

BRUCE ANDREWS

POLI SCI

13

The Domestic  
Content of  
International Desire  
[1984]

# THE DOMESTIC CONTENT OF INTERNATIONAL DESIRE

[1984]

Yes, a “grotesque mediocrity” reigns within our generally depoliticized professional life. So why aren't the complacencies of the orthodox even more embarrassing? Why does the overall agenda of research and conceptualization still tilt — either reflectively or unreflectively — toward the reproduction of a deplorable status quo? Certainly we should play havoc with neorealist orthodoxy — and also with the flashy timidity of its self-appointed successors. But what is actually being articulated in the discipline? An unexpected obituary for the structuralists, the cocksure neorealists and aficionados of old-fashioned *Realpolitik*? Titillating revisionism for the respected ghosts of classical realism? Or merely corrective mechanisms in the self-reproduction of a certain kind of white-gloved theoretical discourse?

There is another agenda to which even the most rarefied conceptualizing can bend its efforts. What makes a nation's attachment to its expansive global (or regional) position so obsessive? Why is a particular state leadership so anxious to flex its particular muscles in a particular way? Why does an imperial power consider its ability to exert control over the social relations that constitute an open world political economy so important? Why are a nation's commitments to the international status quo wrapped up so tightly in the flag, and sanctified accordingly? Do any of the analytical moves at hand, however trumpeted, help us comprehend the grounds on which the key acts of government foreign policy are erected, or the grounds on which they might be confronted or opposed? I am thinking, for example, of the brutal American intervention in Vietnam and, most immediately, the attempted subversion and violent harassment of Nicaragua. Those matters, those sorts of questions,

bruce andrews

POLI SCI

are likely to ambush our little self-important academic scuffles. The “balance-of-power scheme” seems to have little to say about them.

Orthodoxy is undeniably confined to the surface, to a restrictive picture of individual ends-means rationality and self-interest, transferred to the realm of statecraft. It is largely designed to shed light on war policies as sets of tactics undertaken by states as units intent on calculating the means they must use to achieve their previously chosen (or inherited, or a priori) purposes, in light of the situation in which they find themselves. Strategic objectives, for example, are thought to be pursued “for reasons of state” or to serve the “national interest.” The fundamental purposes of the state therefore begin to seem like matters of general public concern. And if official concerns are said to articulate a public interest, this links the continuities of policy to the overall needs of the society, to the general welfare. Policy is considered holistic; it implicates the nation as a whole. In a hostile world, *raison d'état* seems to suit the public interest.

Technique predominates. The ends of state look pregiven, immunized from any questions beyond those of efficiency and “rational” calculation of means. Yet they are not arbitrary. Orthodoxy regards them as a structurally determined response to the intransigent structure of international politics. And for imperial powers, assumptions of technical reason and the “primacy of politics” can seem like the appropriate models for studying security policy precisely because there are so few constraints of an external and mechanical sort.

This primacy of international politics may also derive, ironically, from the limited role that a competitive political process at home plays in shaping the government’s basic aims in a case of foreign intervention. There is often no way to attribute the purposes of these efforts directly to domestic politics or to domestic political considerations. The state apparatus also seems more independent in issues of security than in other policy arenas, and better equipped to overcome the usual domestic resistance; authority is not as circumscribed, power is not as dispersed. Government is therefore much more capable of setting the terms of its interaction with the various political constituencies. In the American case, that cornerstone of democratic ideals, the

idea that the public retains control over government, becomes more of a scare story than anything else.

With this political arrangement, a state can often transcend most domestic claims and private interests; its goals will appear irreducibly national. Moreover, in form it begins to resemble an ideal self-governing agent representing the best interests of the nation but capable of acting independently and not just in response to domestic pressures. Although the state represents the substance of society, it can itself remain more abstract, uncontaminated by narrower interests. Policy makers no longer need to appeal to a higher reason based on divine ordination; the apparent rationality of policy is based on the appeal to a universality that the state embodies, and security is *raison d'état*.

Orthodoxy presents state purposes as substantively or normatively empty. An autonomy, a self-regarding, self-sufficient motivation, takes shape within the sphere of the state itself. Government becomes an extrasocial category, a virtually self-referring unit, tethered only rhetorically (or tautologically) to a society's general welfare. The state becomes hypostatized, absolutized, a carrier of social meaning only insofar as it becomes, in a sense, the author of its own domestic base. What the central government is consistently interested in (in one of the extreme formulations) achieves the status of the national interest.

The nature of domestic society could reveal a matrix of meanings underneath foreign-policy purposes. Yet in conventional theorizing, this entire sphere of meanings expressed by the relationship between society and policy has been energetically suppressed. Certainly policy makers will try to create the impression that policy has transcended all social contingency. They invert the policy, just like a camera obscura would, in order to displace its particular domestic dimensions and give us a kind of formalism of the society as a whole. And this is replicated by the orthodoxies of realist theory, in both its classical and new varieties. The domestic social relations that lie behind the broad purposes of policy are hidden; both official rhetoric and orthodox analysis transport them almost outside of history and the process by which the social and material life of society are reproduced. The record of the nation's policy becomes a chronology of fixations rather than an unfolding of a society's

bruce andrews

POLI SCI

desire.

