

Review - Changing Norms Through Actions

Written by Mariana S. Mendes

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MARIANA S. MENDES, AUG 15 2013

Changing Norms Through Actions: The Evolution of Sovereignty

By: Jennifer M. Ramos

New York: Oxford University Press, 2013

The international relations literature on global norms has traditionally focused on assessing how norms impact and shape state behavior, privileging the treatment of norms as a cause and marginalizing the fact that they too can be a consequence of state behavior. Despite the great amount of research on norm diffusion, contestation and compliance, not as much attention has been paid to the effect behavior has on the emergence and evolution of norms. In order to provide a full picture of the norm-behavior nexus, and based on the premise that structure and agency are mutually and interactively constituted, one should also look at how behavior feeds back to the normative structure, establishing, perpetuating or altering norms.

Based on this conviction, in *Changing Norms Through Actions: The Evolution of Sovereignty*, Jennifer Ramos traces the recent evolution of what is probably the most seminal principle of the international order – sovereignty – and demonstrates how the practice and the results of military intervention (behavior) have modified traditional conceptions of sovereignty (norm). As expected, military interventions have, in general, contributed to a move from

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absolute towards contingent notions of sovereignty (i.e. sovereignty dependent upon having certain standards of behavior met), even though this is not an uncontested process: as different actors push and pull sovereignty in different directions, a growing “sovereignty divide” is contributing to an ideational polarization of the international scene (146).

What is particularly innovative about Ramos’ research is that, contradicting rational choice approaches, she argues that the more costly and arduous an intervention is, the more contingent sovereignty will be reinforced, even if unintentionally. Drawing from social psychology’s cognitive dissonance model – based on the idea that when confronted with two competing cognitions (e.g. defense of sovereignty vs. defense of human rights), people will strive to achieve cognitive consistency by emphasizing one of the values and downplaying the other – Ramos shows how during and after costly and unsuccessful interventions, intervening states have actually yielded more commitment to the idea that sovereignty is contingent upon having certain standards of behavior met.

Taking “leading states” as the main parties responsible for the propagation and modification of norms (since they are the ones that have the capability to act on behalf of the norm) and equating those states with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, Ramos selects two intervening and two non-intervening states in Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq and makes a content analysis of their speeches in the Security Council prior, during and after the onset of intervention in order to determine to what extent the intervention has modified their views of sovereignty. In accordance with her predictions, the analysis of the speeches of the intervening states in Afghanistan and Somalia reveals indeed that they reinforced their commitment to contingent sovereignty during and after the intervention, despite the high costs and limited success of their action. The exception is Iraq, where the false premises on which the intervention was based had the unintended consequence of weakening states’ views on the idea that sovereignty is dependent on compliance with international rules regarding weapons of mass destruction.

Because states’ conception of sovereignty might vary according to the normative issues that are being pushed forward to in a specific intervention, the author picks these three cases as they reflect three different issue areas – respectively, counterterrorism, human rights and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Not surprisingly, she notes that France, for instance, is a strong advocate of contingent sovereignty in cases of human rights abuses but does not hold the same commitment to contingent sovereignty in instances where violations of WMD related norms occur. More interestingly, Ramos argues that the reason why Russia and China (the two usual non-intervening suspects) are generally not supportive of military interventions is not because they are afraid the principle might turn against them but because they seek to maintain cognitive consistency between their external policies and domestic practices. Corroborating this idea, the case-studies reveal how China and Russia hold more strongly to absolute notions of sovereignty in cases like Somalia (human rights) than in Afghanistan (counterterrorism). The fact that both countries increased their support for the international community’s role in fighting terrorism after the intervention in Afghanistan further supports the argument that non-interveners may moderately change their views depending on their culpability and self-interest.

Despite the author’s emphasis on the role of actions in shaping norms, and in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the latter’s evolution, she also demonstrates how, for each of the case-studies, the normative structure was conducive to action and to a redefined understanding of sovereignty in the specific issue areas she focuses upon. Using Florini’s (1996) evolutionary model, according to which there are three necessary conditions for normative change – prominence of the new norm, coherence with other norms and a hospitable international environment – she traces the development of counterterrorism, human rights and WMD related norms and demonstrates how the presence of the three conditions mentioned made possible the evolution towards a norm of sovereignty conditional on states meeting their obligations in these three domains.

While Ramos’ study is empirically rich and theoretically innovative, the use of social psychology to understand states’ behavior is not without limitations. As the author herself recognizes, political leaders of intervening states must make sense of their decision for their publics in order to maintain legitimate power. The same is to say that the reason why they held more commitment to the norm of contingent sovereignty in an arduous and costly intervention might have more to do with this than with maintaining cognitive consistency. Moreover, the fact that the author focus only on the speeches surrounding specific interventions can be shortsighted. She does not assess, for instance, how the

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outcome of an intervention will impact the decision to intervene in a following similar situation. If an arduous intervention will make intervening states demonstrate more commitment towards the issues that made them act in the first place, it can also deter them from intervening in a subsequent crisis and therefore lead to the unintended reinforcement of the norm of absolute sovereignty. The inaction of the international community during Rwanda's tragedy, which took place shortly after the intervention in Somalia, is a case in point. It is therefore more prudent to look at longer periods of time (rather than focusing on one specific event) so as to grasp the full extent to which a state is committed to a norm.

Furthermore, if this book has the merit of emphasizing the role of action in shaping a norm (instead of the inverse), the findings turn out to be exclusively based on content analysis of states' speeches. While this is valid method to assess the evolution of norms – as discourses provide action with meaning and reflect the normative environment – it carries a danger of a different nature: the quantification and subsequent oversimplification of results. As the author bases her analysis on coding strategies, she ends up measuring states' commitment to a norm according to the number of times states invoke it and assessing the weakening/reinforcement of the norms of absolute and contingent sovereignty based on the amount of times they are defended. While there is probably no magic formula to determine states' commitment and to evaluate the prominence of something as abstract and fluid as a global norm, reducing them to numerical measures certainly runs a higher risk of artificiality than when complementing the analysis with additional qualitative methods such as discourse analysis or interviews with policy-makers.

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