

# **“Towards a Second “Second Debate”: history, scientific inquiry and historical sociology in International Relations”**

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## **Introduction**

The 'second debate' in the historiography of the field of International Relations (IR)<sup>1</sup> took place in the 1960s and focussed upon the relative merits of scientific and historical methods for understanding international politics. Science and history were taken to be two separate approaches, and the disciplinary divide that emerged from this debate has generally taken them to be incommensurable forms of knowledge.

However, the incommensurability of science and history rests upon a shallow understanding of each. Scientific method in IR has come to be so closely associated with positivist methodology that the two have become problematically synonymous. The 'second debate' had at its heart an acceptance by both sides that an empiricist philosophy of science and a positivist methodology were representative of scientific inquiry, and that these should be juxtaposed with an interpretivist and historicist approach. In their common acceptance of one specific philosophy of science, they closed off many possibilities for extending the debate. In this paper, we look at some of the new philosophies of science and methodological approaches that have emerged since the period of the 'second debate', and argue that they offer new possibilities for combining scientific and historicist approaches.

We also argue that Historical Sociology in IR is the natural home for these combinations of scientific and historical inquiry. History also has a far richer and more varied set of resources than is often recognised. 'Historical sociology', the analysis of the interrelationship of individual action, spatio-temporally large-scale social structures, and fundamental processes of historical change, is a case in point.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, historical sociology, as analytical attempts to encompass both past and present, events and processes, action and structure, and the individual and the collective via methods that merge conceptual development, comparative generalization, and in-depth empirical exploration,<sup>3</sup> can enable IR scholars more in-depth understanding of their subject matter. Yet the near monopoly positivism has over 'scientific methodology' in IR is a key obstacle in the way.

This paper will argue that IR scholars can move beyond such an impasse by drawing on the nonpositivist scientific methodology that has begun to make an impact in the

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<sup>1</sup> Following convention, 'IR' refers here to the discipline studying international relations (the lower case referring to social relations).

<sup>2</sup> Bryant (2003: 75) refers to Michael Mann's work by a related definition. Also see Skocpol (1984: 1-21, 8, 4), and Novak (2000)

<sup>3</sup> Smith (1991: 3)

broader social sciences. With these developments in mind, we will suggest that the ‘second debate’ should be viewed in a new light: namely as one about positivist methods, not about the status of scientific methodology in IR in general. Looking at contemporary IR in this way, we will argue that perhaps it is time for a second ‘second debate’. Furthermore, we will argue that important gains can be made from reconsidering the methodologies on which explanatory models in IR rest, and that in this way a debate over particular historical sociological arguments *about* world politics can be had.

In the first part of the paper, we briefly examine some of the arguments that characterised the second debate in IR, including the idea that history and science involve incommensurable ways of approaching knowledge. The second part, firstly traces the empiricist desire to achieve a particular form of a science of society as part of a unified theory of knowledge, arguing that mainstream scientific approaches to IR follow in this long tradition. Secondly, the section examines how history has embraced social theory, interdisciplinarity and scientific concepts, as it has moved to enlarge its subject matter beyond ‘high politics’. The third part locates the discussion in the context of methodologies employed in historical sociological analysis. It argues that positivist covering law models of causation are not the most appropriate form for historical sociological explanation. In place of positivist methodology, the section outlines ‘mechanismic explanation’, which is neither epistemologically empiricist nor ontologically reductionist, and has the potential to overcome the history vs. science binary in social scientific explanation. These points will be illustrated with examples from existing historical sociological analyses. The paper concludes with the thought that alternative scientific approaches have the potential to breath new life into IR’s ‘second debate’, and that Historical Sociology is the most promising location within the discipline for the development of some of these new approaches.

### **Part 1: The “Second Debate” in IR: the emergence and prominence of positivism as the theory of science**

A significant and growing group of IR scholars have, in recent years, called for greater historical sensitivity in formulating the categories and theories used to approach international and global social relations.<sup>4</sup> International historical sociology is at the forefront of this move. International historical sociologists argue for a rejection of what key exponents of the field, Steve Hobden and John Hobson, have called ‘tempocentrism’: the idea that starting from the present, past world political forms can be studied by comparison to the structures of the contemporary international system.<sup>5</sup> Their desire to re-establish the temporal distinctiveness of the historical social forms and structures that make up the international could only have arisen in a scholarly environment where historicist inquiry had been marginalised.

The submission of history to other approaches may be viewed as an unlikely path for IR to have taken, given the tastes of some of its earliest thinkers. It is often noted that in the formative years of its development, the discipline was shaped by scholars with a keen interest in history, and sensitivity to the political cultures and forms of the

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<sup>4</sup> Cox (1987); Rosenberg (1994); Buzan and Little (2000); Hobden et al. (2002)

<sup>5</sup> Hobden and Hobson (2000: 9)

past.<sup>6</sup> But the evolution of the discipline moved away from the sensibilities of such thinkers because of the competing desire of another group of scholars, based predominantly in the United States, to establish IR on a more scientific footing. The empiricist philosophy of science<sup>7</sup> that underpinned the efforts of this group reduced historical knowledge to a set of caricatures, carefully selected to add weight to supposedly timeless and invariant laws. This set of theories of the international grew out of the behaviouralist revolution in the social sciences in the 1960s. The work of David Singer, Morton Kaplan and, eventually, the later work of Kenneth Waltz exemplified a desire to draw up parsimonious theories that utilised positivist methodology and objectivity of the natural sciences.<sup>8</sup>

This disagreement about the relative weight of historicist and scientific methods – and their juxtaposition – was institutionalised in a debate on the legitimacy of scientific approaches between Morton Kaplan and Oxford-based classicist Hedley Bull in the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> The key point of contestation was the ‘unity-of-science’ question: whether natural and social sciences can be studied similarly.

Behaviourists like Kaplan argued classical political realist approaches lacked rigour, and instead celebrated the merits of statistical modelling and other quantitative methods to study what were taken to be causal laws (or regularities) of international relations. In his response to Kaplan, Bull defended the long-standing tradition of British IR scholarship that draws on political philosophy, law and diplomatic history.<sup>10</sup> Bull argued the ‘scientific approach’ could not advance IR theory, mainly because formal modelling cannot contribute to our understanding of a quintessentially interpretive subject matter. Bull declared that because scholars’ frameworks are always imbued with value-assumptions, “mathematical” approaches fare poorly in illuminating the nature of world politics. Bull was also critical of what he viewed as the cumulative aims of the behaviourist approach. Bull claimed instead that international theory should involve uncovering

the leading ideas that have governed and do govern our thinking about international relations ... to expound what those ideas are, to relate them to their historical context, and to examine their truth and their bearing on our present political concerns, in relation to past practice and to present practice.<sup>11</sup>

The rather brief exchange between Kaplan and Bull in the 1960s has become known in IR as the second of the discipline defining ‘great debates’. Kaplan and Bull’s disagreement has been the most explicit attempt at a methodological debate in IR to date, but to put it bluntly, it has been detrimental to the development of discussion of methodology in field. In order to make the case for bringing spacio-temporality (back) in to IR (as for example Hobden and Hobson suggested) stronger, discussion on the following methodological shortcomings of the ‘second debate’ is to be encouraged.

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<sup>6</sup> Many have considered the work of the English School as emblematic here. See: Bull (1977); Watson (1992); Buzan and Little (2000); Buzan (2004)

<sup>7</sup> Broadly defined as implying that social scientific inquiry must restrict itself to explanations of that which can be *observed* in specific moments.

<sup>8</sup> Singer and Small (1966); Kaplan (1957); Waltz (1979)

<sup>9</sup> Bull (1966) Kaplan (1969)

<sup>10</sup> Bull (1966)

<sup>11</sup> Der Derian (2003: 64), quoting Bull’s lecture notes at Oxford.

Firstly, there is the issue that despite largely persuading his home audience with his case against ‘scientific’ approaches, Bull only voiced objections to Kaplan’s methodology, but did not specify an alternative.<sup>12</sup> An argument could be made that this move contributed to a convention whereby particularly British IR scholarship did not feel the need to develop its methodologies. The need to develop methodology is pertinent in the context of concept development of historically-minded theories in the field. For example, by what standard is ‘international society’ a spacio-temporally universal (or a particular) concept? By what standards do we judge whether, say, the English School concepts apply to real social relations, and how can those standards be justified? Furthermore, by what standards do we decide whether we can apply concepts of classical social theory to (diverse) contemporary social changes? By what standards can we generalise, if at all? In other words, development of *middle range theory* is important for historically sensitive approaches, but arguably the debate of the 1960s does not offer many tools for this.

