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Historical sociology in international relations: open society, research programme and vocation

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Open Society, Research Programme and Vocation

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Abstract

Over the last twenty years, historical sociology has become an increasingly conspicuous part of the broader field of International Relations (IR) theory, with advocates making a series of interventions in subjects as diverse as the origins and varieties of international systems over time and place, to work on the co-constitutive relationship between the international realm and state-society relations in processes of radical change. However, even as historical sociology in IR (HSIR) has produced substantial gains, so there has also been a concomitant watering down of the underlying approach itself. As a result, it is no longer clear what exactly HSIR entails: should it be seen as operating within the existing pool of available theories or as an attempt to reconvene the discipline on new foundations? This article sets out an identifiable set of assumptions and precepts for HSIR based on deep ontological realism, epistemological relationism, a methodological free range, and an overt normative engagement with the events and processes that make up contemporary world politics. As such, HSIR can be seen as operating as an open society, a research programme and a vocation.

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Stock taking[*]

Thirty-five years ago, James Rosenau (1969) made an eloquent case for a stock-taking exercise which could clarify the principal aims, concepts and methods of the emerging field of foreign policy analysis (FPA). Rosenau wrote (1969: 1),

> Every field of enquiry goes through an important and necessary stage during which scholars turn their attention to the kind of enterprise in which they are engaged. After a prolonged period of concern with substantive matters, self-consciousness of purpose develops and questions arise about the road that has been travelled to date and the direction which enquiry should follow in the future. At this point, histories of the field are written, exploration of its boundaries are undertaken, methods of research are sensitized, and the requirements of further theoretical concepts are re-examined. While it is not clear whether this process of maturation constitutes "healthy fervent" or "hopeless confusion", the nature and limits of the field eventually emerge with greater clarity, thus enabling its practitioners to move on to the central task of accumulating knowledge through the investigation and interpretation of substantive materials.

This article is a Rosenau-inspired stock-taking exercise into the use of historical sociology in International Relations (HSIR). Neither the broader enterprise of historical sociology nor the more particular orientations of HSIR are, of course, the FPA's of their day. Historical sociology can be seen as at least two-centuries old (albeit depending to some extent on when and where you start counting) – an attempt by economists, philosophers of history and nascent sociologists to provide a historically sensitive, yet generally applicable, account of the emergence of capitalism, industrialisation, rationalism, bureaucratisation, urbanisation

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and other core features of the modern world.[1] Although the place of historical sociology within sociology suffered from the broader discipline's diversion into abstract theorising and its turf-wars with cognate rivals, historical sociology experienced something of a renaissance during the late 1970s and early 1980s, around the time that a wave of self-consciously historical sociological work began to appear in IR.[2] Over the last twenty years, the nexus between these two fields – historical sociology and IR – has borne substantial fruit: analysis of the origins and varieties of international systems over time and place (Watson 1992, Spruyt 1994, Buzan and Little 2000), exposure of the 'myth of 1648' (Osiander 2001, Teschke 2003), analysis of the non-Western origins of the contemporary world system (Wallerstein 1995, Gills 2002, Hobson 2004), work on the co-constitutive relationship between the international realm and state-society relations in processes of radical change (Halliday 1999, Lawson 2005a), examination of the social logic of international financial orders (Seabrooke 2006), and exploration of the international dimensions of modernity itself (Rosenberg 1994a, 2006). HSIR is now a formally recognised, if still minority, approach within the discipline.

In which case, why the need for a stock-take? The answer is hinted at by Rosenau (1969: 1): 'After a prolonged period of concern with substantive matters, self-consciousness of purpose develops and questions arise about the road that has been travelled to date and the direction which enquiry should follow in the future'. So it is with HSIR. Even as substantial gains have been made, there has been a concomitant watering down of the underlying approach itself. HSIR seems to be sweeping up refugees from IR's methodological wars just as historical sociology embraced those exiled by sociology's internecine struggles thirty years ago. As a result, it is no longer clear, if it ever was, what exactly HSIR entails: should it be seen as operating within the existing pool of available IR theories – as an attempt to join the rank and file of IR's puzzle-breakers, problem-solvers and safe-crackers? Or is HSIR better

seen as an attempt to reconvene the discipline on entirely new foundations, perhaps reorienting IR more towards sociology and away from its current infatuation with economics?[3] In somewhat cruder IR terms, are HSIR-ers better seen as bandwagoners or revisionists?

Failure to provide a consistent answer to these fundamental questions has contributed to a process of dilution in which HSIR has come to be seen as a catch-all term for any work that contains historical, sociological and international sensitivities. There is a danger that, as currently constituted, HSIR's greatest strengths – its broad purview, its explanatory reach, and its balance between big ideas and empirical graft – could also become its principal weakness, engendering a lack of clarity that could reduce its overall value.[4] Perhaps it is time to come clean about just what HSIR is about – on the grounds of intellectual honesty if nothing else. *Caveat emptor*![5]

HSIR's 'anything goes' approach has been somewhat augmented by catholic tendencies within HSIR itself. Hence, a prominent advocate, John Hobson (2002), argues that there are *seven* types of HSIR, ranging from post-modernists to structural realists – quite a catch. At the same time, Hobden (2002) and Hobson (2006) claim that HSIR is the *über*-approach to IR, a method followed by almost all IR scholars before the Waltzian ahistoricist detour. While this descriptive definition has certainly been of value during the infancy of HSIR when alliances, for prudence sake, were made when and where they could be, there is a danger that taking such a Feyerabend-ian 'anything goes' approach privileges inclusivity above coherence, and risks uprooting HSIR from its own heritage in classical social theory.[6] If HSIR is to become a mature feature within the broad landscape of contemporary IR theory, we need a better understanding of what it is, how it operates and where its boundaries lie.

