

# The Promise of Historical Sociology in International Relations<sup>1</sup>

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This essay draws on historical sociology, in particular on historical institutionalism, to critique the micro-, macro-, and meso-level explanations of contemporary international relations theory. Focusing on institutional development, change, and disintegration, it proposes a conjectural, mid-range approach to capturing the processes of large-scale change that are occurring in the international realm. This essay seeks to broaden the field's scope by outlining the possibilities that historical sociology offers to international relations theory and practice.

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A decade or so from the apparent triumph of Western market democracy, world politics is marked by turbulence and instability. Perhaps reflecting the uncertain tenor of world politics, international relations (IR) theory, too, is undergoing a period of flux. The root and branch assault on mainstream approaches ushered in by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar era has shown few signs of abating in recent years. Rather, the fracture between rationalism and reflectivism, allied to splinters within these broad camps, has produced a scene of dizzying complexity. In place of the pedestrian neorealist and institutionalist interparadigm debate has emerged a display of ebullient plumage: neoclassical (Rose 1998), offensive (Mearsheimer 2003; Elman 2004), and defensive (Van Evera 1999) realism; a re-kindled liberalism (Moravcsik 1997; Legro and Moravcsik 1999);<sup>2</sup> various forms of constructivism (Onuf 1989, 1998; Adler 1997; Ruggie 1998; Wendt 1999);<sup>3</sup> normative theory (*pace* Hoffmann 1981; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Brown 2002); a mélange of post-positivist approaches;<sup>4</sup> and a reconvened English School (Dunne 1998; Buzan 2004). All these approaches compete with neorealism (Waltz 1979, 1993, 1996, 2000; Walt 1987, 2002; Layne 1993)<sup>5</sup> and institutional theory (Keohane 1984; Martin 1992; Keohane and Martin 1995, 2003) on the basis of ontological foundations, epistemological logics, and empirical substance.

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<sup>2</sup>Perhaps the main empirical focus of contemporary liberal theory is the democratic peace. On this phenomenon, see Michael Doyle (1983a, 1983b), Bruce Russett (1993), and the various contributions in Michael Brown, Sean Lynn-Jones, and Steve Miller (1996).

<sup>3</sup>On constructivism's fissures, see Friedrich Kratochwil (2000).

<sup>4</sup>Post-positivism is a somewhat crude catch-all term intended to capture the array of theorists who reject the mechanistic, rationalist project associated with positivist international relations. The best introduction to these diverse standpoints can be found in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (1996).

<sup>5</sup>In this article, neorealism is used synonymously with structural realism.

One of the most striking dimensions of this blossoming of a thousand theoretical approaches has been the sociological turn in IR. Previously, rather neglected by IR scholars, at least compared with the influence of economics, political science, and political theory, sociology has become increasingly influential over the past decade or so. Several approaches, most notable among them constructivism, have discovered (or rediscovered) the work of figures as diverse as Anthony Giddens, Jürgen Habermas, and Erving Goffman, not to mention Emil Durkheim, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and Max Weber. These approaches have served to highlight the importance of socially constructed norms, the social processes inherent in identity formation, culture and ideology, intersubjective understandings, and social structures in the study and practice of world politics.

Given this new attachment to sociology in IR, it is somewhat surprising that one of sociology's principal subdisciplines—historical sociology—has received relatively little attention from the IR community. This omission is even more striking given that the central concern of historical sociology—the processes involved in large-scale change—seems particularly well suited to examining the complexities of contemporary world politics. In fact, the uncertain tenor of contemporary international affairs seems to have provoked three principal strategies within the IR scholarly community: a continued focus on parsimony that is necessarily and self-consciously partial; a retreat to theoretical bunkers in order to defend a particular set of precepts, concepts, and methods; and renewed attention to micro-narratives that provide ample details about the richness of thick historical experience, but little insight into the broader patterns, trends, and trajectories that make up contemporary world politics. The main aim of this essay is to illustrate how a fourth option, opened up by historical sociology, can contribute to a wider discussion about the role, content, and form of IR theory. Historical sociology, as explored in this essay, aims to work alongside, and perhaps even to underpin, a range of IR paradigms. An argument will be made that it is through just such an approach that the major trends, causal patterns, and analytical properties of contemporary world affairs can be usefully unpacked, surveyed, and explained.

The argument will be presented in four sections. The first explores the sociological micro-foundations of contemporary IR theory. There will be little here that is of surprise to those who dine out on the intricacies of this subject. But the discussion provides the necessary basis for a second section in which the equally flawed macro-foundations of the discipline are examined. In both sections, insights drawn from historical sociology, and in particular from historical institutionalism, are used to broaden existing concepts and to build bridges between the apparently obdurate spheres of rational action and social structure. The third section examines the capacity of institutions to act as a conduit between structure and agency, in turn providing a viable means of generating ideal-types that can usefully probe the principal patterns of world politics. The final section highlights the main benefits of historical sociology for IR.

### **Micro-Foundations**

The foundations of any approach that looks to move beyond the stale, yet divisive, dichotomies of contemporary IR theory must start with the microfoundations of social action: the assumption of instrumental rationality itself. Neorealism, institutional theory, and liberalism share a common acceptance of the utilitarian underpinnings of social action.<sup>6</sup> For these schools of thought, actors (primarily states, but

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<sup>6</sup>As Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik (1999) put it, the realist focus on resources, the liberal focus on preferences, and the institutional focus on information make up the three leading elements in the rationalist research program. However, Legro and Moravcsik also want to include certain elements of constructivist theory, which is their preferred approach. Hence, Alexander Wendt, Peter Katzenstein, and others are invited, by virtue of their insights into beliefs (ideology), to join a "meta-paradigm" that acts as an overarching umbrella within which mainstream approaches to the subject can operate. An analogous argument is made by Richard Ned Lebow (2004).

on occasion individuals, transnational firms, domestic bureaucracies, terrorist groups, and nongovernmental organizations) act in pursuit of their narrowly defined self-interest. Under conditions of anarchy, this self-interest is primarily characterized as survival. Preferences, whether endogenously or exogenously derived, are givens; they are assumptions that generate consistent outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

The three approaches differ, however, regarding the consequences of these impulses. For neorealists, international politics represents a prisoner's dilemma that obviates cooperation except in rare situations of necessity (such as the formation of alliances against a common threat). For institutionalists, cooperation is sustained through iterated tit-for-tat mechanisms in which the threat of retaliation alongside the facilitation of smoother information flows and monitoring mechanisms deters cheating (an example could be the abandonment by Libya of its nuclear program following the invasion of Iraq in 2004). For liberals, preferences are less fixed, subject as they are to the machinations of *Innenpolitik* (state-society relations, party politics, public opinion, and the like) as well as transnational forces. Yet, it is argued, even preferences derived from the "bottom-up" constitute relatively firm building blocks for the development of parsimonious theory.

The root of the difficulties that underpin these positions is the matching of rationality with instrumentality. There may well be instances in which expected utility analysis is useful, but as a general theory it is overly rigid. Expected utility analysis cannot explain behavior that does not appear to be self-interested (such as why people vote in elections when the chance of affecting the outcome directly is minute), why people act out of a sense of duty rather than self-preservation (for example, by fighting in wars), or why people behave irrationally (by smoking, taking drugs, or, perhaps, joining revolutionary movements).<sup>8</sup> Assuming that preferences and interests are derived from primal drives, domestically determined tastes, or the necessities of an unyielding structure may generate consistent findings, but these findings distort rather than reflect reality. For example, in political life, it is not always possible to discern what instrumental utility is. As John Elster (1989) points out, policymakers deal with degrees of probability rather than matters of objective or externally derived fact. They may have too much information or too little, may be presented with wrong evidence, or may make incorrect decisions even when confronted with sufficient evidence. Given a lack of clairvoyance, under circumstances of multiple equilibria, there is little way of knowing in advance the optimal path to take. A doctor waiting to perform an emergency operation is acutely aware that the medical team runs the risk of making the patient's condition irreversible if they wait too long in order to gather additional information; yet, the same doctor could also jeopardize the success of the operation by beginning the procedure before he or she has sufficient knowledge of the patient's previous medical history and condition. There is no way of functionally deriving in advance

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<sup>7</sup>The distinction between those who see preferences as rooted in second-image factors and those who see preferences as determined either by primal drives or by the structure of the international system is regarded, at least by Moravcsik (1997), as the fundamental fault-line between neorealism and institutional theory, on the one hand, and liberalism, on the other. In response, Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin (1995, 2003) accept that preferences may vary according to group conflicts within the state. However, both also argue that the primacy of neorealist and institutionalist research stems from their ability to assume consistent preferences and to explain state strategies on the basis of such preferences.