Second, as Colin Wight has persuasively argued, Bull conceded the label of ‘scientific study’ in IR to scholars drawing on positivist methodology.<sup>13</sup> Wight notes that the logical positivist thesis of science was problematically self-validating: “logical positivism declares that the sciences can be unified and logical positivism defines the content of science.”<sup>14</sup> The problem here is methodology defining the object of investigation (ontology), with little consideration for a more robust understanding of concrete social relations. Positivist methodology – applied to, but not “constitutive of” the nature of social phenomena – hence problematically excludes history. We can see the consequences of this today in ‘anti-scientific’ IR approaches, in that they reject “scientific” – positivist – inquiry specifically because such inquiry fails to appreciate the particularity and relativity of social phenomena. Unless we are to give up on the idea that social research is valuable, there is a need to *specify appropriate methodology*.

Thirdly, it can be argued that discussion over the value of theoretical pluralism in IR can be encouraged best through focusing on methodology. It is inherently valuable for IR theorists to discuss what counts as good theory because the discipline is constituted through the idea that there is an ‘international system’, a conceptually independent set of social phenomena to be studied. Again we could ask, by what standards do we judge if this is the case? The problem is that IR responds with reference to standards that are valid *in* a Kuhnian ‘paradigm’ or a Lakatosian ‘research programme’: but very little debate can be had over the relative plausibility of say neorealist and post-structuralist concepts of the international as they apply in 2007.<sup>15</sup> The success of theories also becomes paradigm-dependent. Dominant theoretical paradigms get unwarranted support from emerging theories that seek disciplinary success by justifying their claims about international relations relative to the dominant paradigms, not relative to concrete social processes or social problems. Historical research is of course well placed to evaluate and integrate various theories, but for it to be explanatory, methodology must be discussed. Furthermore, for our social

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<sup>12</sup> Chris Brown argues that Bull did not specify the case for a classical approach, see Brown (1992). In further need of specification was Bull’s methodology, as his criticisms of Kaplan are specifically methodological.

<sup>13</sup> Wight (2002).

<sup>14</sup> Wight (2002: 28)

<sup>15</sup> See Bennett (2003) for further discussion of the problems created by this convention.

explanations be spatio-temporally sensitive, and for them to be *problem-driven (not paradigm driven)*, methodological pluralism should *not* be encouraged<sup>16</sup> (while a plurality of methods appropriate within a methodology, and theoretical pluralism can support particular research projects). This is because our methodology (standards of explanation) should be derived from deep ontology (theory of the structure(s) of complex social reality).<sup>17</sup> And for this reason, paradigmatic theses and positivist methodology should be discouraged to advance historically sensitive research.

In sum, part of the problem with the second debate is that an instrumentalist and positivist approach has come to dominate how we think about scientific inquiry in IR. Yet, as we will go on to argue later in this paper, new social scientific methodologies embedded in alternative philosophies of science can encourage new debate on methodology: they offer the potential for a second “second debate” in IR.

Before so doing, in the next part of the paper, we outline why positivist approaches to science came to define the second debate, informing those theories whose influence led to the dominance of the rational choice approach to analysing international politics. These approaches can be seen as part of a long tradition of theorists who sought to develop a particular kind of science of society. We see that the first dreams of a science of society can be traced to Enlightenment thinkers who hoped to emulate the success of the natural sciences in the social realm. These origins helped to establish empiricism and positivism as the dominant mode of scientific inquiry into the social world. There are many problems with this approach, not least the argument that science and history are ultimately incompatible types of knowledge.<sup>18</sup> This problem is what underpinned the ‘second debate’, when this particular understanding of scientific inquiry came to dominate IR, in both the work of neo-positivists such as Singer and Kaplan, and in the critique made of them by classicists such as Bull, who did not criticise them on their philosophy of science.

## **Part 2: History and science: an uneasy alliance**

### ***A Science of Society***

The idea that history has a direction, and that it may be possible to uncover that direction through the application of rational thought, is a modern one, although, as John Gray has shown, it is an idea rooted in a Christian worldview.<sup>19</sup> During the 1930s, the historian Carl Becker’s *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* put forward the view that the new faith in earthly progress and the perfectibility of humanity in time espoused by the Enlightenment philosophers was, in

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<sup>16</sup> This argument can be contrasted with Lawson’s (2007) discussion of historical sociology in IR.

<sup>17</sup> For the same reason, arguments for ‘multi-causality’ in contemporary IR should be critically assessed. Furthermore, any arguments for multi-causality should be preceded by the question ‘what are the causes we include in our explanatory model invoked to explain?’ Andrew Bennett (2003: 13) has argued that causes explaining regularities (Humean causes) “are satisfied by statements of regularity that invoke an *as if* assumption that focuses on whether outcomes vary as if the proposed theory is true.” Invoking the importance of such causes for explanation overlooks the spatio-temporal dependence of particular causes, and should not be included in our ‘multi-causal’ models. Hence no multi-causality merely for pluralism’s sake.

<sup>18</sup> Berlin (1960)

<sup>19</sup> Gray (2003)

reality, a simple substitution, a secular version of the Christian philosophy that they had sought to undermine.<sup>20</sup>

In the medieval worldview, humanity was to be rescued at the end of time in Augustine's heavenly city of perfect justice. For Becker, the solutions offered by the majority of the Enlightenment thinkers were ultimately a retreat

down the path paved by their Christian predecessors, seeking consolation in the fantasy of *historical* rescue from the problem of evil. For the Enlightenment, this meant faith in the advent of a secular equivalent of the 'heavenly city' of Christian eschatology, a terrestrial paradise of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In fact, Becker suggested ... these millennial expectations bore fruit almost immediately – in the form of the French Revolution, whose fundamentally *religious* character was recognized, among others, by de Tocqueville.<sup>21</sup>

That the culture of modernity retained this essentially Christian heritage from the beginning is important. A linear concept of development in historical time imbued modernity with an orientation towards the future, giving it historical purpose in the project to uncover, through the application of reason, the principles by which humanity could perfect itself. For Becker this was simply the rebuilding of the heavenly city of St. Augustine with more 'up-to-date materials'.<sup>22</sup>

Different inclinations as to how utopia was to be achieved became a source of conflict that would drive much of the history of the following centuries. One problem with the substitution of a secular, rational truth for the revealed truth of god was disagreement as to the nature of what that rational truth might be. As Nietzsche realised, the death of god removed the arbiter among contending perspectives. Without a final position to fall back on, competing relative versions of the truth may ultimately resolve their differences by recourse to strength.<sup>23</sup> The twentieth century witnessed a number of ideological interpretations of humanity's historical destination struggle for the soul of modernity. As leading candidates for universal truth, liberalism and socialism both appealed to reason as offering access to the underlying motor of history, and both pointed towards different versions of earthly salvation from political conflict, scarcity and inequality in historical time.

These remarks are intended to shed some light on the high stakes involved in attempts to formulate a science of the history of society. The loss of an objective standpoint from which to assess competing truth claims has led many to try to recover god-given certainty through recourse to scientific method. Such endeavours are, and have been, inspired by the astounding success of the natural sciences in generating knowledge about the physical world. The early positivists of the eighteenth century led the way in this respect. Positivists interpreted modernity as 'the transformation of the world by the use of scientific knowledge'.<sup>24</sup> Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) and August Comte (1798-1857) formulated early attempts to apply the principles of scientific method, which had proved such a triumph with Newtonian mechanics, to the development of society. Comte viewed this approach as 'social physics', and was the first to use the term 'sociology'. For the early positivists there was no distinction

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<sup>20</sup> Becker (1932/2003)

<sup>21</sup> Wright, foreword in Becker, (1932/2003: xii)

<sup>22</sup> Becker (1932/2003: 31)

<sup>23</sup> Connelly (1993: 1-15)

<sup>24</sup> Gray (2003: 38)

between the methods that could be applied to study the physical world and the social world. Both realms were ruled by hidden laws that it was the function of science to uncover. Their ultimate goal was the unification of all forms of human knowledge through the successive uncovering of the universal laws that drive the history of nature and society.

