

The International Imagination: IR Theory and 'Classic Social Analysis'

Justin Rosenberg

Whatever else may be said of them, the critics of Realist International Relations have been remarkably consistent. Over the years, the same fundamental charges have been levelled over and over again.¹ Among these, four in particular may be noted. First, Realism is said to be unhistorical. Second, its premises and prescriptions are held to be so general as to limit severely both its explanatory power and its policy relevance. Third, its attempt to constitute the study of relations between states as a separate field contradicts the need to understand the social world as a whole. Finally, in its preoccupation with means rather than ends, Realism is accused of replacing the emancipatory role accorded to reason in Enlightenment thought with a fundamentally amoral, instrumental rationality.

These criticisms are so long established that one might have expected by now to have seen the emergence of an alternative to Realist theory which corresponded directly to their requirements. Yet where is it, this alternative approach to IR which combines *historical* understanding, *substantive* explanation, *totalizing* theory and a *moral* vocation of reason? The behaviourists were, if anything, even more unhistorical than their predecessors. The theory of complex interdependence sought not to replace but only to relax the assumptions of Realism. Critical theory, to non-afficionados, seems in constant danger of ditching into a sea of philosophical generalities. And the intentions of

I am grateful to friends and colleagues for much invaluable advice and criticism during the writing of this paper. An early version was presented on a panel organized by Jim Sheptycki at the Spring 1993 conference of the British Sociological Association. It is further indebted to a stimulating seminar discussion on Mills with Fred Halliday, Simon Bromley, Paul Cammack, Chris Boyle and Luis Fernandes. Bromley and Boyle continued to give helpful comments on later drafts, as did Gregory Elliot. The present version has also benefitted from critical responses at the 'New Directions in International Relations' conference held at Keele University in September 1993, and from the irrepressible LSE research student seminar on 'Modernity and International Theory'. Finally, wise suggestions by Philip Windsor have helped me at several points to formulate my argument more carefully.

1. Compare, for example, Kenneth Thompson, 'Toward a Theory of International Politics', in Stanley Hoffman (ed.), *Contemporary Theory in International Relations* (New Jersey, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1960); Stanley Hoffman, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus*, (Vol. 106, No. 3, Summer 1977); Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', in Robert Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986).

postmodernism towards Enlightenment conceptions of reason hardly bear thinking about.

Realists might well conclude that all this speaks for itself: no alternative to Realism has been forthcoming for the simple reason that it does not exist. The repeated calls for it are nothing more than *desiderata*, vague promissory notes which signal not the possibility of its emergence, but rather the inability of generations of utopian souls to face up to the harsh facts of the world as it really is.

In this, however, they would be mistaken. For by a curious coincidence, the same year (1959) which witnessed the decisive consolidation of postwar Realism in Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State and War* also saw the publication of *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills.² In this work, Mills launched a powerful critique of orthodox American social science, analyzing its failures under the headings of 'Grand Theory' and 'Abstracted Empiricism'. Yet the book contains much more than destructive critiques. Running through it is a clear and inspiring alternative conception of the method and purpose of social science. Indeed, it is the presence of this alternative conception—to which he refers alternately as 'classic social analysis' and 'the sociological imagination'—that gives the negative critiques their real authority. For the most damning feature of grand theory and abstracted empiricism appears not so much in the eccentric detail of where each goes wrong—spectacular though this is. Rather, it is the dawning realization of what they *cannot* do, the historic vocation of social science which they are *unable* to address, that speaks most eloquently for their abandonment. In short, *The Sociological Imagination* is an unforgettable polemic; but it is also a constructive, humanist manifesto for the practice of social science.

And herein lies its relevance to the predicament outlined above. For, on the one hand, the failings of grand theory and abstracted empiricism mirror almost exactly the charges levelled against Realism. And yet because, on the other hand, Mills is so keen to expound 'the promise of social science', his argument also makes it possible to see by implication what a non-Realist discipline of IR might look like. Reading Mills, one begins to realise that at least some of the critics of Realism have actually been asking for something which is quite feasible and specific: we have been asking for the sociological imagination.

What, then, is the sociological imagination? And what would it mean to deploy it in IR? This article tries to answer these questions in three parts. First, it summarises Mills' account of classic social analysis. Next, it lists by contrast some of the ways in which our own discipline of International Relations has in the past been resistant to the intellectual approach recommended by Mills. Finally, it asks: what might the sociological imagination look like in International Relations?

2. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

Classic Social Analysis

Classic social analysis cannot be said to comprise a method, in any strict technical sense, for Mills was adamant that 'the requirements of one's problem, rather than the limitations of any one rigid method, should be and have been the classic social analyst's paramount consideration'.³ Nevertheless, he also insisted that 'what may be called classic social analysis is a definable and usable set of traditions',⁴ and he identifies four overlapping themes. These are: (1) the grounding of social thought in substantive problems; (2) the use of an historical and comparative depth of field; (3) the perception of the social world as a totality; and finally (4) the commitment to the ideals of reason and freedom.