<sup>8</sup>On the extent to which IR theories can be said to embrace rationality, see Miles Kahler (1998) and, in particular, Jonathan Mercer (2005a), who makes the point that rationality is not somehow removed from psychological processes but, rather, dependent on psychological states such as emotions. As Mercer (2005a:94) puts it, "emotion precedes choice (by ranking one's preferences), emotion influences choice (because it directs one's attention and is the source of action), and emotion follows choice (which determines how one feels about one's choice and influences one's preferences)." Hence, psychology should be seen less as a means of explaining nonrational mistakes, but more as something that is deeply woven into the fabric of rationality itself. By draining psychology from rationality, Mercer argues, rational choice approaches collapse into normative *ceteris paribus* statements that rely, unwittingly and without acknowledgement, on what he calls "folk psychology."

the desired outcome, individual or collective, from the myriad of options available to rational actors. In effect, rationality cannot hope to infer truth. Rather, as Elster puts it, the balance between short-term and long-term outcomes, the role of belief, issues of will, and the social mechanisms that constrain instrumental action—norms, laws, conventions, and the like—indicate that instrumentality has limits: boundaries that shape its effectiveness as an overarching theory of social action.

The boundaries of instrumental rational choice are further narrowed by the law of “unintended consequences” (Merton 1996, *pace* John Locke). Economists have long been aware that firms weather recessions by lowering wages; they are also aware that the unintended consequence of this rational action is that employees have less purchasing power, which tends to deepen the recession. Political decisions such as the development of welfare systems have generated secondary problems in the emergence of poverty traps and welfare dependency.<sup>9</sup> In these instances, apparently rational instrumental action produces suboptimal or even counterproductive outcomes. Instrumental individual choice, such as having more children in order to provide for a family in old age, delivers collective counter-finality (overpopulation makes everyone worse off) if large numbers of families decide on the same strategy. Mancur Olsen’s (1965) conception of the “collective action problem” is no less difficult an issue today than when Olsen introduced it into social science 40 years ago. The secondary impact of instrumental action may be positive or negative; the only certainty is that unintended consequences (externalities) ensue. Just as prescription drugs contain side-effects, solving one problem while causing another, so it is with the social world. Rationality is indeterminate in terms of both design and outcome.

Problems also arise regarding cognition. Over the last 30 years or so, Robert Jervis (1976, 1997, 1998; Jervis and Balzacq 2004) has consistently illustrated the importance of cognitive bias, motivated bias, and cognitive dissonance in foreign policymaking. For Jervis, belief systems, often shorthanded as “lessons from history” (such as the appeasement of Hitler at Munich or the body-bag syndrome inherited from Vietnam), act as filters through which policymakers make decisions. Frequently, Jervis writes, events sweep aside previously held convictions. In this way, the German Socialist Party chose to support the war effort in 1914, much to the disappointment of the party’s more fervent members. Conversely, policymakers often see what they want to see, ignoring alternative possibilities and manipulating information in order to fit preordained images of how the world is rather than rationally judging each decision solely on its merits.<sup>10</sup> During the Cold War, “threat inflation” by US foreign policy experts consistently led to overestimating the degree of the Soviet threat. The result was a policy that was not rational in a narrow utilitarian sense but driven, to a great extent, by the ideology of the hawks who advocated it (Mann 2004). Bob Woodward’s (2004) study of the decision-making process that led up to the war in Iraq shows that many members of President Bush’s inner circle interpreted the attacks of September 11 through the prism of their predisposition against Saddam Hussein. Sometimes, the “halo effect” that surrounds the actions of friendly states is matched by an equally strong bias against one’s enemies, hence the repositories of “resolve credit” (Snyder and Jervis 1993) that help explain, for example, the very different reputations that the United Kingdom enjoys in the United States and Europe. Because there is such a lack of clarity about the intentions of others in the international realm, policymakers

<sup>9</sup>Nor is the natural world immune from these processes. As Stephen Jay Gould (1985) notes, avian limbs developed to keep birds warm; only later did they become used as a means to develop wings and fly.

<sup>10</sup>On this, also see Michael Freeden (2003). Ronald Inglehart (1990, 1997) has, over a voluminous career, demonstrated how people’s underlying values are shaped by their material circumstances early in life. While attitudes and opinions may change, underlying deeply held impulses remain largely stable.

frequently judge the actions of others incorrectly. In short, misperception and misunderstanding are commonplace in foreign policymaking. Hence, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia on the perfectly rational belief that, even though the British were fully aware of the extent of his territorial ambitions following Munich, they lacked the stomach for a fight. In fact, British foreign policymakers were stunned by the invasion, and Hitler's actions induced a radical change of policy, leading in turn to the advent of war (Jervis 1976).

The rational choice schema that underpins much contemporary IR theory appears to necessitate what Alexander Wendt (2001) describes as a "rearview mirror" approach, looking backward at decisions in order to determine actors "revealed preferences." Even then, rational choice is limited in its scope. As Wendt notes, rational choice envisages human beings as slaves to reason, driven by internal mechanical needs about which people can do little. There may be a degree of consistency to the heuristics and "evoked sets" within which policymakers work. Operational code analysis (Walker 2003), prospect theory (Farnham 1994, 1997; Levy 1997; McDermott 1998, 2004b; Mercer 2005b), and other such approaches (Young and Schafer 1998; Goldgeier and Tetlock 2001; McDermott 2004a) provide useful starting points for managing the complexity of decision making in international politics. But the central problem surrounding the use of expected utility theory as a guiding principle in IR research revolves around the issue of *which* assumptions should be made in order to simplify reality for the sake of theory. This competition should only secondarily be about internal elegance; much more important is the quality of research outputs. Yet, the narrowness of rational, subjective instrumentality privileges presentism in a way that detracts from this goal. Just as the Cold War led to a negative reinterpretation within the Western Alliance of the Soviet role during World War II, so the 9/11 Commission Report in 2004 aptly displayed how difficult it was for professionals, from air traffic controllers to White House staffers, to countenance the prospect of an attack that was so far removed from their frontal frames of reference. Policymakers and members of the public alike consistently gamble resources on schemes in which the likelihood of optimal outcomes is minimal. The "sunk costs" that such ventures consume skew the instrumental utility of particular decisions. As such, a focus on subjective expected utility does little justice to the complexity of decision making in a rapidly changing world; it is as if Occam's razor had become the Manichean foundation for the study of world politics.

Recognizing this problem, some sociologists have built on initial work carried out by Max Weber to broaden the concept of rationality. For Weber, rationality consisted of two ideal types: *Zweckrationalität*, which is technical, purposive, calculating needs-based rationality, and *Wertrationalität*, which is inspired by and directed to the realization of values or "worth." As Weber (1978:280) put it, "frequently, the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamics of interests." Weber's dual anchoring of rationality in both interests and norms inspired the work of Herbert Simon (1982, 1983), James March (1988; March and Simon 1958), and others, who studied how decision-making processes in administrative organizations operated as both a logic of consequences *and* a logic of appropriateness.<sup>11</sup> Simon and March found that the time and space that decision makers could devote to a particular issue were necessarily limited. In this way, rationality was "bounded," partly due to decision makers' own cognitive capacities and beliefs about "the right

<sup>11</sup>Their work is *contra* that of Stephen Krasner, who claims that a foundational difference between international and domestic politics is that the former demands a logic of consequences, whereas the latter accommodates a logic of appropriateness. To put it another way, in the international realm, *homo economicus* trumps *homo sociologicus*. Krasner (1999:51) sums up his position pithily, "a bullet through the head has the same effect regardless of the cognitive perspectives of the target."

thing to do” and partly because the information they received was “imperfect.” In “multi-goal coalitions” like organizations and bureaucracies, choices were made and difficult decisions taken as much because of managers’ own normative frameworks and cognitive capabilities as because of their own *perceived* self-interest. Decision making in these organizations featured a striking level of ambiguity. For both Simon and March, it was more accurate to see individuals as bounded “satisficers” than as isolated egoists.

