Book Reviews

Iver Neumann (2012).  

Iver Neumann’s distinguished career has spanned the academic and professional worlds, including a spell in Oxford and two stints at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) around the turn of the millennium.

With this book, Neumann, the recently appointed Montague Burton Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, takes on the ambitious task of providing a ‘historically informed ethnography of diplomacy, in which I ask what diplomats do and how they come to do it’. Based primarily on his experience at the Norwegian MFA, and deploying an anthropologist’s perspective, the result is a readable, slim volume that is informative, intriguing and thought-provoking.

This perhaps begs the question of whether the MFA (‘at home’) is the ideal place to study diplomats. Like any species, diplomats might best be considered in their natural habitat, and in the diplomat’s case, that is ‘abroad’ — almost anywhere but home. Nonetheless, Neumann manages to extrapolate a great deal, and if there are parts of the book that may seem obvious to the ‘insider’, this probably shows that there is indeed a ‘vast gulf between the public face of diplomacy and opinions and actions that take place behind embassy doors’ (as the book’s cover text suggests).

Professor Neumann rightly insists that if we are to understand diplomacy (and diplomats), we have to understand their provenance, historically and personally. ‘Who Are They and Where Do They Come From?’ provides an informative and essential introduction. The chapter on ‘Abroad: The Emergence of Permanent Diplomacy’ reminds us that there are many ‘legends’ about diplomats (purveyed, for example, by Satow and Nicolson) and that the reality of diplomatic history, assessed from a broad and not self-defining perspective of post-Westphalian state-to-state activity, is more complex, fluid and flexible than the stereotypes allow. It is probably true that in the thick of diplomatic engagement, the ‘career diplomat’ does not think too much about the history of the profession, although many do have a fascination for history of all sorts.
That said, diplomacy is probably not the ideal career for revolutionaries, and ministries will tend to be conservative and risk-averse unless pressed hard and with determination by their ministers to behave otherwise.

Neumann is also right to identify a certain in-built ‘Occidentricity’ that still underpins much of diplomatic life, at least as lived and understood by ‘Western’ diplomats: a mindset that is changing, but perhaps not fast enough to meet the realities of a rapidly shifting world.

The chapter ‘At Home: The Emergence of the Foreign Ministry’ paints an enlightening picture of MFAs over time and of their particularities. How much of the image of the ‘state’ reflects objective realities, and/or how much flows from an image developed and nurtured by diplomats, whose perception of their own interest helped to create the notion of a state, which then required their essential services and life-long dedication?

Professor Neumann places strong emphasis on ‘The Bureaucratic Mode of Knowledge Production’. Some of his remarks on how an MFA operates bring to mind the legendary BBC television series ‘Yes, Minister’. One might wonder how much of his analysis was conditioned by Norway’s own position as a highly respected but relatively small country, as well as by the nature of the Norwegian/Scandinavian/Teutonic societal influences that he himself raises later in the book.

‘To Be a Diplomat’, with its almost mystical undertones, looks at how diplomats view and identify themselves. This is one of the most intriguing parts of the book, and is thought-provoking for diplomats, many of whom probably do not reflect on such things during their active professional life. Diplomats start off as normal people; the critical distinction later is ‘the tension between life at home and life abroad’. There are occasions here when Neumann’s Norwegian MFA colleagues’ sense of irony was perhaps misinterpreted, self-conscious self-effacement being a standard ploy — or even trait — of many a seasoned diplomat.

‘Diplomats Gendered and Classed’ contains some rich insights, with the gender aspects in particular having a strong resonance beyond the Norwegian experience.

In his conclusion, ‘Diplomatic Knowledge’, Neumann again addresses the issue of ‘different modes of knowledge production’ at home and abroad — something that is clearly evolving as a result of secure e-communications, a development that has accelerated in recent years. He suggests that ‘the upper middle class male is still best placed to switch between home and abroad, to ‘integrate one’s public persona with one’s personal life’, and to mediate. But the implication here is that this is changing, if perhaps more slowly than elsewhere in our societies.