The early positivists hoped that these universal laws could provide the standard of agreement between competing perspectives and knowledge claims that secular society required:

according to positivism, science is the motor of historical change. New technology drives out inefficient modes of production and engenders new forms of social life. This process is at work throughout history. Its end-point is a world unified by a single economic system. The ultimate result of scientific knowledge is a universal civilisation, governed by a secular 'terrestrial' morality.<sup>25</sup>

The underlying laws governing the development of society would apply for all places, driving history onward, as society passed through a series of stages of development, successively eliminating sources of social conflict on the road to a utopian future. Saint-Simon declared that 'the laws of history are the laws of destiny, which will inevitably conduct society to a determined end'.<sup>26</sup> Such visions are enduring. A similar Hegelian perspective resurfaced in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* in the aftermath of the Cold War: the liberal democratic state was seen to embody the final realisation of the pre-determined path of historical development.<sup>27</sup>

The certainty that the early positivists had in the possibility of a single scientific method to gain access to the secrets of both the natural and social worlds is the issue of naturalism (or the unity of science question). The empiricist approach to this question is part of the long tradition of what Isaiah Berlin has called 'the pursuit of the ideal'.<sup>28</sup> This tradition can be traced back to Classical Athens: Socrates and Plato were driven by the notion that rational argument could find firm foundations for politics and ethics. Behind all this is the conviction that a timeless and transcendent universal body of knowledge exists, waiting to be unveiled. Once discovered, these laws would be irrefutable, and all opposing judgements must give way. In truth, this form of utopian determinism is founded upon little more than belief, a feeling that behind the turbulent surface appearance of things are unchanging laws. This belief simply updated the Christian hopes for salvation, but now that salvation would take place within the flow of history, rather than at its end.

The ultimate foundation of such certainty came to be seen to rest in the pure form of knowledge offered by mathematics. Mathematical techniques had underpinned all the great advances in the natural sciences that had allowed unparalleled access to the secret laws of the physical world, providing unprecedented possibilities of prediction and control. Furthermore, the iron framework of mathematical and logical reasoning of Newtonian mechanics had been verified by experiment and observation. The eighteenth century positivists hoped such

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<sup>25</sup> Gray (2003: 42)

<sup>26</sup> Gordon (1991: 282)

<sup>27</sup> Fukuyama (1993)

<sup>28</sup> Berlin (1998: 1-17)

order could be introduced into the social sphere as well – uniformities could be observed, hypotheses formulated and tested by experiment; laws could be based on them ... and these in turn could be based on still wider laws, and so on upwards, until a great harmonious system, connected by unbreakable logical links and capable of being formulated in precise – that is, mathematical – terms, could be established.<sup>29</sup>

This tradition of thought continues to strongly influence thinking about the social world. Moving into the early decades of the twentieth century, these ideas were pared down and refined by the logical positivists. The Vienna Circle of philosophers and scientists was the central focus of this philosophical movement, which convened until the rise of Nazism forced many of its leading members to emigrate to the United States. The core of logical positivism was the empiricist (and extreme anti-realist) theory of knowledge that the world can only be constructed from information accessed by the senses (that ultimately social reality is simply that which we can observe).<sup>30</sup> Scientific method alone can allow us to interpret such sense data as we can collect, and only those assertions that can be backed up and tested by science have any meaning: the verifiability criterion. Any speculation outside of this framework is denied legitimacy.<sup>31</sup> The forced emigration of many of the figures from the Vienna Circle by the rise of Nazism meant that their ideas were eventually incorporated into American social sciences. They helped to build the foundations of post-war economic thought in the United States through the work of Milton Friedman, who was heavily influenced by the Vienna Circle. Friedman's thought lifted economics from out of its historical context and sought to establish universal and ahistorical laws of economic behaviour.<sup>32</sup> Both the behaviouralist revolution in IR in the 1960s, and Waltz' *Theory of International Politics*, which seeks to identify timeless laws of behaviour for states in the international system and draws explicitly on a framework borrowed from micro-economics, can be viewed as belonging to this intellectual lineage.<sup>33</sup>

The scientific foundations of the dominant strand of IR in the United States are, then, drawn from an empiricist philosophy of science. This approach, manifested in the social sciences in positivist methodology, marginalises history and historical context in two different ways. Positivists either saw the history of society as moving along a pre-determined path of development towards a utopia where all values converged on foundations of scientific reason – neo-Kantian theories of the democratic peace may be viewed in this tradition.<sup>34</sup> Alternatively, the economic framework inspired by the ideas of logical positivism leads to an essentially ahistorical position – human behaviour can be distilled into a set of timeless principles and laws applicable to all

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<sup>29</sup> Berlin (1998: 4)

<sup>30</sup> Philosophical realism is a position in the philosophy of science that argues that the world exists independently of human thought and perception – it has historically set itself up in opposition to idealist philosophies of science that argue that the physical world is in some way linked with, or depends on, human perception and observation. The logical positivists, as extreme anti-realists, sought to limit discussion of non-observable entities in their investigations into the nature of reality – for them, any such discussions were mere metaphysical nonsense. As Colin Wight (2006: 19) argues, the logical positivist position essential rules out discussion of ontology.

<sup>31</sup> Gray (2003: 39-43)

<sup>32</sup> By contrast, the economic approach of Adam Smith, who, in turn, influenced Marx, was deeply rooted in an appreciation of history, an appreciation that has declined in the social sciences with the rise of positivism: Gray (2003: 41)

<sup>33</sup> Liberal institutionalism and regime theory also buy into the philosophy of science that underpins this research programme

<sup>34</sup> Doyle (1986)

periods. Structural realism, and the research programmes derived from it in IR, such as liberal institutionalism and regime theory, replicate this ahistoricism. In both stances the rich possibilities offered by more complex and robust historical understanding are cast aside.

There are two major critiques of these positions. Firstly, the argument that historical context matters, and that the dream of an essential and ideal knowledge that lays underneath surface appearances and outside of time is illusory and dangerous in its desire to impose universal truth. Secondly, there is the Kuhnian inspired critique that science itself is a process that evolves in historical time, and that its methods and aims change with the knowledge and problems of the day. Both of these critiques reaffirm the centrality that a deeper understanding of the complexity and contingency of history should be playing in our theories of the social world.

The idea that historical context matters for explaining the social world is sometimes used to draw a sharp distinction between incompatible ways of knowing the natural and the social world.<sup>35</sup> Scientific explanation, in this reading, is concerned with establishing ideal models and the laws that regulate behaviour, placing to one side the messy and unquantifiable impact of ideas and feelings.<sup>36</sup> This approach strives for objectivity and seeks a vantage point outside of the object under analysis. In sharp contrast, the other way of knowing is held to be one of understanding the development of human society from the inside, accepting that motivations and causal links must be understood by looking at the ideas and historical contexts of the actors involved. Such an approach is inherently historical, recognising and seeking to imaginatively reconstruct changing historical structures and mentalities as they vary over time and space. It rejects the idea of essences and identities that exist outside of historical time, as well as the notion of the eighteenth century positivists that there can be one universal solution to the problem of designing a political society, based on logic and reason.<sup>37</sup> In this view there is no one model of modernity on which societies will converge, but many paths to multiple modernities.<sup>38</sup> Each solution to a set of historical problems will not bring society a step closer to utopia, but will rather bring with it another set of problems to be resolved.<sup>39</sup> Not only do historical understanding and scientific explanation appear as incompatible forms of knowledge, but, depending upon which is adopted, their inherent assumptions and underlying philosophies also seem to lead to different and politically charged conclusions about the nature and direction of social life.

The second critique of essentialist scientific positions highlights how the gulf between scientific method and historical sensitivity may not be so great. Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, placed the development of science itself in historical context, noting how scientific knowledge did not accumulate uniformly, but was subject to periodic crisis and reconstitution.<sup>40</sup> Kuhn's work undercut the

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<sup>35</sup> See e.g. Hollis and Smith (1990). Weber (1949) is also an important example of this line of thought, because of the canonical role Weber's methodology plays for some strands historical sociology.