First, then, classic social analysis always takes *substantive problems* as its starting point. Indeed, Mills identifies the 'lack of firm connection with substantive problems'⁵ as 'the main reason' for the two principal distortions of social science, grand theory and abstracted empiricism.⁶ Grand theory is characterised by an 'initial choice of a level of thinking so general that its practitioners cannot logically get down to observation'.⁷ Any attempt to find theoretical answers to such general questions as 'what holds a social structure together?',⁸ 'what is the relationship between agency and structure?', or, we might add, 'what is the cause of war?' is doomed from the start to failure. The reason, Mills argues, is that these questions do not have one, abstract theoretical answer but rather as many answers as there are kinds of society in history. And none of them can be discovered without empirical observation. Thus, to pose the question as a theoretical rather than an historical one is to create a whole series of unnecessary theoretical problems which seem to demand resolution before concrete observation can begin.

Meanwhile, abstracted empiricists—by which he meant primarily the advocates of behaviourist science—certainly engage in empirical observation; but their scientific models work by abstracting their data from its broader social and historical context in order to subject it to quantitative methods of analysis. In *International Relations*, attempts to generate 'scientific' laws to explain the

3. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

6. Although Mills chose specific targets for his polemics, grand theory and abstracted empiricism are not formally identifiable schools of thought. Rather, these terms refer to intellectual dangers which all social theorists must guard against when attempting, as they must, either to theorize societies as wholes or to define empirical controls for their ideas. It follows that radical currents of thought are by no means automatically free from these distortions. The sub-discipline of Peace Studies contains many behaviourist examples of abstracted empiricism. And Marxism—especially in its French and German philosophical expressions—has often tended towards grand theory. Correspondingly, 'classic social analysis' is not associated exclusively with any one author or theory. Mills' list includes Spencer, Durkheim, Mannheim, Marx, Veblen, Schumpeter, Weber and so on.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

incidence of war have produced some of the most outlandish examples of this tendency.⁹

What makes classic social analysis different from both of these is not that it refuses abstraction. The point is rather that it does not abstract either in the direction of general theory, where syntactical relations between words usurp the place of historical relations between people, or in the direction of statistical models governed by the empty precision of mathematical formulae. Classic social analysis,

...also involves an abstraction from what may be observed in everyday milieux, but the direction of its abstraction is toward social and historical structures. It is on the level of historical reality—which is merely to say that it is in terms of specific social and historical structures that the classic problems of social science have been formulated....¹⁰

It might be thought that this would lead to a kind of parochial narrowing of focus on the grounds that no two societies are alike. In fact, something like the opposite follows: not a splintering of the world into ungeneralizable particulars but rather a rediscovery of the modern world in its entirety as a particular historical universe. For Mills argues that classic social analysis is largely built on the foundation of one huge substantive problem, namely 'the interpretation of the rise, the components, the shape, of the urban industrial societies of The Modern West—usually in contrast with The Feudal Era.'¹¹ In other words, the overarching substantive focus of social science is modernity itself.

This points to the second major theme of classic social analysis, namely the *concern with history*. In part, the importance of historical knowledge lies in the crucial opportunity it supplies for a comparative understanding of our own society. For '...the mind cannot even formulate the historical and sociological problems of this one social structure without understanding them in contrast with other societies'.¹² This point seems so obvious, yet at the same time so massively important, that it is always staggering to recall just how unhistorical much work in the contemporary social sciences has become. It is, as Ernest Gellner has pointed out, '[t]he great paradox of our age...that although it is undergoing social and intellectual change of totally unprecedented speed and depth, its thought has become, in the main, unhistorical or antihistorical.'¹³ But there is another, less academic, aspect to Mills' historical emphasis. This is to

9. For example, see J. Dougherty and R. Pfaltzgraff, *Contending Theories of International Relations* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1981), Chapter 4, and the discussion of the Correlates of War Project on pp. 347-50. The fact that all these examples come from American sources is significant. The English School, whatever other criticisms one might have of them, were never abstracted empiricists.

10. Mills, *op.cit.*, in note 2, p. 124.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

13. Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book* (London: Collins Harvill, 1988), p. 12.

be found in his claim that what the sociological imagination imparts is 'an orientation to the present as history'. For, he argued, it is above all by locating ourselves within the world-historical transformations which so distinguish the modern epoch—by glimpsing our own participation in and formation by these world-wide processes—that we seek today to grasp the wider meaning of our lives. Nor is this a purely passive identity. For to understand anything of these connections is also to begin to recognise the apparently impersonal and immutable social facts around us as the products of our own daily practice and relations with each other. In this respect an awareness of the present as history becomes the key to a recognition of our own collective agency. It is a recognition which can be both liberating and appalling:

In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. We do not know the limits of man's capacities for supreme effort or willing degradation, for agony or glee, for pleasurable brutality or the sweetness of reason. But in our time we have come to know that the limits of 'human nature' are frighteningly broad. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove.¹⁴

For Mills, it is this quality of historical self-understanding which makes social science—as opposed to natural science, literature or theology—'the common denominator of our cultural period'.¹⁵

