



The Roles Nations Play: A Study of Britain on the International Stage, 1962-1999

David M. McCourt

PhD thesis defence on 31 October 2008

Abstract

This thesis is a theoretical study of the roles nations play in international politics, with a particular focus on Britain's changing engagement with the international system since the Second World War. It notes the pervasiveness of the dramaturgical analogy—or the metaphor of the 'world stage'—in reference to the behaviour of states in international affairs, but the general silence from International Relations (IR) as to the importance of the concept for the theory and practice of international politics. The thesis consequently puts forward an 'interactionist' approach to state roles, based on a reading of symbolic interactionism that, it is argued, can solve a number of the problems identified in the limited number of theoretical treatments of roles found in the literature. Such an approach focuses on the way shared understandings of a state's proper place in the world, or its 'role', emerge and change through particular interactions. This lens is brought to bear on the case of Britain's changing role in the post-War world, which, it is contended, offers a particularly salient example of a state that has altered the bases of its international relations in the recent past. Four episodes of Britain's post-War foreign policy are then analysed in depth in order to gauge the changing meanings associated with Britain's role on the world stage: the 'Skybolt crisis' of 1962, the withdrawal from East of Suez in 1968, the Falklands War of 1982, and finally Britain's involvement in the international intervention in Kosovo between 1998 and 1999. It is argued in conclusion that the approach outlined in the thesis provides not only a more fine-grained analysis of Britain's post-War experience than the dominant narratives represent, but that it also offers a useful theoretical framework with which to approach the study of state behaviour in international politics, one that significantly advances theorising within the constructivist paradigm and the English School tradition.



David M. McCourt

Following the successful defence of his thesis on 31 October 2008, David M. McCourt will remain at the European University Institute, Florence, for the fourth year of the doctoral programme. Before coming to Florence, David completed a master's degree in International Relations at Queens' College at the University of Cambridge. David intends to use the remainder of the academic year disseminating the findings of his research in journal articles and at conferences. He currently has two papers under review with leading journals in IR and international history, and will present his paper *What was Britain's East of Suez Role? Reassessing the Withdrawal, 1964-1968* at the British International Studies Association conference in Exeter, 17-19 December 2008. He also intends to use the comments and suggestions of his internal and external dissertation examiners to further improve the thesis manuscript with a view to publication.