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## The social in thought and practice

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### **The Social in Thought and Practice**

In *Economy of Force* (2015), Patricia Owens has produced original scholarship of the first order. She recovers the discourse of household rule which has informed modern social thought. Readers of *Security Dialogue*, and those who work in Critical Security Studies, will find her work of special interest. International Relations (IR) scholars have typically turned to social theory as a source of critical insight, for leverage in an intellectually and politically conservative discipline. *Security Dialogue* has been an important forum for such work, where disciplines influenced by social theory, from sociology to political economy, have been brought to bear on questions of security. Owens, by contrast, lays bare the hidden conservative politics behind much social theorizing. For her, social thought seeks to domesticate social disorder.

IR has borrowed a great deal from other disciplines, while offering precious little in return. With this book, Owens pays down a goodly portion of our collective debt. She is able to do so, in part, precisely because IR is an “inter-discipline” able to draw together insights from, and speak to, a range of scholarly traditions. In particular, and almost uniquely among the social sciences, political theory and the history of political thought remain vital subjects in IR. We have not relegated them to a pre-scientific past. Owens’ facility with these traditions has led to an argument that demands attention from those engaged in social and historical inquiry, in any discipline. It does so because it is a political theoretic critique of the very possibility

of a social science. For once, it will be social and political theorists reading an IR scholar rather than the other way around. Owens must be feted for this achievement. Her book will initiate debates and new inquiries across many fields.

For Owens, social thought arises in response to insurgency, both among the workers at home and among colonized “natives” abroad. It is concerned with domesticating society, with integrating unruly populations into one form or another of household rule. Social thought is a kind of counter-insurgency manual for social workers and imperial soldiers. Owens claims we cannot understand the development of modern social thought apart from this “Social Question.” This question conjoins industrializing Europe with its colonies as two sites of disorder. Empire becomes essential to the trajectory of social theory. Owens links the social to the imperial, joining those scholars who have exposed its constitutive role in areas of modern thought (Chakrabarty 2000; Chatterjee 2012; Mehta 1999; Said 1979; 1993; Zimmerman 2010).

Owens develops an important implication of this imbrication of social theory with insurgency and empire. Insurgencies and disorder become major moments in the development of the social sciences. It is not just that scholars are called upon to assist the work of empire, from designing the census in British India to the Strategic Hamlet in Vietnam. Social unrest, suicide and anomie, workers’ strikes and revolutionary peasants, incite, generate, and frame social theorizing and its historical trajectories. Owens argues that social thought embodies “conservative moral categories” that respond to social unrest with a politics of domestication (85).

Concepts like community, authority, and alienation appear as basic sociological categories. But they reflect a desire for integration and order in the face of the social upheaval generated by capitalism and empire.

Integration into what? For Owens, social thought mistakes society for a well-ordered household. An ancient Greek *oikos* or a feudal estate was organized around the administration of life necessities, in a hierarchy ruled by a patriarch. Everyone had a place according to their gender, status, caste, race, or other social attribute (8). Running a productive household was an art, and modernity made it into a science: sociology. “Distinctly social thought is . . . the science of household management, the science of how to rule over—de-politicise—populations.” (87) Modern society is conceived as a scaled-up and bureaucratically administered household. Modernity did not destroy household rule, but transformed it. Social thought functions ideologically, obscuring the reality of household politics. Owens re-describes the familiar Eurocentric and stadial model of ancient, feudal, early modern, and modern eras as a succession of forms of household rule (chap. 3). Governance, at home and in the colonies, sought to order populations by status around the production and administration of life necessities. Unruliness was domesticated.

Part of the task of the critical reception of *Economy of Force* will be to determine the limits and significances of its arguments. Owens uncovers a genealogy of modern social thought. She shows how household thinking and politics inform a range of social categories and theories. This is hugely significant. But she goes on to claim that the entirety of social theorizing, any use of “the social” as an explanatory

concept, is invalidated by its household genealogy (286). Of social theories and theorists, Owens writes, “None of them are convincing in light of the history and ontology of households” (287).

As part of her polemic, Owens chides social theory for its depth metaphors, for the idea of the social and society as the source of the “really real,” of social relations as explanations for social and political phenomena (chap. 2). But what difference does it make to re-describe modern society and politics as scaled-up, bureaucratically administered households? For Owens, for example, nation-states are “a distinctively modern and bureaucratic social form of household rule.” (88-89) This kind of claim is considerably different than the idea that a discourse of household politics informs social theorizing. It is to suggest that the “really real” is be found in, and only in, households. Here, Owens mistakes her genealogical argument about social theory with a social and political account of modernity, one that threatens to be totalizing. Uncovering a discourse of household politics in social theory is a different matter than determining how that discourse informed actual, historical practices of governance or counterinsurgency. Owens claims both, but establishes only the first.