The third recurrent theme of classic social analysis is perhaps the most intellectually radical in its implications for the contemporary social sciences—namely the perception of *the social world as a totality*. This perception is profoundly subversive both of horizontal, disciplinary boundaries which reflect supposedly separate domains of the social world (economics, politics, sociology), and of any vertical division of reality into 'levels of analysis' (for example, individual, state, states-system). Taking these in order, Mills straightforwardly rejects the possibility of social scientists confining their studies to a single academic discipline:

...in so far as a man comes to master any of these 'fields', he is forced into the bailiwicks of the others, which is to say, into the sphere of all those belonging to the classic tradition. They may of course specialise in one institutional order, but in so far as they grasp what is essential to it, they will also come to understand its place within the total social structure, and

14. Mills, *op.cit.*, in note 2, pp. 5-6.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

hence its relations with other institutional domains. For in considerable part, it is becoming clear, *its very reality consists of these relations*.¹⁶

Now this rejection of the orthodox division of labour between the academic disciplines is clearly not maintained just for the sake of empirical completeness. It expresses a basic assertion about the character of social reality. When we compare any two historical societies, the systematic nature of the contrast which emerges suggests that neither can be understood as simply an assemblage of separately constituted sectors, actors and processes. Instead, each appears to comprise a complex but recognizable totality of social relations, embodying a definite overall 'structural principle'.¹⁷ The problem with disciplinary partitions is that they tend to work against this perception and thereby to encourage the reification of social relations into monolithic actors (such as 'the state' or 'the market'), leading in turn to a whole series of false questions about how to reassemble the parts. Criticizing the methods of orthodox social science in this regard, Mills charges that social phenomena 'are not to be so mechanically and so externally linked'.¹⁸

But Mills also sets his face against the conventional division of explanations into micro, middle range and macro varieties. Here the key formulation is his oft-repeated assertion that what the sociological imagination enables us to grasp is the intersection of biography and history in social structure. This might, at first blush, look like a level of analysis framework, pointing to causes located respectively at the level of the individual, the society, and beyond in the broader sweep of human history. It might then seem that explanation would proceed by isolating the actors and processes specific to each level, building and testing models that reflect and predict the patterns of their interaction, and finally exploring how these levels impact upon each other as intervening variables to produce particular outcomes. In fact, Mills' usage pushes us in the very opposite direction. Since we shall be criticising the use of the 'levels of analysis' framework when we review the problems of IR theory in the next section, it is important to clarify in what way Mills' formulation really does embody a fundamentally different conception of social theory.

In Mills' thought, what is axiomatic is the ontological *unity* of the different dimensions of human agency—not their methodological separation into different levels, where they are almost bound to be reified into different kinds of actors. Thus, he insists that '[w]hether the point of interest is a great power state or a minor literary mood, a family, a prison [or] a creed',¹⁹ every social phenomenon needs to be understood simultaneously in its individual, structural and historical aspects. And once again, this is not for the sake of encyclopedic completeness,

16. *Ibid.*, p. 139, emphasis added.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

but because none of these aspects can be posed without presupposing the others in a particular form. We can spell this out for each of the three elements.

First, to conceive 'history' as an analytically distinct level could only mean to pose a teleological understanding of human social development, in the manner of philosophies of history. Mills identifies and rejects such a tendency in his opening chapter, together with the 'transhistorical strait-jacket'²⁰ which results. That said, the category of 'history' is included in his own formulation for a definite reason: to incorporate the dimension of movement, the development through time of the social world and the possibility of rational comprehension of this movement. And Mills is by no means averse to the notion of an historical dynamic or principle of social development. What he rejects is a *transhistorical* dynamic of this kind, a principle which operates irrespective of particular historical structures. Never one to let a good argument go begging, Mills here produces one of his most arresting and pregnant observations:

...fate is not a universal fact; it is not inherent in the nature of history or in the nature of man. Fate is a feature of an historically specific kind of social structure.²¹

We should note in passing that this implicitly contradicts Martin Wight's claim that what finally disconnects the logic of inter-state relations from the specific historical character of the societies involved is a presocial necessity associated with the balance of power: 'International Politics is the realm of recurrence and repetition; it is the field in which political action is most regularly necessitous'.²² For Mills, even the way in which we experience necessity (fate) is itself particular to a given social universe, and hence the product of the historically specific form of our collective agency.²³

Clearly then, the historical element of Mills' formula cannot be treated as a level of analysis. Nevertheless, the remaining categories of 'social structure' and 'biography' do look like the familiar social science conundrum of structure and agency. Yet, it is a remarkable feature of *The Sociological Imagination* that the agency/structure dichotomy never arises as a theoretical problem—even though agency (biography) and structure are indeed central categories of analysis. The reason is surely that just as, for Mills, there is no general answer to the question of what holds a social order together, so too an abstract theoretical discussion of agency and structure can be no more than a distraction: the way of classic social analysis is rather to explore *how*, in real historical societies, the individual and collective dimensions of human agency have been variously constituted through

20. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

22. Martin Wight, 'Why is there no International Theory?', in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), p. 26.