<sup>36</sup> Rational choice assumptions of social behaviour are set up to try to resolve this problem.

<sup>37</sup> This approach to historical understanding can be traced initially to the work of the seventeenth century Neapolitan thinker Giambattista Vico (1725), and is exemplified in IR by Robert Cox (1987).

<sup>38</sup> Eisenstadt (1999)

<sup>39</sup> Berlin (1998 :12)

<sup>40</sup> Khun (1970)

perception of science as a unified undertaking that successively revealed new layers of reality. He challenged the covering law approach for its teleological assumption that science was moving towards a final and essential unified knowledge, highlighting instead the historical contingency of science as an endeavour. The history of science becomes not a simple description of scientific activity through time, but rather serves to inform science as to the type of problems to be addressed in successive historical frameworks.<sup>41</sup> In this way, Kuhn challenged the positivist position that scientific theories should be discarded because of failure to live up to empirical observation. In the history of science, theories are more often discarded because competing theories offer a more intuitively appealing vision of the world for a particular historical time period.<sup>42</sup> In this way, science as an evolving practice can be seen to share much with the more interpretive mode of understanding that Isaiah Berlin felt only applied to the history of ideas, and the divide between explanation and understanding appears less unbridgeable.

This approach brings us closer to an alternative understanding of what science is, and therefore an alternative approach to the question of naturalism. Scientific Realism is a philosophy of science that offers an important critique of the positivist position in both the natural and the social sciences (where it often, although not exclusively, has been discussed in the context of Roy Bhaskar's critical realism).<sup>43</sup> The realist position consists in the conviction that the content of science is not contained in its methods, but in its attempt to work towards deep explanations of the reality that underlies surface phenomena. In this sense it posits that unobservable objects are real, in that their existence does not rest simply in their being available to the senses. Unobservable entities, such as society, can come to be rationally known through their causal power, even if they cannot be shown to exist via observation. Realism further insists that science is always a historically located undertaking and that the knowledge arising from it is therefore a social product, not a reflection of universal laws that exist outside of time.<sup>44</sup>

Science, therefore, becomes not about prediction and control, as those in the positivist tradition desired, but about the cataloguing and categorisation of particular causal mechanisms, not the discovery of timeless causal laws (we discuss this in part three in greater detail). This is where recent efforts in Historical Sociology in IR show their affinity with non-positivist approaches to science. Their evolution is reflected in the meeting of the fields of history and sociology themselves, in which, despite the arguments for the incompatibility of history and science as forms of knowledge, many of the advances in our understanding of the past have come from the introduction of self-consciously theoretical approaches, whose methods seek to regain the legitimacy given by adhering to scientific principles. In the next section we look at some of the arguments on the basis of which historical and theoretical knowledge need not be thought of as incompatible modes of inquiry.

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<sup>41</sup> Somers (1998: 737-738)

<sup>42</sup> Somers (1998: 741)

<sup>43</sup> Bhaskar (1979). Critical realism combines the theses of critical naturalism and transcendental realism. In the following section we will draw on a different scientific realist position, that of Mario Bunge.

<sup>44</sup> Wight (2006: 19-46)

## *Theory and History*

The recent upsurge in historical sociological analysis in IR exhibits a commitment to the value of history and process in understanding the nature of the international realm. However, a wide variety of different approaches, from structural Marxism to rational choice associates itself (and has been associated) with historical sociological analysis of IR.<sup>45</sup> Overall, in its tendency to move towards diachronic analysis to understand the nature of change over time, historical sociology naturally gravitates towards other philosophies of science than those which look for causal laws, positing a far more nuanced view of causality. Historical sociologists also look to develop mid-range concepts, a linkage between the universal abstractions of grand theory and the particular detail of specific historical studies. In this section we look at the roots of the marriage between theoretical concepts and historical analysis, showing that, in order to overcome the issues of epistemological and intellectual relativism, historical sociological writing was drawn back towards scientific concepts. But such notions of science are not those of empiricism and positivism.

The great early writers of history were concerned to tell a good story – there was little desire to bring in insights from disciplines outside of the traditional humanities, and certainly no conception that the historical narratives that they built needed to be justified by considerations of scientific method. *Historicism*, a movement born in the German lands in the nineteenth century, and spreading throughout Europe, reached its apogee in the work of Leopold von Ranke, Edward Gibbon and Thomas Carlyle. Confining themselves to such primary sources as were available, these historians sought to construct an imaginative re-creation of the past. The historicist movement, which formed a template for history well into the twentieth century, was, in many respects, a reaction against the positivist ideal of a science of society outlined in the previous section. It can be seen as part of the movement of Romanticism that dominated the nineteenth century, and also as a reaction to the excesses of the French Revolution, where the revolutionaries had sought to begin society anew with an ideology built upon pure science and reason. For historicists,

society was an organic whole, rooted in tradition; to apply first principles without respect for inherited institutions was a threat to the very fabric of social order... in the early nineteenth century, therefore, there was a particularly acute sense among politically conscious people that history imposes constraints which society ignores at its peril.<sup>46</sup>

This new philosophy of imaginative reconstruction of past epochs based on archive materials was a rejection of the positivist notion that historical context did not matter. It set in train the idea that the present can be judged in the light of its difference from previous historical epochs:

Modern historical consciousness comprises two elements: an awareness of the disparity in circumstances and mentality which creates a gulf between all previous ages and our own, and a recognition that our world owes its distinctive character to the way in which it has grown out of those past circumstances and mentalities.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Lawson (2007: 355) for a recent breakdown of those working in the field.

<sup>46</sup> Tosh (1991: 13)

<sup>47</sup> Tosh (1991: 14-15)

The birth of academic history in the nineteenth century continued the Enlightenment awareness of the movement of society through time, but dispensed with the idea of the absolute determinism of society's end destination. In its place it put the notion that the present, and its future options, can only be understood in terms of the past from which it has emerged.

However, the grand narrative approach to history was increasingly discredited in the second half of the nineteenth century. Firstly, there is the undeniable and perhaps irresolvable problem in historical narrative writing that the act of imaginative re-creation always implies an element of subjectivity and individual judgement. This is the problem of epistemological relativism: how to arbitrate between competing versions of truth, an issue that resurfaced with a vengeance in the post-modern stirrings of the late 1960s. Secondly, the traditional narrative approach to writing the history of 'high politics', of war, of diplomacy, of the lives of great historical personalities, came to look like it left out many of the important aspects that drove change in social life: it left out social history. This realisation followed on from the huge changes to social life in the nineteenth century, as the industrial revolution forced European populations from the land into the growing industrial towns and cities, creating a new consciousness of the power of social classes.

The growing desire to develop the history of large groups and classes that was missing from the grand narratives of high politics inevitably led academic history towards theory, and in so doing, towards an interest in the methods and insights of other academic disciplines. To understand the past from below, from the perspective of the ordinary man or woman rather than the politician or monarch, required different tools and different philosophies of history. The lives and motivations of the masses were generally not written down: the new social history required a new set of categories and concepts with which to understand the past. By complicating the historical landscape, by adding in so many more sources of social processes and transformations, the advocates of the new social history also undermined the simple models of causation that accompanied history from above. The causal threads of narrative history were now required to take in the different conjunctures of many factors operating at a variety of levels.

The first attempts to establish such necessary concepts are embodied in the founding fathers of sociology: Marx, Weber, Durkheim. The move towards harnessing the explanatory power of the underlying structures operating at a deeper level of social reality to analyse historical development, swung the pendulum back again toward more supposedly scientific concepts. There was, however, a clear difference between Marx and utopian thinkers like Saint Simon, Comte and Robert Owen in England. Marx brought into the picture the need for human agency: in his scheme such agency is represented by the political struggle of the proletariat.<sup>48</sup> This insight from Marx formed the inspiration for the field of social history, which came into its own in the post-war period in Britain and France. The 1960s saw 'history from below' begin to make great inroads into the traditional historical establishment, exemplified by the Marxian approaches of E.P. Thompson and George Rudé.<sup>49</sup> In the United States, the marriage of theory and history had taken a slightly different tack, but was again

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<sup>48</sup> Macrauld (2004: 13)

<sup>49</sup> Thompson (1963) Rudé (1964)

inspired by the growth of industrial cities and the problems and conflicts this expansion had brought. In the 1920s the Chicago School of Urban Sociology utilised the scientific tools of demography and ideas from biology to model and explain patterns of settlement and behaviour in the development of American cities.<sup>50</sup> The Chicago School produced a number of useful studies, but lacked an overall theoretical framework to pull them all together.

