

Book Review: Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology edited by Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin

In Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology, editors Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin bring together contributors to explore methodologies, theories and sites of analysis emerging out of and extending beyond the meeting point of international, political and sociological study. Hesham Shafick explores how the volume reveals both the opportunities and risks for IPS scholarship today.

Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology. Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin (eds). Routledge. 2017.

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In the year of their inauguration as lead editors for the *Journal of International Political Sociology* (IPS), Jef Huysmans and Joao Nogueira (re-)introduced IPS as a 'meeting ground' for cognate international, political and sociological scholarship (2012, 1). This branding of the emergent field as a hub for interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary cooperation between three of the most grounded – and indeed elite (well-funded, well-published, widely read) – social sciences effectively assembled a critical mass of scholars that were able to transform not only the three cognate fields, but social inquiry writ large.

Recent works have since transformed the very 'brand' of IPS Huysmans and Nogueira postulated. They would later agree that IPS research had already exceeded its space as an intersection point between its composite disciplines (2016). As evident from the disciplinary diversity of contributors to the *Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology*, this 'meeting ground' has widened to include scholars from geography, law, history, historical sociology, ethnography, economics and finance, together with those from IR, politics and sociology.

The diversity of IPS scholarship, centrifugally, has come in parallel with its further institutionalisation centripetally. The handbook is clear-cut evidence that this 'mode of inquiry' is building up into a research cluster that performs the function of an epistemic community, albeit without the boundaries imposed by their usual disciplinary structures. This is also visible in the striking growth of research activity on IPS, particularly to fill the gaps that editors Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin identify: for example, the absence of pedagogy (3). A few months following the book's publication, an IPS 'winter school' took place in Rio de Janeiro and a full PhD course on IPS is commencing as a joint project between Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and Kings College London (KCL) in May 2018. In collaboration with KCL, LSE and University of London in Paris, [QMUL's 'Global Politics Unbound' research group](#) has organised workshops that explore the linearities, intersections, inter-debates and possible futures of IPS as a growing field of research. These activities mix and match a variety of scholarships that far exceeds the borders of IPS's cognate disciplines.

This book is an assemblage of work operating at the boundaries of political, social and international knowledge production. Those include *theoretical approaches*, including feminism (Laura Shepard, Maria Stern), historical sociology (Sandra Halperin) and international political economy (Amin Samman and Leonard Seabrooke); *methodologies*, such as assemblage (Rita Abrahamsen), discourse analysis (Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann) and materiality (Peer Schouten and Maximilian Mayer) and *sites of analysis*, like citizenship (Peter Nyers), development (Joakim Öjendal and Stina Hansson), environment (Hannah Hughes) and finance (Ute Tellmann).

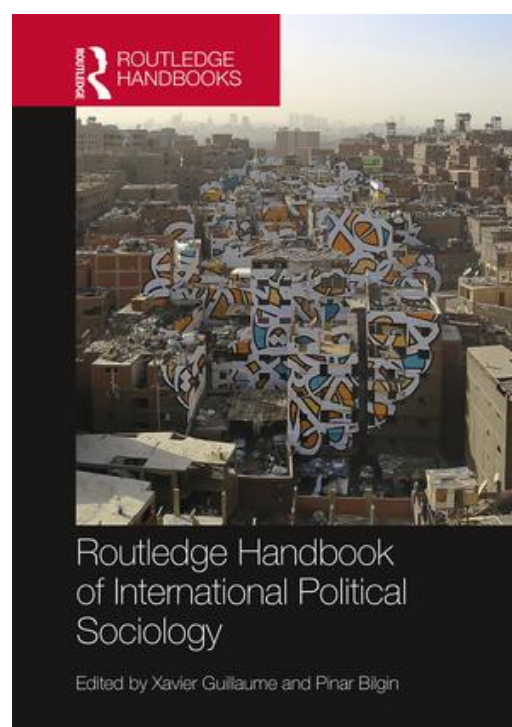




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Combined, these contributions offer a state of the art introduction to the key approaches, methods and sites utilised thus far in IPS research. More importantly, the handbook presents a space in which those versed in these knowledges can engage in a multidisciplinary/non-disciplinary dialogue which, on one hand, offers unique insights into world politics and, on the other, serves to check and balance what is one of the biggest research problems in IPS cognate disciplines and other social sciences:

that is, unchecked reification: the tendency to uphold and rehearse one subjective position to the point where it becomes so widely and seemingly objectively accepted that its subjective origins becomes erased (Roland Bleiker, 321).

Such reifications are readily problematised in IPS, not only through interdisciplinary checks, but also through the reflexive position in which an IPS scholar is *de facto* embedded. Coming from any of its composite disciplines, an IPS researcher is always aware of their disciplinary ignorance of other dimensions of their study. For example, an IPS scholar from an IR department would be simultaneously accepting of their relative ignorance of the sociological dimension and of the importance of this to their analysis. This, as Abrahamsen's chapter explains, 'makes us constantly aware of our own contingent standpoints, so much so that we can gain the kind of scholarly humbleness required to approach the world of world politics in all of its nuances and complexities' (259).