23. This argument is developed across a broader front in Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society* (London: Verso, 1994).

a range of structures of social relations between people. To erect 'structure' as a separate level is actually to make this impossible by closing off access to the constitutive agency of individuals which must remain our basic *explanans*.

Meanwhile, these individuals are not timeless, anonymous building-blocks. They are already, always, fully social and historical beings. There is thus simply no point in positing a presocial level of 'the individual', governed perhaps by the laws of group psychology, which ultimately could be used to mount a 'bottom-up' explanation of social structure. For the nature of these 'units' is constituted precisely through the specific social form of their interaction. It is a recurrent theme of *The Sociological Imagination* that 'the transformative power of history', reflected in 'seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies', also reaches deeply into the constitution of the individual self.²⁴ This does not mean that this self ceases to be an agent. It simply means that its agency is not constituted presocially or outside history.

Thus, what we find in Mills' formulation are three dimensions of human agency and there is no possibility of—let alone any methodological warrant for—posing any one of them in isolation from the others. On the contrary, it is the particular historical form of the interrelation of these dimensions which gives to each period its special quality. Precisely for that reason, the sociological imagination comprises the capacity 'to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two'.²⁵ This contrasts directly with the method of levels of analysis. For David Singer, who elaborated this method for IR in 1961, such 'vertical drift' between levels served only to obstruct the clear definition and effective modelling of data. Indeed, he suggested that it was a major factor in 'the general sluggishness which characterises the development of [IR] theory'.²⁶

Totality versus reification: perhaps all this sounds too easy. And it must be said that there is a genuine intellectual tension here which both the agency/structure debate and the use of levels of analysis models reflect. For it is perfectly true that *as individuals* we do encounter the social world as an external environment in which we move—a set of facts which precede, constrain and outlast the purposes and actions of our individual lives. This experience does seem to warrant the conventional dichotomy between 'agent' and 'structure' (and hence, also, unit and system). As a basis for social theory, however, this must be a false dichotomy. For it is also true that if we think of ourselves *as a*

24. Mills, *op. cit.*, in note 2, pp. 7 and 3, respectively. The major discussion of this point is on pp. 157-164. In one of his most striking formulations, Mills suggests that 'struggles between nations and between blocs of nations are also struggles over the types of human beings that will eventually prevail in the Middle East, in India, in China, in the United States...'. P. 158.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

26. David Singer, 'The Level of Analysis Problem in International Relations', in Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba (eds.), *The International System: Theoretical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 78.

collectivity, then the social world no longer appears to us as an external environment which we inhabit, but rather as the *form* of our relations with each other—a way we collectively are as a society.²⁷ Since the social world has no substance apart from the active reproduction of these relations by individuals, it can be nothing other than a form or dimension of their agency.²⁸ This claim is axiomatic; but it is often also counter-intuitive. It must therefore be the first task of social theory to show us *how* it is so—how the circumstances and pressures which confront us as checks to our *individual* agency are nonetheless simultaneously the ongoing historical product—or indeed *form*—of our *collective* agency.²⁹ And it is hard to see how this vocation is advanced by constructing an analytical framework around the methodological *opposition* of these categories.

Mills addressed this theme in terms of the relationship between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'. Indeed, he saw the illumination of this relationship as not merely the intellectual core but also the political vocation of the sociological imagination:

It is the political task of the social scientist...continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals.³⁰

This brings us to the last major theme of classic social analysis, which concerns its practical orientation to the world: 'The values that have been the thread of classic social analysis, I believe, are *freedom* and *reason*'.³¹ Here Mills links the intellectual deviations of grand theory and abstracted empiricism with what he holds to be their abdication of the political vocation of social science. In brief, this vocation involves not the bureaucratization of reason and its transformation into a technical instrument for the privileged use of those in authority; rather, it involves tirelessly rendering visible and public the actual structures of power within a society in order to enlarge the possible realm of

27. This distinction is taken from Derek Sayer, who notes that 'the social world of capitalism appears as something we inhabit...rather than some ways we are [sic]...'. *Capitalism and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 88.

28. This attribution of agency does not entail either that the agents involved are aware of the social product of their mutual relations, or that they are free to change it even if they were so aware. The fact that we are involved in social processes which we neither fully understand nor have the power as individuals to transform does not make us any the less the authors of these processes.

29. Indeed one could almost define *social* theory in these terms: an explanation of social phenomena which shows how their substance is made up of individual and collective human agency, constituted in particular historical forms. If so, then theories which do not do this, which stop instead at the level of technical relations between entities, are not (by this definition) truly social theories. In this sense, it might be argued that Waltz's theory of anarchy does not qualify as a social theory. This point will be developed further in the conclusion.

