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# THE PUZZLES OF POLITICS

Inquiries into the genesis and transformation  
of international relations

Friedrich Kratochwil



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transformation of international  
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First published 2011  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,  
an informa business*

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Typeset in Times by  
RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
Kratochwil, Friedrich V.

The puzzles of politics : inquiries into the genesis and transformation  
of international relations / Friedrich Kratochwil.

p. cm.—(The new international relations)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. International relations. I. Title.

JZ1242.K73 2010

327.1—dc22

2010007266

ISBN: 978-0-415-58101-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-58102-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-84511-0 (ebk)

‘A collection of Fritz Kratochwil’s essays is self-recommending – his standing as one of the most interesting and challenging of contemporary scholars of International Political Theory is incontestable. The particular merit of this collection is that it contains a number of less well-known and difficult to find pieces as well as some of his most famous contributions to the field. This is a book that deserves a very wide audience.’

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# The Puzzles of Politics

Friedrich Kratochwil is the author of the classic book *Rules, Norms and Decisions* (1989), which introduced constructivism to international relations and has had a profound and significant impact on the discipline.

*The Puzzles of Politics* brings together for the first time a collection of his key essays to explain his approach to international relations and how his thinking has developed over the last 30 years. It addresses topical themes and issues central to his work including sovereignty, law, epistemology, boundaries, global governance and world society.

The book includes a framing introduction written for this volume in which Kratochwil provides an intellectual biography providing context as well as an introduction to his work.

This important volume will be of very strong interest to students and scholars of international relations, political theory and law.

**Friedrich Kratochwil** is presently Professor of International Relations at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, and visiting scholar at Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Korea. After receiving his Ph.D. from Princeton he taught in the US at Maryland, Columbia and Penn, before returning to the LMU in Munich, Germany. He has been the editor of the *European Journal of International Relations* and member of the editorial boards of several journals, including the *Journal of International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *International Organization*, *World Politics*, *Review of International Studies*, and the *Journal of International Relations and Development*.

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# Acknowledgements

The publishers would like to thank the following publishers for permission to reprint their material:

Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies for “The Humean conception of international relations”, Center of International Studies, Princeton University, World Order Studies Program, Occasional Paper No. 3, June 1981.

MIT Press for “On the notion of interest in international relations”, *International Organization*, Vol. 36 (Winter 1982): 1–30.

Springer Science and Business Media for “Sovereignty, property, and propriety: the generative grammar of modernity”, English version of the article “Souveränität und Moderne” in *Festschrift fuer Beate Kohler-Koch*, edited by Markus Jachtenfuchs, Michelle Knodt, *Regieren in Internationalen Institutionen* (Opladen, Ger.: Leske und Budrich, 2002): 29–52.

School of International Affairs, Columbia University for “Thrasymachos revisited: On the relevance of norms and the study of law for international relations”, *Journal of International Affairs* (Winter, 1983): 343–56.

European Journal of International Law for “The limits of contract”, *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 5 (1994): 465–91.

Hart Publishing Ltd for “Has the ‘rule of law’ become a ‘rule of lawyers?’”, in Gianluigi Palombella, Neil Walker (eds.), *Relocating the Rule of Law* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2009): 171–96.

Sage Publications Ltd for “Constructing a new orthodoxy? Wendt’s ‘social theory of international politics’ and the constructivist challenge”, *Millennium*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2000): 73–101.

Sage Publications Ltd for “History, action and identity: Revisiting the ‘second great debate’ and assessing its importance for social theory”, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, No. 1 (2006): 5–29.

Cengage Learning Services Limited for “Ten points to ponder about pragmatism: Some critical reflections on knowledge generation in the social

sciences”, in Harry Bauer, Elisabetta Brighi (eds.), *Pragmatism in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2009): 11–25.

Cambridge University Press for “Of systems and boundaries: An inquiry into the formation of the state system”, *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (1986): 27–52. Copyright © 1986 Trustees of Princeton University.

Millennium Publishing Group for “The politics of place and origin: An enquiry into the changing boundaries of representation and legitimacy”, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, Vol. 1 (2001): 143–65.

Liverpool University Press for “Global governance and the emergence of ‘world society’”, in Nathalie Karagiannis, Peter Wagner (eds.), *Varieties of World Making: Beyond Globalization* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007): 266–83.

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# Preface

When I entered the discipline at the end of the 1980s, it was only tenuously linked to the other social sciences, and only patchily linked to the study of international law. Since then, numerous links have been forged between the three, and for that we may largely thank the emergence of constructivism. For many, constructivism has come to mean the thin American constructivism which studies the importance of ideas in processes of socialisation. Among the contenders, we find a variant that is steeped in the broad tradition of classics, continental philosophy and legal theorising. This variant was spearheaded by Fritz Kratochwil and Nick Onuf.

