

Historical Sociology should not become a subfield of IR

The main argument of this paper is that it would be detrimental both for IR and for historical sociologists in IR if Historical Sociology became a subfield in IR. There are three main reasons for this. First, to establish a Historical Sociological subfield would be to, in Calhoun's words, domesticate Historical Sociology. In the paper I argue that a domesticated Historical Sociology is a critical promise unfulfilled. From within a subfield, a critique of other approaches to IR will a) assume a defensive character and b) be more easily deflected as specialized – rather than generalized – concerns. The second reason has to do with sociology of knowledge. I will suggest that the potential disadvantages involved in increased specialization, theoretical and methodological sophistication, and empirical enclosure outweighs the potential benefits. More specifically, looking at developments of subfields in the human sciences in general there is reason to fear that a Historical Sociological subfield in IR would soon lose its ability to converse with other IR subfields as well as with the core.

In a more positive spirit, this paper then goes on to discuss what it would mean to produce a historical sociology of IR as a discipline. While the history of the discipline is a booming cottage industry, and while the sociology of the field has been the subject of some notable studies, a historical sociology of the discipline promises more. And this is the third reason for why a subfield of Historical Sociology should not be established in IR: such a subfield would not be able to engage the core or other subfields in a debate on a historical sociology of IR.

Historical sociology is often portrayed as a sub-discipline to sociology, and explained as a political economic reaction against the “cultural interpretation and sociopsychological accounts” of sociology (Calhoun 1996: 308). First and foremost an attack on modernization theory and its attendant philosophy of progressive universalism, historical sociology “is a way of dispelling the illusions of false necessity” (Calhoun 2003: 384). Not only does historical sociology strongly reject teleology, it also – at its best – suggest ways in which things could have been different. John Hobson (2002: 6; *passim*) has argued that historical sociology is the remedy to reification, naturalization, eternalization, and homogenization of the political imagination. In other words, historical sociology is the remedy against scholarly myth making, also with a very serious understanding of what myths are (see, e.g. Hall 2006, 2007). In this section I will argue that while historical sociological work in IR is a real promise of enhancement, much work is still left undone. In particular, I will suggest that the self-understanding of historical sociology as being a political-economic reaction to culturalist and sociopsychological theories leads to unnecessary and unfortunate limits on what questions can be asked, and on what knowledge can be produced. Historical sociology approaches in IR

needlessly linger in what Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2005b) has called the second wave of historical sociology. In a more constructive spirit, I will advocate that historical sociologists in IR cast off the political economic fetters, first, and begin to draw on the rising third wave of historical sociology, second. This will mean, amongst other things, that IR scholars can begin to produce a historical sociology of themselves and their discipline.

In a recent state-of-the-field review of historical sociology Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2005b) contours three waves of US historical sociology. While US scholars certainly have their particular, and sometimes parochial, concerns it cannot be *entirely* misrepresentative to discuss general historical sociology in terms devised for US historical sociology. The overall purpose, one that I suggest that IR scholars might make their own, of their volume is to “critique and reconstruct the modernist categories that have informed historical sociology to date” (ibid.: 3).

The first wave of historical sociology, the standard story would have it (e.g. Adams, Clemens, Orloff 2005b; Calhoun 1996), consisted of lone-wolves that were respected, but that did not threaten the structural-functionalist, modernization theoretical, scientific hegemony of the day. Barrington Moore, Reinhardt Bendix, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Neil Smelser and the early Charles Tilly, among others, are often identified as first-wavers. No particular agenda, theoretical or empirical, was generated and the main legacy of the first wave seems to consist of an inspiring literature. In the late 1960s and in the 1970s the second wave of historical sociology began to take shape. Rather than dispersed scholars interested in big issues and long processes of change, the second wave can readily be seen as a whole united by a theoretical, methodological, and empirical agenda, as well as a well defined adversary. The adversary was, a largely cultural understanding of, modernization theory and positivist scientism. Against this adversary second wave historical sociology insisted on variability in historical processes and on “basic tensions and contradictions in the processes of historical change that made it a matter of active struggle rather than automatic unfolding” (Calhoun 1996: 308). Empirically, the problematic was largely based on Marxism although not all second wavers were Marxist, and although Weber was soon brought into the fray. The particular way in which the second wavers latched on to Marx and Weber gave them a strong political economic and structural bent, and they asked questions about relatively rare macro phenomena such as revolution, state building, and class formation. After the political economic approach had been firmly formulated, the next step was to break loose from narrow Marxist economism