An amalgam of these innovative approaches can be seen to take shape in the influential *Annales* movement that emerged in France in the late 1920s, initially through the work of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre.<sup>51</sup> The *Annales* historians sought to move away from the traditional narrative style, with the immense ambition of writing the total history of particular societies and regions. They sought to analyse the underlying economic, cultural and material structures of society on vast regional canvases, over immense timeframes. Such ambition was clearly beyond the limits of the traditional diplomatic archives. In order to fulfil their ambitions, the *Annales* historians freely borrowed methodological and conceptual tools and frameworks from other disciplines: economics, statistics, anthropology, psychology, geography. The *Annales* were hugely influential for the development of post-war history beyond France.<sup>52</sup> The school's greatest practitioner, Fernand Braudel, comes closest to realising the vision of total history in his vast work on the development of the Mediterranean, and in his global history of the social and economic structures of the early modern world.<sup>53</sup>

In Braudel's work, it is historical structures rather than unilinear causal chains that provide the focus of analysis. Through a variety of methods, Braudel seeks a holistic analysis of whole regions by uniting them in their structures of time and space – his comparison of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* is a case in point:

how different, how opposite they seem when approached by the narrowly political historian, how similar when seen in their context of time and space!<sup>54</sup>

Structures provide the way to unite theory and history, and offer new insights unreachable by previous approaches. Braudel's key contribution to the subject of historical time saw him draw a tripartite distinction between different temporal structures. The deepest structural layer of time is seen to be *La Longue Durée*, the relationship of human beings to their physical environment and their climate. Next, the timeframe of social forms, political structures both stable and unstable, large and small: the conjunctural time frame that allows us to distinguish the patterns and cycles that underpin, shape and are shaped by the aggregate result of actors and events. Finally, the ephemeral time frame of events, the *histoire événementielle* that traditional history is concerned with. These structures are overlapping and temporally discontinuous, moving in and out of synchronisation. In this way, we gain an important appreciation of the multi-layered nature of causal mechanisms in social life and their inherent complexity and contingency.

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<sup>50</sup> Macrauld (2004: 35)

<sup>51</sup> Bloch (1949)

<sup>52</sup> Hexter (1972)

<sup>53</sup> Braudel (1949) (1981/1984/1985)

<sup>54</sup> Trevor-Roper (1972: 475)

Some have critiqued Braudel for the determinism of his structural approach, yet the multi-dimensional, multi-layered picture of causality in his work brings us a long way from the early narrative historians. It also embodies an approach to understanding society that is very far from the simplistic hopes of a ‘social physics’ that animate the early positivists and those that work within their tradition. But in their drawing on concepts from social science disciplines to fill in archival gaps and produce a convincing account of great chunks of time, the *Annales* produced a hybrid of history and science that offered progress in understanding the social world. They respected the historicist notion that society is an evolving organism, and the central insight that ‘the thought that is thinkable in one time and place is unthinkable in another’. But their methods bear a scientific stamp:

The historians of the *Annales* school respect the organic nature of societies, the vitality of man, but they are also rationalists in their methods. Whatever can be rationally pursued, measured, quantified, is so pursued...and for the rest, where exactitude is unattainable and the comparative method inapplicable, there is neither the dogmatism of the determinists nor the abnegation of the specialists but a new kind of Pyrrhonism, a limited, suggestive suspension of judgement, which leaves the conclusion open but points tentatively in a possible direction.<sup>55</sup>

But is this science? If positivist methodology is adopted, such an approach is deemed unscientific. But positivist methodology, based in empiricist theory of knowledge, is not the only philosophy for science around, and other philosophies can offer *Annales*-style hybrid historicist methods a ‘scientific’ status. The above statement on the *Annales* by Trevor-Roper, and the discussion of overlapping timescales and causal mechanisms seem very close to anti-empiricist and realist philosophies of science and social science. Therefore, the subsequent part of the paper takes a look at social scientific methodologies that are not embedded in empiricist philosophies of science, in order to assess what they might have to offer for a new debate on methodology in IR.

### **Part 3: Historical sociology and new (social) scientific methodologies**

#### ***The case for nonpositivist theories of science in historical sociology***

Taking our cue from historical sociologists working on international relations, we have so far argued that explanatory approaches in IR should be spatio-temporally sensitive (avoid ‘tempocentrism’). Indeed, as the second part of the paper has sought to show, the direction of the developments in conceptualising the relationship between science and society, and between theory and history, also offer strong support for this finding. Furthermore, to be spatio-temporally sensitive, it would seem the ways of explaining must be representative of the complexity that characterises social phenomena. This is why anti-empiricist methodologies take *ontology* so seriously.

This central feature of recent developments in social scientific inquiry is captured well by the comparative political scientist Peter A. Hall. Interestingly, however, he

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<sup>55</sup> Trevor-Roper (1972: 470)

writes that “the ontologies of comparative politics have substantially outrun its methodologies.”<sup>56</sup> While debates on IR and historical analysis have not traditionally focused on methodology in Britain to the extent they have on the other side of the Atlantic, Hall’s remark arguably has much resonance in British IR too. While British IR has recently taken post-positivist arguments about epistemology and ontology increasingly seriously, the implications of the post-positivist challenge for models of explanation, including concept building have barely been discussed.

As discussed in the first part of the paper, Bull argued that the behaviourists’ mathematical methods are not suitable to study international relations. While Bull’s criticism may well hold true, it was excessively focused on criticising a positivist theory of science without offering an alternative. A stronger historicist argument against the behaviourists may have sought to delegitimise what Hobden and Hobson might call the ‘chronofetishism’ (a ‘sealing off’ of the present such that it appears as an autonomous, natural, spontaneous and immutable entity)<sup>57</sup> of research based in behaviourist methodology. Indeed, a stronger argument for historically sensitive IR would have sought to debunk the ability of covering law models of social scientific inquiry to explain the spatio-temporally conditioned production of social relations and social forms – and have developed an alternative. Might we find tools to do so in contemporary methodological debates in the social sciences?

Furthermore, Bull ought to have developed historicist ‘methodology’ (understood as a means by which scholars try to increase confidence in the inferences they make about the social and political world).<sup>58</sup> A usual means of arguing for a methodological stance involves explicating how causal or constitutive powers operate in the social world to generate (the features of) our objects of study. As such, methodological discussion involves detailing a position on ontology. Simultaneously, methodology also concerns the development of the concepts we use to signify the social processes we are interested in. The question of *what* we abstract our concepts *from*, and how we can justify so doing, are therefore important methodological questions.<sup>59</sup>

Methodological questions are generally important to social science research projects, not least because methodologies are grounded in related ontological and epistemological assumptions.<sup>60</sup> Because postpositivist theories have significantly altered the epistemological and ontological assumptions of not only US IR, but also British IR, Hall’s above-quoted remark about ontologies (and we can add epistemologies) outrunning methodology is poignant on both sides of the Atlantic.

Instead of this shortage on postpositivist methodology being something to regret, there is some reason to take the situation as a window of opportunity for analyses seeking to claim both a historicist and a scientific status. Indeed, as we discuss below, some recent developments of non-positivist methodology enable such a conclusion. But first, it will be useful to elaborate on what exactly is meant by ontologies

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<sup>56</sup> Hall (2003: 375)

<sup>57</sup> Hobden and Hobson (2000: 9)

<sup>58</sup> Hall (2003: 373)

<sup>59</sup> See Sayer (1992: chapter 3)

<sup>60</sup> As highlighted in Jackson, (2006: 89) ‘methods’, as used in positivism, are merely techniques for gathering and gaining access to bits of data. A discussion of ‘methods’ in positivist and nonpositivist methodologies has been left for further research here.