One reason Owens’ re-description of modern politics and society as household rule is less successful is that it seems to leave much of what we know about modernity—from social theorists—intact. For example, Owens demonstrates how Foucault’s potted history of the discovery of population mistakenly imagines the family has been eradicated as a model of government (34). She is surely right;

models of governance continued to draw on the household imaginary. But in saying this imaginary was scaled-up and bureaucratized, placed in the hands of experts dedicated to the reproduction of life and life's necessities, Owens underlines rather than undermines biopolitics as a useful conceptual frame for inquiry. Similarly, in emphasizing the bureaucratic and capitalist dimensions of modern household rule, Owens does not seem to depart far from what the Weberian and Marxian traditions have to teach us about bureaucracy and capitalism. Presumably, analysis and research into household rule would draw in large measure from histories and sociologies of landed estates, patrimonialism, and so on, well-trodden ground for social theory. To show that a household politics lies at the origins of modern social theory and has shaped its development, is to discover something very important we did not realize about social thought. To seek to reduce inquiry into politics and society to the critique of households is another matter.

In effect, there is a slippage between genealogy and ontology in *Economy of Force*; between household rule as a discourse and as a reality in politics and society. Owens ultimately comes down on the latter (286-87), but she is at her most incisive and effective in respect of the former, where her big contribution is to be found. My remaining, critical remarks address some of the consequences of this slippage. Owens fails to confront directly the question of the relations between theoretic and expert knowledges, on the one hand, and social and political practice, on the other, or to address what might be involved in inquiry into historical instances of these relations. Text is privileged, and this shapes Owens' analysis of counterinsurgency,

which ultimately does not get to grips with the relationship between doctrine and warfare. In overstating the significance of its arguments, *Economy of Force* misses the opportunity to explore just what role “social work” plays in counterinsurgency thought and practice.

Owens runs into a problem in her household ontology of politics: she has to offer accounts of actual histories and wars. Given the breadth of her text, this inevitably means relying on historians and social scientists, i.e. on those who typically believe something called society exists and that societies have histories. This is an irony. One she relies on is Eric Stokes, an insightful and intellectually precocious Cambridge South Asianist. She uses his *The English Utilitarians and India* (1959), but not his empirical accounts of the origins and course of the 1857 mutiny and revolt in *The Peasant Armed* (1986). Owens offers a version of 1857 which totters between genealogy and ontology. On the one hand, she focuses on how the utilitarians conceived India, and on the post-1857 reaction against their views embodied in the figure of Sir Henry Maine. The utilitarians sought liberal improvement for native society; Maine and the conservative “social” reaction sought to protect traditional native society, arguing that too much modernity too soon had led to unrest. This is Owens at her genealogical best, offering connected readings of key theoretic constructs and texts with insurgent events.

But then Owens suggests that utilitarian policies caused 1857: “As evidenced by the number of violent rebellions, however, utilitarian models of social contract, discourses of improvement and attempts at legal and economic reform had

catastrophically failed.” (2015: 133) This is to collapse the causes of a major historical happening into a theoretic system that informed only some of the players. We get, for example, no sense of the older-style East India Company administrators and officers who mixed relatively easily in Indian society and were the great opponents of the utilitarians, nor of the new missionaries. Most of all, we get no sense of the power politics of Company rule. For example, utilitarian discourse provided cover for the appropriation of tax rights from the minor noble families from which the Bengal Army recruited Indian soldiers (a more important cause of the mutiny than disrespecting traditions). In distinctly social thought, in this instance, utilitarianism would be called “legitimation” or “ideology” or, best, one of the discourses at work in producing structures and events. But Owens is in the curious position of disowning social thought while offering interpretations of social and historical events.

Consider Owens’ reproduction of the classic Orientalist trope of 1857: “In the case of the Sepoy Revolt, how could Muslim and Hindu soldiers have been asked to use rifles greased with the fat of beef and pork?” (2015: 141-142) The greased cartridges affair is a lesson in the continuing relevance of social analysis and the dangers of collapsing practice into text. It was not a fact or a policy, but a myth or rumor, indeed a recurrent one among the Company’s Indian soldiers (Wagner 2010: chap. 1). With the story of the greased cartridges, we get an image of European officers as disrespectful buffoons, and of Indians as irrational religious bigots. As a trope, it has multiple uses and appeals. Owens is interested in one of them, as a



signal warning about disrespecting Indian tradition that helped wrest India policy away from utilitarian thinking. Another is its strategic utility as an insurrectionary rumor. A rumor, of course, is a social phenomenon in its dynamics and effects. European officers and many Indian soldiers were aware the rumor was untrue. Some officers let their soldiers make up their own cartridges to prove the point. But the rumor still exercised a social effect, driving a wedge between European officers and Indian soldiers. As some of the soldiers explained to their officers, they could not be seen to use the cartridges because their families and their communities believed the rumors. It would be thought they had broken their caste and violated their religion; that is, they would be stigmatized, to use a typically “social” concept (Kaye 1864: 553-59; Palmer 1966: 6). The greased cartridges myth in the events of 1857 and its construction in various discourses about 1857 are two different matters, requiring different forms of research and analysis. One approach is to study the social effects of the rumor in 1857; another is to study its place in colonial discourse. The two kinds of inquiry should not be confused.