and start asking questions about relative state autonomy, the autonomy of the political more generally, and the interdependence of state and war making. All of this was anathema to the prevailing orthodoxy in sociology and political science and disciplinary gatekeepers issued charges of sloppy science. The response of the second wave was methodological. By insisting on rigorous comparative methods, invoking Mill's logics of difference and agreement as well as Hume's constant conjunctions – but “complicated and conditional constant conjunction” (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005b: 23) – second wavers could claim scientific status, while still rejecting covering laws and overly abstract and historically ungrounded conceptualizations. What happened then, Craig Calhoun (1996) laments, was a domestication of historical sociology. Starting, again, as first and foremost a radical challenge to the domination of a teleological modernization theory, historical sociology remade itself into a domesticated subfield, defined by its methodology – *comparative* historical sociology. The radical claim that all sociology must be historical could thereby be countered with a remittance to the venues of this subfield. Moreover, it is easy indeed to imagine that a research programme that rests on the two pillars of history and comparison is unstable, and will be increasingly directed towards methodological issues. ‘History’ evokes process, change, unfinished-ness and difference, whereas ‘comparison’ instead calls to mind frozen moments and entity-ness. One way out of this impasse is increased methodological sophistication. Peter Hall's (2003) discussion of “systematic process analysis” is an appealing illustration of this.

Such is the truncated and very much simplified history (but not historical sociology) of historical sociology until recently.¹ I will now suggest that historical sociology in IR should join the mounting third wave, with a greater enthusiasm than hitherto. Of what does this third wave consist? In brief, of all sorts of things that critical social scientists, as well as others, have been developing for quite a while but that historical sociologists have been reluctant to take on board till now. Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2005b: 64) record four over-arching

¹ This history – not to mention the historical sociology – of historical sociology is certainly more complicated than I suggest here. Gerard Delanty's and Engin Isin's (eds) *Handbook of historical sociology* (2003) gives a radically different picture of historical sociology. Curiously, none of the 17 chapters in Adams, Clemens, and Orloffs (eds) 2005 collection mentions Delanty's and Isin's book (in which most scholars are not from the US) on any of the more than 500 densely typed pages. Tentatively, I suggest that the Delanty and Isin volume is part of the third wave the Adams, Clemens, and Orloff volume is trying to stir up. In other words, I suggest that their US focus is ill-chosen.

trends within the third wave of historical sociology. First, historical sociologists are now attempting to theorize agency. For historical sociologist, where you stand does no longer necessarily depend on where you sit in a political economic structure. Second, whereas the second wave with few notable exceptions (e.g. Mann 1986; Hall 1985) had a fairly exclusive focus on the West and the “unmarked, dominant subjects of modernity” (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005b: 64), the third wave includes various subaltern concerns. A third tendency is to problematize power and look at categorizations, discourses, and other technologies of order. Finally, a host of different third wave historical sociological approaches – inspired by the cultural turn – have started to consider the nonrational elements of social life. Interests as identified by political economy do not crowd out desires and fears, metaphors and cosmologies any longer. To this list I would add a fifth tendency of problematizing knowledge; also this of long standing but only recently taken up by historical sociologist (e.g. Steinmetz 2005; Steinmetz (ed.) 2005; Sewell 2005; Somers 1995a, b). This tendency will be discussed more fully in the next section. While Adams, Clemens, Orloff (2005b: 64) laud this expanding agenda, they are also worried that one of the great strengths of second wave historical sociology – that of a shared language – might get lost.