In the first instance, therefore, this article is an attempt to ascertain just what HSIR's 'domain assumptions' (Gouldner 1970) are. It asks whether HSIR is best seen as a vocation,

as a research programme or as an open society; whether it presupposes a particular ontology, epistemology, methodology or substantive agenda; what its relationship is and should be to other IR paradigms; and which other disciplines should be seen as its friends, siblings or cousins, estranged or otherwise. Providing some preliminary responses to these questions should allow, as Rosenau puts it (1969: 1), 'the nature and limits of the field to emerge with greater clarity'. In the final analysis, the principal pay-off of HSIR will emerge from its substantive output. But if this enterprise is to achieve its widest possible impact, substantive work needs to be premised on an identifiable set of assumptions and precepts which are commonly shared and widely accepted.[7]

Historical sociology as an open society

Historical sociology is as much a part of world history, institutional analysis and development economics as it is a sub-section of sociology, International Relations and comparative politics. Historical sociology, therefore, has necessarily open borders. For HSIR, this is especially important. In its broadest sense, historical sociology aims to unravel the complexity that lies behind the interaction between social action (both deliberate and unintentional) and structural forces (socially constructed but with an enduring authority and dynamic of their own). Hence, for HSIR-ers, international factors are juxtaposed, conjoined and connected with domestic variables with the aim of finding patterns that explain international processes: the general and regional crisis that provoke wars, varieties of capitalist development, forms of imperialism and so on.

The principal benefit of historical sociology in IR is clear – it emboldens what Justin Rosenberg (1994b) calls 'the international imagination'. As numerous scholars have pointed

out, much of mainstream International Relations is curiously unhistorical. In fact, realism (in all its variants) and neoliberal institutionalism share a predilection for seeing the international realm, at least in terms of its structural dimension, as unchanging, in other words as existing *outside* history. Taking a static picture of the structure of world politics – the sovereign states-system – irons out differences between political units, omits other global structural forces such as capitalism and reduces agency to the unit-level musings of statesmen, financiers and generals. In this way, mainstream IR has systematically truncated the study of world politics by introducing a levels of analysis parlour game which reifies social processes and social facts – states, the market, sovereignty – as timeless analytical (and ultimately as ontological) entities. In this way, much IR theory becomes home to what we might call a 'continuist mystique' in which the past is ransacked in order to explain the present. Thus, the contest between Athens and Sparta is transplanted to the Cold War in order to elucidate the stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union; all wars, whether they be guerrilla insurgencies or total conflicts, are explained by international anarchy; and all political units – city-states, nomadic tribes, empires, nation-states and transnational alliances – are functionally undifferentiated. What John Hobson (2002) describes as a 'gigantic optical illusion' generates an isomorphic homology of social kinds.

Historical sociology, which was in its post-war guise in part a reaction to the timeless, spaceless (and specious) general theory associated with Parsonian structural-functionalism, is well suited to disentangling the synchronic mystique of much mainstream IR. Over the last twenty years, HSIR has produced numerous works which have picked away at neorealist and institutionalist assumptions about the international realm. Justin Rosenberg (1994a, 2006) has focused on the origins of modernity itself, laying bare the crude separation of state from society and states from markets carried out by political realism. John Hobson (2004) has demonstrated the importance of understanding the global, long-term genesis of the modern

states-system. Fred Halliday (1999) has, in numerous texts, demonstrated the importance of various forms of social change in the making of the modern world, while scholars as far removed as the critical theorist Andrew Linklater (1998) and the Marxist Benno Teschke (2003) have sought to contextualize and demythologize the foundational myth of Westphalia. Barry Buzan and Richard Little (2000) have shown in a detailed study how the international system changes in form and content according to time and place.

But it is not only dyed in the wool HSIR-ers who are contributing to this form of research. Hence, Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald (1996) have used a historically sensitive, comparative analysis to show how the non-use of nuclear and chemical weapons has, in large part, evolved over the last century from the interplay between a number of domestic and international factors, constructing a standard of civilization that prohibits the use of these weapons. Similarly, Martha Finnemore (1996, 2003) has illustrated how the norm of humanitarian intervention has been constructed over time, starting with the protection of Christians from persecution by the Ottoman Empire, and carried via the fight against slavery and decolonization into a universal concept of humanity. Other constructivists such as Christian Reus-Smit (1999) and Michael Barnett (2002) also adopt a historical sociological take on the institutional underpinnings of international orders and on the changing functions of international organizations respectively. Like these constructivists, a number of neo-classical realists such as Fareed Zakaria (1999), Randall Schweller (1998), William Wohlforth (1993), Thomas Christensen (1997) and Jennifer Sterling-Folker (2002) are looking at how the systemic pressures afforded by anarchy are translated through unit-level intervening variables, ranging from perceptions to civil-military relations. These scholars show that, without building in scope for ideology, perception, domestic state-society relations and the like, structural realism fails to explain why states balance or bandwagon, hide or transcend, chain-gang or buck-pass.

The work of these constructivists and neo-classical realists, allied to the efforts of other IR notables such as Barry Buzan (2004), John Ikenberry (2003) and Stephen Krasner (1999), who also apply historical sociological methods within the English School, liberal and realist traditions respectively, is not always self-consciously written as historical sociology. Yet it could be described as such in that each of these studies is rooted in a *diachronic* understanding of the international realm, looking at how social action and social structures, and the social facts engendered by interaction between these two spheres, change over time, inhabiting a domain of both continuity and disjuncture. In the first instance, such works are empirically grounded studies of 'sufficient similarity', using several cases to generate causal patterns and wider inferences beyond either a universalistic program or a collapse into indeterminacy. As such, these studies take place within a research tradition dating back to Max Weber's attempt to provide an empirically rich, comparative study of social facts which he used as a means to generate and evaluate a general argument. This conjoining of interpretation and explanation (*Verstehende Erklärung*) uses awareness of particular contexts in order to derive a nuanced, causal explanation of ideal-types that potentially contains a wider import. It is this approach that, I argue, contains fertile ground for the study of world politics. By tacking between empirical data, conceptual abstractions and causal explanations, as Michael Mann (1986) puts it, 'carrying out a constant conversation between the evidence and one's theory', it is possible to refine and refute, engage with and accumulate knowledge.

