

Conceptual History and International Relations

Can there be a political theory of Europe?

Martin Hall

Department of Political Science

Lund University

Martin.hall@svet.lu.se

Comments on this *early draft* are very welcome.

The underlying argument of this paper is that IR – just like other bodies of knowledge – must understand itself as a historical artifact. With historical I mean something that is embedded in a temporal process of relations (or a temporally moving context), and with artifact I mean something that is created or invented, rather than discovered.¹ This imperative has two sources. First, to understand IR as something else than a historical artifact would be to misunderstand it. Second, to explicitly understand IR as a historical artifact, and to follow up on the consequences of this understanding, is to contribute to critical self-reflection. In particular, by studying IR as a historical artifact it becomes possible to de-naturalize and re-politicize IR knowledge. This paper is about the second of these two imperatives of a historical praxis for IR. The first imperative will not be further discussed.

The paper consists of three parts. In the first part I briefly review what has been called the “historiographical turn” of IR {Bell, 2001 #2204}. In this debate I join those faithful to Quentin Skinner and others of the Cambridge school of political thought. However, while I accept the Skinnerian theoretical arguments I suggest that there is a methodological alternative available to Skinner’s demanding and time-consuming reading of obscure texts. The crucial point in this methodology is to see knowledge as being carried by conceptual networks, and that the (shifting) meanings of concepts are determined by the location in these networks. I discuss this alternative in the second part of the paper. In the third part of the paper – the one both most interesting and least developed – argue that the concept of Europe is one of at the core of the conceptual network that is IR theory. The paper, particularly the third part, is more of a first attempt at an outline than a real paper.

The Historiographical Turn in IR

Over the last decade, or so, the literature on the intellectual history of IR has grown much in size and developed in theoretical and methodological sophistication (for reviews and overviews see i.a. {Bell, 2001 #2204; Bell, 2003 #2206; Jahn, 2006 #2215; Holden, 2002 #2224; Little, 1999 #2218}). So much so that Duncan Bell asks whether

¹ Gravitation, then, is not a historical artifact even though the knowledge of gravitation has a history.

we are seeing the “dawn of a historiographical turn” (Bell 2001:115)? It is possible to identify four main positions in this debate on how to do the intellectual history of IR. The first, traditional, approach seeks to conjure up a glorious ancient past that then serves to legitimise present theory. Realist historiography is a notable example here, wherein its analysis of the present is legitimised through its invoking an ‘ancient lineage’ of realists stemming back to Thucydides and them moving forwards via Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau. As Brian Schmidt argues, this is an ‘epic rendering’ of IR which helps naturalise the discipline {Schmidt, 1998 #2089} p24-32.

A second approach, importantly exemplified by Stefano Guzzini, is sometimes confusingly called the contextualist approach – although Guzzini himself calls it a historical sociological approach {Guzzini, 1998 #2097} 1-2. In this approach external events are thought to inform the direction that the discipline takes. Typically scholars using this approach declare that the end of the First World War was vital in not only institutionalizing IR but also for propelling liberalism to the fore as the means to realize peace in the aftermath of the carnage of the war. Moreover, historical sociologists argue, for instance, that it was the rise of the United States to world hegemony after 1945 that subsequently promoted the hegemony of realism in the discipline (cf. {Smith, 2000 #2260}). Third, Brian Schmidt as well as Tim Dunne approach the historiography of IR with a “critical internal discursive” methodology (Schmidt 1998: ch 1; {Dunne, 1998 #2226}). In his pioneering book, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy*, Schmidt presents a major attack on the so-called contextual (as well as the traditional) approach on a number of lines, the most important of which lies with his complaint that this approach tends also towards an ahistoricism. That is, he claims, contextual approaches write history backwards in a presentist orientation and accordingly tend to obscure the ‘real’ origins of the discipline.²

To correct for these approaches, Schmidt develops an approach that he calls ‘critical internal discursive history’. This rests on the premise that ‘conceptual change in

² This argument does for historiography what Spruyt’s argument in his *The Sovereign State and its competitors* did for IR’s view on the development of the state {Spruyt, 1994 #550}. A general formulation of the argument can be found in Hobson in *Historical Sociology and IR* {Hobden, 2002 #889}.

disciplinary practice is best understood by examining the endogenous developments in the academic field'. And in so doing his history of the discipline begins in the nineteenth century and proceeds forwards through the identification of the conceptual changes that drive the evolution of the discipline. In the process he recovers ideas that have long been forgotten by the presentist orientation of the discipline. Schmidt's most significant, if not revolutionary, revelation is that IR took its first institutional form not in 1919, as the historical sociological approach claims, but in the mid-to-late nineteenth century (even if it was contained within a Political Science department). Moreover, he claims that much of the theoretical basis of IR had already been forged *before* the First World War.