30. Mills, *op.cit.*, in note 2, p. 187.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 130, emphasis added.

democratic self-government. Mills' discussion of freedom and reason is full of internal tensions, but there is no mistaking his judgement on the social sciences of his day:

In bureaucratic social science—of which abstracted empiricism is the most suitable tool and grand theory the accompanying lack of theory—the whole social science endeavor has been pinned down to the services of prevailing authorities.³²

These four themes, then, make up the core of Mills' conception of classic social analysis: the grounding in substantive problems, the use of an historical and comparative depth of field, the perception of social totalities, and the commitment to the ideals of freedom and reason. It is an inspiring, but also a demanding set of requirements. Sometimes it seems that in our own discipline of International Relations every one of them is systematically contravened. How is this so? And what can be done about it?

International Relations: a Bureaucratic Social Science?

The difficulties which IR has had in embodying these precepts are well known, and need only the briefest rehearsal here. The trouble begins with the conventional, restrictive definition of International Relations as the study of political relations between states. Too often this means that the discipline *begins* by rejecting any working conception of the social world as a totality:

Students of international politics will do well to concentrate on separate theories of internal and external politics until someone figures out a way to unite them.³³

Various justifications are advanced for this, but the effect is unavoidable: the reification of the state. This is because if one seeks to construct a theory of the states-system purely at the international level, the one thing that cannot be included is the character of the social relations which compose the state because they operate at the sub-international level of domestic political life. But if one cannot look at those social relations, then one must treat the state as an irreducible actor. And to do this is to invest the specifically modern Western form of the state with an elemental status which abstracts it from its social and historical reality. A recent exam question wittily summed up the theoretical impregnability which results: 'A state is a state, is a state. Discuss.'

It is not surprising, therefore, that, secondly, IR has been for the most part a *notably unhistorical discipline*. References to earlier centuries have tended to be

32. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

33. Kenneth Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*: a Response to my Critics', in R. Keohane (ed.), *loc. cit.*, in note 1, p. 340.

made in order to support claims for the transhistorical continuity of the behaviour of states deriving from the timeless compulsions of anarchy. Robert Gilpin, for example, has suggested that 'the nature of international relations has not changed fundamentally over the millennia'.³⁴ In this, of course, International Relations flies in the face of classic social analysis, which constitutes the historical *discontinuity* of the modern world as its overarching substantive focus. 'The present as history' is thus unfortunately not an idiom that has flourished in IR—despite the fact that the birth of the academic discipline was associated with the world-historical tumult of the Great War.

Thirdly, the attempt to constitute a strictly international domain of theory has a truly bizarre distorting effect upon any attempt to think in terms of 'the intersection of biography and history in social structure'. Social structure, in Mills' sense, is now invisible because it is classified as an internal, non-international dimension of the state. In its place there appears a different use of the term. It now refers instead to the recurrent patterns of interaction between *states-as-individuals*. This is quite a drastic abbreviation. In one move, it suppresses the central question of social science, namely how to understand the mighty social forces of the modern world—surely nowhere more in evidence than in the international relations of our century—in terms of the underlying structures of relations between people which must compose them and yet which—again, nowhere more so than in international relations—are often so difficult to perceive. To name as 'social structure' the patterns of *interstate* behaviour only gets in the way of this more fundamental task. Furthermore, since these patterns are presumed not to change, but rather to recur, history (in Mills' sense of the transformation of social structures) simply disappears. Meanwhile, and for the same reason, biography (or agency) undergoes an equivalent sea-change: no longer visible as the basic fabric of the social world, it appears now for the most part only in the bureaucratic decision-making of statesmen.³⁵ Agency has become policy.

It is this strange, truncated version of reality which stares out at us from within the methodological framework of 'levels of analysis'. Once inside this framework, we may produce either system-level or unit-level theories. But we cannot picture what *must* be the case in reality, namely the simultaneity of the individual and collective dimensions of human agency. As a result, any theory we produce will be distorted. We may posit any number of causal interactions between separately constituted institutional domains on different levels. But we cannot conceive what Mills regarded as the very substance of their reality: namely, the internal relations by which they are constituted as a single, recognizable social totality. As a result, we are condemned to reify

34. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 211.

35. As Mills notes of the social scientists of his day: '...they are connected, in fact and in fantasy, with the top levels of society, in particular, with enlightened circles of business executives and with generals having sizeable budgets...'. Mills, *op.cit.*, in note 2, p. 95.

indiscriminately the social processes under view. Would somebody please explain how this multistorey gallery of distorting mirrors is supposed to aid our understanding?