Of course, historical sociologists beyond IR's disciplinary boundaries have also contributed to our understanding of international processes. Hence, Michael Mann (1986, 1993) includes numerous international processes, including militarism, in his account of world historical development, while Charles Tilly (1988) has helped to show the importance of warfare and capital accumulation to processes of state formation. These border raids create opportunities for what Bruce Carruthers (2005) calls 'constructive misbehaviour' – the

chance for intellectual entrepreneurs to act as translators, borrowing concepts and data from one academic discipline and introducing it into another.[8] This act of arbitrage, when it is done well, reduces levels of 'intellectual autism' (Steinmetz: 2005) – the narrowing of a field under the watchful scrutiny of academic homeland security agents. What is more, disciplinary travelling can help to deconstruct the mythical qualities of analytical shorthands (such as the state, society or anarchy) which are often reified, in the interests of little more than academic partitioning, as ontological distinctions.

However, it is important not to get too carried away with openness and fluidity both within disciplines and between them. Interdisciplinarity can engender thinness and sloppiness as well as promote depth and rigour. Indeed, some of historical sociology's raiding parties on various disciplines, including IR, has seen the misapplication of outdated concepts and theoretical toolkits.[9] It is, perhaps, inherent in interdisciplinary work that it is attracted to the mainstream of another subject rather than to the more interesting debates that lie beneath the surface. Equally, hastening to interdisciplinarity can collapse the distinction between incommensurability and incompatibility. While the former conceives of HSIR as being carried out within a relatively closed or autonomous research community, co-existing peacefully (if somewhat estranged) from other IR paradigms, the latter sees HSIR in open conflict with rival approaches, basing its *raison d'être* on contesting, refuting and falsifying some of IR's foundational claims. In this sense, it is important not to obscure root-and-branch differences lest bridge-building become a metaphor for cannibalism, a means of amplifying the narcissism of small differences, or of generating dilettantism. Better, perhaps, to try to coax the broad field of HSIR into two major ideal-types which, with apologies to Isaiah Berlin, I will call 'hedgehogs' and 'foxes'.[10]

Hedgehogs

Isaih Berlin's (1953) essay – *Hedgehogs and Foxes* – distinguished between those who orient research around one big idea (Hedgehogs) and those who are sceptical of such ventures, preferring instead smaller scale interventions into particular fields (Foxes). Hedgehogs work *from* general abstractions *to* empirical material (when and where they deign to do so). This is the stuff of grand theory, of foundational macro-schema operating above the rudiments, and to some extent the impediments, of events, action and experience. Hedgehog research – in long-hand what we might describe as historically-nuanced social theory – stems from a rejection of induction as a means of generating verifiable, or refutable, social theory.[11] Candidates include the Wallersteinian (1995) world-systems approach, Giddens' (1991) evocation of globalisation as the deep structure of the contemporary world, and Rosenberg's (2006) concept of uneven and combined development, all attempts to provide a hypo-deductive, determinate *modus operandi* within which the principal contours of world history can be derived. Hedgehogs bare a family resemblance to the Austrian School of economists, centred around Carl Menger, who argued in the latter part of the nineteenth century that only deductive, nomological, abstract reasoning would produce 'proper' theory that could generate universally applicable laws.[12] Karl Popper (1957: 38), one of the progenitors of the nomological method, explains its virtues with his customary élan, 'theories are nets cast to catch what we call the world: to rationalise, to explain and to master it we endeavour to make the mesh ever finer and finer'.[13]

The strengths of such theorising are easy to distinguish – they are grand in scale and ambition; often original, imaginative and fertile schema which generate and sustain significant research programmes. As such, they are exemplars of what Kuhn (1962) calls 'extraordinary research'. Grand theory is often allied to parsimony and elegance, and those who pull-off such a venture stand squarely on the shoulders of the illustrious theorisers of the

nineteenth century. However, the weaknesses of abstracted grand theory, particularly in historical sociology, are also glaring. By focusing on (often single) underling determinants, these theorists tend to omit the range of factors, long-term and short-term, material and ideational, economic, social and political, that make up processes of large-scale change. This produces a gap between theoretical assertions (analytical scope conditions), and historical analysis (temporal and spatial scope conditions) which threatens to make the former static rather than dynamic, and the story of human history simple rather than complex. Such a theory cannot be exhaustive; rather, it runs the risk of delivering internal elegance only at the cost of its analytical punch.[14]

All too often, hedgehogs overcome anomalies by pushing their idea into domains for which it is ill-equipped to cope. A good example of this is provided by contemporary neorealism. Following the end of the Cold War, neorealists struggled to explain the relatively peaceful change from a system of bipolarity to unipolarity.[15] Although some advocates attempted a salvaging job on this apparent incongruity,[16] they strained to maintain the efficacy of the theory given the apparent absence of great power balancing since 1989. The result has been an increasingly fractious debate over the relative stability and durability of unipolarity, the concept of soft balancing, and, most notably, a 'back to the future' scramble in which many realists have resurrected classical theorists in order to re-introduce unit-level dimensions that were exorcised from the approach by Waltz and others.[17] Given these two major discrepancies in neorealist theory – peaceful systemic change and an apparently stable unipolarity – it is more likely that such debates have marked a retreat from neorealism rather than a modification or extension of its core precepts. As such, they represent the degeneration rather than the progression of neorealism as a research programme, a pertinent illustration of the tendency of hedgehogs to swallow or slide away from unhelpful empirical anomalies rather than to ditch an idea which seems to be have been falsified.[18]

It is doubtful whether the determinate theories offered by hedgehogs can capture the particularity of world historical development in all its intricacies, quirks and twists, at least not in the depth required or with sufficient detail. To do so requires reducing history to a secondary role, what Stanley Hoffman (1960: 135) calls, 'a grab-bag from which each advocate pulls out a "lesson" to prove his point'. If world history is messy, complex and at times, contradictory, then a multi-causal analysis that finds common patterns, trends and trajectories *from* empirical analysis rather than one which seeks to impose a monolithic order *on* historical ambiguities is likely to yield a richer picture. After all, once they are applied, general abstractions soon reach their limits. And sometimes the search for a master process can seem akin to a search for the mind of God, a theistically driven desire for there to be intelligent design amidst the flotsam and jetsam of world history.

The Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1970) makes this point well. For Sartori, at the extreme edge of abstraction lies the possibility of 'concept stretching' or 'straining' towards vague, amorphous crystallizations, pseudo-universals without either precision or purchase – anarchy and globalisation being two such examples.[19] The result is abstracted short-cuts leading to empirical short-circuits, failed attempts to apply rigid rules to a changing, multi-faceted and complex world. By conducting theory 'at first remove' and by focusing on the *structural* dimensions of world historical development, such analysis is infused with a reductionism that loses touch with the uncertainty and, most crucially, the agency that lies at the heart of processes of large-scale change. But agency can neither be ignored nor merely grafted onto an existing structural theory: the actions of individuals, groups, organisations and the like play a *formative* role in the creation, process and resolution of processes of change. Mikhail Gorbachev was not a bit part player in the collapse of the Soviet Empire, nor was Bill Clinton in the construction of the liberal post-Cold War

settlement, and nor is President Bush and his entourage in the extension of the US imperium today.

Far from being the passive bearers (*Träger*) of overbearing structures, human agency is, at least in part, *constitutive* of processes of social change. Yet abstracted grand theorists give us only a partial picture – one that, albeit unintentionally, can look like an inevitable tale or a pre-determined narrative. This entails not just a loss of agency, but also a failure to grasp the second aspect of what Giddens (1984) calls the 'double hermeneutic' – the fact that the theories that people use to make sense of social processes enter reflexively into the very causal processes which they are theorising.[20] Abstracted theory which relies on others 'under-labouring' can produce little more than interpretation of others interpretations, what John Goldthorpe (1991: 211-230) calls 'incomplete speculations', 'pick and mix raids on history's sweetshop'. All theories need to simplify reality in order to function as theories, but on occasion, simplification can become uncomfortably close to distortion.

Foxes

Foxes, the second broad group of historical sociologists, can be seen as sociologically oriented historians, those with their roots in idiographic methods. For most such historians, the task of assigning patterns to history, let alone conducting any search for its determinant trends, is futile, more likely to generate fools gold than findings of real value. As Robert Nisbet (1969: 240-241) puts it,

> History in any substantive sense is plural. It is diverse, multiple, and particular. There have been innumerable histories since the first history of the first human group began … not only are there many histories, there are many chronologies, many times … many histories, many areas, many times! The mind boggles at the task of encapsulating such diversity within any empirically clear formula or synthesis. It cannot be done; not empirically, not pragmatically.

Given this starting point, the best that the researcher can achieve is what Michael Mann (1986: 4) calls 'proximate method' or what Jean-Paul Sartre (in Smith 1991: 231) labels as 'rational disorder' – an assemblage of history's multiple vectors into a kind of organised mess. After all (Mann 1986: 4), 'societies are always much messier than our theories of them', and contingency, accident and indeterminacy are constant companions to world historical processes. For Mann and other historical sociologists in this bracket, there can be no story of ultimate primacy. Embracing the complexity of world history and accepting multiple patterns of causation tends towards an inductive approach that builds *from* history *to* mid-range abstractions.[21] The benefits of such an approach are clear – in terms of nuance, detail and sensitivity, historical sociology of this type is unrivalled.

However, such an approach also has its downsides. By stressing contingency, accident and particularity, there is a possibility that bigger, more important commonalities are missed. At the very least, this runs the risk of 'overdetermination' – the provision of a shopping list of causes that includes all sorts of weak or insignificant factors in a vain attempt to provide a 'complete' explanation. Worse still, such an approach can collapse into arbitrariness, incoherence, ad-hocery, and ultimately, into negativity, becoming analysis rather than theory, and sacrificing depth for broadness. Just because the world is complex, it does not mean that it is unknowable. Even if we can not see things as they 'really are', it is still possible to conjure appropriate shorthands and metaphors that provide compelling narratives into world history's gloaming. Most of the time, as Eric Ringmar (1996) points out, the research process of 'seeing as' encounters a relatively stable set of understandings and meanings. And there should be little inhibition to making a judgement that prefers one explanation over another. Accepting particularity does not, therefore, entail abandoning the attempt to evaluate rival truth claims into the causal rhythms that punctuate world historical processes. Rather, the generation of causal narratives provides a means of telling superior

stories – studies of causation that seek to explain the most important elements within complex social processes and to make sense of structural production, reproduction, reform and transformation.[22]

Nisbet and other researchers in this mould are surely right to insist that social explanation tally closely with historical records. Here it is worth returning again to the work of Giovanni Sartori (1970). Sartori proposed that social science works within a ladder of abstraction ranging from general abstractions (genus) to mid-level taxonomies (class) to empirical analysis (species). For Sartori, social scientists would be best served by starting with medium-level abstractions or hypothesis and working up and down the ladder of abstraction, testing whether their hunches fit both with more general concepts, and with the available empirical material. For Sartori, this process of 'conceptual travelling' generates 'fact-storing containers' (empirical universals) which are geared at unravelling the interplay between homogeneity and heterogeneity, and which combine explanatory purchase with a high level of empirical content. Subsequently renamed by David Collier and James Mahon (1993) as a 'ladder of generality', Sartori's method seems particularly well suited to historical sociology, allowing concepts, categories and causal regularities to be properly assessed over time and space, and in the process generating workable, theoretically compelling taxonomies and classificatory schemas.

