

I think it is fair to say that these are two very different sorts of books, and I have not been able to dream up a way to connect them, even on a panel defined by two extremely ambiguous words: institutions and identity. Indeed, I feel reasonably confident that, if pressed, Jennifer and Dorry would define those two words quite differently. I will offer some modest commentary on each in turn. Let me say first that both books are truly excellent, and I encourage everyone to take a look at them.

Sterling-Folker

In her book Jennifer offers us an extraordinarily sophisticated treatment of the theoretical literature in international political economy (IPE) that deals with cooperation. I am impressed by her ambitions, which include: a fundamental redefinition of the concept of cooperation; the reconciliation of two theoretical traditions heretofore considered by many to be antithetical; a rejection of thirty years’ worth of the most influential scholarship in IPE; and a reinterpretation of the international monetary policies of the United States since the end of the post-war fixed exchange rate system. I am not completely convinced that her book will achieve all of its ambitions, but I am delighted to have had the opportunity to engage intellectually her efforts. Although I was able to skim other chapters in the book, in this essay I will focus on chapters 1 (“Explaining International Cooperation”) and 3 (“A Realist-Constructivist Alternative”).

Let me start with cooperation in general, and move quickly to monetary cooperation in particular. (Yes, I am aware that I risk losing everyone else’s attention, but I think it is interesting, and so does Jennifer, at least. Additionally, I promise that this is going to go somewhere.) Jennifer argues that scholars falsely dichotomize autonomy and cooperation (pp. 25-26). I think her book effectively demolishes the dichotomy as a matter of pure definition. Jennifer’s case that most IPE scholars have based their analysis on this putatively false dichotomy is also convincing.

But neither of these conclusions necessarily leads to a third, with which I think Jennifer’s analysis sometimes flirts – namely, that the number of real situations in which the dichotomy is actually false is the majority. Jennifer writes several times that “some forms of cooperation” may protect autonomy. (p. 26) I can think of only one, actually: international monetary leadership in the service of cooperation, of which Jennifer’s case study of international monetary policy-making is a prime example.
Unlike most forms of cooperation, and certainly trade cooperation, monetary cooperation is inherently hierarchical. This insight, which can be traced back at least to the economists John Maynard Keynes and Charles Kindleberger, is based on fundamental features of the international monetary system. To put it succinctly, monetary cooperation requires a focal point. International monetary cooperation – toward the end of stable exchange rates – requires that countries (or their central banks) adjust their monetary policies so that they are in line with each other. It is not possible, however, for all countries to adjust to one another’s monetary policies simultaneously. Almost every case of sustained international monetary cooperation during the past 150 years had at its center a single country’s currency, and its monetary policy, toward which other countries adjusted. (Economists refer to the “n-1 problem.” In a system of stable exchange rates within group of n countries, there are only n-1 exchange rates. So, one country (the nth) can focus only on its domestic monetary objectives, while all others must, if they are to sustain the cooperation, adjust to the nth country’s monetary policies.) This means that for all of the countries that must adjust their monetary policies toward the focal point, policy autonomy must unambiguously be sacrificed for the sake of cooperation. And for one country – and one country only – monetary cooperation is not only consistent with policy autonomy, it may actually enhance autonomy.

Does any of this matter? I think so, for the starting point of Jennifer’s analysis is that the autonomy-cooperation dichotomy is problematic and must be rethought. Jennifer’s rethinking of the problem emphasizes that “the practice of autonomy is the institutional and cognitive template through which the choice and act of cooperation will be interpreted and conceived by state agents. The cooperative choice cannot be mutually exclusive to the practice of autonomy in this regard, because it can only be derived from the institutions and social practices of autonomy. … As it turns out, international cooperation can only be realized through institutional contexts that embody the practice of autonomy.” (pp. 30-31) If, however, in fact the autonomy-cooperation dichotomy remains useful for nearly every form of cooperation except monetary cooperation from the perspective of the leading (but not following) states, then we need not locate so many cooperative practices in the practice of autonomy. And then I wonder if more of the logical chain unravels. If we do not need fundamentally to rethink cooperation, and if almost all cooperation does indeed require the sacrifice of some autonomy, then is it really so imperative to understand the social practice of autonomy and its derivation from anarchy?