“outrunning” methodologies. The profound significance of the new kinds of ontological arguments in the social sciences is that such investigations centre on dynamics in history, which can potentially mean an appropriate grounding for methodologies that can overcome positivism’s hegemony over scientific inquiry into society.

The previous sections of this paper have already alluded to the main problem with an empiricist theories of the nature of scientific inquiry: their (often positivist) methodology is ahistorical. This methodological issue can be illustrated with reference to the positivist understanding of causation. Milja Kurki provides a concise summary of ‘causation’ in this position:

Causality (for the positivist) is something we identify through studying general patterns of observed events, whether it is the tendencies of heavy objects to fall on the ground or the tendency of democracies not to fight other democracies. ... Causal connections or causal laws (can be posited only) when strong empirical regularities have been identified. ... Regularities can also be used to predict (at least probabilistically). As a consequence of the dominance of empiricism, ... causal analysis has entailed the prioritisation of methods focused on systematically observing patterns of facts or ‘laws’.”<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, scholars accepting such notions of causation hold positions on scientific inquiry according to which it is legitimate to try and increase confidence in the inferences made about social processes by abstracting *not* from historical social processes, but conclusions can be arrived at by deducing from or inducting to ‘laws’ that are posited to operate universally. This notion is made possible by an empiricist view of causes, according to which causal laws can only derived from regularly *observed* patterns of events and instances, because scientific inquiry has access only to the world immediately observable to us.

An argument can be made here that for some philosophies of time an understanding of history as a law-like pattern, teleological or cyclical, would not be a problem. Indeed, the idea of universal causal laws operating in the social world might well be synonymous with a teleological theory of history (as represented by Fukuyama’s argument about ‘the end of history’). Yet there are reasons to doubt whether such covering law models of causation work best for the goals of historical sociological analysis (take as examples Hobden and Hobson’s arguments about tempocentrism and chronofetishism, and footnote 17 in this paper). Historical sociologists are concerned with sociological analysis of the contexts within which social life of (various spatial and temporal scales) is transacted and transformed. Most of them emphasise historical contexts, and generate “middle-range” theories and concepts from them, often to facilitate comparison with other historical contexts. Indeed, to the extent that history is about specific times and places, the contextual specificity of generative sources of social power, questions of ontology are key. Historical context cannot be taken to be ‘just full of data’, bits of which are useful to confirm our analysis, bits of which are not relevant to our causal model. An ontological focus on causation means we look to the historical context itself to show us what is causal about it. Viewed in this way, as Hall notes, “ontology is ultimately crucial to methodology because the appropriateness of a particular set of methods for a given problem turns on assumptions about the nature of the causal relations they are meant to discover.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Kurki (2007: 362-363)

<sup>62</sup> Hall (2003: 374)

This claim about ontology's importance for explanation in the historical social sciences is in line with developments in contemporary political science. Given the key research interests of historical sociologists outlined above, we are surely safe to expect that existing scholarship in that field cannot derive much from positivist methodology. Or can we?

In historical sociological analysis, just as much as in other fields of sociology and political science, the jury is still out on the question of the compatibility of social scientific sociological analysis and history. But positivist methodology continues to attract adherents. To illustrate this point, it might be useful to categorise historical sociology using the following methodological categories:<sup>63</sup> 1) "positivist" and modified positivist; 2) interpretivist; 3) mechanismic. In the rest of this section, we will elaborate on the developments in historical sociological analysis in the recent decades through these categories, aiming at showing that, here too, the move has been away from positivist methodology.

Let us begin with some remarks on our first category, *positivist or modified positivist historical sociology*. Similarly to political science, postwar US sociology of the 1950s and 1960s was also affected by behaviourist methods; it was, in the words of a prominent scholar of the field, Theda Skocpol "assumed to be a discipline capable of formulating a universally applicable general theory of society, and history was condescendingly assumed by sociologists to a collection of archival researchers devoted to gathering "the facts" about particular times and places in the past".<sup>64</sup> Unlike the multidisciplinary fathers of historical sociology (Marx, Weber, Durkheim et al), postwar historical sociologists had to make claims to fame in this disciplinary context. Furthermore, as Skocpol reflects, "the application of a general model to one or more historical instances was the kind of historical sociology most likely to be recognised as empirically rigorous and theoretically relevant".<sup>65</sup> In historical sociology driven by positivist methodology, a theory is applied (or examined) in various historical contexts in order to demonstrate that various particular cases are but different modalities of a more general process (corresponding to natural-science conceptions of laws).<sup>66</sup>

*Interpretivist* analysis can be taken as a second methodological category of historical sociological analysis. The key bulk of this work is grounded in Weber's texts (but not exclusively so).<sup>67</sup> Charles Ragin and David Zaret's 1983 article contrasted Durkheimian and Weberian sociology with regards to their conceptions of causality and explanation, and identified the former with antihistoricism, whereas historical

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<sup>63</sup> This categorisation applies to the argument in this paper. For other categorisations, see for example Skocpol (1985) and Deflem (1997)

<sup>64</sup> Skocpol (1984: 362)

<sup>65</sup> Skocpol (1984: 362-363)

<sup>66</sup> See Deflem (1997). An argument could be made here that for instance Skocpol's own work on revolutions (1979) based in Mill's comparative methods of Difference and Agreement are representative here – but for now the relevance of this point is left for further research. For a point along these lines, however, see Manicas (2006: appendix B).

<sup>67</sup> Kalberg (1994) would disagree with this categorisation of Weber's work.

methods were identified with the Weberian tradition.<sup>68</sup> There is disagreement as to the validity of this categorisation,<sup>69</sup> but the article illustrates well an important methodological turn towards interpretivism in historical sociological analysis. In terms of specific methods, interpretivist historical sociologists develop concepts as meaningful interpretations of broad historical patterns (against applying very general theoretical models to history). This approach pays attention to culturally embedded intentions of individuals or group actors in the given historical settings under investigation. Interpretivist historical sociologists draw closely on Weber's method of building ideal-types to selectively and systematically highlight a particular aspect of reality that the researcher believes to be responsible for a particular phenomenon. Moreover, Weber argued that general laws do not tap into social reality as such. Instead, through ideal typical constructions, we can organise and more clearly conceptualise individual relationships of a particular phenomenon in order to understand the ends of human action (and judge actions against the internal consistency of their stated aims).<sup>70</sup> Carrying the Weberian methodological agenda forwards, it is understandable that the recent historical institutionalist literature has presented sensitivity to political agency as a key contribution it can offer historically engaged social science.<sup>71</sup>

Another key point about interpretivist historical sociology is that while some of it presents itself as a (social) scientific methodology (Weberian approaches certainly do), interpretivists generally reject the 'science' label due to philosophical commitments. The latter approaches are represented by relatively few historical sociologists, but there are certainly recent works rejecting any 'unity of science' theses, as can be seen in most of the contributions to Terrence McDonald's edited volume on 'The Historical Turn in the Human Sciences'.<sup>72</sup> As such, interpretivist historical sociology may not offer the strongest claim for overcoming the juxtaposition between historical and scientific research.

The third category of *mechanismic historical sociology* can be distinguished from both the positivist and the interpretivist categories in that such inquiry has an explicit conception of itself as an antipositivist scientific methodology. Hall's point about 'ontologies having outrun methodologies' applies here in a rather fruitful sense: the ontologies promoted by research here can be combined with nonpositivist methodology that can challenge the methodological incommensurability thesis of history vs. science. Because this is very much an ongoing development, this is an emergent or latent methodological category of historical sociological research (but is represented, for example, by research on 'path dependence' in historical institutionalism).

The promise of mechanismic historical sociology's ontological premises, concept-formation and position on explanation can be illustrated with a famous notion from Michael Mann's *Sources of Social Power, vol. 1*. Here Mann criticises the view of

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<sup>68</sup> Ragin and Zaret (1983). Skocpol argued in return that Ragin and Zaret overlooked the important differences between those who use comparisons to sharpen particularistic descriptions and those who use them to explore or establish causal generalisations. Skocpol (1984: 361).