Lumpers and splitters, sweepers and detailers

It is important to note that any hard distinction between these two ideal-types is unlikely to be carried through in practice. Rather, the choice to be made is one of degree – as John Lewis Gaddis (2001) argues, the difference between 'embedded theory' as practised by historians in which theory is subordinated to the overarching narrative, and 'encompassing theory', which

subordinates narrative to theoretical needs, is often one of aesthetics rather than principle. To add a degree of precision, therefore, to our ideal-types, we may want to further nuance these categories. Figure 1 attempts to do just this – providing a basic grouping of historical sociologists divided by two axis: the x axis runs between lumpers (holists) and splitters (instrumentalists), and the y axis between sweepers (abstractors) and detailers (historians). What this sub-division entails is four basic camps: in the top-left quadrant (lumpers/ sweepers) can be found (neo)Marxists and structural functionalists; in the bottom-left (lumpers/detailers) quadrant are predominantly world historians; in the bottom-right quadrant (detailers/splitters) lie (neo)Weberians; and the top-right quadrant (sweepers/splitters) is occupied by advocates of rational choice, network analysis and other, mainly US-dominated, methodological pursuits.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

Figure 2 provides a more detailed mapping exercise which adds a further layer of subtlety to these broad categorisations. By looking at how individual scholars map onto these two axis, it is possible to gauge the substantial variation within historical sociology. Orientation within the mapping exercise is best begun via its extreme edges. At the furthest remove of the sweepers/lumpers is Talcott Parsons, doyen of structural functionalism. Towards the central point of this quadrant can be found Benno Teschke, an IR based neo-Marxist who incorporates substantive historical research and a fair degree of agency in his analysis. Those who retain a firmer attachment to holism or structuralism, while also maintaining a degree of historical nuance, such as Theda Skocpol and Barrington Moore, can be found further along the west of the y axis.

Moving counter-clockwise into the bottom-left corner of the grid, the extremity is marked by Fernand Braudel – patrician of the Annales School of French historians who were

much taking with the slow-moving impact of geography and demography on world historical development.[23] Braudel's evocation of the *longue durée*, change which takes place over eons, marks him out as a lumper, but the extraordinarily richness of his historical research – each volume of *The Mediterranean* (1972) alone runs to over a thousand pages – marks Braudel as a consummate detailer. Moving east along the x axis takes one away from structuralism and towards instrumentalism, while moving up the y axis denotes a higher degree of abstraction. Hence, a researcher who focuses on the structural impact of demographic change, Jack Goldstone, is only just contained within this quadrant, while John Hobson, a world historian much influenced by Weberianism can be found edging towards the mid-point of the grid – Hobson's research attempts to conjoin detailing and lumping, and to link instrumentalism with a degree of conceptual abstraction.

Moving once more counter-clockwise around the grid we come to the bottom-right quadrant represented by splitters/detailers. At the furthest edge of this quadrant is E.P. Thompson, the British 'historian from below', who consistently emphasised the importance of taking individuals and individual agency as the basis for 'real' history.[24] Interestingly, almost directly above Thompson can be found Michael Mann's recent work on fascism. Mann has followed a trajectory steadily eastwards across the grid, from the first volume of *Sources of Social Power* (*SSP*) which places him, albeit marginally, among the lumpers and detailers, to Volume II of *SSP* in which Mann moves just across the border into splitters/detailers and, most recently, towards the edge of this quadrant, a move predicated by Mann's shift towards thick description and instrumentalism. Towards the centre of this quadrant can be found a number of prominent neo-Weberian historical sociologists including Anthony Giddens, Norbert Elias, and straying towards the instrumentalist hinterland of the x axis, Charles Tilly.

Finally, moving into the top-right corner of the grid delineates the space occupied by abstractors/splitters. The farthest position here is taken up by Michael Hechter and Edgar Kiser, well known for their avocation of a rational choice strand within historical sociology. This quadrant is less well occupied than the others – indicative of the fact that historical sociology is not particularly well suited to abstractions such as rational choice, particularly when this is conjoined with instrumentalism and methodological individualism.[25] Towards the centre of this quadrant lie some IR scholars who can be described as HSIR-ers even if they do not often wear the label explicitly.

This grid indicates two key points: first, there is considerable variation within historical sociology. Historical sociologists appear as foxes and hedgehogs, lumpers and splitters, sweepers and detailers on a broad continuum between universality and particularity, thick description and the generation of concrete universals. Historical sociology, therefore, is not a homogenous field in which it is possible to lay down definite border positions – the enterprise is a prototypical open society. Second, the grid indicates that one of the central tasks of historical sociology (perhaps *the* central task), is to perform a balancing act between theoretical and empirical work, and between recognising the complexity of the social world while at the same time ensuring that one does not become lost in minutiae – differentiating between normal abnormality and abnormal normality. This is the reason why C. Wright Mills appears at the centre of the diagram. Mills' clarion call for a sociological enterprise that eschews both grand theory (abstraction without application) and abstracted empiricism (behaviouralist quantifications of human action) speaks directly to the historical sociological imagination – an imagination that, as Roland Dannreuther and James Kennedy point out in their contribution to this forum, is thriving, if unevenly so.

