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James W. Davis, ed. *Psychology, Strategy, and Conflict: Perceptions of Insecurity in International Relations*. London: Routledge, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-415-62204-2 (hardcover, \$135.00); 978-0-415-64329-0 (paperback, \$39.95).

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Reviewed by **Stacie E. Goddard**, Wellesley College

Each year, undergraduates in my introductory course on international relations read three articles by Robert Jervis. His classic “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma” forces students, so often used to thinking in terms of intentions and motivations, to recognize how structure can lead to tragic outcomes in world politics. They then turn to a chapter from his book *Perception and Misperception*, which explains that intentions and motives are critical to deciding if one is in a spiral or deterrence situation. Finally, they encounter “Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma,” which mixes careful history and nuanced theory to argue that competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was in fact *not* a security dilemma, that it stemmed more from the clash of two revolutionary, crusading social systems than dynamics inherent to the anarchic system.¹

¹ See Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, vol. 30(2), (January 1978), 167-214; Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), Chapter 3; Jervis, [“Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?”](#) *Journal of Cold War Studies* vol. 3 (Winter 2001), 36-60.

Perhaps I should not be surprised that at this point in the semester, invariably a student will raise her hand and ask, with no attempt to hide her exasperation, what exactly *is it* that Robert Jervis is trying to argue about world politics? [I was heartened when, in his contribution to this volume, “Both Fox and Hedgehog: The Art of Nesting Structural and Perceptual Perspectives,” Jack Snyder relates a similar story of a student who complained that Jervis “keeps arguing AGAINST himself! It’s SOOOO FRUSTRATING!” (14)]. I suspect that this edited volume will do little to quell my students’ (or perhaps other scholars’) frustration. Like Jervis’s own research program, the volume is dizzying in its scope. It brings together a group of outstanding scholars, working in diverse fields, to build upon and extend Jervis’s theoretical and empirical research program in structural realism, psychology, systems theory, nuclear strategy, intelligence, and diplomatic history. If this sounds like a lot of ground to cover in a single volume, it is, and as James Davis notes in his introduction, “it would be difficult to identify commonalities that would constitute the defining features of a coherent school of thought” (2)

But to characterize Jervis’s program, or this volume, as mere eclecticism would miss both the significance and influence of his theoretical and empirical approach. As Snyder forcefully argues although Jervis’s “non-dogmatic arguments draw on diverse intellectual sources, cut across standard categories...and characteristically depend on the integration of opposing considerations...The hard core of Jervis’s theoretical project has remained coherent and consistent as he has explored its implications in various domains” (15). Indeed, I would argue that this volume highlights the critical contributions of Jervis’s work to three key contemporary debates in international relations theory.

First, the essays in this volume demonstrate (as does Jervis’s work itself) the critical relationship between ‘theory’ and ‘puzzles’ in political science. In the last decade, international relations has arguably seen “the end of theory,”² or, to put it less dramatically, a shift away from theoretical debates towards a more ‘puzzle-driven’ approach to international relations. One starts, not with one of the ‘isms,’ but with an empirical puzzle and seeks to build a ‘mid-range’ theory. As Davis notes in his introduction, Jervis’s “less dogmatic and more integrative approach” was never quite a part of the “grand-theoretic” tradition of the 1980s and early 1990s (2), and thus in many ways Jervis’s own pursuit of intriguing political problems seems more in line with this puzzle-driven approach.

Yet Jervis’s work—and the work in this volume—insists that theory, even grand theory, must continue to play a role in international relations scholarship. As Rose McDermott notes in her contribution “Political Psychology,” Jervis’s starting point was to “generate theory from abstract ideas and then to use those models to address specific policy problems.” (58) It is theory and the models it produces—the security dilemma; Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD); the spiral model—that allows Jervis and others to parse through “real life” political problems to, as Snyder argues, “orient people to enduring

² See the symposium “The End of International Relations Theory” in the *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 19 (3), September 2013.

patterns that are likely to be relevant to their more specific tasks” (13). It is theory that allows scholars to identify ‘puzzles’ in the first place; to see a deviation in an expected pattern, we obviously need to have an idea of what that baseline behavior should look like in the first place. Puzzles, in turn, can generate scope conditions for existing theories, or even break ground for new research programs.

