

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Martin Shaw

Department of International Relations and Politics, University of Sussex, UK

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Summary

This chapter examines sociology's relevance to International Relations (IR). It begins by examining the development of sociology and the meaning of a historical sociology. It argues that the theory of the State has been central to historical sociology, and then shows how this might be valuable to International Relations. It proceeds to examine the principles of a historical-sociological approach, and the possible problems of adopting it in IR. The chapter then poses some of the issues involved in extending historical sociology to the study of globalization, and the possible tensions between a global and a historical sociology. The chapter concludes by offering a future sociological agenda for International Relations.

1. Sociology's Relevance to International Relations

The field of international relations originated in the study of international politics, with a narrow definition of its object as the study of the relations of states in international systems. Although this intellectual framework can be traced back to early modern and even classical political theorists, it owed much of its force to the particular historical conjuncture of the Cold War. To a visitor from sociology, international relations had some of the charm of a 1950s theme park, where questions long since thrown up – and seemingly answered – in other fields were popping up as novelties.

However, the big historical questions – world order, state development, war and peace – did at least have a place in international studies. In sociology these macro-concerns,

although treated by major figures, became curiously marginal to the empirical mainstream of the subject. And although international relations was often slow to adapt -- e.g. feminist approaches emerged long after they had begun to influence sociology -- an intellectual ferment has developed in international studies in the last two decades.

In this transformation, the definition of international relations as the study of international *politics* has been increasingly challenged. There has been growing interest in developing a broadly sociological approach to the subject, as well as in the relevance of the specific contributions of classical and contemporary sociologists to international relations. The aim of this chapter is to explore the nature of this challenge and the role it is playing in contemporary international relations.

It is important to place these changes in the context of the historical development of the worldwide social sciences, and to understand the relative roles of international relations and sociology in these processes. International relations can be considered a relatively “new” field of social science because it first developed as an organized field in the early twentieth century. As such it stands as a “secondary” field in relation to the more “fundamental” social sciences of sociology and economics as well as, of course, politics.

Indeed, international relations only became widely institutionalized in North America in the second half of the century. It only began to spread to a wide range of countries in the final decade of the century. It is still widely considered, even in the United States, as a sub-field of political science.

The late twentieth-century attempts in international relations to bridge disciplinary boundaries between economics, politics and sociology represent a fundamental shift in the field. The idea that international relations should be considered an interdisciplinary field is therefore still, to some extent, controversial. However, since it corresponds to strong currents in the real world of international relations it is unlikely to be reversed.

In this new interdisciplinary understanding of international relations, it is important to look back at the historical roots of the disciplinary differences that are being overcome. Classical debates, at the root of the modern social-scientific tradition, are of central relevance to contemporary international relations. If sociology is a new approach in international relations debates, it is nevertheless a foundational approach in the social sciences. The context in which it was formed helps to explain its relevance, and its relationships both to the classic “political” tradition of international relations and the new “political economy” tradition that has also gained ground in recent years.

Two further points that we need to note at the outset are as follows. First, the most explicit way in which sociology has been “brought into” international relations is as *historical sociology*. Second, sociological approaches have also been considered particularly useful in illuminating contemporary approaches to *globalization*. Thus international relations has drawn on two main strands of sociological thought and research, which are quite different from each other, and have contrasting relationships to the history of the subject.

2. The Historical Origins of Sociological Thought

Historically, sociology emerged in reaction to three core traditions of thought that developed in the European Enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: political economy, philosophy and political theory. To appreciate the contributions that sociological approaches can make to international relations, we need first to understand something of these traditions and their historical background.

Classical *political economy* was one of the forms of thought which emerged in the revolutionary changes which created what we have come to think of as the modern world. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Britain was in the forefront of industrial change, and Scottish writers like Adam Smith -- seen today as the founder of economics -- developed important insights into the market relations of the emerging industrial world.

In the other major European countries industrialism was slower to develop, but the French revolution had stimulated the development of *political theory* and of *philosophy*. The greatest thinkers of the early nineteenth century were much more encyclopedic than their successors in the twentieth-century social sciences. Among the greatest of the German philosophers, for example, Immanuel Kant was concerned with the conditions of world peace, and GFW Hegel absorbed many of the critical insights of the new political economy into his “dialectical” understanding of how history and thought are related.

In the mid- to late nineteenth century, however, fundamental changes occurred in the intellectual picture. With the consolidation of the increasingly industrial market economy on the one hand, and of the modern bureaucratic state on the other, the relationships between philosophy, economic thought and politics were transformed. There were two contrasting lines of developments: of historical materialism on the one hand and the modern disciplines of economics, sociology, etc. on the other.

Karl Marx, the greatest of modern polymaths, synthesized the dialectical thought of Hegel with the political economy of Smith’s principal successor, David Ricardo, and the emergent communist and socialist strand in the political thought of the time. Thus Marx presented his work as a *critique* of political economy. It not only uncovered, he argued, the historically specific social relations of labor and capital underlying the market economy -- these had already been acknowledged in Ricardo’s claim that labor was the source of value -- but it showed how these would lead to the transcendence of political economy in practice.

