis of the taboo, and its changes over time, enriches his argument and strengthens his conclusions. His depiction of the image of chemical weapons as “uncivilized” and their historic association with weakness is thought provoking and challenging. The discussion of the development of the ban on poisons is enlightening, particularly the conclusion that poison weapons somehow upset the norms of warfare as a contest of power. Poisons were deemed unacceptable because they gave a great capacity for destruction to relatively weak states. Thus, powerful countries condemned the use of poisons as an unacceptable form of warfare to avoid the risk of conflicts that would not necessarily be won with superior economic and military strength.

Price makes a major contribution to the understanding the vicissitudes of the chemical weapons taboo, but his book is marred by some weaknesses. Most important, Price sets up his explanation of the taboo, as a twentieth-century political construct, in opposition to the view that chemical weapons are a modern form of an ancient abomination, recast in different guises over time. He appropriately rejects both the essentialist argument, that the prohibition stems from the cruelty of the weapons, and the realist argument, that chemical weapons are useless militarily, as an inadequate explanation of the durability of the taboo. Price argues that diplomats at the Hague Conference viewed chemicals as different from poison. The latter weapons had a long history, but chemical weapons, he claims, were not treated as a variant or subset of poisons but as a new category. His evidence for this novel contention is intriguing, but some of his conclusions are not convincing. He does not present the evidence from both sides of this argument, weigh it in a balanced fashion, and support his conclusion in the face of evidence from both sides.

Moreover, Price’s insights do not depend on separating the chemical from the poison taboo. The two theories explaining the taboo are not exclusive. It is perfectly possible to accept the validity of what Price says concerning the political construction of the chemical weapons taboo while viewing it as a cloak surrounding and protecting the time-honored poison taboo. His observation that the moral, perhaps prismatic, objection to the use of poisons was not a sufficient explanation for the strength and duration of the chemical weapons taboo does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that its origins are elsewhere. Nor does the existence of the centuries-old objection to poisons, attached to the political construction now defined as the ban against the possession of chemical weapons, mean that the germ of abhorrence to poisons was absolutely necessary to the establishment of the political structure. By abandoning the poison taboo, Price is unable to evaluate the question of whether the chemical weapons taboo could have been established without its historical roots, with the implications for establishing barriers to the use or possession of other types of weapons.

Price’s use of obscure words and needlessly complex sentences is likely to frustrate even erudite academics. It is almost certain to discourage the casual reader from mine to the history from what is an otherwise fascinating look at an important subject. The purpose of academic research, particularly in the social sciences, is to make new ideas and important findings accessible to a wide audience, not simply the experts in a narrow subfield.

Despite the above reservations, Price’s study of the polit-