The fourth main methodological approach to the history of IR theory is the one developed by Quentin Skinner and other members of the Cambridge School. In the history of political thought, this approach is normally called contextualist – although the argument has been made that Skinner himself is perhaps better viewed as a “conventionalist” (Holden, 2002 #2224} p 262. But the context in this approach is not confined – or even related – to the “external events” which Schmidt disallows as generators of changes and developments in IR theory.³ What is relevant, instead, for contextualist is the intellectual and linguistic context in which these texts were produced. The crucial question to ask in contextualism, thus, is why any given text was written. Certainly, as Bell points out, historical texts were not “penned solely to instruct *us* – as trans-historical manuals to the mysteries of the world” (Bell 2003: 156). Rather, the author of the given text must, it is assumed in this approach, have had some rather more mundane intention with the text – such as addressing the political concerns and debates of the time, for instance. A text, then, is a historical artifact that can only be understood in terms of the conditions under which it was produced. Significantly, no body of knowledge stands in splendid isolation. The intellectual and linguistic context of any intellectual pursuit is always wider than the particular concerns of that pursuit. From this point of view Schmidt's approach is doubly reductionist. It is reductionist

³ Schmidt, *Political Discourse of Anarchy*, pp. 32-37. Holden, *Who Contextualizes the Contextualizers*, p. 255 argues that Schmidt has misunderstood contextualism. And Bell, 2001, Little 1999, and Holden *Who Contextualizes the Contextualizers*, all argue that Schmidt is rather more contextual than he cares to admit.

since the relevant discourse is internal only; IR discourse is driven by IR discourse. And it is reductionist since it reduces any potential external influence to events. The contextualist approach, which informs this paper, treats “external discourse” as at least as important as internal discourse. Also, I find it difficult to reject the importance of events. Not because events in any way can *cause* discourse, but because events generate or stimulate interpretations. And interpretations are, obviously, part of discourse.

I thus agree entirely with Schmidt that what needs to be overcome above all is the presentist construction of the discipline, and I therefore seek to provide a historicist analysis that avoids projecting backwards the present aspects of the discipline. But where I differ is in my rejection of the view that conceptual ideas unfold within a discipline as if somehow this goes on largely behind the back of a wider intellectual and political context. In this paper I suggest that the two are fundamentally connected.

One particularly thorny issue for contextualist is the relationship between philosophy and history.⁴ If IR knowledge is considered to be philosophical it means that the traditionalist are right – there is a timeless agenda, or a set of timeless problematiques, that political theorists have addressed themselves to. We can read Thucydides as addressing the concerns of the Cold War. Critical internal discourse-ivist, historical sociologists, and contextualist all reject this notion. For the first two IR knowledge is only historical – related to, and addressing, the concerns of the time in which it was expressed. We cannot read Thucydides as addressing the Cold War problematique, but we can, possibly, read him to gain an understanding of why we have the IR knowledge that we do have. For contextualists things are more complicated. Because if, as contextualisers claim, the ‘great texts’ of political theory can find their intentionality and meaning only within the political discourse (that is, including also ‘smaller’ text) of the time, we are necessarily without criteria on which to decide why any text is great at all? That is, the contextualising approach makes it difficult to establish a canon of political thought (see {Brown, 2002 #2193} for a discussion of contextualism and canon). Whether it is important to have a canon or not is of course problematic in itself,

⁴ See Bartelson 2007 for a sophisticated treatment, and an attempt at reconciliation, of this issue. {Bartelson, 2007 #2261}

but it is at least difficult to deny that without common references, overlapping if not identical vocabularies, academic debate and development would become hard to attain.⁵ A further problem with contextualism is that beyond the insight that things vary over time, there is precious little to be learnt from the history of political thought, and this is intuitively unsatisfactory. Moreover, as Chris Brown, Terry Nardin and Nicholas Rengger (2002: 5-6) have argued, from the point of view of IR theory there *are* “points of contact” between political thinking in different periods. These points of contact do not amount to a common agenda shared by all international political theorists at all times. But Brown et al argues that they are themes that “establish points of contact across time and between very different sets of political circumstances” (2002: 6). There are, they continue, three important such themes, the first of which is inside/outside. What constitutes a collectivity, and what should relations between collectivities be like? The second theme concerns universalism/particularism, and the “normative orientation of individuals to ‘their’ collectivity and its relationship to the wider whole” (ibid.). Third there is the theme of the quality of the contacts between collectivities: system/society. In the introduction to Edward Keene’s highly readable *International Political Thought: A Historical Introduction* there is a lucid discussion along these same lines {Keene, 2005 #2262}. I am in general sympathetic to this approach, although I think the line between a theme and a perennial problematique is fine indeed. In the next section of this paper I will outline a different methodology, however.⁶ I understand this alternative methodology to remain true to the basic intentions of contextualism, although Bartelson (2007) argues that there are important philosophical differences between them. The focus of my alternative methodology is on concepts, and the basic argument is that the meaning of concepts is determined by their relations to other concepts.

