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Historical Sociology

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Emerging in the 1980s, maturing in the 1990s and taking-off in the 2000s, historical sociology has become a major feature of contemporary International Relations (IR) theory. However, the origins of historical sociology run much deeper than this. Indeed, historical sociology can be seen as at least two centuries old – an attempt by economists, philosophers of history and nascent sociologists to provide a historically sensitive, yet generally applicable, account of the emergence of industrial capitalism, the rational bureaucratic state, novel forms of warfare and other core features of the modern world (introductions to the field include Abrams 1982; Skocpol ed. 1984; Smith 1991; Delanty & Isin eds. 2003; Mahoney & Rueschemeyer 2003). Although the place of historical sociology within Sociology suffered from that discipline's diversion into abstract theorizing 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. Over the past twenty years, historical sociology in International Relations (HSIR) has contributed to a number of debates ranging from examination of the origins of the

modern states-system (Rosenberg 1994; Spruyt 1994; Teschke 2003) to unraveling the core features and relative novelty of the contemporary historical period (Shaw 2000; Buzan & Little 2000; Rosenberg 2005). However, as it has developed, so HSIR has become increasingly “catholic” in its tastes, often presenting itself as a loose approach representing almost any work which contains either historical or sociological sensibilities (Lawson 2007). In short, even as substantial gains have been made, there has been a concomitant watering down of the underlying approach itself. Paradoxically, therefore, just as HSIR has become increasingly “seen” by the IR scholarly community, so its core rationale has become less manifestly “heard”. If the specific challenge and promise of HSIR is to be sustained, its core intellectual identity requires clearer formulation.

This formulation can be approached by building upon C. Wright Mills’ (1959) famous description of “the sociological imagination”. Classical sociologists, Mills argued, constructed their analyses at the intersection of three dimensions of the human world: structure, history and biography. The principle of *social structure* was concerned with the fact of the social world itself and the perception that human behavior is always involved in, and shaped by, particular patterns of social relationships – the fabric of society. *History* added the perception that these social structures are always specific to given times and places, that they vary enormously from one period or setting to another, and that they are themselves subject to change over time. Finally, *biography* connected these larger-scale phenomena of structure and change to the experiences of individuals – revealing how their lives were shaped by broader social and historical processes and how their agency, in turn, effected these processes. By triangulating these three registers, Mills concluded, “classical social analysis” had produced an idiom of understanding so rich and compelling that it provided the “common denominator” for the modern social sciences, and perhaps the humanities too.

As a branch of historical sociology, HSIR is fundamentally concerned with operationalizing Mills' vision of classical social analysis in the field of International Relations. In doing so, however, it also modifies Mills' original formula: in effect, the triangulation of structure-history-biography becomes instead structure-history-international. The purpose of this modification is not, of course, to expunge the dimension of human agency (which can, in fact, be studied from all three angles); it is rather to adjust the focus of "the sociological imagination" in line with the subject matter of IR. And what results from the new triangulation is the intellectual agenda of HSIR itself. By contrast with traditional realist claims for the "autonomy" (Bull 1977) and "enduring sameness" (Waltz 1979) of international relations, this agenda includes questions such as: how international relations are connected – both in general terms and in particular historical cases – to the basic patterning of the human world (structure); how international relations have varied across space and changed across historical time (history); and finally, though this question has only recently emerged in the field, the consequences of the interactive multiplicity of social orders for our conceptions of social structure and historical process (international).

With this in mind, this essay introduces the origins, development and prospects of HSIR in three parts. The first section locates the origins of the approach within the wider field of historical studies in IR. These origins, it is argued, are associated with a specific understanding of the relationship between structure, history and the international based on the construction of big-picture narratives alongside sensitivity to contingency, particularity and detail. Having identified the foundations of the approach, the second section chronicles two waves of scholarship within HSIR. The first, associated with the work of scholars like Theda Skocpol (1979), Michael Mann (1986), Charles Tilly (1990) and Anthony Giddens (1985), developed largely *outside* IR. Although these scholars produced important work, their impact

was limited by an association with a quasi- or proto-realist approach to international theory, one which significantly impeded their theoretical and empirical reach (Jarvis 1989; Hobden 1998). Partly as a response to this shortcoming, a second wave of scholarship emerged *within* IR, engendering insights into issues as varied as the co-constitutive relationship between the international realm and state-society relations in processes of radical change (Halliday 1999; Lawson 2005), examination of the social logic of international financial orders (Seabrooke 2006), as well as exploration of the international dimensions of modernity itself (Rosenberg 1994; Teschke 2003). This second-wave of scholarship included works influenced by such Marxist writers as Perry Anderson (1974a, 1974b), Immanuel Wallerstein (1983) and Robert Brenner (1977, 1986), as well as John Ruggie's (1986) Durkheimian analyses of international historical change. Having grown significantly during these two waves, HSIR can today be seen as a burgeoning, vibrant field of enquiry.

In the final section of the essay, we outline the parameters of a "third wave" of HSIR scholarship, which we label "International Historical Sociology" (IHS). In terms of the triangulation of structure, history and the international, the second wave of HSIR concentrated largely on the implications of the first two for the third: it sought to reconnect the international to historically specific social structures and to explore its varied form over time. By contrast, IHS seeks to complete Mills' triangulation. Conceiving the international as the simultaneously differentiated and interactive dynamics of historical development, it examines the substantive and methodological implications of the international for our conceptualizations of social structure and historical process, thereby advancing the distinctive contribution of IR to the social sciences as a whole. This move, we suggest, contains the potential for a historical sociological enterprise which can tackle issues of core concern to both IR and Sociology, serving as the "common denominator" for research in both.

What is History in International Relations?