An example will help illustrate this point further. On June 6, 1944, allied forces began an attack on German-occupied France: Operation Overlord or D-Day. Looking back at D-Day 60 years or so after the invasion, it is difficult to recall or recapture the sense of uncertainty that surrounded it. Yet, recent research indicates that those closest to the invasion were far from certain about its outcome, as indicated by a note prepared by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, General Dwight D. Eisenhower (in Van der Vat 2003:46), on the eventuality of a failed attack:

Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air force, and the navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault is attached to the attempt, it is mine alone.

Eisenhower’s note reveals many of the difficulties associated with utilitarian schema. First, despite an extensive, meticulous research exercise, allied planners were still dealing with imperfect information. They were unable to gauge the full strength of the Germans, the role that would be played (or not played) by Germany’s Luftwaffe, nor fully unravel German communication messages. Second, there were contextual forces and hidden variables that it was impossible to control fully: the weather, which delayed the invasion for several days; the exact depth of the ocean at their chosen landing points; the number of troops who became seasick; and so on. Third, Eisenhower’s note invokes a sense of the normative issues—hope, duty, responsibility—without which human history would have no meaning. Collectively held norms define what is appropriate conduct in particular kinds of social settings. People’s beliefs and views of the world influence both what their interests are and what they perceive them to be. These qualities are fundamental to social life. They are at the root of human experience. Yet, they cannot be predicted in advance. Willpower and collective spirit are the reason why apparently weaker sports teams overcome stronger opponents; they are also the means by which small, committed bands of revolutionaries can defeat far better resourced, and better armed, adversaries. Functional, utilitarian approaches fail to understand or explain how social action takes place on the ground as well as how the various units and actors on the world political stage play a *formative* role in the creation of their conditions and in the processes of social change.

Without an adequate understanding of norms, values, and cognition in addition to a more nuanced analysis of risk, uncertainty, and psychological processes such as framing and coding, the view of rationality offered by much mainstream IR theory appears more like a belief system relying on the false consciousness of actors who do not know why they are acting in a certain way rather than on any kind of universally applicable social theory (Boudon 1998). This picture of parsimonious theory as dependent in the first instance on accepting a thick form of rational choice results is a radically stilted picture of international affairs. As Elster (1989:54) writes, “sometimes the world is messy, and the most parsimonious explanation is wrong.” The first dimension of a historical sociological turn in IR is to help shift researchers away from the use, and abuse, which follow from the widespread adoption of such a restricted view of rationality.

### Macro-Foundations

Understanding the intricacies that constitute the microprocesses of world politics does not mean ignoring the more general trajectories that unite states in the modern era, whether these be the triviality of national emblems or the more serious business of shared economies, peoples, and history. In the contemporary world, the most powerful of these generic tendencies is modernity itself: the range of political, economic, and social processes that have served to recast domestic and international orders over the last 400 or 500 years. The resulting constellations—the states-system, capitalism, patriarchy, and the like—are structures that contain a global reach. In many ways, therefore, global history over the last half-millennium is a shared story. Struggles for and against colonialism, the extension of trade around the world, and technological advances have, with varying degrees of coercion, brought the world within some kind of public commons. In this sense, modernity is, as Ernest Gellner (1983) puts it, a “tidal wave” of homogenizing pressures. But the tsunami has not been equally or evenly felt. Although the commodification of labor, urbanization, bureaucratization, gender equality, universal suffrage, and the like may have penetrated even the most inhospitable of environments, they have not done so in a uniform manner. The systemic dislocations wrought by modernity have provoked a multiplicity of responses: global capitalism and autarky, market democracy and authoritarianism, fundamentalism and secularism. At its heart, modernity appears to be an inherently contradictory process that is marked by greater affluence but also rising inequality; global forms of governance exist alongside a drive for local autonomy (Clark 1997).

This terrain—the transformation of social, economic, and political orders under modernity—is the principal turf occupied by historical sociology.<sup>12</sup> Although there was, and remains, much variation within historical sociology, it is possible to delineate three main assumptions that historical sociologists share. First, there is an appreciation that any understanding of contemporary social relations can only be formed by knowledge about the long-term and short-term antecedents that generated them. This assumption means accepting that contemporary conditions are inherited from the past, constraining and enabling the actions of people in the present day. At the heart of historical sociology, therefore, is recognition of the importance of “path dependency”: the idea that there is a causal dependence *from* contemporary events and processes *to* prior occurrences (Abbott 1990, 2001; Aminzade 1992; Arthur 1994; Ertman 1997; Isaac 1997; Goldstone 1998; Mahoney 2000; Katznelson 2003; Pierson 2004; Sewell 2005).<sup>13</sup> Such an understanding runs counter to the tendencies of much IR theory to truncate the study of world politics by reifying social processes and social facts—states, the market, sovereignty—as timeless analytical (and ultimately as ontological) entities. The 200 or so states that make up contemporary world politics are forced into the same timeless conceptual straightjacket as the 600,000 or so political communities that existed 3,000 years ago, ignoring the historical evolution from a sparse system of states, to a society of states, and, perhaps, to a world society (Wendt 2003; Buzan 2004). This has been

<sup>12</sup>A selective list of those contributing to post-World War II historical sociology would include Smelser (1958); Mills (1959); Bloch (1961); Eisenstadt (1963); James (1963); Lipset (1963); Moore (1966); Aron (1968); Braudel (1972); Anderson (1974a, 1974b); Bendix (1978); Stinchcombe (1978); Collins (1979); Skocpol (1979, 1992); Calhoun (1982); Wallerstein (1983); Giddens (1984); Hall (1985); Mann (1986a, 1986b, 1993, 2004); Gellner (1988); Tilly (1988, 1999, 2003); Sayer (1991); Collier and Collier (1991); Spruyt (1994); Rosenberg (1994a, 1994b); Ertman (1997); Frank (1998); Collier (1999); Halliday (1999); Buzan and Little (2000); Parsa (2000); Shaw (2000); Mahoney (2001); Teschke (2003); Hobson (2004); Thelen (2004); Pierson (2004); and Lawson (2005). Useful collections of work on historical sociology can be found in Skocpol (1984); Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol (1985); McDonald (1996); Delanty and Isin (2003); Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003); Gould (2005); and Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2005).

<sup>13</sup>Although it is important to note that this does not mean a necessary acceptance of teleology, linearity, and monocausality (see Sewell 1996).

neither a linear nor a structurally determined path. Rather, it has been a story of conflict and struggle as individuals, groups, political communities, religions, firms, nations, and empires have interacted within rapidly shifting contexts in the construction of contemporary world politics.<sup>14</sup>

Such a move also runs counter to the ahistorical tendencies of much IR theory: the mining of the past in order to confirm suppositions about the present; the smoothing out of differences, varieties, and processes of change in the interests of methodological purity and theoretical rigidity; and the bracketing off of history behind an eternal “illusory present” (Hobson 2006). Thus, the contest between Athens and Sparta is transplanted to the Cold War in order to elucidate the standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union; all wars, whether they be guerrilla insurgencies or total conflicts, are fundamentally explicable by the basic facts of international anarchy and instrumental action; and all political units—be they city-states, nomadic tribes, empires, nation-states, or transnational alliances—are functionally undifferentiated. As a consequence, much IR theory exists *outside* history (Rosenberg 1994b), operating from a static picture of world politics that irons out differences between political units, omits global structural forces beyond anarchy and polarity, and reduces agency to the unit-level musings of statesmen, financiers, and generals. Historical sociology, like classical social theory more generally, is rooted in the substantive application of social relations as they are constituted *in* time and place, followed by the examination of how far these social processes and social facts are generalizable *across* both time and space. This focus stands in stark contrast to the “synchronic mystique” (Hobson 2002) within which much IR theory labors—in which the past, the present, and the future are presented as one and the same story: a giant optical illusion that distorts rather than captures the richness of history’s multiple landscapes.