We are left with doctrines that, like that reification which is a central mark of ideology, deny their lack of relativism and their lack of eternity, and modes of analysis that do the same. They naturalize. By a process of removal and purification, a wholly “natural” appearance is bestowed upon the realm of the social. The result looks unspoiled and immaculate, like a carefully smoothed surface, beneath which, however, troubling interpretative problems are being hidden away. “Strategic imperatives” and “the national interest” act like antiseptic and chloroform, deployed to achieve a euphoric clarity. State actions begin to take on all the unglamorous stability of natural, self-explanatory facts. The basic lines of policy become the self-evident — proverbial, commonsensical, that which “goes without saying.” Everything seems obvious.

Policy thus receives the exalted status of the “codeless”; the idea of the national interest or of the international power struggle naturalizes (and dedomesticates) the intentions behind the state’s performance. Likewise, policy is presented as a “pure recording” of objective national needs; it claims something like verisimilitude for itself, a kind of photographic clarity. It becomes (obvious) content without the deflections or fabrications of form. It is as if a strategic logic of policy — an apparently literal denotation of international rules and needs — looms so large in the foreground that only the government’s intention remains in view, not its underlying motivation. This erases an entire domestic system of meanings that stands behind policy: a code, a language (or *langue*) in relationship to which foreign policy functions as speech (*parole*). This domestic (social) dimension is practically banished from thought.

International interests are commonly expressed in a desire, a calculated project. Consequently, in the explanations we make (of war policies, for example) we start by describing in detail the project and the implicit evaluation of national costs and risks and benefits that it involves. These underpin the commitments that often stand behind the state’s specific purposes in a particular arena. But what explains the desire? What is *its* content? The usual descriptive emphasis on the relationship between ends and means — the plane

of technical rationality — must give way to make room for a larger set of (explanatory) questions about the ends themselves.

True, strategic interaction is not just a matter of policies being determined by international rules that are external to practice. Nor is practice just a simple externalizing of autism, of entirely “private” states, of self-blind embodiments of technical reason battling it out on an emptied international stage. True, the interaction between states is elaborated by what some would like to call intersubjective understandings and consensus, by coreflectively shared protocols, by the specific generative or organizing schemes of diplomatic tradition. Of course, the detailed orienting of practice involves a self-reflective performative aspect, an acknowledgment of the moves of other states in a complicated game with significantly consensual aspects, not to mention a variety of forms of learning and creative adaptation and artful improvisation.

Still, to speak of competence and generative schemes and empowerment as strictly *international* phenomena is disabling. National organizing schemes are embedded in and constituted by more than these international protocols. This ethnomethodology of statesmanship merely replaces a statist idealism with an interactionist idealism. It rejects an international political structuralism only to fetishize a surface international political formalism — a power game pursued for its own sake, however “coreflectively.” Its hermeneutic commitment is a refusal of domestic depth, confining us to the surface.

Beyond the baseline of the protection of physical defense, how is practice to be explained? What motivates it? These interpretative questions cannot be easily answered by either neorealism or classical realism. The orienting schemes of governments are domestically embedded in very particularized ways, ways that we need to analyze. Otherwise, the surface description of official concerns is put into the foreground so insistently that we forget to ask what kind of society is implicated. What society would understandably project these purposes and schemes when it comes to the international arena?

Classical realism, footnoted into fashion by references to contemporary social theory, is just as inclined to deny this social basis of state power. It stands in the way of a more critical analysis. For example, what do we learn by the old realist sleight-of-hand in which the optimizing and accumulation

of power (even in its “fullest sense”) is equated with the national interest and with the successful internalization of balance-of-power principles? Why does a state orient itself toward this balance-of-power scheme? Why is this axial principle of the balance of power being followed? Why is this “instinctive”? Why does it seem as if even hegemonic practices are undertaken for strictly political purposes? This does little more than repeat the most glaring complacency of the classical realists: to idealize the search for power as an end-in-itself, and to encourage prescriptions for our troubles of the most dematerialized and passivity-inducing sort. (To claim that the state is motivated merely to produce or reproduce itself, or that the international balance of political forces is what produces or constitutes the state, is to offer us once again the same old disembodied idealism that has characterized the mainstream of the discipline. This is not news.)