Historical sociology is as much a part of world history and comparative politics as it is a subsection of Sociology or International Relations. Historical sociology, therefore, has necessarily porous borders – it is the prototypical open society. 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 and social structures (understood as relatively fixed configurations of social relations). Hence, for advocates of HSIR, international factors are juxtaposed, conjoined and interrelated with domestic processes with the aim of finding patterns that explain important historical processes including the general and regional crises that provoke wars, processes of state formation, varieties of capitalist development, forms of imperialism and so on (Hobson 2002; Lawson 2006).

It is generally assumed that HSIR represents a reaction to IR theory's "ahistorical" tendencies, best captured by Waltzian neo-realism and Keohane-inspired neoliberal institutionalism. As is well known, both of these approaches work within an assumption of anarchy as containing a transhistorical logic. In this sense, the strength of third-image approaches, it is supposed, lies in the assumption of a continuous structural context to international relations (anarchy) which, in turn, generates a number of derivative logics – a self-help system, the need for states to prioritize survival, a recurring security dilemma and the mechanism of the balance of power. Because anarchy stands as a constant structural condition, so the international sphere appears as a continuous, almost static, holding pen for "actual existing" international relations. In turn, this means that IR scholarship is – or should be – primarily concerned with mapping the ceaseless struggle for survival (as in neorealism) or the conditions for cooperation (as in neoliberalism) which take place within a timeless and spaceless anarchical system.

It is also commonly assumed that historical sensitivity is something that has become a core feature of IR scholarship only relatively recently. But, in fact, a concern with temporality has long been a feature of international studies. On both sides of the Atlantic, leading figures in the discipline such as E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, Martin Wight and Stanley Hoffman have employed history as a means of illuminating their research. Indeed, Wight (1966) made searching through international history the *sine qua non* of international theory, the best that could be hoped for in a discipline without a core problematique of its own. For their part, both Morgenthau and Carr saw the international realm as one of fundamental discontinuity, even if they accepted the importance of unit-level attributes such as aristocratic rule and citizenship rights to changes in the make-up of the international system itself (Hobson 2000). In this sense, the emergence since the end of the Cold War of historically-sensitive paradigms such as constructivism (e.g. Finnemore 1996, 2003), neo-classical realism (e.g. Schweller 2006) and the English School (e.g. Buzan & Little 2000) should be seen less as a breakthrough than as a return to business as usual (Hobden 2002). Likewise, HSIR should be considered less as a new approach than as an older, more classical sensibility – one concerned with timeliness rather than timelessness, with dynamics of change as well as processes of continuity, and with recognizing the contingency of events alongside the identification of deep-lying structural patterns. In short, HSIR is concerned with the same issues, dynamics and concerns as those which motivated classical social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The neo-neo debate, therefore, can be seen as a disruption both to IR's historical norm and to HSIR's longer-term sensibilities. But this is only the first step in a more substantial argument. After all, there are major differences between the ways in which figures such as Carr, Morgenthau, Waltz and others approach history. It is important, therefore, to pose a

first-order – if rarely considered – question: “what is history in IR?” A first cut at this question is possible via the help of two metaphors: “history as scripture” and “history as butterfly”. On the one hand, there lies a significant section of the IR community which views history as some kind of “scripture” in which timeless “lessons” and inviolate rules can be removed from their socio-temporal context and applied to ill-fitting situations: the “lessons of appeasement” become a shorthand for the necessity of confronting dictatorial regimes across time and place; the US retreat from Vietnam is invoked to halt talk of withdrawal in Iraq; the Reagan years are employed to support the idea that ultimate victory in the “war on terror” rests on the deployment of overwhelming US military force married to the promotion – by force if necessary – of democratic ideals around the world. This view of “history as scripture” is a form of macro-historical approach typified in IR by neorealism. As we argue below, such a tendency promotes a selection bias in which history is reduced to a role, however well disguised, in which it is little more than the pre-determined site for the empirical verification of abstract claims. Although “history” as a point of data collection is often present in these accounts, *historicism* – an understanding of the contingent, disruptive, constitutive impact of local events, particularities and discontinuities – is absent. As such, “history as scripture” can be seen as a curiously ahistoricist position.

If the macro approach shuns historicism, a second, equally prominent, tendency in IR scholarship does the reverse, seeing history as the “if only” realm of uncertainty (Versailles less punitive, Bin Laden assassinated before 9/11, Pearl Harbor never taken place): a “butterfly” of contingent hiccups upon which IR theorists provide ill-fitting maps – maps which reveal merely the distortions of scholar’s ideological prisms. Despite the sense in which this “history as butterfly” approach seeks to foster a kind of “pure history”, it is also inadequate in that it fetishizes the particular and the exceptional, failing to see how historical