*Relational Conceptual Historical Sociology*⁷

⁵ See {Stuurman, 2000 #2263} for a review of the main critiques of the received canon of political thought. Stuurman divides the critique into two major lines: a democratic critique, and a methodological critique.

⁶ That is, I take Brown’s et al themes to constitute the basis of a methodology for the study of political thought.

⁷ Not to be confused with the historical sociology discussed above.

Historical sociologist Margaret Somers has in a series of articles developed what she calls a ‘relational historical sociology of concept formation’ {Somers, 1998 #28; Somers, 1995 #46; Somers, 1995 #49}. This approach derives from two important foundations: an historical epistemology (Somers 1996 in *Historic Turn*) and relational realism {Somers, 1998 #28}. This I take to, respectively, be the ‘historical’ and ‘sociology’ of the nomenclature.

‘Historical epistemology’ is intended to “contradict the assumed foundationalism of epistemology” (Somers 1996: 54). Historical epistemology, then, insists that everything to do with knowledge – logics, assumptions, reasoning practices – is “history laden”. What a historical epistemology does is to “appropriate and interpret histories of knowledge through a reconstruction of their making, resonance, and contestedness over time” (Somers 1996: 54). Importantly, historical epistemology does not deny the actuality and objectivity of reality – it only argues that the way we can know this reality is “history laden”. Also, historical epistemology says nothing about the veracity of the knowledge at issue.

Relationalism is a way of theorizing that has close affinities with processualism, and is – as far as modern social science is concerned – perhaps most closely connected with the historical sociology of Norbert Elias (see van Krieken 2001). Of contemporary social theorists particularly those that consider themselves to be historical sociologists have interested themselves in relationalism (e.g. {Emirbayer, 1997 #34}, {Somers, 1998 #28}, {Tilly, 2002 #1010}). Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon {Jackson, 1999 #1008}, as well as Yosef Lapid (2001) have started to introduce this approach to the IR community. The basic tenet of relationalism is that humans, far from being reifiable abstractions, are “living, breathing, changing, dying creatures and entities, embedded in time and constituted – not merely engaged – in relationships” (Somers 1998: 766). Relationalism therefore rejects essentialism, and take networks of relations as the primary unit of social analysis.

Based on these two foundations, a relational historical sociology of concept formation involves three dimensions (Somers 1995a: 134):

- A reflexive approach to social science concepts.
- A definition of social science concepts as relational concepts.
- A treatment of social science concepts as historical and cultural objects.

Being reflexive about social science concepts means transforming them from that which explains to that which is to be explained. To paraphrase Somers, in the context of this paper being reflexive about concepts would lead to such questions as “*Why and how and to what effect* have social scientists had the particular idea that the social world contains something significant called *Europe?*” (Somers 1995a: 135).

Defining social science concepts as relational is to reject what Popper called essentialism. That is, it is to reject the philosophy that seeks information about the true nature of things in the definitions of their essences. Instead, relational historical sociology of concept formation examines concepts as embedded in conceptual networks (or sites, or fields, or matrixes). Concepts, here, derive their meaning from the conceptual networks they are part of. This means that concepts cannot be defined “on their own as single ontological entities” (Somers 1995a: 136). To study a concept historically sociologically, then, is to study it in its site and it is to study the network of relations that constitutes it. To say ‘concept X stands for phenomenon Y’ can never mean more than ‘this network of relations has temporally and contingently stabilized in configuration Q’.

To treat social science concepts as historical and cultural objects, finally, is to deny that concepts are natural categories with given sets of attributes. Rather, as historical and cultural objects, concepts too are embedded in “symbolic and historically constructed cultural structures and assigned meaning by their location in those structures” (Somers 1995a: 137). As a consequence, we must problematize social scientific knowledges as historical items. We should note, however, that the denial of a direct relationship (sic) between concept and reality in no way comments on the status of this reality.