The second assumption among historical sociologists focuses on the importance of accounting for changing temporal contexts. For example, modern forms of empire, revolution, and war diverge fundamentally from cases drawn from previous epochs precisely because the contexts for action—both domestic and international—as well as the structures and agents bound up with these processes of change are substantively different. The result is what we might call “research with adjectives” (Collier and Levitsky 1997) or, more specifically, middle-range theory: the linking of general abstractions (such as society, state, or empire) with additional explanatory signifiers (industrial versus postindustrial society; market state versus sovereign state; formal versus informal empire) in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between conceptual abstractions and empirical research. Examples include exploration of how the general structural conditions of the Cold War played out in regional contexts (for instance in the Middle East; see Halliday 2005) and how time and space differentiation impacts on general abstractions such as empire (Lieven 2001; Mann 2003) and revolution (Halliday 1999; Lawson 2005).<sup>15</sup>

The Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1970) makes this point well. For Sartori, at the extreme edge of abstraction lies the possibility of “concept stretching” or “straining” toward vague, amorphous crystallizations, pseudo-universals without either precision or purchase. Sartori proposed that social science works within a ladder of abstraction ranging from general abstractions (genus) to

<sup>14</sup>The reduction of international politics behind reified abstractions also generates a Eurocentrism that does a disservice to the myriad ways in which the non-Western world has been at the leading edge of global political, economic, and cultural developments (see Amin 1988; Frank and Gills 1996; Frank 1998; Hobson 2004).

<sup>15</sup>The term “theories of the middle-range” comes from Robert Merton (1996). It is important to note that not all historical sociology adopts this approach. Indeed, there is a major strand of historical sociology, with its roots in Marxism, that is holist, structuralist, and determinist. See Lawson (2007) for a differentiation of the types of historical sociology.

mid-level taxonomies (class) to empirical analysis (species). In this way, Sartori argued, social scientists are best served by starting with medium-level abstractions or hypotheses and working up and down the ladder of abstraction, testing whether their hunches fit both with more general concepts as well as with the available empirical material. For Sartori, this process of “conceptual traveling” generates “fact-storing containers” (empirical universals) that are aimed at unraveling the interplay between homogeneity and heterogeneity and that combine explanatory purchase with a high level of empirical content. Subsequently, renamed by David Collier and James Mahon (1993) as the “ladder of generality,” Sartori’s method allows concepts, categories, and causal regularities to be rigorously assessed over time and space, while also allowing for the generation of workable, theoretically compelling taxonomies and classificatory schemas that can differentiate between normal abnormality and abnormal normality.<sup>16</sup>

As a third assumption, historical sociologists contend that empirically sound, comparative work can direct disciplines away from static, snap-shot approaches to a more vibrant account that can make sense of the dynamism of social action and social change. Rather than searching for a kind of functional homology between social and historical processes, history itself becomes the tool kit or route map that, as Dennis Smith (1991:184) observes, “can help us distinguish between open doors and brick walls.” Over the last two centuries, several waves of historical sociologists have studied the interaction between large-scale structural processes and the actions of individuals, groups, and states that have both produced and reproduced them.<sup>17</sup> These scholars have found enduring patterns to world politics, but they have also discovered that even the most powerful social structures are historically particular, created by the actions of people in a particular time and space. Empires rise and fall, world religions are forced to reform their practices or face losing moral authority, dictators delegate, and slaves rebel. There are numerous homogenizing features that affect the international realm ranging from the spread of global capitalism, religions, ideologies, and languages to the adoption of national flags, anthems, airlines, football teams, and Olympic squads. Yet, these processes are neither unalterable, nor are they uncontestable. Human beings are not puppets whose movements are controlled by unseen forces, nor are they automatons, doomed to respond to stimuli in prescribed ways. If such were the case, history would offer no surprises: no tale of David defeating Goliath, no example of revolutionary change being made under unlikely circumstances. Yet, to take on this latter example, revolutions are processes in which people actively create and respond to changing contexts, constructing novel social orders that are both constrained and enabled by social structures inherited from the past. No structure, however immutable it seems, lasts forever.

The dynamism of this picture—a story of the making of the modern world rooted in the co-constitutive role played by material and ideational factors, by economic, social, and political processes, and by international and domestic forces—is one that is only latently recognized within the IR lexicon. Indeed, the contrast

<sup>16</sup>Sartori’s work echoes the clarion call issued by US sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959), who argued for a social scientific enterprise that eschewed both grand theory (abstraction without application) and abstracted empiricism (behavioralist quantifications of human action). For more on how Sartori and Mills contribute to the “historical sociological imagination,” see Lawson (2007).

<sup>17</sup>This is not to say that all historical sociologists have adopted this line. Much “second-wave” historical sociology exhibited a tendency to focus on the structural dimensions of social change—relative geopolitical position, degree of modernization, class relations, and so on—to the detriment of agency, both domestic and international (see, for example, Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979; and Goldstone 1991). Others have attempted to link rational choice explicitly to historical sociology, although not without attracting criticism (see Hechter 1992; Hechter and Kiser 1998; Somers 1998; and the various contributions in Gould 2005). However, for the most part, historical sociologists have tended to adopt a form of relationism (Emirbayer 1997). On the various “waves” of scholarship within historical sociology, see Smith (1991), Lawson (2005), and Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2005).

with structural IR theories, in particular neorealism, could scarcely be more pronounced. At its core, neorealism is static, denying changes to the deep structure of the international system over time and place. For structural realists, only third-image explanations carry with them the prospect of genuine theory. Even a minimal interpretation of the theory sees the third level of analysis as the basic starting point for theorizing about world politics. Without accepting the explanatory implications of the anarchical international system, structural realists argue, one cannot understand the mechanism of balancing nor the eternal security dilemma (Jervis 1978) under which states labor. The unyielding fact of anarchy breeds a world of depressing consistency: of timeless state conflict as a necessary impulse of the self-help system, of statesmen foolishly playing dice with the loaded mechanisms of international structure,<sup>18</sup> of division within the world based only on relative material capabilities (for which the word power is often misleadingly substituted).<sup>19</sup> Structural realism may be a theory, but it is a theory without a nuanced understanding of structure or world history.

Neorealists assert that there is a dual structure to international politics: a primary level of (constant) anarchy that compels processes of socialization, emulation, and competition, and a secondary (variable) sphere of polarity, which affects the quality of balancing.<sup>20</sup> Neither of these structures seems to contain much analytical purchase. First, beyond *describing* a world without a Leviathan, it is difficult to see what *explanatory* weight anarchy carries. The absence of world government does not mean the absence of order. In various epochs in world history, empires, hegemony, and security communities have acted as the functional equivalents of Leviathans, laying down standards, both by force and by consent, and providing order within their sphere of control. In this sense, hierarchy is just as much a feature of world politics as anarchy (Lake 1996; Wendt and Friedheim 1996; Cooley 2005; Hobson and Sharman 2005). Institutions—formal in the sense of international laws, international organizations, and treaties and informal as carried by conventions, rules, and standards of behavior—have long provided mechanisms through which international affairs can be conducted (Bull 1977; Reus-Smit 1997; Buzan 2004).<sup>21</sup> If international structure *determined* the form and function of its constituent parts, observable effects would follow discernible causes without room for unseen or collective action, unintended consequences, creativity, or surprise in world politics. How, then, to explain the capacity of a range of actors—OPEC in 1973, Al-Qaeda in 2001 among them—to act well beyond their

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<sup>18</sup>“States are free to disregard the imperatives of power, but they must expect to pay a price for doing so” (Waltz 2000:37). Quite how an imperative allows the actor to be free is not a point that Waltz sees fit to comment upon, nor is the price of this dereliction of structural (non) necessity explained in full.

<sup>19</sup>For such a central topic of analysis, power is a radically underdeveloped concept in international relations. Power derives from the Latin word *potere*, which literally means “to be able.” It has, therefore, normally been applied in the social sciences as a causal concept signifying a capacity to affect people or events. Yet, in IR, power has tended to be used in a static sense to denote the distribution of resources and capabilities within the anarchical system. (For alternative conceptions of power as a relational, dynamic process, see Clegg 1989; Wrong 1995; Hindess 1996; and Stewart 2001).

<sup>20</sup>For Kenneth Waltz (1979), the ideal international system is bipolar because such a system offers the best chance of regularizing contact and minimizing conflict (although it is not without the risk of overreaction to small threats). Unipolarity is inherently unstable in that rival states will form a coalition to challenge the sole power. Multipolarity is the most unstable system of all, producing shifting alliances and the likelihood of unlimited war. On the potential benefits of hegemonic systems in which a single power is responsible for laying down and enforcing global rules, particularly in the sphere of international political economy, see Charles Kindleberger (1973) and Robert Gilpin (1981).