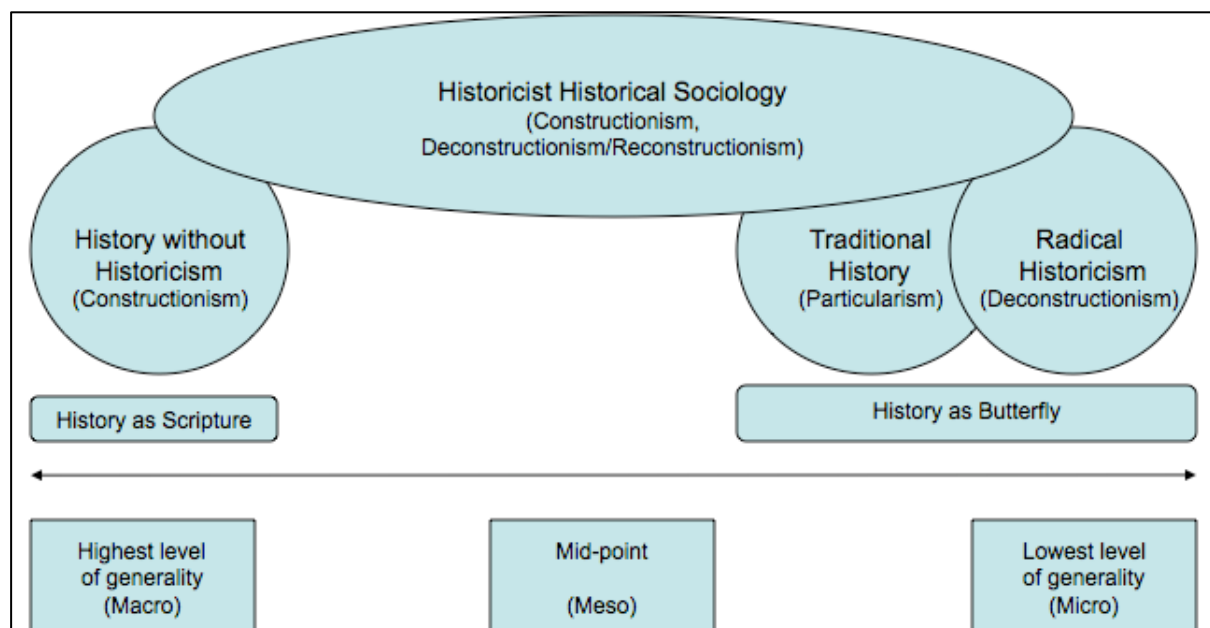
events, dramas and processes are part of broader interrelations, sequences and plots which provide a shape – however difficult to discern – within historical development. Indeed, the result of the “if only” school of history is a reduction of the past to a “pick and mix” candy store which is raided only in order to satisfy the tastes of the researcher. As such, where the “history as scripture” approach is historical without being historicist, in some ways, the “history as butterfly” approach is historicist without being historical, focusing on deconstruction without attempting to reconstruct meaningful causal narratives.

The existence of these two generic tendencies – history as scripture and as butterfly – is forged by the working practices of IR scholarship itself. Most mainstream approaches adopt a form of “history as scripture”, using history in order to code findings, mine data or as a source of *post factum* explanations (Isacoff 2002; Kornprobst 2007). Most post-positivist approaches – particularly postmodernism – assume a form of the latter, using history as a means to disrupt prevalent power-knowledge nexuses (e.g. Ashley 1986; Walker 1993; Vaughan-Williams 2005). But few IR scholars have spent sufficient time asking what it is we mean when we talk about history (Hobson & Lawson 2008). As a result, both positivists and post-positivists have generated an artificial divide in which second-order noise has substituted for first-order enquiry. HSIR by contrast, carves out a novel space between these positions, paying attention to micro-developments that are often governed by contingency but taking care to place these within broader patterns of historical development.

Figure 1 represents a deeper cut into this issue. The figure discerns four ideal-typical modes of history in IR – “history without historicism”, “historicist historical sociology”, “radical historicism” and “traditional history” – each of which adopts a particular position on the “scripture-butterfly” spectrum. At the far left of Figure 1 lies a version of the “history as scripture” approach – one we label “history without historicism”. This is an approach adopted

by most mainstream IR theories, including neorealists such as Robert Gilpin (1981), John Mearsheimer (2003), and Colin and Miriam Elman (2001, 2008), who have sought to historically “fill-in” the Waltzian frame, as well as Robert Keohane (1984), Lisa Martin (1993) and others who have applied historical analysis to a neoliberal institutionalist research program. As noted above, these approaches seek to establish general propositions across time and place, universal truths which reduce history to little more than a means to test hypothesis and resolve anomalies. As such, this stands as a view of history as the eternal under-laborer – a source of data to be mined as theoretical abstractions demand.

Fig. 1: What is History in IR?



At the other end of the “history in IR” spectrum – on the far right of Figure 1 – can be found radical historicists. These scholars practice a “history as butterfly” approach in that knowledge is seen as contained within tightly bound spatio-temporal contexts themselves the products of particular power-knowledge nexuses. This mode of research argues that texts are reflective of a singular cultural and intellectual milieu (Greenblatt 1982). As such, this form

of research is akin to a kind of deep contextualism, one which finds its clearest expression in the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and which has been carried into IR by scholars like Nick Vaughan-Williams (2005; cf. Finney 2001). For these researchers, there is no single historical truth or “historical record” available for discovery, but rather multiple, indeed an undecidable infinity, of possible historical truths.

Moving in from the outer limits of Figure 1, we find a third mode of conducting historical research in IR – a space occupied by traditional historians. At first glance, it may appear odd to place traditional historians (many of whom are positivists) so close to radical historiographers (who are anything but positivists). In our representation, however, rather than being diametrically opposed, these positions contain much in common. First, like radical historicists, traditional historians reject the application of *a priori* theoretical templates to the study of history. Indeed, theoretically-informed approaches are derided as “make-believe” versions of the “true” historical record in which theoretically-informed scholars select the “facts” in advance without holding them to objective scrutiny. Second, both of these apparently antithetical modes of analysis exhibit incredulity to grand narratives, seeing such endeavors as ahistorical in that they eschew immersion in particular historical material in favor of grander, historically unsustainable claims. In this sense, both approaches seek to trace how one-thing-followed-another in an unfolding of events that is deemed to be so contingent as to be unreplicable. Indeed, both traditional and critical historians agree that such approaches hover somewhere between shoddy scholarship and dangerous ideological contortion. As such, despite their epistemological differences, traditional historians and radical historicists converge around a tendency to particularism and in a shared resistance to theoretically-inspired narratives.

The final mode of “history in IR” – historicist historical sociology – occupies a central place in our diagram, overlapping with the other three modes of analysis and, indeed, with the work of those historians themselves who consider their primary identity as situated outside the traditional conception of history (e.g. Carr 1967; Gaddis 1996; Roberts 2006). This viewpoint considers the macro “history as scripture” conception favored by most mainstream IR scholarship as inadequate because it irons out historical discontinuities by creating isomorphic transhistorical categories. By taking a static picture of the geopolitical structure of world politics (the anarchical states-system), differences between political units and international systems are occluded, important *social* structural forces (such as capitalism, patriarchy and racism) are ignored, and agency is reduced to the unit-level musings of statesmen, financiers and generals. In this way, mainstream IR truncates the study of world politics by introducing a levels of analysis parlor game which reifies social processes and social facts – states, the market, sovereignty – as timeless analytical (and ultimately as ontological) entities. As a result, 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 explicable by the basic fact – or permissive context – of anarchy; and all political units – city-states, nomadic tribes, empires, nation-states and transnational alliances – are functionally undifferentiated. The result is a “gigantic optical illusion” which generates an isomorphic homology of social facts (Hobson 2002).

