

Sociological Resources for the Study of International Relations

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Only when I joined the political science department at Columbia almost seven years ago, after twenty-seven years as a professor of history and sociology, did I make four vivid, surprising discoveries I had somehow avoided before then:

1. Many of us in sociology and history had actually been studying international relations for years, but giving the subject other names.
2. Our view of how international relations worked, however, didn't look much like what my students and colleagues in international relations made of the subject.
3. Nevertheless, my political science students and colleagues had something to gain from sociological theory and research on their subject, especially when it came to explaining international processes and placing them in historical-comparative context.
4. Partly because the Warsaw Pact had collapsed and partly because various forms of cultural analysis had started corroding the steely edges of the IR models that had previously appealed to strategic analysts, my students and colleagues in IR had become curious about history, comparative politics, and even sociology.

My earlier encounters with IR specialists had generally been disappointing, since their fancy models of relations among states didn't correspond closely either to the way I understood international processes or to my preference for historical-comparative analysis of those processes. Now it seemed that there was hope for a fruitful conversation among sociologists, historians, and IR specialists. In particular, it seemed that sociologists and historians who rejected static, reductionist single actor models in favor of emphasis on dynamic relations and social processes could collaborate fruitfully with students of international relations, and even help them avoid some of the difficulties caused by cultural reductionism.

My statement today will avoid the huge question of rhetoric that looms behind our session's announced topic: how one might persuade certified specialists in international relations, including political practitioners, to incorporate sociological perspectives and findings into their work. No doubt other speakers will address that rhetorical problem superbly. Instead, I will settle for identifying some sociological fields in which analyses of international processes play prominent parts. They include:

- state transformation
- war and revolution
- world systems
- boundaries, identities, and related social processes
- migration
- contentious politics
- globalization

Let me say a few words about each.

State Transformation. With a few important exceptions such as Japan and China in their ascendant phases, sharply bounded, territorially contiguous states only began to prevail across the world during the 18th century. As a consequence, anyone who studies the history of state transformation necessarily takes into account the social construction and reconstruction of states. Back to competing Marxist, Weberian, and evolutionary accounts, sociologists have been describing and explaining state transformation - however inadequately - for more than a century. Provided that they avoid the teleological and single track versions of state transformation to which such analyses often resort, IR theorists have much to gain from looking critically at this body of work.

War and Revolution. Sociological studies of war, even of civil war, have always necessarily taken international relations into account. At least since Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* drew attention to the international context

of the national processes her teacher (and mine) Barrington Moore had analyzed, students of revolution likewise regularly treat international connections as crucial. Indeed, students of both subjects have converged on interactions between wars and revolutions. At a minimum, IR theorists can use existing sociological work to get a better grip on relations among war, revolution, other interstate interactions, and domestic politics.

World Systems. Although Rosa Luxemburg and her collaborators had long since detected the powerful presence of a capitalist world system, Immanuel Wallerstein's 1974 *The Modern World System* stimulated an enormously fruitful set of exchanges among sociologists not long before John Meyer and his associates began a partly independent foray into the interdependence of national processes. World systems analysts generally treat interstate relations as simply one component of larger international networks. They therefore provide valuable indications as to what other sorts of dynamic connections IR analysts might take into account.

Boundaries, Identities, and Related Social Processes. Originally challenged by postmodern analyses of identities, a large number of sociologists who study culture, inequality, ethnicity, politics, and organizations have in recent years been stirring up an excited conversation about boundaries, identities, and related social processes.¹ They range from phenomenological or cultural reductionists to hard-nosed rational action analysts, but they actually speak to each other. You will find a number of them reaching back for theoretical inspiration to Karl Marx on exploitation, to Max Weber on social closure, and to Georg Simmel on webs of group relations. Although most of them work at national or subnational scales, many of the processes they analyze also operate internationally.

Migration. Although studies of migration - even, ironically, of international migration - long ignored questions of international relations in favor of mechanical and economic accounts of individual movement, over the last generation students of citizenship and of transnational communities have made up for that long neglect. With studies of what James Scott calls "seeing like a state," indeed, systems of registration, control, and empowerment have become major preoccupations of migration specialists. Thus migration studies join hands with analyses of censuses, passports, border control, and citizenship.

¹ See, for example, the exchanges on boundaries and social processes in <http://www.people.virginia.edu/~bb3v/symbound/conf2003/vforum1.html>.

Contentious Politics. With the inevitable complaint from historically minded sociologists and political scientists that newcomers are forgetting international dimensions of antislavery, feminism, socialism, and other major 19th century mobilizations, numerous students of political struggle have recently taken up contemporary cross-border collaboration in politics, international promotion and connection of indigenous movements, diffusion of tactical repertoires among countries, and coordinated action that targets international organizations and/or transnational firms.

Globalization. Some of those specialists in contentious politics are focusing on anti-globalization protests and/or fashioning explanations of collective claim making in terms of global processes. But many other sociologists are examining a) diffusion and adaptation of western technologies, organizational forms, and cultural models, b) creation of global communication systems, and c) worldwide flows of population. Of course, as before historically minded people (including me) repeatedly complain that today's globalization fans are ignoring previous waves of globalization back to the migration of humans out of Africa some 50 thousand years ago.

If my experience working with IR students at Columbia provides a reliable sign, these sociological resources all help international relations specialists to broaden their scope, and even to explain better some of the phenomena they already have on their agendas. The major obstacles to effective collaboration between sociology and international relations do not lie in the absence of a common vocabulary, the lack of shared concrete knowledge, the incompatibility of analytic techniques, or even the disparity of research questions. They lie in two other areas: in the strong orientation of international relations to normative and strategic questions, and in competing approaches to explanation.

Of course normative and strategic questions motivate a good deal of sociological research, but on the whole they leave considerable room for cumulative inquiry into reliable causes and effects; the likelihood that such seductive ideas as the Democratic Peace will translate rapidly into policy or at least into political rhetoric leaves less slack for patient verification in IR than in sociology. As for explanation, IR generally follows political science as a whole by assuming that dispositions of persons or groups cause their actions, and therefore that a good explanation consists of credibly reconstructing those dispositions just prior to action. Plenty of sociologists share that predilection for dispositional explanations, but a significant

minority within the field but instead on the identification of dynamic relational processes and the mechanisms that drive those processes. The minority includes the most promising sociological allies of international relations specialists. Oriented as IR is to present-day normative and strategic questions, and committed as it is to dispositional accounts of social processes, however, I am not confident that sociological modes of explanation have much prospect of becoming dominant in the professional study of international relations as a whole.