Historical Sociology as a research programme

The preceding section argued that historical sociology is a broad church containing its fair share of zealots, converts and heretics. As it has developed, historical sociology has been applied within a number of formal disciplines and across a number of issue areas. Historical sociologists have asked important questions, probed at interesting puzzles, provided some compelling hypothesis, and produced an array of empirical studies on subjects as varied as the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the development of manners. The promise of historical sociology, considered in this light, is rich indeed. Going beyond the broad parameters laid out above, this section delineatea some clear domains and guidelines within which advocates of HS can work. In other words, I am attempting to establish some basic ground rules for historical sociological work – as Larry Laudan (1977) would have it, 'a set of ontological do's and don'ts'. Or as Imre Lakatos (1970) prefers, as a research programme which provides a sense of progress as it develops over time.[26]

Ontological realism

There is no flawless frame for the construction of theory. Indeed, as C. Wright Mills (1959) warns, working from a single ontology can create a 'transhistorical straightjacket' within which history is manipulated rather than given the chance to breathe. Nevertheless, the current ontological framework within which much social science operates, as Heikki Patomaki and Colin Wight (2000) point out, exerts a similar straightjacket on research. Patomaki and Wight claim that the current choice available to scholars is little more than that between two narrow forms of realism: realism as sense data (the empirical, phenomenal realism practiced by rationalists) and realism as language (the linguistic, inter-subjective

noumenal realism of post-positivists). From this perspective, reality is reduced either to immediate experience or to an object of discourse, creating a shared ontological 'problem-field' buttressed by secondary epistemological differences.

The focus of contemporary historical sociologists, just as was the case for classical social theorists, is somewhat different than this straightjacket allows, centring on the *underlying* reality that provides the environment for everyday action, events and processes. This deep-lying ontological realism (Bhaskar 1979, 1986; Collier 1994; Hollis 1994; Hacking 1999), is primarily concerned with the principal structures that constrain and enable surface level experience and perceptions – the capabilities, tendencies and potentials that, to some extent, lie beyond individual understanding and agency.[27] The aim of historical sociology has in the past, and should be today, to illuminate these structures and tendencies. This is the reason why so many historical sociologists have focused their attention on processes of radical change, or what Mann (1986) calls 'neo-episodic moments' – it is at precisely at these instances that structural tendencies are revealed, reproduced, reaffirmed, reformed or cast anew.[28] As Dennis Smith (1991: 1) puts it, 'one of historical sociology's objectives should be to distinguish between open doors and brick walls, and to discover whether, how, and with what consequences walls may be removed'.

Historical sociology, therefore, offers as one of its central imperatives an explanation of historical development itself. Recognising the complexity of world historical processes and agreeing that numerous causes lie behind what Charles Tilly (1984) calls 'master-processes' does not mean abdication from the central task of establishing the prime movers that orchestrate these processes and the principal colours that define them. But rather than subsuming or cloaking findings within readily available Hempelian 'covering laws', historical sociology aims to provide conceptual abstractions that, when conjoined with

empirical work, provide explanatory contours that lie beyond and beneath the lurches and hiccups of world history.

Principia media

A commitment to deep realism is the first dimension within the historical sociological research programme. Equally important is the work on the sociology of knowledge carried out by Karl Mannheim (1960), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967), and others, who conceive of knowledge gained into the social world as inherently relational rather than isolated or free-standing. Hence, the social world is revealed not through synchronic abstraction, but via *diachronic* conceptualisations. As Robert Nisbet (1969) writes, the tradition of social science in the west has, at least to some extent, emerged out of the Greek concern with *physis* – the study of the origins and growth of things. As a result, being, at least for classical social theorists, was a story of becoming – explaining change, development and growth become the central task of social theory. The medium by which to unravel the complex flows of these world historical processes was seen as causation. Hence, historical sociology became the task of establishing, *pace* Mannheim, *principia media* – the movement of social forms, relations and trends across time and place. This task, I think, can be seen as a *sine qua non* of historical sociology. Following from this, a secondary goal is to provide an account of order, hierarchy and priority which these causal flows subscribe to, evaluating between what Aristotle calls 'necessary' and 'accidental' causes, Weber described as 'adequate' and 'chance' causation, and Nisbet describes as 'original', 'formal', 'motor' and 'final' causes. This is the pursuit of *principium medium* (concrete determinate trends) – the apex of the causal staircase represented in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 about here

21

Historical sociology, therefore, operates with a dual foundational toolkit: deep ontological realism and epistemological relationism. It understands there to be an underlying social reality, but equally clearly understands that all social relations exist in constitutive inter-relation with others, hence the need to problematise difference, multiplicity and interactions, to go beyond immediate context and to transcend narrow viewpoints. Rather than compare reified, static social facts, this mode of research involves the study of the relations, linkages and processes that make up the social world. In the first instance, this involves a temporal extension into the past. But it also requires a concomitant examination of the spatial relationship between societies and social formations, in other words an inter-societal or inter-social perspective. If there is a motif that lies behind historical sociology, it is 'never forget time and place'.

Application, application, application

Methodologically, historical sociology is promiscuous: historical sociology can be inductive or deductive, carried out at the macro, the meso or the micro levels, be based on constitutive or causal theory, and be conducted in a variety of guises: from ethnography to *verstehen*. At one extreme is the promotion of rational choice historical sociology by Michael Hechter (1992), Edgar Kiser (1996) and others (see the various contributions in Gould (ed.) 2005), an attempt which has spawned a wide-ranging meta-theoretical debate which, in turn, has prompted significant work on relationalism (Emirbayer 1997, Somers 1998, Nexon and Jackson 1999) path-dependency (Mahoney 2000, 2001; Goldstone 1998; Pierson 2004), temporality (Aminzade 1992, McDaniel (ed.) 1996, Sewell 2005), historical institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio (eds.) 1991; Steinmo, Thelen and Longstreth (eds.) 1992; Thelen 2003, 2004; Streeck and Thelen (eds.) 2005) and other such ventures. At the other extreme

stands cultural, post-colonial and other 'third-wave' historical sociologies, well captured in the work of Craig Calhoun (1996, 2003) and introduced into IR by Steve Smith (2002) and others.[29]

Ultimately, though, there is only one methodological stricture presupposed by historical sociology: that it is applied. Historical sociology offers a powerful one-two combination – history (a story of why things happened, when and how they did), allied to sociology (an explanation of why this is significant). It asks the simple but powerful question, 'so what'? Without application, historical sociology loses this double strength, at the same time minimising much of its value. Many contemporary debates in IR and other social sciences struggle in the face of battle scars caused by a century or more of turf wars in which borders have been constructed in order to seal off terrain and safeguard specialist knowledge. The result is a splintered social scientific enterprise in which analytical shorthands have been reified as ontological distinctions and disciplinary partitions have been mistaken for substantive ones. One of the benefits of historical sociology is the refusal to see these apparently incommensurable dichotomies as intractable. Hence, issues of agency-structure, macro-micro, positivism-post-positivism are conceived not as theoretical, ontological or methodological problems but as substantive ones – in other words as the study of how, in time and place, human agency is constituted within social structures. In this sense, agency does not lie beyond or outside history but *in* history.[30] And rather than reinventing the *Methodenstreit ad infinitum* or philosophical parlour-games *ad nauseum*, historical sociology is rooted in the substantive application of social relations as they are constituted in time and place, followed by the examination of how far these social processes and social facts are generalisable across both time and space.