Now, to be fair, the more careful theorists—from Singer who introduced the term into IR in 1961, through to Hollis and Smith thirty years later³⁶—have always stressed that 'the level of analysis debate is a methodological not an ontological debate: it refers to how best to explain and not to how the world really is'.³⁷ So, for example, the separation of international from domestic processes is effected temporarily in order to facilitate predictive modelling, and not axiomatically in the belief that these phenomena really do form separate worlds. In the long run, a frame of reference will be developed which will integrate the models constructed at each level: 'What that frame of reference should be, or will be, cannot be said without much certainty, but it does seem clear that it must exist'.³⁸

There are two problems with this defence. The first is that there is no sign of this frame of reference emerging. A full quarter century after Singer's article, we find Waltz still waiting to see if 'someone figures out a way to unite them'. This means that the level of analysis framework provides us as yet with no means of dissolving the reifications which it confessedly promotes, no possibility of seeing through them to grasp 'how the world really is'. As a result, the separation of levels *might as well* be asserted as an ontological proposition—at least until 'someone figures out a way to unite them'. Secondly, however, we might as well face the fact that this integrating frame of reference never will emerge. This is because once the basic method of levels of analysis has been accepted, the problem of how to construct that frame cannot help but appear in the false terms of how to reassemble the misshapen fragments. And it then becomes clear why Mills was so insistent that 'the little pieces, no matter how precisely defined, are not to be so mechanically and so externally linked'.³⁹ For if we begin with a conception of the levels as separate, then it is hard to see how any solution could avoid a choice between reductionism (in which one level is held to be determining 'in the last instance') and a kind of mechanical eclecticism. Hollis and Smith, who adopt the levels of analysis problem as the central organizing theme of their textbook, seem to choose the latter:

If [actors'] perceptions are predictable, given the psychology of small groups, and if their intentions are predictable, given the Theory of Games and given knowledge of their preferences, and if any ideological colour in perceptions and preferences is predictable, given the selection procedures

36. Singer, *op. cit.*, in note 26. Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

37. Hollis and Smith, *op. cit.*, in note 36, p. 203.

38. Singer, *op. cit.*, in note 26, p. 92.

39. Mills, *op. cit.*, in note 2, p. 68.

which gave them their position, then the complications are merely complications.⁴⁰

Merely complications? How, one wonders, did it come about that the great promise and inspiration of social science—to understand how we, individually and collectively, make and remake the social world in a fantastic historical variety of forms, often in ways that seem no longer recognisable to us but which nonetheless *are* us—how did this vision, this challenge above all to the *imagination*, come to be replaced by the technical problem of fitting together micro-models with the avowed purpose of establishing instead that the social world can be understood by the same method that we use to understand a machine? When did human life become so small and uninteresting?

Finally, if Realist theory instinctively telescopes any conception of collective agency into the question of policy, then it is understandable that IR should address itself, in the main, to developing theories that will guide the policy-making of those in office. This does not mean that the discipline always produces bad advice or adopts politically orthodox positions. However, it certainly does move it away from any particular relation to the ideal of freedom, and towards an uncritical, instrumental conception of the role of reason in social life. We shall return to this point below.

None of this means that there has not been good, substantive work done in IR. As suggested earlier, grand theory and abstracted empiricism are moving targets. And some parts of the discipline—mostly outside the US—avoided the behaviourist phase altogether. Nonetheless when, in his 1977 article, Stanley Hoffman came to review the intellectual progress made over the previous three decades, his survey made for rather grim reading. How far would Hoffman's concluding judgement need revision today?

I am more struck by the dead ends than by the breakthroughs; by the particular, often brilliant, occasionally elegant, but generally non-additive contributions to specific parts of the field, than by its overall development....⁴¹

Refusal to see the social world as a whole, suppression of historical specificity, twisted conceptions of social structure and human agency, fatal attraction to the service of those in power—if ever a discipline needed the sociological imagination, that discipline is International Relations. The question is: what would it mean to apply the sociological imagination in our field?

40. Hollis and Smith, *op.cit.*, in note 36, p. 201.

41. Hoffman, *op.cit.*, in note 1, p. 51.

Classic Social Analysis and the International Imagination

It is a remarkable feature of orthodox International Relations that classic social analysis has found no real place in the discipline. Notable scholars have lamented that IR has no great theorists, but must make do instead with a thin combination of statesmen's reflections, manuals of statecraft, treatises of international law, and 'the *parerga* of political philosophers, philosophers and historians'.⁴² Wight himself concludes that the reason for this lies in the very character of interstate relations. But the difficulty surely has more to do with the attempt to constitute IR as a distinct level of analysis which should generate its own theories, rather than as a dimension of a wider social structure in the manner of classic social analysis. Viewed from this latter perspective, the claim that IR has no classical figures comparable to the sociological trio of Marx, Weber and Durkheim need no longer hold. We do have such figures—namely Marx, Weber and Durkheim.

Once this step is taken, once we have changed into the gear of classic social analysis, each of the four elements outlined above indicates a definite implication for the study of IR. In this section we shall first examine these implications and then explore one way of elaborating them into an agenda for further research.