Yet, the loose ties that locate IPS scholars within common interstices do add to the power of IPS as a competitor in the field of social knowledge production. Unlike decisively empirical – and often radically reflexive – modes of knowledge production such as ethnography, anthropology and autobiography, IPS purports theoretical, conceptual and methodological interventions together with its empirical endeavours. In that, it is also distinct from armchair 'theorists' dominating the fields of IR, politics and sociology. IPS is rather a mode of inquiry into the interstices, gaps, fissures and problems left over by such disciplinary boundaries: one that 'gets its hands dirty' through empirical and reflexive approaches but then seeks to make general and transferable claims and networks that build an alternative community of knowledge.

The possible tension between the reification of knowledge structures and the production of alternatives is explored in depth by two contributors to the volume: Prem Kumar Rajaram from a relational perspective and Sankaran Krishna from a postcolonial perspective. Despite their disagreements, they both assert that resisting standing structures of power/knowledge does not necessitate giving up on power/knowledge construction altogether. IPS scholarship rather intends, as Marieke de Goede also argues in this book, to 'intervene' in power/knowledge production, seeking not only to expose the mechanisms at play in this economy, but also to interrupt, resist and possibly revoke their oppressiveness and empower, endorse and possibly (re-)instate immanent spaces of resistance and emancipation.

Maneuvering the lines that once distinguished both its cognate disciplines and other disciplinary boundaries in social research, IPS literature questions multiple assumptions about global and social orders. It does not, however, leave us there at the point of disorder. Instead, it offers alternative tools and methods through which this mess can be approached and re-ordered in a way that produces instruments that perform a dual function: 1) allowing the world to be (re-)comprehended; and 2) enabling that comprehension to be (re-)problematized.

It is this dual and reflexive process of exposing the epistemological boundaries of social and international research and striving to push those boundaries through theoretical, methodological and empirical innovations that situates IPS as a moving force within contemporary social science. This handbook is a demonstration and reification of the pivotal position the emerging field performs within international, political and social literature. However, it also exposes two implicit dangers.

The first is the potential growth of IPS into a comprehensive discipline, with chairs, professors, funding, journals, workshops, students and curricula. Readers of the book might think of it as one exposition of a possible unproductive convergence, particularly if they note, like I did, the amount of reiterations, internal citations and repetitions of methodological, theoretical and epistemological 'grounds' throughout the book's chapters. This, combined with the aforementioned 'growth' in IPS resources since the book's publication, might make us join Anna Leander in her worry that IPS might end up merely 'another discipline'. The experiment of international political economy makes this possibility lurk in the background of the book (384-85).

The second, and perhaps more obvious, danger the book exposes is the extension of academic relationships of domination pervasive in IPS cognate disciplines to IPS itself. A socially reflexive look at the demographics of the book's contributors reveals the continuity of white domination, male domination, straight domination, abled domination, aged (professorial) domination and European domination. With the exception of the first two, this list is particularly significant for its exclusion of a huge portion of intelligible subjects from theoretical debates *without* facing accusations of racism or sexism. LGBT subjects, disabled people, the (academic) youth and the 'non-citizens' of the European world are readily and shamelessly overlooked in the formulation of IR and political theory. As for women and people of colour, they are largely invited in this volume and elsewhere only to speak on behalf of 'themselves', i.e. to discuss 'feminism' or 'post-colonialism', rather than to contribute to the wider discussions that remain dominated by older, white, straight, abled and, most importantly, male Europeans (citizenship holders).

Perhaps these two red flags add to, rather than subtract from, the book's intellectual value. On one hand, it demonstrates the limits of IPS in a way that enables further reflexivity. On the other, it grounds the foundations for maneuvering such limits in the contributions by the book editors and the three book commentators who feature in the concluding section, 'Transversal Reflections' (de Goede, Stefano Guzzini and Leander). As they inform us, the avoidance of the potential collapse of the IPS movement into another confining system of knowledge domination is engrained in the continuity of its resistance against 'the temptations of disciplining' (378). How can such resistance be deployed? To what extent can it stand its ground against the increasingly corporatized academic competition? How can it continue growing as an ontological-epistemological assemblage *without* structured organisation that produces inherent relations of domination?

The response to these questions will determine the fate of this emerging field of study. The book, as a process of knowledge production in itself, highlights the risks involved and the potential for evading them, at least partially. The satisfactory realisation of those possibilities in research practice remains a pressing challenge, but also an exceptional opportunity in IPS scholarship.

Hesham Shafick is a PhD student at Queen Mary, University of London, funded by the University of London's Graduate Teaching Assistant Scholarship. He convenes a PhD course on International Political Sociology, a joint seminar series organised by faculty and staff from QMUL and KCL and open to all students in the UK. [Read more by Hesham Shafick.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.