Historicist historical sociology is equally critical of the position employed by traditional historians and radical historicists: the “history as butterfly” approach which fetishizes particular events but which fails to see history as a *social* process in which

historical events forms part of broader patterns of continuity and change. By stressing contingency, accident and particularity, there is a possibility that bigger commonalities are missed. At the very least, this runs the risk of producing 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 description rather than theory. That the world is complex does not mean that it is unknowable. And even if analysis begins with the inexorable facts of contingency, complexity and multicausality, it is still possible to determine a certain significance to the sequence within which events are conjoined. In other words, accepting the contingency of events does not preclude these being placed in broader analytical narratives, nor abandoning the attempt to evaluate rival truth claims regarding the causal rhythms that punctuate world historical processes (Abbott 1995; Sewell 2005; Tilly 2006). Rather, the generation of causal narratives provides a means of telling meaningful stories – explanations which generate a degree of causal determinacy to the production, reproduction, reform and transformation of social relations.

Historicist historical sociology, therefore, stands both within and beyond each of the other three modes of conducting historical research in IR. Epistemologically, historicist historical sociology stands between the mainstream macro approach at one extreme and the micro approach of deconstructionist radical historicism and traditional history at the other. *Contra* radical historicists, historicist historical sociologists accept that history is knowable but, *pace* traditional historians, they insist that history is produced within a certain time and place, and subject to the interpretations of its practitioners. Echoing the macro-historical approach, historicist historical sociology explores general patterns of causation and development, rejecting the postmodern propensity for “reconstructionist refusal”. But

following traditional history, it also places emphasis on historical discontinuities, rejecting timeless and spaceless claims to transhistorical truth. In short, historical sociology embraces the nuances, subtleties and complexities of world politics, while retaining an overarching goal of finding meaningful flows, patterns and trends within world history itself.

Two Waves of HSIR

This foregrounding of HSIR in broader analytical, conceptual and methodological debates is an important one, not least because HSIR is rarely problematized within IR. The usual procedure is to pronounce or dismiss IR as ahistorical and asociological and then to proceed in advocating HSIR as an antidote. But as we have argued, mainstream IR is insufficient not because it is *ahistorical*, which it is not, but because it is *ahistoricist*. Given this, the fundamental purpose of HSIR is to inject *historicist* insights into IR, thereby countering the ahistoricism of the “history as scripture” position while avoiding the dangers posed by the extreme historicism of the “history as butterfly” approaches. In other words, between the Scylla of pure historicism in which the big picture is drowned in a sea of micro-particularities and the Charybdis of macro approaches which swallow discrepancies within their grand schemas, lies an approach sensitive to both rich detail and broader patterns of historical development. In this sense, HSIR occupies a position at the crossroads of history, Sociology and IR. From history comes insight into the importance of events, contingencies and local particularities; from Sociology understanding of how relatively fixed configurations of social relations (structures) impact on these micro-processes; and from IR comes realization of the central role played by “the international” in this dynamic.

The First Wave of HSIR

By the late 1980s and 1990s, a small number of IR scholars drew explicitly on historical sociological insights in order to counter the direction that the discipline was taking under the auspices of the neo-neo debate. Various scholars saw Weberian historical sociology (WHS) as providing a useful means of developing such an alternative (Halliday 1987; Jarvis, 1989; Hobson 1997; Hobden 1998; cf. Yalvaç 1991). At this point, prominent Weberian scholars such as Theda Skocpol (1979), Raymond Aron (1986), Michael Mann (1986), Charles Tilly (1990) and Anthony Giddens (1985) began to appear regularly in the footnotes of leading IR publications. The initial link between these historical sociologists and IR theory lay in the fact that they sought to combine developments in the international realm with domestic or national social processes. The “promise” of WHS rested on four key claims. First, WHS placed significant ontological weighting on the domestic sources of state power even if, paradoxically, the goal was to reveal the “autonomous” powers of the state (see especially Evans et al eds. 1985; Mann 1988: Ch. 1; Hobson 1997). Second, bringing state-society relations back in was coupled with a focus on the interaction between the national and international realms. Here, special emphasis was placed on revealing how pressures emanating from the international state system came to reshape national societies – for example, where states could not marshal sufficient resources to remain competitive militarily, so defeat in warfare could facilitate social revolution (Skocpol 1979). Third, WHS seemed to contain the capacity to overcome the mainstream emphasis on a materialist ontology – Mann’s (1986) emphasis on the potentially “transcendent” power of ideology was seen as one example of this. Fourth, these writers emphasized the importance of international discontinuity in contrast to neo-neo structural stasis. Taken as a whole, these four insights amounted to the *promise* of WHS for IR.

It would, however, be a mistake to equate first-wave HSIR merely with neo-Weberian historical sociology. After all, some of the first scholars who imported historical sociology into IR were quasi-constructivist (John Ruggie), Marxist (Robert Cox) and poststructuralist (Richard Ashley). And many of the most important influences on these scholars, and on the general development of historical sociology, drew on strands of social theory which went well beyond the Weberian tradition (e.g. Moore 1967; Braudel 1972; Anderson 1974a, 1974b; Wallerstein 1983). Ruggie (1986) played a seminal role in establishing the transition from feudal heteronomy to modern sovereignty as a core problematique for IR scholarship, helping to forge a series of engagements into how the modern international states system came into being (Spruyt 1994; Rosenberg 1994; Reus-Smit 1999, Teschke 2003). Robert Cox's (1986) early work was no less influential, acting as a conduit to a range of neo-Gramscian HSIR (Halperin 2004; Murphy 2005; Morton 2007; Gill 2008). Poststructuralist writings also emerged following Ashley's (1986) influential intervention, many of which utilized historical sociological insights even if they did not always directly associate themselves with this label (e.g. Campbell 1992; Weber 1995; Bartelson 1995). Last, but by no means least, some scholars combined these approaches to powerful effect, perhaps most evident in the work of the critical scholar Andrew Linklater (1990, 1998).