In IR the state of the art of historical sociology is somewhat confused. While historical sociology as a particular approach is not recognized in important overviews (e.g. Carlsnaes, Risse, and Simmons (eds) 2002; Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner (eds) 1998) several factors have allowed historical sociological work to flourish. I suggest that three factors have been particularly important. First, J. G. Ruggie’s (1983) challenge that Kenneth Waltz’ *Theory of International Politics* (1979) only contained a reproductive logic has been a centrepiece of theoretical debate at the core of IR. Thus, from the very beginning of the dominance of neorealism, one of the most important challenges to this approach has been historical sociological (see also Cox 1986?). Importantly, this particular challenge was not issued from the ‘silences’ or the dissidents. Ruggie is, or was, hardly an outsider, and his challenge has been further developed by such central figures as Barry Buzan, Richard Little, and Charles Jones (refs). Second, in Great Britain Martin Wight – one crucial icon of IR in that country – can arguably himself be characterized as an historical sociologist, and the English School is an, if not historical sociological, at least historical approach to IR. Third, whereas Political Science has been hit hard by rational choice, this creed has been less successful in IR. In IR particularly constructivism has been mobilized against rational choice and constructivism, even in its mainstream form (e.g. Wendt 1999; Katzenstein (ed.) XXXX),

forms an easy friendship with historical sociology (ref to somebody in HH HSIR who!?). Incidentally, Anthony Giddens (e.g. 1984) is both an early important figure in constructivism and a key historical sociologist. In sum, then, historical sociology has met with a less fierce resistance in IR than in many other fields of social science and has even been propounded by some of its most centrally placed scholars.

The upshot of these three “tolerations” is that historical sociology in IR has not been forced to close ranks, defend itself on methodological grounds, and constitute itself as a subfield. A range of historical sociologies exist within IR, some of which use the “second wavers” as interlocutors, and some of which are clearly part and parcel of the allegedly not-yet-cresting third wave (refs to these respectively). There are promises as well as threats involved in this co-existence of a plurality of historical sociologies in IR. These promises and threats are well known from any pluralistic intellectual formation, such as social science writ large for instance. Pluralism promises richness, debate, and critique. Also, the more kinds of tools that are used, the likelier the possibility of actually catching or making something.² Threats abound, however. With pluralism come division of labour, then specialization, and finally the loss of a common language and inter-subjectivity. Of course, this is exactly what Adams, Clemens, and Orloff suggests might happen to the third wave (see above). In other words, and more particularly, if historical sociology in IR does not constitute itself as a subfield, it might lose itself altogether. While not seeing any easy way out of this gridlock I propose that historical sociology of IR continue to encourage pluralism while division of labour and specialization is combated. I further propose that a means to this end is to carefully attend to four commonalities that underlie all historical sociologies of IR. These four commonalities are commitments to relationality, flux, differentiation, and processual specificity (see also Jönsson and Hall 2005).

Relationality.

Flux.

Differentiation.

Processual specificity.

² Whether knowledge is caught or made depends on ontological and epistemological stands that I will not discuss here.

As a foundation for a historical sociology of international relations, I suggest, these four commonalities allow for several important developments. First, this non-essentialist historical sociological language does not prohibit dialects and accents. It allows, for instance, both institutionalist historical sociological work and historical sociological work concerned with identity formation. If both types of studies, furthermore, explicitly situate the specifics of their respective approach in this overarching image of what a historical sociology of international relation is, there is ground to believe that they could profitably relate to each others' work. Importantly, there is no thought here of a shared research programme or any other sort of consensus beyond this non-essentialist language.