Returning to the historiography of IR, I suggest that a complementary methodology to that of themes is to focus on relational networks of concepts. In these networks meaning

is neither timeless nor infinitely mutable, and meaning does not inher in concepts as such but in their relations to other concepts. Meaning change as the relative position of concepts in these networks change. I read Bartelson (2007) to argue the same *methodological* case, although his argument is underpinned by a much more rigorous philosophy that might, moreover, be rather different from that of Somers.⁸

In the next section of this paper I will suggest that the concept of Europe is part of the relational conceptual network that for long has constituted International Political Theory.

Europe as a Theoretical Concept.

Schmidt

French are using christianity, UK Europe and talks of protecting free Europe and Protestantism with the help of Bal of Power – this in 1680s-1700. “The triumph of W III and the Grand Alliance against Louis XIV, associated as he then was-quite wrongly- with the ambitious aims of setting up a universal monarchy and a united Catholic Christendom, brought about the first major stage in the long process of western secularization, the exchange of Europe for Christendom as supreme political collectivity

Burke Did E exist

E is not so much a place as it is an idea.

To determine what E meant to earlier generations is impossible so long as we consider the term in isolation. We need ot place it within what might be called the ‘repetorie’ of concepts available for expressing group identity in different places and times.

In the early MA the term E as that of West occurs every now and then, exp in the contex fo invasion (toti occidenti excidium, about the mongols)

Invasion re-emph – so can oen argue that it is defenisve for largest imaginable group?

Identifies (in 16th cent by which E is clear and present) three context in which it occurs

⁸ At this point I want to reiterate that this paper is an early draft, or even an outline of topics to be discussed. I am the first to admit that all of these topics requires furhter elaboration.

- 1) turkish threat; in which case T is infide, E christian; T had despot, E limited monarchies and republics
- 2) invasion of other cultures (note that 1 and 2 are still both about invasion, plus about metageographical distinctions)
- 3) now we move more to 17th, political conflict within E itself, and the threat of a unified Europe under either Habsburgs or France (need to defend E from this)

although the term 'E' was coming in, the more traditional concept of 'Christendom' was slow to go out. It was often used in contexts which had nothing to do with religion. In the treaty of Utrecht of 1714 the phrase the C commonwealth (respublica christiania) can still be found

but in total still weak – identity much more local (but I cannot make a claim about identity)

Pocock in Pagden

It was Voltaire, Gibbon, Hume, Robertson, Raynal and Diderot that set about defining Europe as a secular civilization and supplying it with a secular history and an age of modernity (note, of this with starting not with Thu but Her, thus “starting” with these guys instead of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant.....)

Once there were several of these monarchies, “E” could be said to have endowed itself with a states-system, whose *raison d'état* and *jus gentium* took the place of the political theology of empire and papacy, and this states-system, or system of international relations, began to become the definition of E itself 63 (snygg kapiteltitel: From Political Theology to Political Theory) balance of power P even argues that balance of power defines E to such a strong degree that if you are not part of that system (like east and central E you are not wholly part of Europe)

[Europe defined by balance of power, e used as rhetoric against universal empire, realism connected to balance of power and not least security dilemma, realism also theory against theology of papal (or other) empire....!!!! This is one way in which E is constitutive of the conceptual network of IR]

after Napoleon the concert of Europe heir to early-modern states-system, but this had to be guaranteed by the eastern military monarchies Prussia Austria Russia, and therefore include them (but not the Turkish empire)

two eras when E was defined as a largely economic entity and doing so was designed to put an end to periods of destructive war 1) 1713-1789, E was presented as a republic of states held together by commerce after wars of religion and threat of universal monarchy 2) our own time

Fontana in Padua

Already Montesquieu argued that the plains of Asia made it prone to empire, E more natural frontiers

République des lettres + Grand Tour

E nations were separate entities, connected by close commercial and cultural exchanges but still divided by economic, dynamics and territorial rivalries, and it was a zero-sum game

Napoleon remained attached to an implausible vision of his empire as a confederation like the US or an ancient Greek federation

N's imperial adventure remained bound with the revolutionary heritage and with universalistic tradition of Enlightenment

Some critique of this: goes back to Montes... pluralism

N war proved the inadequacy of balance of power; from now on this had to be managed, it was not strong enough as spontaneous mechanism

With the settlements of Vienna the modern idea of E had reached a point of no return. From now on the E identity would no longer reside in shared traditions, and all related affinities.

Stråth I Other broken

In 1648 after 30 years of religious warfare the universalism and state-transgressive pretensions of the Catholic C had become impossibleIt was with the discourse of the enlightenment that Europe emerged to fill this void. The idea of E as a community belonged to the enlightenment project.

With enlightenment, E took over the role of a universal civilization project from Christ