<sup>21</sup>Nicholas Onuf (1998:61) puts this point simply: “rules yield rule.” On the capacity of institutions to generate “governance without government” in the international realm, see James Rosenau and Otto Czempel (1992). For more assessment of these issues, see John Ruggie (2004).

underlying power capabilities and generate substantive changes in the texture of world politics?<sup>22</sup>

It is also difficult to weigh with any great certainty the impact of various forms of polarity. The contemporary world is often considered to be unipolar, but this scarcely seems the case in Europe. Given both the hard power and the soft authority held by the European Union and the current frostiness of the transatlantic alliance, the continent does not appear much like the lapdog of an overbearing hegemon.<sup>23</sup> Nor is the United States unrivaled in Asia, where China, India, Japan, and Pakistan maintain countervailing tendencies to US influence, particularly when it comes to highly sensitive security issues such as North Korea. Sub-Saharan Africa, for its part, is perhaps better seen as a sphere without structural authority; the Middle East is a tinderbox region of arcane complexity. Thus, even a cursory glance at the contemporary world displays multiple international systems in operation: a “postmodern,” Kantian world inhabited by members of the European Union; a Lockean, modern system experienced by the European Union’s “near abroad”; and Hobbesian, “premodern” conditions that are all too pervasive in much of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>24</sup>

Historically, too, there have been countless international systems, many of which have overlapped with each other. As Barry Buzan and Richard Little’s (2000) extensive analysis of international systems throughout world history shows, the international system in ancient Greece extended beyond city-states to embrace Carthage, Rome, Egypt, the Persian Empire, and barbarian tribes, perhaps extending to India. At the height of the Roman Imperium, the Han Empire in China was bigger, more sophisticated, and featured a far higher level of centralized authority than its Roman counterpart (Lieven 2001). Neither in terms of contemporary world politics nor with reference to the historical record does it seem a straightforward exercise to determine the number of poles operating at any one time, let alone carry out an assessment of the logics that various polarities generate. Debates about the relative stability and durability of unipolarity, the need to distinguish (or not) within the broad category of multipolarity (for example, allowing for a subset indicating tripolarity), and the lack of agreement about even the most basic characteristics of balancing seem less a construction of a progressive research program than a numbers game designed primarily to keep academics in gainful employment.<sup>25</sup> All theories need to simplify reality in order to function as theories, but when this process involves distorting history to such a degree, perhaps it is the theoretical *explanans* itself that needs addressing.

An example helps further illustrate this point. Paul Schroeder’s (1994) study of European interstate politics between 1648 and 1945 indicates that states hid from threats, bandwagoned, or tried to transcend problems more often than they pursued a strategy of balancing. Different states facing the same threats devised different strategies to deal with them. Nor did the balance of power appear a necessary axiom of European politics; equilibrium was far less often the norm than

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<sup>22</sup>It should be noted that Waltz has somewhat rowed back from the idea that anarchy determines state behavior. Hence, he (Waltz 2000:24) has argued that “structures shape and shove, but they do not determine the actions of states.”

<sup>23</sup>Indeed, the perilous state of the transatlantic relationship has led some scholars to see European states (among others) as beginning a process of “soft balancing” against the United States (see Pape 2005; Paul 2005). For a counter-argument, see Brooks and Wohlforth (2005).

<sup>24</sup>Wendt (1999) identifies three “cultures of anarchy”—Kantian, Lockean, and Hobbesian—depending on whether other states are seen as friends, rivals, or foes. This is mirrored in work carried out by the British diplomat Robert Cooper (2000), who divides the world into “post-modern,” “modern,” and “premodern” zones.

<sup>25</sup>This has not, of course, stopped scholars from constructing a cottage industry around issues of polarity (see Waltz 1979, 2000; Gilpin 1981; Walt 1987, 2005; Christensen and Snyder 1990; Layne 1993; Schweller 1998; Wohlforth 1999). Recent work on balancing can be found in Ikenberry (2002), Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann (2004), and Schweller (2004, 2006).

asymmetries of power. The creation of the Concert System during the first half of the nineteenth century was a deliberate attempt to design an interconnected system that could generate an *équilibre politique* (Schroeder 1993) of functionally differentiated roles, duties, and responsibilities.<sup>26</sup> Crucially, it was not just interests that brought the concert system together, but a shared sense of identity. State interests were multiple and shifting rather than narrow and fixed, accommodating changes to both international and domestic contexts. Neither the move from feudal absolutism to constitutionalist, bureaucratic nation-states, nor the machinations that saw the development of British mercantile ascendancy, can be seen through the prism of the anarchic system alone.<sup>27</sup> What parsimony gains in elegance, it appears to lose in empirical veracity.

Many contemporary realists seem to recognize the limits of the neorealist reverence for third-image parsimony. Hence, in recent years there has been a shift away from many of the hardcore and auxiliary assumptions of structural realism in favor of a neoclassical approach that fills in (or perhaps does violence to) neorealist foundational axioms.<sup>28</sup> Drawing on the work of Thucydides, Carr, Morgenthau, Aron, Wolfers, and others, neoclassical realists such as William Wohlforth (1993), Thomas Christensen (1997), Fareed Zakaria (1998), Randall Schweller (1998, 2004, 2006), and Jennifer Sterling-Folker (2002) look at how the systemic pressures afforded by anarchy are translated through unit-level intervening variables, ranging from perceptions to civil–military relations. These scholars show that, without building in ideology, perception, domestic state–society relations, and the like, structural accounts fail to explain why states balance or bandwagon, hide or transcend, chain-gang or buck-pass.

Much of the analysis offered by neoclassical realists bears a “family resemblance” to historical sociology. Historical sociology aims to unravel the complexity that lies behind the interaction between social action (both deliberate and unintentional) and structural forces (socially constructed but with an enduring authority and dynamic of their own). Hence, international factors are conjoined with domestic variables in order to find patterns that explain central social processes such as wars, alliances, and the rise and fall of great powers. Over the last 20 years, research drawing on the nexus between historical sociology and IR has borne substantial fruit: analysis of the origins and varieties of international systems over time and place (Watson 1992; Spruyt 1994; Buzan and Little 2000), exposure of the “myth of 1648” or the Westphalian myth (Oslander 2001; Teschke 2003), analysis of the non-Western origins of the contemporary world system (Wallerstein 1983; Gills 2002;

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<sup>26</sup>In this way, Britain became the guarantor of balance, the protector of small states, and the promoter of commerce, whereas Russia was the guardian of the monarchical order and defender of ancient regimes against revolutionary outbursts. The Netherlands and Belgium, along with other small states such as Switzerland, acted as neutral buffers between the great powers. This concert existed, as William Dougherty (1993) notes, beyond the existence of a French threat to European security; rather, it included the restored monarchy.

<sup>27</sup>It is worth looking at the debate that followed the publication of Schroeder’s article, in particular the reply by Elman and Elman (1995) and Schroeder’s (1995) withering rebuttal. As Schroeder writes (1995:194–5), Elman and Elman provide “an elaborate word game explaining and predicting nothing about the actual historical character of the international system. . . . It (neorealism) addresses only questions, the answers to which we know already, and its explanatory framework is the night in which all cows are black. . . . it is not even wrong.” Similarly, as Jervis (1998) points out, it is not possible to explain the actions of Hitler’s Germany or Stalin’s Russia via anarchy, polarity, or rational instrumentality. These states were not driven by narrow self-interest or the necessary pursuit of security, but by a desire to remake their domestic orders and to reorder the world in this image. Much the same could be said of revolutionary states over the past 200 years or so (see Halliday 1999; Lawson 2005).

<sup>28</sup>Legro and Moravcsik (1999) doubt whether neoclassical realists can really be seen as realists, given that the two variables the two groups share—the retention of anarchy (and its consequent self-help system) and rationalism—are not sufficiently distinctive to warrant the realist coat of arms. On the one hand, the shifting sands of realism can be seen as a strength, providing what Michael Banks (in Guzzini 2004:544) calls a “vacuum effect,” in which anything valuable is swallowed in the name of the paradigm. But, on the other hand, Legro, and Moravcsik argue, if too much is allowed within the realist tent, the paradigm becomes internally contradictory and externally overly promiscuous and begs the question: “is anybody still a realist”?