Fritz has put his mark on the discipline in three ways. First, by publishing *On Rules, Politics and Knowledge* in 1989. Secondly, by contributing a series of articles, the most central of which are collected here. And thirdly, by being the polyhistor to whom the rest of us would turn for inspiration and advice. At every ISA, Fritz, his former students and sundry hangers-on would make up a peripatetic *Stammtisch*, an untranslatable German term meaning a group of people meeting to discuss something at regular intervals as well as the table itself. For Fritz may love his ancient Greeks and know many languages, but there is no doubt about his nationality. In the German tradition, his students seem to think about him not only as a supervisor for a doctoral project, but as a *Doktorvater* (“doctor father”) for life. And in the German tradition, his pedagogical methods would strike most British people as, shall we say, unorthodox. I recall a panel in San Diego where Fritz served as discussant. The first paper was on Hedley Bull’s approach to international relations which the author apparently misinterpreted. The author, who in Kratochwil’s opinion, had badly misrepresented Bull’s position, was told, “and if he had been here, I am certain he would have grabbed hold of anything he could lay his hand on and clobbered you over the head with it, repeatedly”. I was the co-author of the next paper. Fritz noted that we found interesting consuls were new to the IR gaze, and opined that: “You say that no one has looked as this topic before. Well, as I say to my PhD students when they make that point: There may be a reason for that.”

The very same scholarly take-no-prisoners ethos shines out of the autobiographical essay that opens the book. We are then treated to three

perspectival essays, three legal essays, three epistemological essays and three categorising essays. Taken together, they demonstrate what a philosophically and socially informed constructivism looks like.

Iver B. Neumann

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1 A Wanderer between two worlds: An attempt at an intellectual biography	1
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Defining the approach</b>	13
2 The Humean perspective on international relations	15
3 On the notion of “interest” in international relations	38
4 Sovereignty, property and propriety: The generative grammar of modernity	64
<b>PART II</b>	
<b>Writings on international law</b>	81
5 Thrasymachos revisited: On the relevance of norms and the study of law for international relations	83
6 The limits of contract	99
7 Has the “rule of law” become a “rule of lawyers”? An inquiry into the use and abuse of an ancient <i>topos</i> in contemporary debates	126

**PART III**

**Writings on epistemology** 151

- 8 Constructing a new orthodoxy? Wendt's "social theory of international politics" and the constructivist challenge 153
- 9 History, action and identity: Revisiting the "second" great debate and assessing its importance for social theory 181
- 10 Ten points to ponder about pragmatism: Some critical reflections on knowledge generation in the social sciences 200

**PART IV**

**Drawing boundaries: The inter/external and the private/public nexus** 217

- 11 Of systems, boundaries, and territoriality: An inquiry into the formation of the state system 219
- 12 The politics of place and origin: An enquiry into the changing boundaries of representation, citizenship and legitimacy 241
- 13 Global governance and the emergence of "world society" 262

*Index* 281

# 1 A Wanderer between two worlds

## An attempt at an intellectual biography

### Where to begin?

The task of providing the reader with a brief intellectual biography is challenging for several reasons, especially at this stage of my life. But all of them actually boil down to the problem inherent in any biographical attempt, i.e. in the making out of the contingencies and accidents of one's journeys some more encompassing narrative that gives every detail its place shows its role in the developments that are being traced. This makes it necessary to choose a proper beginning, or perhaps put better, one needs to select a decisive break that organises the "before" and "after" and lets us follow through to the present. Such a move imposes thereby the perspective of an all-knowing narrator whose perceptions might be at odds with the actual twists and turns of the ongoing process of life, but which tries to make sense out of the contingent and seemingly unrelated elements. Given the story line, things and events attain by hindsight an importance and coherence they hardly had when they occurred. Different from the "first inklings" or "antecedents" that play such a role later, both the "inklings" and the various attempts at dealing with the contingencies of life were in "real time" little more than the effort to deal with the buzzing, blooming confusion of the world.

In a rather generous and sympathetic appraisal of my work Richard Falk has recently argued that I had "always been a Humean", and that he remembers me as one graduate student at Princeton who did not have to engage with lengthy soul-searching that is usually part of a graduate career.<sup>1</sup> True, by the time I met Richard and he had become my dissertation mentor I was well on my way to defining my approach to politics that – admittedly – was rather removed from the dominant "isms", be it realism, liberalism, or (at that time still) Marxism. Robert Gilpin had encouraged me during my seminars to follow up on the issue of "conventions", which seemed promising to him, but coming from a "realist" his suggestion left me somewhat puzzled at first. Actual help could have been available just a few buildings down College Walk since David Lewis was – if I remember correctly – at that time still in the philosophy department at Princeton. Unfortunately, I never met him and

## 2 *The Puzzles of Politics*

only later discovered his work which took off from Hume. Rather, it was Richard Falk who (in a long talk several months after the dissertation defense) twisted my arm and encouraged me to draw out the implications on signaling, on the emergence of custom, and of “unspoken rules” which develop through interaction, all of which had been the topic of my dissertation (which dealt with the emergence of the Cold War and attempts of détente).<sup>2</sup> What was needed was a much more integrated statement of a research program that could be built on such a conventionalist approach.