Historical Sociology as a vocation

Historical sociology's methodological promiscuity is matched by the free-range of its substantive agenda. Although there has been a general predilection in historical sociology towards big issues – systemic change, processes of state formation, wars, revolutions and the like – this has not ruled out many smaller scale interventions into both meso-level and micro-processes, a point Bryan Mabee makes strongly in his article for this forum. What has been common to historical sociology in all its guises is a concern with normative, politically engaged work concurrent with an intellectual engagement into method, theory *and* substantive issues – hence Theda Skocpol's (2003) valorisation of historical sociology as 'the doubly engaged social science'. In this sense, historical sociologists recognise that facts are value laden, but that values too are factually embedded. And as Patomaki and Wight (2000) observe, this leads to a simple desire to make values factually explained, and facts subject to critical evaluation. The result is a connection, or perhaps a reconnection, between the world of ethical deliberation and the world of causal processes far removed from the banalities of 'value-free' abstract research programmes, 'orphans of the scientific revolution' (Puchala 2003) as they are. Historical sociology stands in direct contrast to those approaches which, as Skocpol (2003: 412) notes, 'conspire to know more and more about less and less'.

Hence a further critique of much of the contemporary academy, both in IR and beyond, is its confusion of ends and means, and the endorsement of a bureaucratic enterprise that serves to restrict intellectual freedom. The application of historical sociology as a vocation promises a double engagement (both political and intellectual) which marks a return to the concerns of classical social analysis. As such, the historical sociological imagination favours the analysis of substantive problems and issues rather than technical approaches premised and assessed on the basis of methodological purity. In this sense, historical

sociology is humanistic rather than abstract, seeking to connect the world of human agency and struggle with the apparently impersonal structural forces that seem to lie beyond our control. Historical sociology takes human relations and their articulation and crystallisation in real historical conditions as its central calling. Above all else, historical sociology promises the study of 'we' rather than 'they', or 'it'.

HSIR is, therefore, not just an open society nor a research programme but a vocation progressing on several fronts simultaneously: a central group of researchers providing empirical and theoretical depth supplemented by a range of networks generating breadth and fostering creative synergies. The view of HSIR conceived here is, in metaphorical terms, a form of what Eurocrats call 'subsidiarity' – the academic equivalent of a Schengen agreement in which a core-group of researchers produce works within a well-conceived and broadly accepted corpus. Augmenting this hub is a series of spokes or networks that reach out to others, fostering ties and generating mutual competences. This is a project that speaks to the heart of the historical sociological imagination – respecting the particular intricacies of both history and academic specialisms, while at the same time remaining aware and committed to the common threads and interests that unite work in the classical social science tradition and which underpin a broader normative engagement with the stuff of world politics. The result, as Dennis Smith (1991: 78) puts it, is, at least ideally, a 'process of never-ending exploration'.

It may be worth making one final remark lest the primary purpose of this article be lost amidst the preceding discussion. This stock-taking or ground clearing exercise has not been undertaken in order to engage in a lengthy bout of navel gazing, but with the intention of prompting a concerted period of substantive HSIR research. The French mathematician Henri Poincaré once chastised sociology as the 'science with the most methods and the fewest results'. Above all else, historical sociology should be the study of concrete reality

(*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*), an approach that asks new questions and develops an agenda for further research – as Craig Calhoun (2003: 437) puts it, 'opening up vistas for understanding'. This is the principal reason for being open about the core dimensions of HSIR project – taking one step backwards in order to take two more forward. Thus, to some extent, having cleared the decks, it might be worth paying heed to the words of C. Wright Mills (1959: 124), perhaps the most passionate advocate and exponent of the classical social scientific method,

> Every man his own methodologist!
> Methodologists! Get to work!

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[1] In this article, I use the term historical sociology interchangeably with 'classical social theory' to make the point that historical sociology is less a sub-field of sociology than its very core. As such, historical sociology is at the heart of what C. Wright Mills (1959) evocatively calls 'the sociological imagination'. On the development of historical sociology as a self-aware body of work, see Abrams (1982), Skocpol (ed.) (1984), Smith (1991), Delanty and Egin (eds.) (2003), and Lawson (2005a, chapter 1). On historical sociology in IR, see Hobden and Hobson (eds.) (2002).

[2] Although isolated examples of self-aware HSIR had appeared before this point, most notably in the work of Raymond Aron (1986).

[3] To some extent, this is a *re-orientation* towards sociology – many prominent classical IR scholars, including Stanley Hoffman (1960), Hans Morgenthau (1967) and Hedley Bull (1969) were scathing in their condemnation of economism. My thanks to Robbie Shilliam for making this point to me.

[4] This is also a danger for the wider enterprise of historical sociology itself. There is, as far as I know, no department of historical sociology anywhere in the world. Rather, the division and subdivision of academic subjects into schools, faculties, departments and disciplines has served to spread historical sociology broadly but not deeply. Without its own institutional base from which to build, what at first appears to be a feast of historical sociology can begin on closer inspection to look more like a famine.

[5] 'Let the buyer beware'.