The point is not that Owens gets 1857 wrong. She should not have got herself in the position of offering an account of it (or her other counterinsurgent cases) as an historical event, as somehow really about utilitarians and households. In doing so she fudges the relationship between knowledge and practice, text and event, offers no convincing account of it, and ends up privileging textual constructs rather than social and historical research. This would not have been a problem if *Economy of Force* remained at the level of genealogy. It is a problem as soon as one claims that

the really real of modern society and politics is to be found in households, and that we know this because there is a hidden discourse of household politics in the texts of social theorists and counterinsurgents. Nowhere in *Economy of Force* is there anything that looks like a historical sociology of household rule or warfare, something that shows that interpretations of historical events that do not take household politics seriously are wrong. Owens' strengths in reading texts and her mastery of intellectual history establishes the genealogy of "social thought," not the role it played in structures and events.

At some level Owens recognizes this problem: "There is no direct correlation between the conduct of counterinsurgency and the prevailing government ideology of the counterinsurgent state; any suggestion that counterinsurgents consciously seek to apply particular social theories must be heavily qualified." (2015: 248) This is surely correct and Owens is admirably gimlet-eyed in her account of the violence and brutality of counterinsurgent warfare. She knows and emphasizes that the violent reality of such warfare departed considerably from the dulcet tones of "social" documents like *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*. In all the counterinsurgency campaigns she considers, there were simultaneously: strategic and policy texts that emphasized "social programs" and "hearts and minds" (or their analogues); widespread counterinsurgent terror and violence; and a COIN-war of social administration, housing, medicine, land reform, education, etc. Vietnam, as she notes, brings both the so-called "big unit war" and the "other war" to a pitch only

the United States was capable of, destroying and saving, bombing and building, villages at industrial pace.

What never becomes quite clear is what Owens' position is on the relationship between "armed social work" in thought and in practice; between "social thought" and its household politics as an expert discourse, and its role in producing historical events and outcomes; or between counterinsurgency doctrine and counterinsurgency warfare. She argues that conceiving COIN as "armed social work" is "more than window dressing" (2015: 161). She re-describes Diem's Vietnam and Petraeus' Iraq as forms of "despotic household rule" which have converged with "sociocratic techniques" (211, 227, 260). But she does not address just how "despotic household rule" challenges or changes other scholarship and interpretations of the origins, course, and outcome of the counterinsurgency campaigns in Malaya, Kenya, Vietnam, or Iraq, or the more general social upheavals of which they were a part. Indeed, she draws on extant scholarship on modernization theory, power/knowledge relations in colonial and counterinsurgency campaigns, and other social and historical research to illustrate what she means by the convergence of despotic household rule with sociocratic techniques. We are left wondering just what difference it makes to describe Vietnam or Iraq as forms of household rule.

At stake here ultimately is how to assess the significance of Owens' arguments. How much of social thought and social science is left standing? To the extent Owens offers accounts of events and processes, she engages in social analysis—or at least

cites it. As I have pointed out, many of her re-descriptions leave intact much of what we know about modern society from social theorists and empirical inquiry based on their work. If, on the other hand, she is engaging in a critique of ideology, showing us that social thought provided the “intellectual rationale” for sociocratic practices (as she says of its role in the war in Vietnam), then she needs to establish—by means of social research—just how this works in specific cases (241). Crucially, she needs to show just where her understanding differs from extant scholarship on subjects like the nation-state, capitalist economies, and insurgent warfare. After all, ideology critique and power/knowledge studies are established fields of social inquiry. Showing us that the “social” informed the thinking of policymakers and academics who sought to violently modernize South Vietnam may not, in the end, change much of what we know about that war. As with the conservative reaction to the utilitarians in India, a genealogy of their thought is not an explanation of events or policies.

Owens brilliantly traces out the discourse of social thought and its integrative household politics, from its nineteenth century origins to its prominent place in counterinsurgency doctrine. That is what she should be read for, and widely. She is less successful at offering new interpretations of the counterinsurgency campaigns she considers. Her claims about politics and society being households all the way down remain speculative, as do her Arendtian politics of plural equals debating their common affairs beyond life necessities (282-83). One is tempted to side with the Vietnamese communists, who defeated a discourse of the household with a politics

of the social, making careful use of Marxian analyses of agrarian society in order to do so. Their success suggests that the politics of social thought may be more open-ended than Owens would have us believe.

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