Hobson 2004), work on the co-constitutive relationship between the international realm and state–society relations in processes of radical change (Halliday 1999; Lawson 2005), examination of the social logic of international financial orders (Seabrooke 2006), and exploration of the international dimensions of modernity and globalization (Rosenberg 1994a, 2005, 2006).

Scholars from other theoretical tribes are also contributing to this form of research. Hence, Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald (1996) have used a historically sensitive, comparative analysis to show how the nonuse of nuclear and chemical weapons has, in large part, evolved over the last century from the interplay between a number of domestic and international factors, constructing a standard of civilization that prohibits the use of these weapons. Similarly, Martha Finnemore (1996, 2003) has illustrated how the norm of humanitarian intervention has been constructed over time, starting with the protection of Christians from persecution by the Ottoman Empire and carried via the fight against slavery and decolonization into a universal concept of humanity. The outcome of this journey was neither predetermined nor linear. Rather, it was the subject of conflicts played out domestically and internationally, an uneven development that generated an overarching structural norm within which international intervention could take place.<sup>29</sup> In a comparable vein, Thomas Berger (1996) has shown how the national security roles of Germany and Japan refute geopolitical interests and relative capabilities. Rather, identity, values, and the culture of foreign policymakers in these countries explain the relatively slight influence of these two great powers, at least militarily, on the contemporary world stage. Other constructivists such as Christian Reus-Smit (1999) and Michael Barnett (2002) have also adopted a historical sociological take on the institutional underpinnings of international orders and on the changing functions of international organizations, respectively.

The work of these constructivists and neoclassical realists, allied to the work of other scholars such as Stephen Krasner (1999), John Ikenberry (2001, 2002), and Barry Buzan (2004), who also apply historical-comparative methods within the realist, liberal, and English School traditions, respectively, is not always self-identified as historical sociology. Yet, it could be described as such in that each of these studies is rooted in a *diachronic* understanding of the international realm, looking at how social action and social structures—and the social facts engendered by the interaction between these two spheres—inhabit a domain of both continuity and disjuncture. In the first instance, these works are empirically grounded studies of “sufficient similarity” that use several cases to generate causal patterns and wider inferences beyond either a universalistic program or a collapse into indeterminacy.<sup>30</sup> As such, these studies take place within a research tradition dating back to Max Weber’s attempt to provide an empirically rich, comparative study of social facts that he used as a means to generate and evaluate a general argument. This conjoining of interpretation and explanation (*Verstehende Erklärung*) uses awareness of particular contexts to derive a nuanced, causal explanation of ideal types that potentially contains a wider import. It is this approach that appears to contain fertile ground for the study of world politics. By tacking between empirical data, conceptual abstractions, and causal explanations—or as Michael Mann (1986a)

<sup>29</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) claim that the influence of norms in constituting change in world politics is threefold. First, norms emerge, usually via individuals and groups who act as “norm entrepreneurs” framing a particular issue and creating a critical mass of support for it, whether that be women’s rights, the abolition of slavery, or banning landmines. Second, through processes of emulation, imitation, and socialization, these norms cascade around the world, carried via state departments, international organizations, and epistemic networks. Third, bureaucracies, both domestic and international, institutionalize the norms as “taken-for-granted” principles that are then formalized in policy.

<sup>30</sup>On the challenges and opportunities presented by case studies, process tracing, and middle-range theory in general (the most common methodological tools used by historical sociologists), see Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003), and George and Bennett (2005).

puts it, “carrying out a constant conversation between the evidence and one’s theory”—it is possible to refine and refute, engage with, and accumulate knowledge.

As it has developed, historical sociology has been applied within a number of formal disciplines and across a number of issue areas. Historical sociologists have asked important questions, probed at interesting puzzles, provided some compelling hypotheses, and produced an array of empirical studies on subjects as varied as the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the development of manners. By adopting a historically sensitive, comparative set of tools, historical sociologists have concentrated on how to link the broad currents of world politics with events on the ground, in other words how to marry “organic tendencies” to historical happenstance. The principal questions for historical sociologists working with middle-range theory are: how is it possible to navigate a coherent path through the complexities of world politics? What are the tools of correspondence that can mediate between international and domestic factors, material and normative issues, general and genetic tendencies? What are the *via medias* that can incorporate the logic of both creative agency and structural authority, mediums capable of uncovering, in John Searle’s (1995:5) words, “the structure of social reality”?

### Meso-Foundations

A number of scholars have turned to the study of institutions as a means of finding the conduit to help answer these questions. Advocates of the “new institutionalism” (March and Olsen 1989; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992; Thelen 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005) claim that institutions can lay bare the dynamic between people’s interests and preferences as well as the standing conditions and patterned relations within which they act and that are affected by their agency. Institutions, for these scholars, are the sites at which the international and domestic, material and normative factors, social facts and brute reality are joined.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the most prominent element of the “new institutionalism” is a rational choice approach that understands institutions as stabilizing, constraining forces. For rational choice advocates, institutions are coordinating mechanisms that sustain social equilibrium, a kind of social cartilage binding society together and reducing the possibility of conflict. Much of this view is rooted in a commonsense understanding of institutions. After all, the British House of Lords and the US Supreme Court are, by their very nature, associated with continuity, stickiness, and stasis. But as Kathleen Thelen (1999, 2004) points out, what gives these institutions their staying power is actually their adaptability and capacity to *evolve* over time. Institutional survival depends on flexibility. The House of Lords, for example, has resisted increasing the legitimacy of the House of Commons, as well as the removal of hereditary peers and various attempts to reform it out of existence. Likewise, as Stephen Krasner (1999) has observed, the long-established principle of sovereignty has endured precisely because of the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations that have been attached to it. Institutions may be sticky, but they also appear to move.

Following Thelen and others, an alternative group of scholars, sometimes referred to as “sociological” or “historical institutionalists,” focus on how institutions develop and adapt rather than on how they function. As such, institutions are not conceived as timeless entities performing a universal task, but as variables that are particular to a time and place and require reproduction (positive feedback) in order

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<sup>31</sup>Much of the sociological literature on institutions is drawn from work originating in economic history and, in particular, from the pioneering studies of Douglass North (1990, 2004) and Brian Arthur (1994).

to keep pace with changing norms and material contexts (Abbott 1990, 2001; Aminzade 1992; Arthur 1994; Ertman 1997; Isaac 1997; Goldstone 1998; Mahoney 2000; Katznelson 2003; Pierson 2004; Sewell 2005). Margaret Weir (1992), for example, sees institutions as engaged in “bounded innovation.” For Weir, once changes are “locked-in,” they are difficult to shift; small initial differences can become substantial ones over time. By the very nature of the interplay between agency and structural context, institutions are examples of “bricolage” in which layers of change take place over the tops of others. Institutional innovation is the norm, but only on top of existing foundations and within set parameters. Institutions are at one and the same time sites of change, reproduction, and transformation and offer a means of unraveling the continuity and disjuncture of domestic and international orders.

The main problem with how institutions are used in IR theory revolves around the neorealist and institutionalist conception of institutions as *functional* necessities for generating order (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001). In other words, states seek to exploit their power and reduce security threats *by necessity*, often by designing institutions, brittle or robust as they may be. For neorealists, institutions are reflections of state power and the relative distribution of capabilities. As a consequence, institutions are doubly yoked—first to state interests and, by dint of this subservience, for a second time within the structure of international anarchy. Thus, for Mearsheimer (1990, 1995), Krasner (1991), Waltz (2000), and others, institutions serve at the whim of the great powers or hegemon—*to be used, abused, or ignored as needs dictate*. The first cut of institutional theory, for these scholars, should be an analysis of divergent national power capabilities. As Krasner (1991) has argued, for issues on which there are disagreements about basic principles and the norms needed to underwrite the institutions or if there is a radical asymmetry of power between states, then institutions are unlikely to develop or endure. Because institutions rely on the great powers for their very existence, any effect they have is weak and inconsequential, limited to those situations in which power capabilities are more or less equal and shared interests and mutual gains will follow.