Let us begin with the concern with substantive problems. This entails a strong caution against either general theories of the states-system based on the idea of anarchy or quantitative studies which trawl history for raw data. The way of classic social analysis lies neither through the grand theory of deductive Realism nor through the abstracted empiricism of behaviourist science. Indeed, it could be argued that both of these begin by posing the international system in the wrong way—as a set of logical relations between entities in the first case, and as a set of statistical relations between events in the second. Each must therefore appear as a false abstraction when compared with our substantive task which is to grasp 'the rise, the components, the shape' of the specifically modern international system as a definite, historically developing set of relations between people. This task forms a part, as the repetition of the quotation implies, of the overall substantive problem of classic social analysis—to understand the emergence, character and fate of the modern social world as a whole. But this is to state the case too weakly. For it was the great structural transformations that brought the modern social world into being which produced the global international system which we study in IR. Thus, any attempt—such as Realism—to theorise it in abstraction from the historical character of those transformations simply throws away the key to understanding its social form. For this reason, the great works of the sociological imagination which illuminate the structures and dynamics of the modern social world are of fundamental importance to us—even though they are not treatises in international theory. The

42. Martin Wight, *op.cit.*, in note 22, p. 19. *Parerga*: 'subordinate or secondary business...something subordinate to the main subject...by-work', etc. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

first implication, then, is that Marx's *Capital* and Weber's *Economy and Society* are our classics too.

Why the kind of overall social theory of modernity offered by such works should be necessary in IR becomes even clearer when we examine the implication of the second element, the concern with history. For Mills, this had two parts: comparative and narrative. Now, a little comparative history goes a long way. It shows us that the sovereign state is not naturally occurring. In fact, by comparison with other forms of rule and ways of organizing space, it is historically exceptional. Most of all, the way that it seems to stand outside civil society and constitute an autonomous realm of the political (an autonomy which Morgenthau regarded as the cornerstone of Realism)⁴³ coupled with the parallel and equally unprecedented emergence of a purely economic sphere—these features are novel and emerged uniquely in the modern West. Thus the very institutional form of our international system, the fact that it is made up of states and markets, needs to be explained sociologically. The conventional starting point of the discipline cannot stand.

Meanwhile, historical narrative answers to what emerges as an equally pressing need. For once we know that our social world—including our states-system—is distinctively modern, then we have to ask how it emerged and what has been the course of subsequent development which has brought it to its current condition. Once again, however, this formulation drastically understates the case. We who live in the last decade of the twentieth century are caught up in what a front-line observer once described as 'a gradual but gigantic revolution—the greatest and most momentous social, moral, and religious, as well as political revolution which, perhaps, the world has ever witnessed'.⁴⁴ We are indeed witnesses to momentous events: the collapse of Soviet communism, the heaving strains of European integration, the slamming brakes of international recession, the gathering momentum of growth in the fifth of humanity that is Chinese. Yet these events themselves are only a part of one conjuncture in that ongoing 'gigantic revolution' in which the West—and increasingly, though unevenly, the world as a whole—has been caught up for at least the last two hundred years. Exactly what this revolution is remains the central and most controversial question of social science. But that the social and historical meaning of our lives is bound up with its progress, that its forms define the kind of history-making in which we as individuals participate and the kinds of people we may become, and that its crises will continue to be the fulcrum of international conflict and struggle in our time—of these, there can be no doubt. Thus, a second historical implication is the need for an orientation to the international present as world history.

43. See Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, Sixth Edition (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 13.

44. Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India, speaking in 1878, cited in T. Von Laue, *The World Revolution of Westernization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 15.

How strange, then, that such considerations tend to be excluded from most IR theory. Anybody would think it was some kind of secret that modern world history has actually been *about* something. What is perhaps most remarkable about this silence is that IR as a discipline is itself the shell-shocked intellectual child of the most traumatic crisis yet in the progress of that 'gigantic revolution'. Its founding classic is even called *The Twenty Years' Crisis*.⁴⁵ And yet the argument of Carr's text is almost completely abstracted from the actual social content and world-historical significance of the convulsions whose diplomatic mismanagement he so brilliantly analyses. Admittedly, that abstraction is part of the argument: it reinforces his claim to identify a distinct logic to the behaviour of states which Utopian aspiration could not deflect. Yet it is nonetheless striking to find that in this work, as a result, Carr does not confront the question: what was the twenty years' crisis actually about?⁴⁶

One has only to ask such a question to realise that the historical understanding we are seeking is unthinkable without the third component of classic social analysis, namely the perception of reality in terms of a social totality. For the twenty years' crisis was not primarily a diplomatic crisis aggravated by Utopian bungling.⁴⁷ It was a crisis of entire social orders, one whose roots, as Polanyi argued in *The Great Transformation*,⁴⁸ lay deep in the structural foundations and uneven development of modern Western civilization as a whole. No purely political or purely economic account could help us here—but, arguably, nor could a mechanical combination of the two, however ingenious. For if it really is the case that the differentiation of spheres which gives us our familiar domains of politics and economics is historically original to modern Western societies, then the real riddle of modernity is not so much the question of how to fit the parts together but rather why they appear to be separate in the first place. If we could understand *that* feature—which is so central to the constitution of power in the modern world—if we could grasp what it is about our social relations with each other that causes them to take on the impersonal forms of states and markets, then we might also begin to discern within the historical movement and crises of those forms the actual relations between people which must be their real content. Marx certainly thought so.

Yet this historical self-knowledge does not of itself make us free. There is nothing starry-eyed about Mills' view of the relation between reason and freedom—the last component of classic social analysis. Indeed, what reason showed Mills was an alienated, unfree social world, riven with conflict and increasingly dominated by undemocratic structures of public and private power.