<sup>69</sup> See Skocpol (1984) and Kalberg (1994)

<sup>70</sup> Weber (1949). Also see Cochran (2002)

<sup>71</sup> Smith (1996: 121-122)

<sup>72</sup> McDonald (1996)

‘society’ as a unitary totality. In his view, “we can never find (such) a single bounded system in geographical or social space”. Instead, “*societies are constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power.*”<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, mechanistic historical sociological approaches, firstly, reject what can be called ‘reductionist’ notions of ‘the state’ and ‘society’. For mechanistic historical sociology, there is no sense in which states can “ultimately” be reduced to their citizens or governing elites (as in, for example, pluralist theories of the state), nor can societies be reduced to a single generative power source (e.g. mode of material production). Non-reductionism is the argument that social phenomena cannot be explained and defined by their parts. Mechanistic social ontology is non-reductionist, and as such also necessitates a rethinking of what is comparable in terms of particular times and places. For example, by Mann’s definition of social power, ‘Spanish society’ and ‘English society’ are not directly comparable entities (because it might not be explanatorily meaningful to say that two are alike).<sup>74</sup>

Accordingly, mechanistic historical sociology has to reconstruct concepts like ‘the international’ based on its non-reductionist ontologies. Ontologies is used in the plural here because very different kinds of sociology can underlie works on social and causal mechanisms (for example pragmatist and constructivist theories work on mechanisms, and so do approaches based in scientific and critical realism). As such, as Bennett has noted, the mechanistic methodological agenda can offer grounds beyond paradigmatic research foci in IR.<sup>75</sup> Given this divergence, arguably both neo-Marxist and certain neo-Weberian historical sociology can be mechanistic. Moreover, if mechanistic methodology can offer a strong nonpositivist notion of scientific inquiry, much of neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian historical sociology stands well placed to contribute to scientific inquiry of international relations. To further investigate such possibilities for theoretical pluralism, it will be useful to explore what is meant by mechanistic explanation by its contemporary exponents.

### ***Antipositivist methodology: the promise of mechanistic explanation***

The question ‘why use this label ‘mechanistic’ to refer to certain kinds of historical sociological explanation?’ might be posed here. The term ‘mechanistic’ is borrowed from the philosopher of science Mario Bunge.<sup>76</sup> Mechanisms are focussed upon here because the approaches in our third category assume a (social or causal) mechanistic view on explanation, in contrast to the covering law model in positivism.<sup>77</sup> Mechanist methodologies provide alternative theories of (social) science to positivism, and make a strong case of moving beyond the traditional history vs. science juxtaposition.

In very broad terms, mechanistic explanation departs from the positivist position on explanation as it starts from historical social relations to explain ‘how a particular type of (social) thing works, what makes it tick, what are its mechanisms’.<sup>78</sup> In an important work of 1967 on mechanism-based explanation, Robert Merton argued a

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<sup>73</sup> Mann (1986: 1). Italics in the original.

<sup>74</sup> Jackson and Nexon (1999: 300)

<sup>75</sup> Bennett (2003)

<sup>76</sup> Bunge (1997)

<sup>77</sup> ‘Mechanisms’ are not used here in the classically mechanistic manner.

<sup>78</sup> Bunge (2004)

point that further establishes the relevance of mechanistic explanation for historical sociological analysis. Merton notes that in the context of “theories of the middle range”, mechanism-based explanation can work the ground between abstract grand theories and atheoretical descriptive accounts, adding that:

This type of theory cuts across the distinction between micro-sociological, as evidenced in small group research, and macro-sociological problems as evidenced in comparative studies of social mobility and formal organization, and the interdependence of social institutions.... Total sociological systems of theory – such as Marx’s historical materialism, Parsons’ theory of social systems and Sorokin’s integral sociology – represent theoretical orientations rather than the rigorous and tightknit system envisaged in the search for a “unified theory” in physics.... As a result, many theories of the middle range are consonant with a variety of systems of sociological thought.<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, mechanism-based explanation can complement grand sociological theories by offering a non-positivist methodology to strengthen middle range analysis.

While some have suggested that mechanism-based explanations are just a *style of theorising*,<sup>80</sup> a more ontological stance on mechanisms, represented by the work of Bunge or, alternatively, Charles Tilly, is both particular to and promising for historical sociological explanation. As Mahoney has noted, ontologically-based mechanistic analysis offers an attractive alternative to correlational analysis of historical processes, as correlations per se are nothing but statistical relationships between variables, and as such are inherently limited representations of historical causal processes.<sup>81</sup> On the contrary, the new research on mechanisms views them as real processes in concrete social systems. They are not analytical constructs; instead, well-known instances of social mechanisms include inclusion and exclusion, coercion and rebellion, migration and colonization, technological innovation, et cetera.<sup>82</sup>

Overall, mechanistic approaches to explanation seek to explain a given social phenomenon by identifying the processes through which it is generated. This approach to explanation has variously been called ‘systematic process analysis’ (Hall); ‘causal reconstruction’ (Mayntz);<sup>83</sup> ‘causal complexes’ (Patomaki),<sup>84</sup> ‘process-tracing’ (Jackson and Nexon).<sup>85</sup> The different categorisations may refer to differing philosophical ontological positions (idealist or realist). Yet all mechanistic positions converge on the commitment to non-reductionist social ontology, and on the idea that social causes are of many kinds and work in complex, spatio-temporally specific ways.

The key debate that seems to be emerging in the literature on mechanistic explanation reflects differences in philosophical ontology: in between philosophically pragmatist and philosophically realist approaches. Realists, drawing on Bhaskar, Bunge and others, commonly talk about the mechanisms of social structures, structurata and human agents. A key realist writing on mechanistic explanation in the social sciences, Andrew Sayer, argues that mechanisms are relatively independent

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<sup>79</sup> Merton (1967: 68) quoted in Pickel (2004: 178).

<sup>80</sup> Hedstrom and Svedberg (1998); Elster (1998)

<sup>81</sup> Mahoney (2001: 575-577)

<sup>82</sup> Pickel (2004: 176)

<sup>83</sup> Mayntz (2002)

<sup>84</sup> Patomaki (2002)

<sup>85</sup> Jackson and Nexon (1999)

from their ontological conditions, that explanation must also include reference to the necessary conditions for the existence (and operation) of mechanisms.<sup>86</sup> This is why causation does not imply merely regularity in patterns and sequences of events. Sayer's point emerges from the realist thesis that the world is in part composed of complex things (for example social systems and complexly structured situations) that *by virtue of their* structures, possess certain powers, potentials, and capacities to bring about outcomes in certain ways, even if those capacities are not always empirically observable. One can think of the example of a nuclear arsenal; or the legitimation crisis of a state. In sum, for the realists, mechanisms are not the whole of ontology. Mechanisms are latent tendencies of social structures and agents – and as such they can only be activated by agents. For the latter reason, realists are uneasy about the idea that there could be macro-macro mechanisms between social structures.

In contrast, the pragmatist, or “processualist” view of mechanisms focuses on what these approaches call ‘relational mechanisms’, that is, macro-macro mechanisms or connections between social systems.<sup>87</sup> Most explicitly, the processualist position is laid out in opposition to cognitive and rational choice positions. Tilly's key argument is that the complexity of social systems translates into nonreducible systemic properties, such as when the same properties are realised by different mechanisms on different occasions. Furthermore, he argues that the extreme complexity of human symbolic interaction contributes to the irreducibility of social processes.<sup>88</sup>

A further particular feature of the relationalist position is that its social ontology starts from processes, not from agents and structures as the main generative or causal features in the social world (the relational position views the agent/structure concepts as essentialist). This can be contrasted with the realist position for which the dialectic of agent/structure is a key driver of social change. A key criticism of the relational position can be that it leaves agency out; for the relational position to be truly explanatory (not just descriptive) it should specify alternative drivers of social change.

From this brief discussion on mechanistic methodology, some tentative conclusions can be drawn for social scientific historical analysis in IR. These conclusions apply to how historical sociological analysis can be viewed as most fruitfully merging with IR analyses.