For institutional theorists, institutions are designed to deliver absolute, if sub-optimal, gains under conditions of anarchy.<sup>32</sup> Because there are only “thin” push factors toward cooperation in the international realm, states create institutions in order to overcome collective action problems, reduce transaction costs, lessen incentives for cheating, facilitate informational flows, shorten the shadow of the future by transparently providing anticipated returns, and distribute capabilities more evenly. As such, they are focal points for cooperation, providing essential monitoring and information tasks that can deliver what Mearsheimer (1995) describes (or derides) as “distributional gains.” The creation and maintenance of institutions engenders system equilibrium and, therefore, some degree of stability (for an example, see Ikenberry 2001). In this way, institutionalists are attempting to augment rather than subvert neorealism. As Keohane and Martin (2005:42) put it, “by seeking to specify the conditions under which institutions can have an impact and cooperation can occur, institutional theory shows under what conditions realist propositions are valid.”

Institutional theory has, as proponents admit, not conducted enough testing of *ex ante* difficult cases; often there has been a selection bias and the choice of non-random, restricted cases through which to examine the theory. Moreover, the question over whether institutions act as dependent or independent variables in

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<sup>32</sup>Some institutionalists argue that, in certain cases, gains may be relative rather than absolute. Hence, Keohane and Martin (2003) agree that the interests of states may diverge in terms of the distribution of gains, particularly between strong and weak states. In this sense, there is no agreement about what Krasner (1991) has called the “Pareto frontier”: the realm of mutual gains.

specific cases has led to questions about the problem of endogeneity that the theory contains (see Keohane and Martin 2003). For their part, neorealists have yet to explain the endurance and increasing density of institutions in global affairs.<sup>33</sup> Even if institutions are endogenous to state interests and international structure, they are not necessarily epiphenomena. For example, in situations of multiple equilibria, institutions may exert a considerable degree of agency and independence. International institutions often establish a relative autonomy from the states that set them up by constructing categories of actors (like refugees), promoting new interests (such as human rights), or transferring models of political association around the world (in particular, democracy). As work on principal-agent theory shows (Gould 2003, 2004), international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have a fair degree of latitude vis-à-vis their apparent masters. Once set up, international institutions often move in ways quite removed from their intended function, generating inconvenient commitments in the process. Thus, the states that have created the International Criminal Court are also subject to its jurisdiction, and European states that have chosen to pool economic decision making in a continent-wide central bank are thereafter constrained by its decisions.

Work by Barnett and Finnemore (2004) has indicated the extent to which international institutions assign meaning and normative values to certain modes of behavior, helping construct and constitute the social world in their image. By carrying out the “duties of the office” and “doing their job,” international institutions control information and establish a level of expertise that states cannot possess. This specialized knowledge shapes rather than merely implements the policy directives of states. Hence, UN peacekeepers have an authority that stems from their generally perceived role as neutral, independent actors implementing Security Council resolutions. The World Bank classifies who can be considered “peasants,” “farmers,” and “laborers” and asserts its authority by dictating the content and direction of global development programs. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has the power to set up camps and make life and death decisions, without recourse to consultation with the UN’s member states. International institutions fix meanings, establish rules, and transmit norms in the international realm.<sup>34</sup> In this way, these institutions can act as agents of progressive change rather than as conservative constraints or as mechanisms of the *status-quo ante*.

Similarly, institutions are not functionally determined. Some international institutions, like the European Union, take on rather more functions than was originally intended, whereas others such as the Arab League, the Organization of American States, and the African Union do less. As Adam Ferguson (quoted in Onuf 2002:215) wrote over 200 years ago, “institutions are the result of human action, but not the execution of human design.” Many international institutions move well away from the vision of their founders. The “sunk costs” involved in changing or abolishing institutions once they are established, despite changes in overarching structural conditions, engender a degree of path dependence (Keohane and Martin 2003). Thus, the UN Security Council, set up to reflect post-World War II power capabilities, has to date resisted calls for fundamental reform of its make-up and functions despite the structural shift that accompanied the end of the Cold War. Nineteenth-century governmental departments set up to meet the challenges of the

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<sup>33</sup>Michael Barnett (2002) calculates that, whereas in 1860 there were just five international institutions and one international nongovernmental organization (NGO), by 1940 there were 61 and 477, respectively; by the turn of the millennium, there were 260 international institutions and over 5,000 international nongovernmental organizations.

<sup>34</sup>As Barnett and Finnemore acknowledge, this does not mean that international institutions necessarily carry out these roles well. Factionalism, turf wars, cumbersome decision-making processes, and self-insulated elites do not make for high quality policymaking.

industrial age persist despite their lack of success in tackling the thorniest issues of the information economy. As changes occur to the context within which institutions were formed, they generate effects and exhibit a capacity for persistence beyond endogenous interests, preferences, and the overarching structure within which they act.

Importantly, institutions are sites of conflict as well as tools of consensus. Disputes in the UN Security Council in the lead-up to the war in Iraq, the turmoil prompted by the failure of the European Union to agree on a draft constitution, and the seemingly ceaseless tensions prompted by the processes of EU enlargement indicate the ways in which institutions are units of political contestation.<sup>35</sup> Institutional conflicts and decay go well beyond “punctuated equilibrium” (Krasner 1984:224) in which institutions lose their “stickiness.” The process of *deinstitutionalization* is also crucial in world affairs; consider the cases of the abolition of slavery or the decline of imperialism and colonialism with all the consequences that ensued. Institutions such as those surrounding human rights and humanitarian intervention clash with those dealing with sovereignty and self-determination; in other words, international political and economic institutions often diverge. Hence, while the United Nations was condemning the Chilean junta led by General Pinochet during its period of dictatorship, the IMF and World Bank were propping up the regime through beneficial loan agreements.

Likewise, neither neorealism nor institutional theory deals adequately with variation in terms of time and place. As David Stasavage (2004) points out, the optimal design of institutions varies according to changing needs, levels of public opinion, and the legitimacy of the institution. Despite operating under apparently equivalent structural conditions, Athenian hegemony favored third-party arbitration or what Reus-Smit (1997) calls “trilateralism,” whereas the contemporary US version, for the most part, veers between multilateralism, unilateralism, and bilateralism.<sup>36</sup> The degree to which the Bush Administration and its unilateralist perambulations have moved away from Clintonian multilateralism is striking; it also indicates that multilateralism is not a necessary impulse directed by the structure of the international system. As Ruggie (1998) posits, if Germany had won World War II, it seems scarcely credible to hold that world politics would feature the same predilection for multilateralism as it does today. Rather, multilateralism took the form it did precisely out of a need to rebuild and contain the imperial pretensions of the Soviet Union, Germany, and Japan, while at the same time bolstering the transatlantic alliance. Hence, it is not hegemony alone, as neorealist and institutional theory would have it, but US hegemony that explains the position of multilateralism in the world today, predominant or subaltern as it may be.

Finally, institutions are not just effects; they are also causes. In other words, they are *constitutive* rather than merely regulative. For Ruggie (1998), the failure to understand how institutions constitute as well as regulate activity in world politics is the principal failing of the neorealist and institutionalist research traditions, missing out on the way in which the *norm* of reciprocal sovereignty must be recognized *before* the state-system can operate effectively; how property rights have to be established *before* a market economy can function; and how the principle of

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<sup>35</sup>This is a particular problem for institutionalists, who claim that institutions are essentially derived from the need for cooperation. The result is an acceptance, at least by some (for example, Keohane and Martin 2003), that in certain cases, particularly those featuring large asymmetries of power, interests may diverge and gains may be relative rather than absolute.

<sup>36</sup>James Lindsay, an analyst at the Council for Foreign Relations and a former adviser to President Clinton, calls this “multilateralism à la carte.” Mark Leonard (2004), Director of the British Foreign Policy Centre, is more explicit, writing that the Bush Administration has hit a “geopolitical pause button,” which is “unilateralism if we care about it, multilateralism if we don’t.”

exclusive territoriality exists before the actualization of guiding structures like the sovereign state. Barry Buzan (2004) has usefully explored the rise, consolidation, decay, and demise of international institutions over time, dividing institutions into “primary” or “master” types (shared practices rooted in common values) and secondary, derivative norms, rules, and practices. Hence, for Buzan, sovereignty is the fundamental ground rule that generates international law and nonintervention, in turn engendering international organizations like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court. The master institution of the market is derivative of trade liberalization and, in turn, global financial architecture like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the IMF. Crucially, as Buzan points out, even primary institutions, although enduring, are not eternally fixed. Hence, dynasticism and colonialism, both deep institutions from past international systems, have faded to the extent that they are, to all intents and purposes, no longer legitimate dimensions of policymaking practices. Institutions may be binding forces, but they can also become unstuck. The world does not come preconstituted; it is not a ready-meal.

