

Book Review – Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, The European Union as Global Actor (2006)

*By Sebastian Wolf**

[Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, *The European Union as Global Actor*, (New York: Routledge, 2nd edition, 2006, ISBN: 0-415-28244-6)]

“The Union has translated its value-based identity into normative action, as promoter of human rights and sustainability across the international system. As a development and humanitarian actor the Union is distanced from the imperial legacy of the Member States and has developed a distinctive approach”

– Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, *The European Union as Global Actor*

A. Introduction

Compared to the bulk of literature on European multi-level governance and the different internal policies of the European Community, there is rather little research on the European Union’s external activities. This is likely to change. The post-Cold War world has pushed the EU to a more proactive international role. This development is reflected, inter alia, in several treaty amendments extending the Union’s external competences. *The European Union as Global Actor* by Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler impressively shows that the EU’s foreign policy is already a highly complex subject, maybe more complex than a nation state’s external relations. But complexity alone would hardly justify intensive research. The obvious question is: Does EU foreign policy matter? Bretherton and Vogler attempt “to provide an assessment of the capacity and character of the European

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Union as a global actor”.¹ From the outset, the authors make no secret of their opinion that the Union impinges significantly on several areas of global politics.²

B. A social constructivist approach

In the first chapter, Bretherton and Vogler stress that their book is unique because of its social constructivist approach: “We found particularly useful a social constructivist approach that conceptualizes global politics in terms of the processes of social interaction in which actors engage. These formal and informal processes shape the evolution of actors’ identities and provide contexts within which action is constrained or enabled”.³ Despite this (well-grounded) preference for Constructivism, it is rather sad that the authors deal with other major approaches, such as (neo-) Realism, Pluralism, and neo-Marxism only on a few pages.⁴ Regardless of their varying tendency to neglect the role of international organizations in global politics, these approaches might also contribute to some extent to an assessment of the capacity and character of the EU as a global actor.

The book’s constructivist approach is based on the notions of “presence”, “opportunity”, and “capability”. These notions are defined as follows: “Opportunity denotes factors in the external environment of ideas and events which constrain or enable actorness [...] Presence conceptualizes the ability of the EU, by virtue of its existence, to exert influence beyond its borders [...] Capability refers to the internal context of EU external action – the availability of policy instruments and understandings about the Union’s ability to utilize these instruments, in response to opportunity and/or to capitalize on presence”.⁵

Chapter 2 elaborates on competing collective identities offered to the Union and their potential implications for the EU’s actorness. This chapter, titled “Nature of the beast”, is of great value even for scholars who are not interested in the Union’s international role. Both inclusive identities (“the EU as singular actor or

¹ CHARLOTTE BRETHERTON & JOHN VOGLER, THE EUROPEAN UNION AS GLOBAL ACTOR (2006), 10.

² *Id.*, 1.

³ *Id.*, 13.

⁴ *Id.*, 15.

⁵ *Id.*, 24.

civilian/normative power”⁶) and exclusive identities (“the EU as a fortress”⁷) shape not only the Union’s external relations, but also internal EC policies.

C. Multifaceted external relations

EU policies cover all of the significant issue areas of contemporary global politics. Thus, chapters 3 to 8 deal with trade policy, environmental policy, development and humanitarian policy, relations with candidates and neighbors, Common Foreign and Security Policy, and European Security and Defense Policy. Bretherton and Vogler show that the EU’s capacity as a global actor varies from policy area to policy area. In the relatively well-established Community policy areas of trade, environment, and development and humanitarian assistance, the Union is able to play a leading role in international politics. On the other hand, the EU’s capacities with regard to security and military policies (so-called second pillar policies) are still rather limited.

Readers who expect that the threefold constructivist approach developed in chapter 1 is systematically applied to each policy area will be disappointed. There are no sections on “presence”, “opportunity”, and “capability” in every chapter. Some chapters rely more on these three notions, for instance chapters 3 (trade policy) and 5 (development and humanitarian policy), while others hardly mention them at all. All policy chapters are predominantly descriptive. The authors provide short historical overviews, selectively quote relevant TEC/TEU provisions⁸ and often indicate how a policy is administered by the Commission and/or the Council.⁹

The authors conclude that “the reasons for under-performance, or limited actor capability, can be summarized under the headings of consistency and coherence”.¹⁰ Deficiencies with regard to consistency and coherence are mainly ascribed to diverging Member States’ interests. It appears that the book profits from the fact that the constructivist approach is not overemphasized. Bretherton and Vogler do

⁶ *Id.*, 41.

⁷ *Id.*, 46.

⁸ It should be noted that *The European Union as Global Actor* is a book written by political scientists for political scientists and other social scientists. Lawyers with an interest in European politics will also profit from this insightful book, but they should not expect to find detailed information on TEC/TEU provisions and secondary law.

⁹ The reader will appreciate the supplementary information provided by many figures, tables, and notes. However, footnotes would be more accessible than the book’s endnotes.

¹⁰ See, *supra*, note 1, 222.

not claim that all (national) interests are constructed. Sometimes even the EU's value-based identity (often highlighted by the authors) is selfishly exploited by the Member States.

The conclusion, however, heavily draws on Constructivism. This makes sense: While day-to-day policies are often developed incrementally, overall strategies and policies are much likelier to be shaped by collective identities. Bretherton and Vogler attribute "to the union three broad roles - as a model, as a promoter of its proclaimed values, and as an alternative to the USA".¹¹ The first role refers to the Union's power of attraction, which mainly stems from its internal policies that led to stability and prosperity. The last role seems closely connected with the current US administration and might lose importance in future years. As to the second role, the authors' analysis is worth quoting: "The provisions of the European Security Strategy imply the subordination of value-based priorities, such as poverty eradication and environmental protection, to the security of the Union. The Strategy is quite clear that the first line of the Union's defense should be abroad; its interpretation, in future practice, may come to undermine the Union's value-based identity".¹²

D. Conclusion

The European Union as Global Actor is a very insightful addition to the literature on the international role of the EU. It benefits to a large extent from the many interviews the authors conducted with officials of several national and European institutions. Thus, contrary to other books, this one provides interesting details on how the Union's foreign policies are administered at a working level. Moreover, Bretherton and Vogler provide an excellent overview of the Union's complex external policies. Nevertheless, the authors seem to overemphasize some policy areas, for instance environmental policy,¹³ while neglecting others, for instance the external dimensions of the Common Agricultural Policy.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the book tells us little about the EU's foreign energy policy, one of the most important issues of the future. But these are only minor deficiencies of an exceptional piece of

¹¹ *Id.*, 223.

¹² *Id.*, 223.

¹³ Vogler is the author of numerous publications on the environment in world politics.

¹⁴ The CAP contradicts value-based foreign policy priorities such as poverty eradication.

scholarly work. As the EU is undergoing significant change, Bretherton and Vogler should not wait too long to publish the third edition of their excellent book.