

Maciej Herbut

ARTICLE REVIEW

TY SOLOMON, BRENT J. STEELE, MICRO-MOVES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY, EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS 2017, VOL. 23(2) 267–291

DOI: 10.1515/ppsr-2015-0036

The article represents an interesting trend in international relations (IR) which attempts to move away from macro-political theorizing. In this case macro-theorizing is associated with the great debates in international relations which have dominated the discourse in IR since the beginning of the 20th century. As Ty Solomon and Brent J. Steele, the authors, claim, IR theories dominated by the aforementioned grand theoretical debates overshadow the ‘everyday life’ practices of ordinary citizens. This is an important aspect of IR which should not be overlooked and be more deeply analyzed by scholars. The article is divided into five parts:

In the first part, *The introduction*, the reader’s attention is drawn to ‘grand theories’ and their downsides. The alleged “demise” of grand theories (which, according to the authors, is in fact not taking place and is more of a reflection of the condition of IR theorizing rather than their “end”) paves room for more “unorthodox” theories and ontologies to draw scholarly attention. As the authors claim, ‘micro theories’ classify as such and have the potential of (re)discovering the roles of individuals as well as communities in the shaping of international relations. Solomon and Steele thus consider micro-theorizing as complementary rather than an alternative to macro-theorizing. They introduce the concept of “micro-moves” which (according to the authors) may reshape the way in which global politics will be perceived. This conceptual framework comprises of a ‘three-dimensional space’ composed of *affects*, *space* and *time* which allows for the assessment of how the ‘every day’ lives of citizens influence international affairs.

In the second part *Explaining, and characterizing, moves to micropolitics in and of IR*, the authors continue to explain the importance of ‘micropolitical spaces’ and ‘micropolitics’ as being integral to the understanding of macropolitics. As the authors claim, the reasons why micropolitics started drawing scholarly attention is due to the rapid processes associated with globalization after the fall of the Soviet Union and the interdisciplinary inspirations of political and IR scientists. Additionally, after the 90’s research went beyond the boundaries of nation-states. More attention was drawn to non-state actors as well as societies which discern a great deal of activity due to the development of new technologies.

In the third part, *Micro-moves in IR theory considered: Practices, emotions and the everyday*, Solomon and Steele argue that an important aspect of IR inquiry should focus on bringing scholarly debates “down to the ground of world politics” while also making attempts of measuring how micropolitical processes “produce global political affects”. In other words, the authors try to convince the reader that IR should “steer away” from grand

systematic frameworks that, in many instances, neglect the roles of actions, practices and behaviours of communities.

In the next section, *Unpacking the micro: Affects, spaces, times*, the authors, by referring to case studies on the Arab Spring, describe the most important components of their theory, as indicated in the title of this section. All the three components are strictly interrelated and constitute a specific kind of a *milieu* which allows for a greater understanding of the *micropolitical moves*. It is the sociological and relational aspects, rather than psychological, on which the authors focus on. *Affects* are understood as “the energy of a particular situation” that is “heated up or cooled down by the pressure cooker of social interactions”. Of course, these *affects* can only be understood once ‘encapsulated’ in a sociologically determined domain of interactions centered around everyday activities of citizens such as rites, ceremonies, rules and laws.

In the fifth section, *Micropolitical possibilities*, the authors try and prove one of their main observations that the ‘spontaneous formations of micro-politics’ do not run counter to macro-processes. The micro-processes significantly affect the broader settings of the world, namely the society, state as well as global politics which leads to the tracing of casual effects that go beyond the ‘initial inquiry’. Additionally, the evaluation of ‘micro-effects’ allows not only the broadening the scope of investigation but it also allows one to comprehend certain processes that “have been missed or lost by the macropolitical analysis”.

The paper by Solomon and Steele, without a doubt, introduces an interesting and novel approach in understanding global politics. Still, the question is, does it really bring anything new? Taking under account that constructivist as well as sociological and cultural research already made attempts at linking the role of *agency* in international relations and its impact on the international *structure*, one may draw a conclusion that nothing new was introduced in the paper. Nicholas Onuf’s *The World of Our Making* as well as the research of James Rosenau (for instance, *The Study of World Politics: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges*), seem to address the issues related with micropolitics as well as the nature of interrelations between the micro and macro levels. Additionally, there are classical volumes such as the 1965 *The Ecological Perspective of Human Affairs with Special Reference to International Relations* by Harold and Margaret Sprout which address the concept of “milieu” to which also the authors of the reviewed article devote particular attention to. Still, regardless of some similarities, the concept of micro-moves as introduced by Solomon and Steele is not devoid of originality. For instance, what distinguishes it from the aforementioned research is that it does have a ‘true understanding’ of focusing on processes which occur ‘close to the ground’ or on the ‘individual level’ of ‘ordinary citizens’. While the Sprouts focus on the *milieu* of leaders and states and Rosenau deals with non-state actors that are situated below the level of the nation-state, none of the mentioned research seems to address the everyday activities and practices of citizens. The constructivists or sociologists such as Onuf, Rosenau or the Sprouts seem to focus rather on the *nomothetic* rather than *idiographic* aspects of the *agency-structure* debate. In other words, the reviewed article not only manages to make attempts of embracing the ‘grass-root’ problems that may affect international relations, but it also manages to deliver a seemingly viable analytical/theoretical framework (in this case in the form of the three dimensional space bounded by affects, spaces, times) which can serve as a “toolkit” for more thorough generalizations and has the potential for future theory building.