The scholars in this volume do an exemplary job demonstrating what ‘theory-driven puzzling’ looks like. Randall Schweller’s essay “Jervis’s Realism,” for example, offers an extended discussion of Jervis’s realist theorizing, particularly his emphasis on the security dilemma and uncertainty in international politics. He notes that ‘puzzling’ cases—overly aggressive behavior among status quo states, for instance—are less refutations of the model than examples of different types of security dilemmas, some which resemble Prisoners’ Dilemmas, and others which work like the less precarious Stag Hunt.

Both Marc Trachtenberg’s “Robert Jervis and the Nuclear Question” and Tom Christensen’s “The Meaning of the Nuclear Evolution: China’s Nuclear Modernization and US-China Security Relations” analyze the logic of MAD in a manner with more nuance than contained in much of the contemporary debate on nuclear strategy. Trachtenberg’s essay walks readers through Jervis’s logical reasoning on nuclear deterrence, risk, and the threat that leaves something to chance. He notes that Jervis’s insight that states would try to make each other think nuclear escalation was inevitable, in order to manipulate the risk of war, is precisely what shaped strategic discourse in both the United States and Soviet Union in the late Cold War, that both the United States’ insistence on developing a countervailing strategy, and the Soviet Union’s claims that nuclear escalation was uncontrollable, were “attempts to manipulate the other’s beliefs about what it itself is thinking...”(111) As a significant aside, Trachtenberg notes that this was something he would not have simply gleaned from the documentary evidence, and that “this point would not have registered with me if I had not been exposed to Jervis’s way of thinking” (111). In a similar vein, Christensen’s contribution questions whether MAD dynamics apply to the U.S.-China relationship. As Christensen notes, the issue is not whether MAD is right or wrong, but whether the scope conditions that lend nuclear deterrence its robustness are yet present in Sino-American relations. More specifically, without a clear second-strike capability, and without an obvious firebreak between conventional and nuclear operations, he argues, MAD is on shaky ground indeed.

Jervis’s second contribution, driven home consistently in this volume, is to remind us that uncertainty and systemic complexity place extraordinary limits on rational and predictable action. This is a constraint that shapes not only politicians’ ability to decipher information, but also the ability of scholars to produce generalizable theory about world politics. As Schweller argues, international politics is fraught with two types of complexity: an “epistemological” and an “ontological” complexity. The first suggests that there is a real, stable and “knowable” world out there, but that human beings have difficulty perceiving it. The second is a more fundamental uncertainty, that the world is “unknowable’ given the complexity of the world” (26).

This may all sound esoteric, but the implications of this for Jervis's work, and international relations theorizing more generally, are substantial. Most generally, the pervasiveness of uncertainty suggests that reductionist theorizing of any kind—be it to the dynamics of an objective anarchic structure, or to the interests of rational individuals—is futile. On the one hand this means that structures, as Jervis reminds us, produce systems effects: they create unintended outcomes and emergent properties that cannot be attributed to the doing of their parts (27). On the other hand, scholars must be sensitive to how actors respond to these structural dynamics, and the way in which their own individual beliefs not only shape their reactions to structural effects, but can reshape the structure itself. For example, because actors engage with their environment on the basis of emotion, as McDermott and Janice Gross Stein remind us, structures may be destabilized, and unexpected conflict and financial crises erupt.³

The pervasiveness of uncertainty also means that scholars must be attuned to the myriad ways in which actors attempt to manage uncertainty in the international system. In the last few decades, the management of uncertainty has been reduced to the exchange of costly information in international politics. In "Rationalist Signaling Revisited" Jonathan Mercer, drawing from both his own work on reputation and Jervis's work on signaling, suggests that this is a rather impoverished view of how actors navigate their uncertain world in international politics. Signals reduce uncertainty, not only because they are costly, but because they impart meaning to behavior. For example, a state may seek an explanation of motive before deciding whether an action was aggressive or defensive, and this interpretation depends upon a host of intersubjective and subjective meanings that have no objective cost. Likewise, Paul Schroeder revisits the Concert of Europe system to argue that these institutions reduced uncertainty, not merely by communicating information, but by establishing "rules of the game" to manage the post-Napoleonic order.⁴