Second, relationality, flux, differentiation, and processual specificity as the foundation of a historical sociology of international relations do not sever the link back to the significant accomplishments made by the second wave.³ Instead, to embrace these four commonalities is to hold the baby safely in your arms while the bathwater is being thrown out. With varying *degrees* of commitment, depth, and explicitness, most if not all second wave historical sociologists talk the language of relationality, flux, differentiation, and processual specificity. For instance, the world (historical) sociological research agenda that Hobson and Hobden (2002) harvest from the variety of historical sociologies on display in their *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Hobden and Hobson (eds) 2002), and which potentially span the second and third waves, could have been (more tightly, as well as more inclusively) formulated in terms of relationality, flux, differentiation, and processual specificity.

³ While the tone of this paper is critical of the second wave, this critique must be tempered by a recognition that the second wave of historical sociology, and second wave work within IR, has been, and continues to be, immensely important. It would be a major mistake to effectuate a differentiation between the second and third waves of historical sociology. The third wave, instead, should be thought of as a continuation of the second wave. For instance, while John M. Hobson's *The Wealth of States* (1997) is a hugely important second wave historical work in IR, his *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (2004) is an extremely significant third wave book.

Calling my study historical sociological I must immediately explain what it is not. Often historical sociology is portrayed as a sub-discipline to sociology⁴, but explained as a political economic reaction against the “cultural interpretation and sociopsychological accounts” of sociology (Calhoun 1996: 308). However, since the early phases discussed by Calhoun “cultural interpretation and sociopsychological accounts” are no longer anathema to historical sociology (see for instance contributions by XXX in Delanty and Isin (eds) 2003 and XXX in Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (eds) 2005). My study is neither political economic nor traditionally sociological. A traditional sociological approach to my subject matter would probably have asked important and interesting questions about academic gate keeping, career and publishing strategies, and about the politics of universities and scholarly associations, for instance (see Waever Holsti, ngn feminist). A political economic approach to my subject matter would probably have asked important and interesting questions about funding, institution building, academic freedom from the powers that be, and so on (anybody to cite?). My study does not ask these questions, although they might well be crucial to my ambition of understand why, how, and to what effect we have the IR knowledge that we have. This is perhaps the most important theoretical and methodological limitation to my study.

Rather than pursuing the sociological or political economic affinities of historical sociology I have chosen to look towards what I understand to be a connection to anthropology. Emphasising meaning, and the role of relational networks, as well as the historicity and specificity of knowledge it is difficult not to think of (selected anthropologists) rather than (selected soc pol econ). All these points of departure will be further elaborated in the chapters that follow. Let me now, first, give a preview of my substantial argument, and then, give an outline of how to book will proceed.

⁴ But note that the first footnote in a major recent anthology on historical sociology (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (eds) 2005) goes to Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington – two political scientists!

Relational historical sociology of concept formation

The area of research most underdeveloped in historical sociological IR is knowledge. Obviously, the great material processes of war, political economy, and state-making (Hobson 19967; Spruyt 1994; Thomson 1994; Halperin XXXX) have their historical sociologies. So do some important international institutions (Reus-Smit 1999), such as diplomacy (Jönsson and Hall 2004). As for the historical sociology of IR knowledge, perhaps only Naeem Inayatullah's and David Blaney's *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (2004) qualify.⁵

The relational historical sociology of concept formation that is being developed by Margaret Somers (Somers 1995;; Somers 1995) derives from two important foundations: an historical epistemology (Somers 1996) and relational realism (Somers 1998).

'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), (Somers 1998), (Tilly 2002). Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon (Jackson and Nexon 1999), as well as Yosef Lapid (2001) have started to introduce this approach to the IR community. The basic tenet of relationalism is that

⁵ There are plenty of histories of IR knowledge, and even a few notable sociologies of IR knowledge (i.a. Waever XXXX and Holsti 1985).

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 takes 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 *the West*?” (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 by 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 discoveries as historical items. This does not mean that we must snub them as historical artefacts, however. We should note, also,

that the denial of a direct relationship (sic) between concept and reality in no way comments on the status of this reality.