It is here that Hume became so important for me since following up on some of his ideas allowed me to integrate such issues as “salience”, the emergence of conventions, and the need for a “public entrepreneur” procuring public goods, but also the question of “emotions” and the extension of “sympathy” to others, of “interest” (that which is “in-between us” rather than a mere preference), of the role of language in social life, and of the “constructed character” of the social world and its inevitable “historicity”. Suddenly international law, particularly the discussions on custom or on “soft law” and a strategic analysis *à la* Schelling – with its emphasis on salience – showed some surprising elective affinities that could be brought together. The attention to history, so well justified by Bull and the British school, also seemed to fit with a focus on practical reason and the “classical approach” that took seriously the “particular” in politics. Rather than becoming enthralled by some grand “theory” and “science” that was based on an understanding of classical “physics that never was”, as Toulmin remarked later, there was much work to be done to give greater stringency to an approach that traditionally oriented itself on “prudence” rather than “theory” and which only in law had been worked out somehow. In short, all these elements seemed to define a research program of considerable scope and of heuristic power. Later my encounter with Berger and Luckmann’s work on the *Construction of Social Reality*, my deeper engagement with Austin’s and Searle’s language philosophy and with Luhmann’s often rather obscure sociology prepared the way for the “constructivist” approach with which I became later identified.

Even from this rather sketchy account it becomes clear that Richard Falk’s perception that I always had been a Humean was in a way fitting, but it also needed some correction. True, at the dissertation stage, when our meetings and discussions became frequent and covered a lot of ground, and following that, the one year I was at the Center for International Studies where both the *Humean Perspective* and *The notion of interest* were written, my approach had remained essentially in place for some time. What Falk’s interpretation underplays, though, is the years of graduate studies in the States, first at Georgetown and later at Princeton, that had provided me not only with a solid grounding in the discipline – I had entered graduate school without having ever taken a course on international politics – but also with an astonishing amount of food for thought that forced me to go back to and re-think what I had learned before.



Thus, I actually learned more about the “German tradition” in sociology (Weber, Marx, Schuetz, and Simmel) and history (Dehio, Hintze, and Meinecke) from Professors Allers (Georgetown) and Gilpin (Princeton) than from my teachers at the University of Munich. Richard Falk’s anti-formalist approach to law, although policy oriented – and here we did not always see eye to eye – was tremendously important for me breaking the sterile mode of a Kelsenian conception of law. It also impelled me to read some of the classics such as de Vitoria, Grotius, Vattel, or Savigny. Oran Young’s year long tutorial on the “Philosophy of the Social Sciences” at Princeton – which was an extensive course on both “scope and method” of political science (with occasional excursions to economics and sociology) – forced me not only to engage fully with the “scientific” study of politics but also to re-think some of the arguments that I had encountered in Germany, which later were referred to as the *Positivismusstreit* (which had pitted the Frankfurt School against logical positivists). So, if in a way I had hoped in 1967 to escape my past by “leaving town” and going to America, I quickly had to realise that such an escape was not viable. Nevertheless, I also quickly noticed that without such a sudden departure from the “old world” and its strictures, the new engagement with these debates and sources would not have been possible.

To that extent, the years in the US between 1967, when I arrived, and 1974, when I left Princeton for a job at Maryland (while 1969 I spent as an assistant at the Technical University back in Munich before returning to the States), were truly formative. They thus provide the justification for treating them in the sense of the all-knowing narrator as the crucial turning point that establishes the “before” and “after” and endows these categories with meaning.

## **The before**

If I had to name the influences that most strongly shaped my early life, they were certainly not ideas but the brutal circumstances of the post-war period. Being a refugee from the former Czechoslovakia and expelled again by Austria – which had in time discovered that it had nothing to do with the Third Reich – we landed in the American occupation zone in Germany in a little village in Bavaria near Augsburg. My father, a lawyer by training, had found a job in a saw mill, while my grandfather went back to his trade and produced brushes in a “cottage” industry. My function was mainly to be a worry to my parents as I had contracted tuberculosis. With no antibiotics available, all one could do was to wait and pray. Even staying with my family had become a problem, since a couple – well connected with the military government – wanted to adopt me, alleging that my parents could not care for me. Later, also, school officials objected to admitting me to school because of the dangers of infection. Needless to say, it was not a happy childhood and our precarious situation in Germany was reinforced by the general anxieties which were induced by the increasing chilliness of the Cold War manifesting itself in the Berlin Blockade, the Korean War, and the division of Europe.