However, while a good deal of first-wave HSIR scholarship was not directly inspired by neo-Weberian historical sociology, there lingered a general perception that the Weberian-inspired insights of Tilly, Mann and Skocpol et al marked the core of this genre. And increasingly, IR scholars came to view the neo-Weberian wing of first-wave HSIR as fundamentally flawed in how it approached the international realm (e.g., Fuat Keyman 1997: Ch. 3; Spruyt 1994; Hobden 1998; Hobson 2000: Ch. 6; Teschke 2003; Lawson et al. 2006). Critique centered on the ways in which many first-wave neo-Weberians tended to

conceptualize the international realm as one of anarchic geopolitical competition between states and, above all, on how national processes tended to be informed by a geopolitical logic derived, in turn, from the timeless presence of international anarchy. In this sense, the first wave can be said to have largely failed in terms of delivering the original “promise” of HSIR. And, as such, realizing this promise became the task for subsequent scholars working within the next stage of HSIR.

The Second Wave of HSIR

In contrast to first-wave HSIR, later scholars moved away from examining the specific interconnections between international geopolitics and domestic social change. A further difference that marked the second wave from the first was that it was driven principally by IR scholars working *within* IR. This is significant in that it allowed HSIR to develop an indigenous rationale, identity and research community (e.g. www.historical-sociology.org). To some extent, second-wave HSIR can be said to derive from two core critiques of mainstream IR: *chronofetishism* and *tempocentrism* (Hobson 2002: 6-15). Chronofetishism is a form of ahistoricism in which the present is thought to be explainable by looking only at present causal variables. But examining only the present leads to various illusions, the first of which is the “reification illusion” in which the present is sealed off from the past, rendering it as a static, self-constituting autonomous entity, thereby obscuring its socio-temporal context. Second, it leads to the “naturalization illusion” in which the present is effectively naturalized on the basis that it emerged “spontaneously” in accordance with “natural” human imperatives, obscuring important historical processes that constitute the present. This can, in

turn, often lead to a third problem – the “immutability illusion” – where the present is eternalized to the extent that it is deemed to be resistant to change.

If chronofetishism leads to a sealing off of the present so that it appears as autonomous, natural, spontaneous and immutable, the second prevalent form of ahistoricism within IR – “tempocentrism” – extrapolates this reified present backwards through time so that discontinuities between epochs are smoothed over or flattened altogether. In this way, international history appears to be marked, or is regulated by, a regular tempo that beats according to the rhythm of the present system. This is an inverted form of path dependency which renders previous epochs and international systems as homologous to the current international order. Thus we are told that ancient imperialism is equivalent to that found in Europe between 1492 and the twentieth century (Waltz 1979); or that European feudal heteronomy is equivalent in its *modus operandi* to that of the modern international system (Fischer 1992). Likewise, this approach induces tempocentric statements such as: the “classic history of Thucydides is as meaningful a guide to the behavior of states today as when it was written in the fifth century BC” (Gilpin 1981: 7); or that “balance of power politics in much the form that we know it has been practiced over the millennia by many different types of political units, from ancient China and India, to the Greek and Italian city states, and unto our own day” (Waltz 1986: 341). In this way, terms such as sovereignty, balance of power and anarchy are employed without due regard for time and space specificity; instead they take on stable, fixed meanings. And above all, it is precisely the attempt to (re)present all major actors as isomorphic, and therefore commensurable through time and space, that enables most mainstream accounts to see the centrality of anarchy as the timeless governing principle of international politics.

The antidote that second-wave HSIR scholars provide is not so much a reversion to

extreme particularity (as in traditional history) but an historicist approach which is able to construct a narrative while simultaneously being open to issues of contingency, unintended consequences and the importance of context. Utilizing this approach, second-wave scholars have looked to transcend the tempocentrism of mainstream IR *and* some first wave HSIR by examining the differing contexts that inform the conduct of “actual existing” international relations (e.g. Rosenberg 1994; Buzan & Little 2000; Bisley 2004; Barkawi 2005; Colas 2007). In the process, they are able to show how contemporary world politics is historically double-edged: having one foot in the past but also being, in certain respects, singular.

As with the first wave of HSIR, the second wave draws upon a variety of theoretical schools. Marxists have examined the ways in which class relations generate diverse forms of international relations across time and place, exploring how these engender distinct forms of international order (e.g. Rosenberg 1994; Cutler 2002; Teschke 2003, Lacher 2006). Constructivist and critical theorists have not only problematized the sovereign state (Biersteker & Weber 1996; Philpott 2001) but have also shown how the changing moral purpose of the state generates particular international institutional environments (Reus-Smit 1999, 2002), discrete forms of national identity (Hall, R.B. 1999) and different relations between states more generally (Weber 1995; Linklater 1998, 2002). English School writers have focused on the changing norms, practices and institutions that underpin international society (Gong 1984; Keene 2002; Buzan, 2004; Suzuki 2009), as well as on the ways in which international systems oscillate between hierarchy and anarchy (Watson 1992; Kaufman et al. eds. 2007). Neo-Weberians have demonstrated how varying state-society relations have promoted distinct trade regimes (Hobson 1997) and have studied the ways in which forms of radical change have both constituted, and been constituted by, their broader relationship with the international realm (Halliday 1999; Lawson 2005). In this vein, cognate work is being

undertaken in “relational HSIR” (Jackson & Nexon 1999) and in critiques of IR’s Eurocentrism (e.g. Hobson 2004, 2007a, 2007b; Shilliam 2006).