The utility of using institutions as analytical tools comes from the ways in which they link material practices with symbolic construction, helping understand how capitalism is concretized through property rights, ownership, and contracts; Christianity becomes “solid” through prayer and the ritual of church going; and democracy is formalized by voting, parliamentary debates, legislation, and so on. Institutions operate at the nexus of the material and social worlds, or at what Buzan (2004) calls the explicit and implicit ends of social action. As such, they can be understood as *conjunctions* of social construction and material forces. Institutions are at once rules and roles, interests and identities, practices and principles. They are points at which structure and agency, material and ideational factors, conflict and cooperation, intentional action and unintended consequences, continuity and disjuncture come together. As such, they are an ideal *via media* for addressing what, at first sight, appear to be unbridgeable dichotomies and of helping provide analytical order to a world of sometimes bewildering complexity. The primary connections that individuals experience are within networks of shared interests and identity. Institutionalization is the *formalization of these networks of shared interests and identity through adopting common rules, norms, and practices*. Institutions are the result of this process, defined as *sets of common understandings, rules, and practices operating in a particular issue area*.

Members of institutions, domestic and international, are always relatively free to articulate their interests, position themselves strategically, and fix their relationships vis-à-vis others. As practices, norms, and procedures are repeated and institutionalized, so the dynamic is reproduced and space opens up for new connections, relationships, and networks to be institutionalized. Although they are inhibited by processes of rule making, supervision, and regulation, such structures are not wholly constraining; they are also enabling and generative, open to negotiation and resistance. Delegation always features some degree of discretion and interpretation (agency), even if this takes place within set parameters and rules (structures). Institutions represent tangible sites in which to study the interplay of social action and social change as this is carried through in a number of research settings, for example, in exploring varieties of state–society relations and the particular logics that are generated from these relations (Mann 1986b), in unravelling the transformation capacity of contemporary revolutions (Lawson 2005), or in examining the underlying changes to the generative grammar of world politics over time and place (Bull 1977; Buzan 2004; Holsti 2004). As such, the potential for applying mid-range historical sociology, focusing on institutions as *via medias par excellence*, provides a strong counterweight to mainstream IR theory’s functionalist straightjacket.

### The Promise of Historical Sociology

This essay has explored how historical sociology and, in particular, how one of its variants—historical institutionalism—can add value to the study of IR.<sup>37</sup> The potential impacts of the historical sociological turn on the micro-, macro-, and meso-foundations are fourfold. First, there is historical sociology's general orientation toward a diachronic rather than a synchronic understanding of the international realm. The rejection of universal, timeless categories and their replacement by multilinear theories of world historical development give history the chance to breathe and agency the chance to make a difference. The result is what we might call, *pace* William Sewell (1996), an “eventful” IR enterprise. Such a move rejects pseudo-scientific accounts of predetermined outcomes rooted in system functions, expected utility, and material capabilities, opting instead for an awareness of contingency, uncertainty, and unintended consequences within broad structural constraints. In turn, this promotes a more nuanced, complex picture of the principal causal flows that lie at the heart of world historical development and allows for differentiation between types of social facts: empires, wars, and revolutions among them. Historical sociology in IR is a research program in which empirical work, theoretical awareness, and methodological rigor are seen as mutually important features. Taking the simple motif—“history matters”—as its first-order maxim, historical sociology aims to trace and examine the slow-moving processes, sequences, and developmental paths that can, and should, constitute the principal points of inquiry in the discipline.

Second, historical sociology opens up the possibility of more effective periodization within IR. If contexts, structures, and social facts move and if there is a patterning to these processes, then a conjunctural analysis that looks both inward at the empirical detail of an era as well as outward at its broader causal constellations provides a potentially rich understanding of eras and epochs in world history (Rosenberg 2005, *pace* Braudel 1972). For example, by renewing interest in temporality and, in turn, in the various logics within which world history takes place, the Westphalian moment and, indeed, the entire modern European states-system become just one part of a much wider canvas (Frank 1998; Gills 2002; Hobson 2006). In other words, if Westphalia is a moment within a broader “age of empires,” then it is open to question about precisely what its impact is. Is it a critical juncture that generated sufficient positive feedback mechanisms that its principal dimension (the mutual recognition of state sovereignty) became locked in and, therefore, increasingly resistant to change, or is it an event that did little more than change the rationale by which imperial polities could legitimately subsume other polities?

In a similar vein, adopting a historical sociological view of globalization means critically assessing the extent to which (1) the post-World War II era characterized by popular sovereignty and nationalism is being superseded by an epoch defined primarily by globalization and de-territorialization and (2) these processes are themselves rooted in much longer-term historical trajectories that have proceeded, if not linearly, then at least sequentially, to the present day. Sensitizing IR researchers to these tools of analysis and this way of thinking contributes to an open-ended research program headed into relatively uncharted territories: the production, reproduction, reform, and recasting of primary and derivative

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<sup>37</sup>It is important to emphasize that institutionalism is just one variant within the broad corpus of “third-wave” historical sociology. For a wide-ranging introduction to the varieties of contemporary historical sociology, see the contributions in Adams, Clemens, and Orloff (2005), and, in particular, the chapter by Magubane (2005), which explicitly opens up historical sociology to post-colonial studies and the wider “cultural turn” within the human sciences. For a critique of the “domestication” of historical sociology within mainstream social and political science, see Calhoun (1996).

institutions that flow out of and form particular structural conjunctures; the relationship between initial choices, developmental paths, critical junctures, and transformation of issues as varied as state formation and systems change; and investigation of the forces that act as *principia media* in driving macro-level processes of social change. At the heart of the historical sociological imagination is understanding the importance of *time* and *place* variation—the idea that development has both temporal and spatial dimensions that need to be both theoretically and empirically problematized.

The third major benefit of historical sociology in IR lies in its capacity to debunk taken-for-granted assumptions about central concepts and myths of origin in the discipline. Studying systems change, monitoring the emergence of the concept of anarchy, and conducting historical-comparative work into the functioning of the balance of power over time and place illustrate how the core concepts of the discipline are made to *appear* natural when in fact they are rooted in particular historical conjunctures. To this end, ongoing work into the social theory of world historical development (Rosenberg 2006), the origins of the contemporary international system (Teschke 2003), the Eastern origins of Western civilization (Hobson 2004), and the like present an alternative picture of the principal flows, patterns, and directional processes within world politics that are relevant not just around the margins of the discipline, but speak to its very heart. A reminder of the need to study “in” history rather than “outside” history is a useful corrective to the tendency of scholars in IR to misapply abstract, timeless variables to ill-fitting contexts. After all, once they are applied, general abstractions soon reach their limits.

As a fourth benefit, this essay has looked at how historical sociology in at least one of its guises—historical institutionalism—can help to redirect understanding of institutions within IR. Potentially, institutions have the capacity to help unravel and guide researchers through the intricacies, complexity, and turbulence of world politics, but only if institutions are understood beyond the straightjacket afforded to them by much mainstream IR theory. This allows historical sociology to take its place among the number of paradigms that are seeking to push the discipline away from a narrow view of rationalism, a limited conception of social structure, and a concomitant failure to see the dynamism of the process (captured in this essay by the logic of institutions) that lies between and across these spheres. Historical institutionalism is offered here as one part of a general turn in IR theory away from parsimonious parlor games, bunkerist retreats to theoretical isolationism, and banal abstractions masquerading as timeless truths. Rather, historical institutionalism, and historical sociology more generally, offer a means of embracing the nuance, subtleties, and complexities of world politics without abdicating the overarching goal of finding meaningful causal flows, patterns, and trends within processes of world historical development.

As this essay has shown, the research projects that arise from such an enterprise may be conducted from a myriad of different starting points. Some neoclassical realist, liberal, constructivist, and English School theorists have adopted a form of historical sociological reasoning in studying the formation and development of postwar settlements, alliances, empires, global norms, and international systems across time and place. Historical sociology aims to add to this resurgence in empirically aware, theoretically rigorous, and methodologically scrupulous research that constitutes a return-to-normal for IR as a discipline (Hobden 1998, 2002). In this sense, historical sociology is part of an open conversation that recognizes both the relative autonomy of each approach but also the common ground that unites them. And given this starting point, the promise of historical sociology for IR theory is rich indeed.

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