For all the talk of the social basis of power, the domestic “subject” (or referent) of these international policies directed toward the balance of power is still the society as an undifferentiated whole. The universalism of these generative schemes, like that of the so-called national interest, begins to reek of an almost Hegelian vagueness and portentousness. A “scholasticism of material life,” as Marx called it, is being trotted out once again to serve as anesthesia. It seems to exonerate the fundamental purposes of policy, which are conveniently justified by the need to optimize power or to gain leverage in various subtheaters of the balance-of-power “game.” It neutralizes the domestic context and it dematerializes the societal “subject” to which policy makers refer.

We can talk about vital interests that extend beyond the nation’s physical security all we like — and this is often what is involved in discussions of the balance of power — but *why* are these interests vital? What motivates it all? Even a response to so-called international needs or to the protocols of international or Great Power statesmanship will carry a domestic significance (or signification), which we need to interpret. The purposes are particularized. Key actions are specific social practices on behalf of a specific society permeated by a particular set of social relations. For our part, we must decide how to conceptualize these domestic roots, this deeper domestic context. Before

they become fully intelligible, the purposes themselves — and the desire to enter into these international schemes and protocols — must be interrogated and put into context *at the domestic level*. To see how this context works to structure policy purposes, we need to analyze a mediating network of domestic concerns that stand behind policy; we need to reinterpret the international purposes and schemes as a set of messages, one that presupposes a domestic code as instances of writing and speech presuppose a domestic language.

Public doctrine pretends a lack of self-consciousness or awareness about its own existence as a discourse — in this case, intertwined with a language of domestic society. This is a pretending which we ought to penetrate. Implicit domestic social choices seem to be involved, since policies can be thought of as institutionalized social practices, as forms of official praxis (and speech) on behalf of society. A government's surface goals and commitments can be reinterpreted as means. Their successful attainment would be designed specifically to insure the security of the domestic environment in which the government is embedded — that is, the social relations and interests and representations that most matter, the ones around which this particular society is most centrally organized at this point in its history. This will give us an idea of what society is giving government policy to work with. A certain domestic context and societal future will specify the motivation behind the direction of policy — in other words, policy's "point."

Policies can be thought of as an articulation, a writing, either internally consensual or contested, of a particular society. To comprehend a language, a semantic realm will need to be uncovered. In demythologizing the purposes of the government, we can tear away that look of self-evidence, that oppressive obviousness which so often clings to them. The same holds true for national security, or balance-of-power schemes, or the search for power. Their mere mention does not make a policy self-explanatory (at least it should not). Instead, we must de-naturalize or de-fetishize them, resituating the nation's intentions within (or in relationship to) a specific societal context. This will help restore their ground of meaning (the connotations of policy), which is threatened by the usual process of myth-making and "counterexplanation." By revealing how this domestic content is articulated (or, really, fabricated) in

bruce andrews

POLI SCI



foreign policy, we can get closer to understanding such things as imperial interventions and arms races that threaten to get out of control.

In order to grasp this domestic motivation, something like a national subject must be specified. And we are led to ask: what do we need to know about the domestic social order to make sense out of a nation's most sacred international commitments? We will need to uncover the weighted configuration of domestic interests that is implicated by the nation's international purposes—a specific domestic paradigm, in other words, a model of the domestic social system—so that we can grasp the reproduction needs of a social system, not only internationally but domestically.

We can think of the seemingly “political” and “strategic” purposes of foreign policy as being placed in the service of the distinguishing features of a domestic system (features that may, for example, center around the economy). Government's grasp of foreign policy's domestic “calling” articulates a sense of need and provides it with a set of identifiable rules, protocols, and criteria (in varying degrees of discursive formulation). Like the paradigms involved in scientific research, a conception of the domestic system provides policy makers with an implicit model for their problem solving; it codifies the existing social arrangements that they value. Moreover, it provides a government with a relatively fixed conceptual framework and thus places limits on the type of questions that are going to be asked about society's future, and about the ways in which the reproduction needs of that particular society are intertwined with the regional or international environment.

The domestic order or status quo presupposed by policy purposes (or by the willingness to devote such attention to balance-of-power schemes) is what we can think of as a domestic paradigm, as distinct from the complacent generalities of the national interest. Such a *domestic paradigm* will articulate the particular presupposed social system that gives policy its horizon of meaning. It will enable us to translate a state's international and strategic concerns into (usually less explicit) domestic ones. Foreign-policy purposes, in other words, can be said to grow out of the desire to protect (and deepen the specificity of) a domestic system. Success is particular. If global commitments are designed to protect a particular definition and agenda for the system at home,

bruce andrews

POLI SCI

that becomes the main context in light of which the government's orientation makes sense. If we can specify the nature of this particularized domestic context, we can begin to pinpoint the motivation behind foreign policy. And faced with policies which we deplore, we can then begin to pinpoint the changes for which we need to struggle within the domestic social order in order to encourage a change in the state's motivation: a transformation of official international desire by means of a transformation of domestic content.

THE DOMESTIC  
CONTENT OF  
INTERNATIONAL  
DESIRE

bruce andrews

POLI SCI