In its first two waves, therefore, historical sociology appeared as a broad movement capable of incorporating a wide number of paradigms and explaining a number of important issues. Although proponents share an understanding of the centrality of discontinuity, contingency and particularity in international processes, they also have a common concern in examining how social structures shape international events. As such, historical sociology can be said to offer a double punch: a focus on the rich detail of historical international relations alongside an emphasis on causal explanations wherever these are located, specifying how patterns, configurations and sets of social relations combine in particular contexts in order to generate certain outcomes. Thus, historical sociologists seek not just to provide historical analysis; they also aim to generate powerful theoretical explanations.

Towards “International Historical Sociology”

To date, therefore, HSIR has sought to reveal not just the different forms that international systems have taken in the past but also the ways in which the modern system cannot be treated as an ontological given. Historical sociologists in IR are unanimous in asserting that rethinking the constitutive properties and dynamics of the contemporary system can be successfully achieved only by applying what amounts to a more sensitive “non-tempocentric” historical sociological lens. At the same time, by tracing the historical sociological origins of the present international order, HSIR scholars are able to reveal some of the continuities between the past and the present, thereby dispensing with the dangers of chronofetishism.

However, while second-wave scholarship has succeeded in placing HSIR on IR's agenda, there are two problems with the approach as currently constituted. First, second-wave HSIR has become both unwieldy and heterogeneous, making its *distinctive* contribution to the discipline hard to identify (Lawson 2007). Indeed, all too often, HSIR boils down to little more than a commitment to inject historical sociological insights into IR without necessarily explaining *why* IR scholarship should take notice of such research. Paradoxically, therefore, just as books and articles in HSIR have begun to proliferate, many IR scholars have become increasingly puzzled by the sub-field. Indeed many, if not most, IR scholars would be hard-pressed to summarize what the specific contribution of HSIR is to the discipline. Thus a failure to drop anchor sufficiently within IR coincides with an equally important inability to situate research within a core that can be considered as distinctively HSIR.

The second need to reorient HSIR stems from a more intellectual challenge: the failure shared by both classical social theorists and IR scholars to “theorize the international”. As a discipline, IR appears to have a semi-permeable membrane which allows ideas from other disciplines in, but blocks substantive traffic out (Buzan & Little 2001). As Buzan and Little argue (2001: 20), “when the question is posed: what have other disciplines learned from IR, the cupboard is, if not quite bare, then certainly not well stocked”. Indeed, much of the time, IR scholarship has engaged less in fruitful interchange with other disciplines than served as canon-fodder for raiding parties from outside. Indeed, these “looting and pillaging raids” (Mann 1995: 555) conjure up an image more akin to intellectual asset stripping than to a fertile trans-disciplinary relationship (Lawson 2008). One of the main benefits of IHS is precisely its capacity to help define a core *trans-disciplinary* intellectual agenda for IR which would leave it relatively immune to these border raids. It also provides a chance to exorcise a specter that has haunted both IR and classical social theory. Kenneth Waltz (1986: 340) once

famously stated that “[s]omeone may one day fashion a unified theory of internal and external politics ... [Nevertheless] students of international politics will do well to concentrate on separate theories of internal and external politics until someone figures out a way to unite them”. Our third-wave approach that we label “international historical sociology”, we believe, provides a means of crafting just such an approach.

The categorical separation of domestic and international spheres of enquiry, as cited by Waltz, appears at first to be a problem internal to IR. In fact, however, it can be traced back to deficiencies in the conceptualization of historical development inherited from the very works of “classical social analysis” celebrated by C. Wright Mills (Rosenberg 2006). In a tradition which extends from Montesquieu to Comte, Marx, Spencer, Durkheim, Weber and Tönnies, classical theorists generated commanding accounts of internal development and change. And they used their awareness of the historical diversity of forms of society to construct penetrating methods of comparative analysis too. Much harder to find in this tradition, however, is any organized attempt to introduce the effects of inter-societal co-existence and interaction into the basic conception of “development”. The consequence is that “the international” has been externalized from the object domain of social theory and its effects have been subsequently treated as intervening variables or, as in Barrington Moore’s (1967: 214) phrase, “fortuitous circumstances”. On the one hand, these effects – including wars which interrupt internal development; social/cultural/technological transmissions which accelerate or redirect it; or patterns of integration which extend its enabling conditions far beyond any single societal unit of analysis – are so great that they have been invoked by some writers (e.g. Nisbet 1969) as a refutation of the very possibility of theorizing social development. On the other hand, one particular group of these effects – political-military relations – has been formalized into an anti-sociological international theory most obvious in Waltzian neorealism and its derivatives.

If this diagnosis is correct, it would explain both the problems of “domestic analogy fallacy” and “reductionism” which sociological approaches have encountered in IR and the “intellectual paucity” (Wight 1966) of the way in which Martin Wight, Hedley Bull, Kenneth Waltz and others have identified the specificity of “the international” by directly counterpoising its properties to those of domestic societies – Sociology’s traditional object of analysis. It would also point to the necessary form of any solution to the impasse which historical sociology has reached in this field. Such a solution would have to involve a reformulated concept of historical development which, by incorporating the interactive multiplicity of societies, would bring inter-societal relations and effects within the compass of a social theory. This need not trigger a shift from “theory to thick description” which Waltz rightly warns against. If we define “the international” as “that dimension of social reality which arises specifically from the co-existence within it of more than one society” (Rosenberg 2006), the phenomena we pin-point will be highly specific, and though international, they will be apprehended for the intrinsically sociological phenomena they are.