A third lesson that can be drawn from this volume is that for Jervis and those influenced by him, the study of international politics is not only a scholarly but a normative imperative as well. It is not simply that Jervis's research or the essays in this volume are policy relevant, (though they are). It is a more foundational argument that feeds through the volume, that academics have an obligation to use their theoretical and empirical knowledge to help policy makers confront the dilemmas they face in world politics. Jervis's work on the nuclear revolution was born of his frustration with what he saw as the deeply flawed arguments justifying a countervailing strategy. As much as Jervis was puzzling through the abstract logic of deterrence, he was also debating directly with classified material of critical importance to American foreign policy. James Wirtz's contribution, "The Art of the Intelligence Autopsy," explains how Jervis applied his cognitive theories in two intelligence autopsies: one on the failure of the CIA to "warn of the Shah of Iran's inability to respond forcefully to the Islamic revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeini," and thus more generally

³ See McDermott's "Political Psychology" and Stein's "Fear, Greed, and Financial Decision-Making."

⁴ Paul W. Schroeder, "Reflections on Systems, System Effects, and Nineteenth-Century International Politics as the Practice of Civil Association."

to predict the fall of the Shah and the Iranian revolution (181); the other the failure of the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate to recognize that Saddam Hussein lacked Weapon of Mass Destruction (MAD) capability. In both cases, failures stemmed, not from overt politicization or bureaucratic shortcomings, but from reliance on reasonable—but ultimately flawed—assumptions that blinded intelligence officers to conflicting evidence.

But this raises a question, as Davis notes in his contribution, “The (Good) Person and the (Bad) Situation: Recovering Innocence at the Expense of Responsibility?” If Jervis’s research ultimately suggests that “political outcomes are the tragic consequence of boundedly rational action in complex social systems where prediction is often impossible” then what room is left for ethics and responsibility in international politics (203)? If decision-makers must constantly struggle with cognitive limitations and structural complexity all at once, does this suggest we absolve individuals of their inability to act rationally in international politics? Not at all, suggests Davis. What Jervis points to, rather, is a standard of prudence, in which decision makers realize the limitations of their world-views, the possible unintended consequences of their actions, and abandon “the preoccupation with power and interest narrowly conceived that so often is not only evil but self-defeating” (215).

Jervis contributes the final piece to this volume, “Force in our Times,” an essay about the future of force in international politics. True to form, Jervis offers not a forceful concrete prediction, but a discussion of the emerging and often contradictory processes that dominate contemporary world politics. Jervis notes evidence of a robust security community among the United States and Europe, arguing—contra many realists—that the existence of a space in which war is unthinkable represents an enormous change in international politics (228). The forces of interdependence, of the democratic peace, he argues, are very real, and work against the likelihood of massive violence. Yet in tension with this is the “outsider” status of China and Russia, actors not fully embedded in the security community. This does not mean that we will face major power war any time soon. It does suggest that in relations with Russia and China, the ‘traditional’ dynamics of war and peace—deterrence, the security dilemma—have not yet departed the realm of international diplomacy. Add to this the unique dynamics of a unipolar world, which might make the use of force more likely than less, and the picture is not entirely optimistic. Still, Jervis suggests that “violence has lost a good deal of its allure in both cost/benefit and normative terms” (238). In the midst of the systemic complexity and cognitive blinders, perhaps human beings have become, if not more clever, then at least more humble. Let us hope that he is right.

This is, in sum, an excellent volume. Its individual contributions are impressive in their own right. As a tribute to Jervis, it is outstanding.

Stacie Goddard is the Jane Bishop '51 Associate Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College. Her research explores issues of identity, legitimacy, and conflict in international relations. Her articles have appeared in *International Organization*, *International Security*, *International Theory*, and the *European Journal of International Relations*. Her book,

Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy: Jerusalem and Northern Ireland, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2009.

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