Marx understood his theory as pointing beyond philosophy, political economy and political theory as they had been understood previously, although it incorporated a “critical” version of each of these. Overall, however, Marx has been seen as making a transition from philosophy to *historical social theory*. For Marx, social relations, understood as specific to a particular historical epoch, were the central problem in the understanding of economics, politics and philosophy.

The new *disciplines* of social-scientific thought represented a contrasting line of

development. The gradual institutionalization of social science in the academy moved in an opposite direction to Marx's synthesis. Each discipline emphasized the distinctiveness of specific areas of society. Thus through what was called the “marginalist” revolution, modern economics developed as a discipline that no longer acknowledged social and political relations as theoretically central to the economy. In a parallel development, a specific field of *sociological study* was developed, by writers like Auguste Comte, as a new form of understanding of social relations in which economic conditions were no longer seen as fundamental.

Thus Sociology represented, initially at least, a radically opposed development to that of Marx, even if in the late twentieth century there has been a *rapprochement*. Comte proclaimed a “positive” scientific philosophy -- hence “positivism” -- in opposition to Marx's continuation of Hegel's “negative” or dialectical thought. And for Comte, like his forerunner Henri de Saint-Simon, what was important about the new industrial society was not the contradictory social relations of the market, but the scientific idea through which a new sense of social solidarity would emerge.

This strand of sociology – as opposed to political economy -- was developed further in the work of Emile Durkheim. It became central to the functionalist theory of the “social system” developed by Talcott Parsons, which dominated American sociology in its mid-twentieth century heyday. With Parsons, the main tradition of sociology became fundamentally idealist, locating the unity of society in its “central value system” rather than its class relations. It also became *ahistorical*, not only in the Marxist sense of neglecting the contradictory historical specificity of capitalist social relations, but in the more general sense of seeing broad trans-historical generalizations (across all social systems) as its basic purpose and any kind of historical difference as of secondary significance.

A more historical approach to sociology had been developed, however, by Max Weber (even if the historical dimension of his work was minimized by Parsons, who also claimed Weber's legacy). The significance of his huge, wide-ranging life's work has often been compared to that of Marx -- he has been seen as the “bourgeois Marx”, offering a fundamental alternative to the latter. In reality, Weber's work does not lend itself to such an easy ideological polarization. Despite his famous investigation into the significance of Protestant religion in the rise of capitalism, Weber does not offer a simple “idealist” foil for Marx's “materialism”. Just as Marx, the heir of Hegel, understood the significance of ideas, so Weber emphasized material circumstances.

Weber's importance lay precisely in the breadth of his historical perspectives, centered on a comparative sociology of world civilizations, and the reasons why only the West had developed capitalist *economic rationality*. Weber, like Marx, recognized the world-historic significance of capitalist modernity, but he defined capitalism more in terms of this rational logic of market relations than the specific social relation of wage-labor and capital -- which Marx made central. This meant that he had a view of the future of capitalism which was simultaneously more closed and more open than Marx's.

On the one hand, Weber believed that the instrumental rationality ushered in by the capitalist market -- even if originating partly in religious ideas -- was becoming

universal and all-pervasive. Weber believed that socialism, far from radically disrupting this process, would actually consolidate it. In this sense, there was no escape from the “iron cage” of capitalist rationality. *Rationalization* -- which Weber also saw as implying *bureaucratization* -- was ineluctable, and history was in this sense “closed” to any serious alternative to capitalism.

In another sense, however, Weber’s approach appeared more open than Marx’s. Capitalism was compatible, he recognized, with a variety of cultures and historical conditions. The defining class dialectics of Marx’s understanding of capitalism, which in some hands became a deterministic view of the inevitability of socialism, were circumvented. Weber’s historical method was looser than the more systematic approach to which Marx’s concept of historic specificity lent itself.

As critical sociology developed a distinctive voice against the 1950s supremacy of Parsons and other functionalists, writers like C. Wright Mills argued that the “sociological imagination” needed to be historical -- in a broad sense that owed more to Weber than to Marx. The late 1960s and early 1970s, however, saw the re-emergence of calls for sociology to be historical in distinctively Marxist senses: although even among Marxists, differences emerged between the *structuralist* followers of Louis Althusser and the others such as the *humanist* E.P. Thompson whose idea of history emphasized human agency. These Marxist divisions centered on the relationship between opposed concepts of history: as the succession of modes of production, or as the product of the conscious struggles of classes.

By the 1980s, these arguments were increasingly transcended in a sociology which was broadly Weberian, but also post-Marxist in the sense of having absorbed some important parts of Marx’s and subsequent Marxist thought. Anthony Giddens had developed a “contemporary critique of historical materialism”, and attempted to resolve the dilemma of structure and agency in his theory of “structuration”. Giddens’, even more than Weber’s, was an intrinsically historical sociology that made *open-endedness* and *discontinuity* principles of analysis.

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Biographical Sketch

Martin Shaw (1947-), who previously held a chair of sociology at Hull University, has been Professor of International Relations and Politics at the University of Sussex, England, since 1995. His books include *Theory of the Global State* (2000), *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises* (1996), *Global Society and International Relations* (1994) and *Post-Military Society* (1991). He edits the critical social science portal www.theglobalsite.ac.uk and a personal website at www.martinshaw.org. Email: m.shaw@sussex.ac.uk.