One historical sociological approach which deploys this revised concept of development (and the sociological conception of the international which it enables) is the theory of “uneven and combined development” first employed by Leon Trotsky (1980/1932). In recent elaborations, this theory traces the very existence of the international to two features intrinsic to social development. On the one hand, it holds, human development is at any given moment expressed in a multiplicity of differing societies: considered as a whole, it is inherently uneven. On the other hand, because these same societies co-exist concretely in space and time, they affect each other. Their individual development thus has both reproductive logics arising from their inner form *and* interactive logics arising from their co-existence with others: it is “combined development”. First formulated by Trotsky to construct an inter-societal explanation

for the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, this theory has more recently been taken up within IR, and has been utilized to provide an analysis of “global” social change in the 1990s (Rosenberg 2005), the long-term genesis of the Iranian Revolution (Matin 2007), the development of nationalism (Dufour 2007), the intellectual trajectory of nineteenth and early twentieth century German social thought (Shilliam 2009), the historical origins of the First World War (Rosenberg 2010), the nature of relations between sub-Saharan African states and external donor institutions (Brown 2009), and last but not least, the role of interaction in the (late prehistoric) formation of the first known states (Rosenberg 2009).

A second strand of IHS is now emerging which can be primarily identified as “global dialogic”, or non-Eurocentric. Although this approach shares much in common with the theory of uneven and combined development, it begins in different form, most notably as a critique of the Eurocentrism of social theory, IR theory and much second-wave HSIR (Hobson 2007a, 2007b). The limitations of Eurocentric accounts are seen to emerge, at root, from the shortcomings of endogenous models of development and political/social change. Much social theory, historical sociology and IR theory, it is argued, develops accounts that privilege the West as the progenitor of the international system and holds that the most significant developments in world politics emerge in the West. Moreover, these accounts are premised on the notion that the superiority of the West is derived from its endogenous, innate, pristine character. In this story, little-to-no progressive role is accorded to the East, which is deemed to be incapable of development and is represented either as the passive victim or beneficiary of Western imperialism and modes of development.

The proposed antidote to Eurocentrism lies in a *global* approach which grants agency and ontological weighting to both West *and* East. More specifically, it is possible to envisage an approach to historical development which traces the influences of the East on the rise of the

West (e.g. Hobson 2004). This begins by singling out the various “resource portfolios” (ideas, institutions, technologies) that were invented in the East, before turning to analyze how these were transmitted to the West. Such an approach places its emphasis on “dialogues of civilizations”, since it is through these dialogical transfers that development was enabled in the West. However, the next stage of the argument seeks to produce a sociological explanation of the initiatives that Europeans undertook to assimilate these Eastern resource portfolios and to adapt them in order to make the breakthrough to industrial modernity, enquiring also into the imperial exploitative processes that, in turn, enabled Western industrialization. This mode of research also enquires into how West-East dialogues and transmissions impacted on the East. This again entails an analysis of Western imperialism, although it also seeks to reveal Eastern inputs into the reproduction of empire and the channels of Eastern “resistance agency” that led to the overthrow of empire.

It might be inferred from this brief discussion that such an approach is capable of producing only a third image or outside-in approach and would, therefore, fail to satisfy the desire to fashion an approach that unites domestic and inter-societal processes. But a key part of this approach examines precisely the domestic formations of societies and civilizations in order to determine how they refract “incoming” influences to particular ends as well as examining the social processes that refashion these influences in certain directions. “Global dialogic” IHS, therefore, shares a fundamental interest in processes of uneven and combined development. And while it focuses on global transmissions that shape civilizations and societies across the globe, it also accounts for “domestic” processes. In fact, taking up this point of departure requires us to recognize how civilizations and societies shape each other in promiscuous ways, resulting in hybrid social formations that can be differentiated across time and space.

The third variant of IHS – “Eventful IHS” – shares a desire to theorize and explore

empirically the intersection between interactivity and multiplicity/difference. However, unlike the other two modes of IHS, this approach concentrates neither on inter-societal relations nor on inter-civilizational dynamics but on *inter-social* relations as these generate particular pathways of historical development. In fact, this form of research – what we could more broadly call “nomothetic history” or “relational process tracing” – rejects the use of “entities” such as society and civilization in favor of a concentration on how historical *events* enable social formations to emerge, reproduce, reform, transform and break down. For example, following some social network theory (e.g. Tilly 2005), it is possible to examine the formation, transformation and breakdown of networks of shared interests, identity and meaning as these are generated from both “inside” practices and “outside” interactions. In this way, “radical” political actors such as armed militants may become “moderate” via dynamics which arise from reaction to events both within their networks *and* via exchanges with external actors (e.g. Krebs & Chawdhury in press). Comparable accounts illustrate how “inside” and “outside” rhetorical strategies used to frame certain events both enable and close down certain policy avenues (e.g. Jackson 2006; Jackson & Krebs 2007), how “network entrepreneurs” working within and between networks enable breakthroughs in apparently “indivisible” conflicts (e.g. Goddard 2006), and how transnational religious networks can mobilize around certain events in order to disrupt modes of rule (e.g. Nexon 2009).

This third form of IHS, therefore, rejects a number of taken-for-granted binaries in the social sciences, not least amongst them structure and agency. Where a focus on the former has a tendency to reify relatively fixed patterns of social relations as “actual existing things”, over-emphasis on the latter has an equally problematic tendency to imagine a pre-existing, non-social individual whose motivations, interests and preferences come pre-packaged without recourse to broader social practices (Jackson & Nexon 1999). Rejection of these

positions leads this approach toward a meso-level of research occupied by a number of like-minded research agendas. For example, “historical institutionalists” (e.g. Thelen 2004; Pierson 2004; Lawson 2006) examine how the formation of common rules, norms and practices – at once based on both internal “sameness” and external “difference” – within certain fields yields patterns of continuity and change which, in turn, constitute particular path dependencies. And some organizational sociologists (e.g. Clegg 1989) explore the ways in which members articulate their interests, position themselves strategically and fix their relationships both in “internal” circuits *and* vis-à-vis “others”. As these practices, norms and procedures are reproduced, space opens up for new connections to be institutionalized. Although they are inhibited by processes of rule making, supervision and regulation, structures of rule are not wholly constraining – they are also enabling and generative, open to negotiation and resistance. As such, organizations represent tangible empirical sites by which to study the interplay of social action and social change as this is carried through via sociological dynamics which are themselves generated by the immediacy of both interactivity and multiplicity.