To put my concern most straightforwardly, I am worried that Jennifer has recognized that, at least in U.S. international monetary policy-making, cooperation rarely required that the U.S. sacrifice policy autonomy; and then she has built an entire, extremely sophisticated and elegant theoretical structure around an important, but unusual, stylized fact. (Of course, one of the moments in which the U.S. would have been obliged to abandon monetary policy autonomy in the service of international cooperation was during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in response the Nixon administration destroyed the entire Bretton Woods system, which is how we arrived at the post-Bretton Woods era Jennifer so astutely analyzes.) Jennifer expresses her own concerns about this issue later in the book: “…so it may be the case that the United
States remains relatively unique in its internal institutional design, its isolationist tendencies, and its protectiveness of autonomous decision-making. While it is certainly possible to think of other nation-states which have been similarly protective (e.g., France comes to mind), it may not be a universal phenomenon. Alternatively, a realist perspective suggests that because social practices are developed and maintained in the service of groups, internal decision-making structures would inevitably develop within each group so that the practice of autonomy could be considered a universal phenomenon.” (p. 229)

It is, in other words, an empirical question, and the French case is indeed instructive: French international monetary policy making over the past century has been a source of incredible frustration for a series of governments in Paris that did indeed prefer to maintain autonomy. But every attempt to maintain monetary policy autonomy destabilized the cooperative arrangements in which they were involved, most recently the European Monetary System. The most recent (and, I presume, final) French approach was to give up completely monetary policy autonomy for more than a decade (by shadowing the German mark) while waiting for monetary union. One could argue, as does, for example, Joe Grieco (whom Jennifer cites approvingly), that the French gave up autonomy for a while in order to recover it at the European level. But surely this transformation in French national and state identity – so that autonomy can be exercised collaboratively with German and Italian central bankers – suggests that if we retain the autonomy-cooperation dichotomy, we will be forced to explore the processes that reshape collective identities in ways that make cooperation more sustainable. And Germany at the center of European monetary cooperation fits the story Jennifer tells about the U.S.: the leading state made monetary policy autonomously from its following countries (France, Italy, etc.). (Of course, then we must sort out why Germany was prepared to give up its monetary power and autonomy, but that is another question.)

I have a few other reactions to the logic Jennifer proposes. Although Jennifer does, as Ted points out in his comments, rely on the connections among anarchy, self-help, and state survival a great deal, I found her explanation of “imitation” quite compelling and, considering a range of economic policies, intuitively plausible. The potential negative consequences of ineffective economic policies are, in her account, less dire than death. The issue is falling (relatively) behind. But there is a very interesting twist, because no one knows (not really, anyway) what causes countries to be more or less successful (defined by economic growth) over time. So, we are two steps removed from death: “The social practices of the powerful are attractive objects of imitation by other groups because those practices appear to be responsible for having produced the material advantages enjoyed by the powerful.” (p. 82, my emphasis) As I mentioned, I am not completely convinced that the practice of autonomy is the most important example of this imitation, but this argument of Jennifer’s has a wide application. I can think of a dozen economic policies of the U.S. and other developed countries that have been imitated by developing countries with disastrous results because they were implemented in a different institutional context or at a different level of development. But they were certainly imitated for the reasons Jennifer outlined – because they were (sometimes mistakenly) thought to have caused the success of the U.S., and because those countries’ leaders were desperate not to fall further behind.
I wonder whether Jennifer’s broad specification of autonomy has limited its usefulness, and whether a more contextualized version would still serve her theoretical purposes. In the cases I know well, government leaders and policy-makers do not think about autonomy as a general goal; rather, autonomy is specific. That is, they are concerned to maintain autonomy from specific other states. And, as is almost always the case, the material facts of the world are underdetermining of which states are considered threats to autonomy and which are not. Ted mentions Estonia in his comment, which is an instructive example: Estonian policy-makers are desperate to maintain autonomy from Russia, but are in general unconcerned about autonomy from, say, France and Germany. Indeed, to invoke money again, the first thing the Estonian government did when it left the post-Soviet ruble zone in 1992 and introduced an independent currency (so that it would be autonomous from the Central Bank of Russia) was to peg the Estonian kroon to the German mark with a currency board (thereby having its monetary policy made in Frankfurt). This policy choice was an outcome, in my view, of Estonian national identity, which embodied concerns for autonomy with a specific direction.

And it is on identity that I have my broadest concern. Jennifer’s analysis of the process of identification within and among states is an insightful and useful first cut. But there are a number of different kinds of collective identities that are relevant to her analysis, including national identities, which are distinct from state identities, which are distinct from what might be called regional identities, not to mention developed country identities (“the powerful”) versus those developing countries that are doing the imitating; those identities vary a great deal, and each in its own way. My instinct is that for any empirical question of sustained international cooperation it is at least as important to evaluate the variation in those potentially important identities as it would be to analyze how that cooperation might be (no longer, thanks to Jennifer, paradoxically) maintaining the autonomy of governments.

Noyes

I feel far less competent to comment on Dorry’s book. I can certainly begin with praise: Dorry’s prose is both beautiful and elegant, and it was a real pleasure to read the pages she sent along. I am eager to read the rest of her book. In what follows I will simply raise a few questions and reactions stimulated by my reading.