[6] This fuzziness can also promote a conservative bias – the grounds of John Krige's critique of Fayerabend's philosophy of science. Krige makes the point that, 'if "anything goes", then everything stays'.

[7] It should be made clear from the outset that this exercise, as Rosenau points out, is performed with the intention of fostering 'healthy fervent' rather than reducing its participants to 'hopeless confusion'.

[8] Illustrative examples of fruitful interdisciplinarity include the concept of 'punctuated equilibrium', first mooted by the biologist Stephen Jay Gould to describe the switch-points in which long periods of stable reproduction within complex systems are punctuated by short, periods of rapid change. Gould's concept has been usefully transported into numerous 'soft' academic sciences. Another pertinent example is the concept of 'path dependence' which originated in economic history and has become used in many disciplines to describe how small initial distinctions are amplified over time, becoming substantial schisms which are then difficult to reverse.

[9] For more on this, see Lawson (2005b) and Hobson (2005).

[10] It is important to note that these categories are proposed as analytical tools rather than as concrete explanatory categories. As such, borders between them should neither be overstated nor pushed too hard lest they become artificial, superficial and ultimately, absurd.

[11] Karl Popper led the twentieth century assault on induction in numerous texts (see, for example 1957). Popper organised a range of figures to join him in this task, including Albert Einstein, who was supportive enough to write in a letter to Popper (1962: 492), 'theory cannot be fabricated out of the results of the observations, but must be invented'.

[12] The debate between the Austrian School and the German Historical School over scientific method became known as the *Methodenstreit*. In contrast to the former group, the German Historical School argued that, rather than focusing on universal truisms modelled on *homo economicus*, the line which was pursued by classical economists, economic processes operated within a social framework which was in turn shaped by cultural and historical forces. Hence, Gustav Schmoller and his associates favoured historical, comparative research that could uncover the *distinctive* properties of particular economic systems. The core debates

of the original *Methodenstreit* continue to reverberate around contemporary social science: the degree to which people's actions are shaped by their social, historical and normative contexts as opposed to the view of individuals as universally driven *homo politicus* or *homo economicus*; preferences as exogenously generated by social institutions or the endogenous result of primal drives; rationality as a broad category embracing a range of motivations versus rationality as a narrow, limited realm of utility maximisation.

[13] Popper owes this analogy to the German poet, Novalis, 'hypothesis are nets: only he who casts will catch'.

[14] As Stanley Hoffman (1960: 44) warns, many such theories are 'a triumph of form over substance'.

[15] Of course, neorealism does contain a theory of systemic change, much of it originating in power transition theory, but only as this is carried through via great power war. On this, see Organski (1968), Organski and Kugler (1980), and Gilpin (1981).

[16] See, for example, Wohlforth (1994).

[17] On polarity, see Waltz (1979), Gilpin (1981), Walt (1987), Christensen and Snyder (1990), Layne (1993), Schweller (1998), Wohlforth (1999), and Waltz (2000); on soft balancing see Pape (2005), Paul (2005), and Brooks and Wohlforth (2005).

[18] On neorealist degeneration, see Vasquez (1997); on its progress see Elman (2003). A parallel argument is made in Philip Tetlock (2005). Tetlock argues that specialists are actually less good at predicting events in their field as non-experts, having a tendency to over-extrapolate from the past to the future. This is, in many ways, unsurprising. After all, experts are not neutral observers but partisans who have a vested interest in explaining and predicting a certain chain of events. As such, they have an in-built tendency towards motivated bias and groupthink, a point well made thirty years ago by Robert Jervis (1976) and more recently by Michael Freeden (2003). For illustrative examples of the struggles of some IR hedgehogs to incorporate unhelpful evidence and to predict major events in world politics, see the article by Robert Kaplan (1994), which predicted the imminent dissolution of Canada, and those by John Mearsheimer (1990, 1995) who, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, predicted the break-up of the EU and the dissolution of NATO, and advocated ceding nuclear technology to Germany so that it could act as a deterrent against Soviet aggression (despite Mearsheimer's concerns about the potential for a German invasion of Poland, and a war between Hungary and Romania).

[19] On the poverty of the former, see Spruyt (1994); on the latter, see Rosenberg (2005).

[20] Thanks to Justin Rosenberg for clarifying my reading of Giddens on this point.

[21] Of course, induction can never be 'pure' – even historians work within general (deductive) categories which act as orienting devices for their research.

[22] On causal narratives, see Suganami (1999); on superior stories, see Tilly (2005).

[23] When asked what he considered to be the agents of social change, Braudel is said to have replied: 'forests and rivers'.

[24] Thompson (1965: 228) is worth quoting on this issue: 'history is not a factory for the manufacture of grand theory, like some Concorde of the open air; nor is it an assembly line of the production of midget theories in series; nor yet is it some gigantic experimental station in which the theories of foreign manufacturers can be "applied", "tested", and "confirmed". That is not its business at all. Its business it to recover, to explain and to understand its object: real history'.

[25] For more on this, see Lawson (2005a).

[26] On the benefits and difficulties of applying Lakatosian criteria to social science and, in particular, to IR, see Elman and Elman (eds.) (2003).

[27] But not, of course, outside human agency. Although social structures such as capitalism, patriarchy or time appear to exist outside or beyond us, they are nothing more than social relations, formed as concrete historical conjunctures according to a particular time and space constellation. At their heart, therefore, is human agency. A central function of a historical sociological research programme is to examine the production, reproduction and, potentially, the *transformation* of these historical conjunctures.

[28] For Mann, this is the point in which ideology becomes transcendent (thereby containing the possibility of generating a radical alternative order) rather than imminent (concerned with legitimating the existing order). Karl Mannheim (1960) similarly writes that such a moment represents a potential shift from ideology to utopia.

[29] An excellent collection of articles on third-wave historical sociology can be found in Adams, Clemens and Orloff (eds.) (2005).

[30] For more on these issues, see Mills (1959) and Rosenberg (1994b).