One of the strengths of “Eventful IHS” is its capacity to accommodate patterns of both continuity and change. After all, it is clear that, much of the time, social orders regulate processes of social, political and economic exchange fairly smoothly, both internally and in their exchanges with others. To be sure, these regularities do, from time to time, break-down (for example via elite contestation, resistance “from below” and/or external conflict) and, equally clearly, this process is dynamic (following a logic of what Michael Mann calls “interstitial emergence”). As such, change is a constant feature of social life. But at the same time, there is often a relative stability to how exchanges governing areas such as trade, diplomacy and security are conducted. In other words, social relations are produced and

reproduced in a frequently sticky, if always contingent, process. The result is what Norbert Elias (2000) called a *figurational* approach to causation, focusing on how historically specific outcomes are the results of processes which are themselves drawn from the complex intersection of events, networks, institutions and organizations. By focusing on events which take place within periods of rapid change such as “organic crises”, revolutions and wars (what Michael Mann (1986), following Ernest Gellner, calls “neo-episodic moments”), it is possible to expose this sociological dynamic and examine how social orders are produced, reproduced, disrupted and transformed. In this way, insight into the origins and development of historical processes are generated without requiring analytical shorthands such as society or civilization and, potentially, their reification into objects in their own right. In short, “Eventful IHS” seeks to occupy the messy eclectic centre of social (and historical) theory, seeing this vantage point as the best means of combining analytical rigor, conceptual sophistication and empirical reach. Importantly, it is guided not by prefigured analytical boundaries, but by empirical puzzles regarding how certain practices come into being, how they change and, indeed, how they break down.

For A “Rich Parsimony”

Over the last thirty years, IR has been contained within a view of “proper” theory which privileges parsimony over complexity. For Kenneth Waltz, as for many IR theorists, second image factors were to be omitted lest their inclusion lead toward analysis which requires knowledge of each state-society nexus, thereby moving us from a parsimonious to a complex ontology. Making this move, Waltz argued, would render it impossible to identify the law-like patterns of the international that many IR theorists equate with the mark of scientific status and

theoretical validity. And fundamental to his claim is the associated belief that, as one moves away from such an approach, we simultaneously move away from theory building toward thick description.

Our reply is that it is possible to combine domestic level processes with the “international” in such a way that we can generate a “rich parsimony” – one that is able to provide a succinct definition of the international, albeit one that develops and changes over time, while also situating the domestic realm within its core area of concern. In this way we hope to affect a balance between parsimony and complexity while also combining theoretical strength and empirical richness. As such, historical sociology can be said to contain two major contributions to contemporary IR. First, it forms part of a broader turn (see also Wight 2007; Jackson in press) toward a non-positivist social science, taking its place amongst other approaches which accept the value-laden status of knowledge claims, but which refuse to give up on the possibility of *explaining* processes of continuity and change in international politics. Second, historical sociology is bound up with the desire not just to develop meta-theory or generate methodological breakthroughs, but to contribute to important empirical issues. In this sense, historical sociology – like both classical social theory and recent cognate work in the field (e.g. Adams et al 2005; Calhoun 2003; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003) – is intended to differentiate between open doors and brick walls, forming part of a move away from questions about “how can we know” toward those concerned with “what we can know”. In this light, the contribution of a third stage in historical sociology which links IR formatively to other social sciences has the potential to enrich a number of important debates in the discipline (Halliday 2002).

Our fundamental argument in this essay is simple – by insisting on the autonomy of the international sphere, IR has developed two, linked problems. First, the discipline denies itself the

possibility of intelligibly conceiving its subject matter as part of the wider social world. Second, once segregated in this way, the enormous implications that IR generates, here understood as the basic significance of inter-societal multiplicity and interaction for conceptualizing the social world, cannot be formulated, perpetuating the weak standing of IR within the social sciences as a whole. In its short history to date, HSIR has gone a long way toward addressing the first of these problems. The second remains to be overcome and it is the reason why HSIR must ultimately go beyond itself, why it must complete the triangulation set out so elegantly by C. Wright Mills some fifty years ago, and why it should now aspire to creating a genuinely international historical sociology.

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Online Resources

Historical sociology and IR working group. At <http://www.historical-sociology.org/>. This site contains news about events held by the group. There are also links to related sites of interest, reports from workshops, and a range of online resources.

The Journal of Historical Sociology. At <http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0952->

[1909](#). The Journal of Historical Sociology is a useful port of call for work in the field, although it is not geared towards work conducted in IR.

Comparative and Historical Sociology section of the American Sociological Association. At <http://www2.asanet.org/sectionchs/>. This wide ranging site includes much of interest including lists of - and links to - relevant publications, online newsletters, details of events and more.

Justin Rosenberg's homepage. At <http://www.justinrosenberg.org/>. This site - hosted by a well known historical sociologist at the University of Sussex - is particularly strong on teaching resources, containing details of courses in historical sociology and world politics. The site also contains downloadable versions of Rosenberg's many essays on historical sociology.

Marxists Internet Archive. At <http://www.marxists.org/>. A remarkable collection of Marxist writing including virtually everything written by Marx and Engels, Trotsky, C.L.R. James and others.

Max Weber. At <http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Weber/Whome.htm>. The first port of call for students and faculty interested in the work of Max Weber. Contains original works, essays on Weberian thought and links to further resources.

Dead Sociologists Index. At <http://media.pfeiffer.edu/lridener/DSS/#weber>. An indispensable guide to the work of classical social theorists including Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Comte. The site contains in-depth biographies, summaries of key ideas and links to original works.

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