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<sup>86</sup> Sayer (1992: 107, 111)

<sup>87</sup> Tilly (2004); Tilly (1997)

<sup>88</sup> Tilly (2004). IR scholar Patrick Jackson elaborates on what he calls ‘relational methodology’ (NB this might be ontology by our definition here): “The goal of relational analysis is to show how a number of robust mechanisms come together in a particular case so as to produce a unique outcome. ... the central thrust of this work is that causal mechanisms are qualitatively different from intervening variables that link inputs and outcomes but exercise their impact in unique configurations ... What replicates across cases, then, is not a systematic correlation between inputs and outputs but particular causal mechanisms like brokerage and certification .... The role of narrative when it comes to these mechanisms is not simply to trace linkages between factors but also to demonstrate how concrete outcomes are produced through concatenations of these mechanisms and processes. Methodologically, this is a relational approach to the study of social life, privileging mechanisms and processes rather than the putatively rational decisions of self-propelled actors or the homogenous effects independent causal factors.” (Jackson, 2006: 91)

The first is that mechanistic explanations have already begun to emerge as a strong alternative to positivism in the broader social sciences. To the extent that mechanism-based explanation is in use in historical work, we can already speak of the scientific inquiry of historical sociology. Examples of mechanisms that historical sociologists have unveiled include the important state formation-related notion of ‘path dependency’ and ‘increasing returns’.<sup>89</sup>

Another benefit to be derived from engagement with mechanistic methodologies is this methodology can be used as a lens with which to approach existing historical sociological work from IR. Identifying which historical sociological analyses and concepts amount to causal mechanisms would be an interesting undertaking, and one that historical sociologists themselves have not always been particularly interested in taking on. The downside of their lack of interest is that many IR scholars are used to classifying historical sociologists according to the theoretical paradigms of IR. For example Mann’s analysis of military power has led to his association with positivist neorealism in IR,<sup>90</sup> but in methodological terms this should hardly be the case.

There is the further issue that Mann himself has on occasion identified his own work with empiricist theories of science and positivist methodology and epistemologies<sup>91</sup> - yet this seems somewhat contradictory given his ontological analysis of the sources of social power. Furthermore, in a response to his critics in the recent *An Anatomy of Social Power*, he states that his four sources of social power (ideological, economic, military and political) “have emergent properties giving them some causal autonomy”.<sup>92</sup> Mann makes it quite clear that these are social structural powers (not simply interactional or relational powers *between* structures), and as they are emergent, they must be tendential and cannot be directly observable. This would align him *not* with empiricism or positivism, but with scientific and ontological realism – a potential connection worth further analysis. Thus a further uncovering of Mann’s potential methodological mechanistic-position should also illuminate how his analysis might generate insights not only for macrosociological analysis of large spatial social structures – but *also* identify the social mechanisms of his sources of social power with respect to social forms that are more spatially and temporally condensed.

A final point here should be the following. To counter-balance Hall’s previously cited claim, we should not let our epistemologies or ontologies outrun our methodologies. As argued above, a focus on methodology in historically and sociologically engaged nonpositivist analysis is important, to ensure that we take time to consider *what* we abstract our concepts from. By way of mechanistic causal analysis we can abstract

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<sup>89</sup> See for example Pierson (2000)

<sup>90</sup> See for example Hobden (1998)

<sup>91</sup> The following statement in Mann (1994: 42) seems to not to adequately represent his ontological statements on societies and social forces: “My own position is more Kantian, a kind of “as if” positivism. We must act as if this was true, since there is no stopping short of relativism if we do not. We must present facts as they seem, engage with the contrary facts produced by others and demonstrate to the satisfaction of third parties that our perception generates more explanatory and predictive power. I also accept the sociological conclusion that Weber drew from Kant: that facts are only interpretable, and can only be grouped into sociologically significant categories, in terms of meaning-systems. For a sociologist theory and data perennially enmesh and correct one another. Both empiricist historians and sociologists neglect this to their great cost.”

<sup>92</sup> Mann (2006: 343)

from real, dynamic, historical social relations when developing concepts. In rejecting any universal, covering law notions of causation in favour of a tendential, emergentist, mechanistic view of causes, we are simultaneously accepting that concepts referring to social forms are both spatially and temporally conditioned – they might apply only as long as the mechanisms producing those social forms are active. Furthermore, as a universal definition, ‘the state’ is not a useful concept, as real state forms vary. Through serious engagement with international historical sociological research, IR scholarship can be and should be specific about what brings about certain state forms in certain times. To take another example, ‘sovereignty’ by itself is not an explanatory concept, although it is often treated as such in IR. The new nonpositivist methodologies can help us show that while human nature-based accounts claim ‘sovereignty’ applies to state outcomes in a law-like manner, it is usually less clear what, if anything, the legal concept of sovereignty has to offer by way of a *mechanism* in the context of particular social phenomena. In sum, the spatio-temporal specificity of concepts can be gained by focusing on the nonpositivist methodology of the mechanism-based accounts.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusions

This paper has argued that the 'second debate' in IR of the 1960s and 1970s, which led to the incommensurability of the research programmes of those that followed a supposedly 'scientific' method (as narrowly defined by the positivist methodologies in the field) and those that followed a historicist method, was partial and incomplete. Both sides accepted an empiricist philosophy of science and a positivist understanding of scientific method. This equating of science with empiricism and positivism was also later bought into by the anti-science stance of the post-modernists and hermeneutic theorists in IR. This debate can be, and is being, reawakened by the growing number of adherents to other philosophies of science, which have the potential to overcome the incommensurability of history and science.

Our quick tour through the foundations of the positivist dreams of a 'science of society' or 'social physics', and the legacy that it has left in the social sciences and in some of the mainstream research programmes in IR, reveals a central theme and problematique. It is the ancient struggle between realist and idealist approaches to the study of the social world. For the early positivists, science could reveal the underlying determinism or teleology of history by uncovering universal laws that exist outside of time, waiting to be discovered. History is the junior partner to science here: it consists in recurring patterns or predetermined stages of development on the way to some form of utopian conclusion. Human agency takes a back seat. Although simplistic, this vision underpins neo-positivist research programmes in IR: structural realism or democratic peace theory find their intellectual traditions located here, in their attempt to make IR a policy science with predictive power. But if this vision of science is rejected, we are left with the old problem of how to negotiate between contending truth claims: a problem that modernity inherited after the demise of god as ultimate arbiter. Narrative history, given its reliance upon judgement and interpretation, ran up against this problem, and turned back towards science in its desire to have the

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<sup>93</sup> More on the relevance of time and of space for explanation in Sayer (2000: 108-109) and Patomaki (2002: 138-141).

respectability of the scientific veneer.

However, other philosophies of science, which have gained steady influence in the social sciences, and are beginning to infiltrate IR, are offering the legitimacy of science, allied to an understanding of history as absolutely essential to comprehending the international. We have argued that, with a simultaneously historicist and scientific approach to theorising international relations, historical sociological theories are the most appropriate approaches that can be developed in the context of particular IR research problems. Historical sociology offers us the best kind of contextually situated theories of social processes (hence supporting the principle of epistemological relativism).<sup>94</sup> Yet it does not bind researchers to any one, particular methodology, nor do historical sociologies necessitate a commitment to philosophically realist social ontology.

Given the above, the added value of mechanistic methodology can be summed up in two points. Firstly, the added value for historical sociological theories in general is that mechanistic methods can be employed to assess and advance the relevance of macrosociological theories in microsociological contexts.<sup>95</sup> Ultimately, some historical sociologies give better explanations of particular social problems than others, and it follows that 'Historical Sociology in IR' is not a monolithic approach. But as the argument in this paper has sought to show, mechanistic historical and sociological analysis is currently perhaps the most fruitful avenue of research. It can ground and sharpen good middle range theory. Yet because the dominant conception of scientific inquiry in IR still dates back to standards introduced in the 1960s 'behaviourist revolution', and the promise of alternative methodologies remains relatively unexplored, we have argued it may well be time for a second 'second debate'.

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<sup>94</sup> By this we mean not only that social phenomena are concept or 'subjectively' dependent, but also that social phenomena is spacio-temporally dependent on prevailing social structures. Interestingly, Bhaskar had made this point about historical sociology in *The Possibility of Naturalism*. When writing about 'tendencies' or generative mechanisms that particular *kinds* of social actors or social structures are likely to possess, he argues that these tendencies are the intransitive dimension of the social world, and sciences like historical sociology are particularly good at discovering what the tendencies of particular actors and structures are at particular times. Reprinted in Bhaskar (1989: add page).

<sup>95</sup> For a parallel argument, see Mabee (2007).

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