What I found most remarkable about the Patum as an institution for the cultivation and maintenance of collective identities – Berguedan and Catalan – was the change in their purposes over time. Although the form – “crowding, strong rhythms, repetition, drink, continuous dancing, centripetal movement, and intense pyrotechnics” (intro., p. 3; also ch. 2, p. 18) – and symbols of the Patum have not changed, the meanings of the symbols have altered fundamentally. During the Franco years, the Patum was a mechanism for protest; during the Transition a tool of mass mobilization; and still later a process for incorporating immigrants into the community. Perhaps I have misread Dorry’s prose, but my depressing conclusion is that the Patum has evolved to the point where the mere maintenance of the community is the central goal.
Dorry puts it much better than I, of course: “industrial decline and factionalism in this small mountain capital turned the festival into an end in itself, a passionate creation of an immanent unity recognized as ephemeral at the outset.” (intro., p. 2) Neither the Berguedan nor the Catalan identity remains politically or even socially purposeful. They appear to be ends in themselves, and the Patum has become no longer an expression of an identity; instead, it has become merely a desperate attempt to cling to identities threatened by broader economic and political processes at work in Spain and Europe.

This evolution (if I am not doing too much violence to Dorry’s subtle account) raises all sorts of fascinating questions in my mind. If the meanings of these symbols and identities changed so much over time, how did that happen? How did the very same institution come to reproduce an identity with the same name through processes that served rather different social purposes? This is particularly relevant because Dorry uncovers weak agency, that is, only modestly influential self-conscious authors of the “multiple ‘texts’ of the Patum.” (ch. 1, p. 9)

An issue that is related to this apparent contemporary lack of social purpose is the contestation of the meaning of the community and its associated identities. So, as Dorry writes, “Berguedans of all classes treated the event as a deliberate instrument of community reproduction, despite intense agreement about the nature of the community in question.” (intro., p. 4) Does this mean that the content of Berguedan was so contested that the mere fact of being Berguedan was the only purpose on which members of the community could agree? And if that is so, what are the implications for the evolution of the content and contestation of other identities, particularly sub-national identities in Europe?

Another potentially important line of Dorry’s reasoning to pursue is the usefulness of ambiguity in the reproduction of identity and, in particular, myths of primordialism within a community. I was intrigued by a series of questions Ted raised in his comments: “How do identities stick? Why do some institutions reproduce identities better than others?” Ted proposes one possibility: that the Patum is consonant with environmental demands. Another possibility is that the Patum’s symbolism is so ambiguous that it is malleable enough to survive even rapidly changing environmental demands. Dorry writes that the “allegory allows the Patum’s combats to be read as the triumph of the current orthodoxy....” (ch. 2, p. 21) If I consider cases I know well, the symbols nationalists invoke often change in meaning over time, and the more ambiguous the symbolism the more malleable the institution. The story of the Patum is similar: it has lasted more than four hundred years because its allegories are ambiguous enough to be interpreted differently over time.

I am eager to hear Dorry elaborate in person on her description of identity as “embodied memory.” (ch. 8, p. 42) Her analysis is intriguing and evocative. I was fascinated in particular by her description of the performative nature of Catalan identity: “Initial participation would be voluntary, but the traces of performance left in memory were objective and inalienable, becoming more so with each repetition.” (ch. 8, p. 44) I was left wondering, though, whether this sort of performative identity “sticks” as well
as mythological essentialism does. An obvious advantage is that the community can be remade, and can incorporate outsiders relatively easily. But my concern is that repetition is not as powerful as a claim to innateness – that what some have called “role” identities (which are recognized through practice, and are thus similar to performative Catalan) are thinner than “type” identities.

In fact, the distinction reminded me of a J. D. Salinger story I read some time ago, and which I re-read after Dorry’s pages. Franny (of Franny and Zooey) relates the story of a book, The Way of a Pilgrim, to her boyfriend while she is in the midst of what appears to be a nervous breakdown. The book recounts the travels of a pilgrim in Russia, of all places. The pilgrim is seeking a method of constant, repetitive prayer, which is laid out in the Philokalia. The idea is to repeat a prayer constantly, until the prayer becomes “self-active.” Eventually, “the words get synchronized with the person’s heartbeats, and you’re actually praying without ceasing.” The most important aspect of this method of prayer is that one need not actually believe at the beginning: “All you have to have in the beginning is quantity. Then, later on, it becomes quality by itself.” Faith is supposed to result from repetition, much as a performative identity is supposed to emerge from repetition, in Dorry’s account. What I wonder, then, is: How does that happen?