45. E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1939).

46. Elsewhere, Carr showed himself a most acute analyst of the historical nature of the crisis. The point here is simply that this kind of understanding does not arise naturally within a Realist framework.

47. Once again, I do not mean to imply that Carr was unaware of the wider dimensions of the crisis.

48. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1957).

Yet nor does he therefore maintain that the vocation of Reason must be relentlessly practical. On the contrary, he states explicitly that:

...for the social scientist to take [direct social and political actions] to be his [or her] normal activities is merely to abdicate his role, and to display by his action a disbelief in the promise of social science and in the role of reason in human affairs.⁴⁹

Has Mills here fetishised reason? There are, it is true, real strains within his discussion of these points, but such a charge would be excessive. For if he lays such stress on the responsibilities of intellectuals, it is certainly not because he believes that human progress can be given an abstract definition and advanced at the level of ideas by obscure arguments about epistemology. The claim is far more down-to-earth. It is quite simply that in a democratic society, the sociological imagination is a necessary *public virtue*.⁵⁰ Unless we know what the structural consequences of our choices are, we cannot exercise the political freedoms we have in a responsible way. It is, therefore, the particular responsibility of political intellectuals to promote that collective self-knowledge by illuminating the structures of social power, identifying the kinds of human freedom which can be realised within them, and tracing where the lines of responsibility—formal and unwitting—may run. It is an endlessly difficult and controversial task, both politically and intellectually. It is not, and arguably cannot ever become, the exclusive preserve of any one intellectual method or political position. But it is addressed to a real social need, one which the alternative vocations of grand theory and abstracted empiricism have disqualified themselves from answering—the one by its manifest irrelevance, the other by its subservience to the prevailing authorities. This need is surely no less pressing in International Relations than elsewhere.

The four components of classic social analysis also point to a clearly identifiable agenda of substantive research and explanation for our discipline. This agenda, which we might call 'the international imagination', will be summarised broadly below. First, however, we should recall that Mills himself did not regard the sociological imagination as the exclusive property of any one school of thought.⁵¹ Similarly, the particular account of the international imagination which follows—in which the concerns of Marx and Weber are taken as exemplary—is intended to open a debate, rather than to monopolise the definition. Hopefully, others will wish to contest this version and argue for a different way of constructing the sociological imagination in IR. They might claim, for example, that an earlier figure such as Hegel, or a more recent one

49. Mills, *op.cit.*, in note 2, p. 192.

50. To some extent, Mills' discussion of this point begs the question of the structural preconditions and limitations of capitalist democracy—not, however, in a way that could offend a liberal sensibility.

51. See note 6 above.

such as Habermas, provides a more adequate articulation of the four premises of classic social analysis, and one which points to quite different explanations. They might argue that recent currents within IR—such as Critical Theory or historical sociology—are already operationalizing Mills' precepts and therefore provide a way forward. Perhaps they would be right. The point, however, is that our debate would then be conducted on the common ground of classic social analysis. And this would surely be a new departure in our discipline. For while the need to conceive the totality would place this debate beyond the reach of Realism, the simultaneous requirement to think historically and substantively would also make it rather different from what has been called 'the post-positivist, fourth debate'. In this respect, the international imagination really does seem to offer the discipline a way forward which is distinct from those proposed, for example, by critical theory or postmodernism. What, then, is its agenda?

First, the international imagination does not start with ahistorical questions about the general properties of states-systems *sui generis*. Nor does it seek to abstract its subject matter into quantifiable data for the purpose of statistical analysis. It defines its object of study as the real international system of modern world history, that set of geopolitical forms and relations which emerged historically out of the debris of European feudalism and expanded geographically to incorporate the rest of humanity. Since it is impossible to understand either the nature of these forms or their dramatic expansion and continuing development in isolation from the qualitatively new social world of which they make up a part, the international imagination turns first to the great works of classic social analysis which provide the deepest insights into the social forms of modernity.

Thus even when we confront the central categories of our discipline—such as sovereignty, anarchy or the balance of power—it may be that Marx and Weber must come before Morgenthau and Waltz. To be sure, a Marxian understanding of the modern world in terms of the emergence, spread and uneven development of capitalism looks very different from a Weberian account which focuses on the (resultant) rationalization and disenchantment of the spheres of social life. But the shared sense of the distinctiveness of our age—the determination to spell out its historical specificity across the full range of its experience—lends both these theories a concreteness which is missing from much IR theory.

Second, the international imagination is indeed concerned with history—but not for antiquarian reasons. As Mills expressed it: 'The climax of the social scientist's concern with history is the idea he comes to hold of the epoch in which he lives.'⁵² The realization that the sovereign state is not a self-evident form of rule reveals the need for a different kind of explanation. But it is only the first step. Ahead lies a long trail of exploration which denaturalises in the same way a whole series of features of our international system which Realism takes for granted. These include not only that thing of wonder, the vast spiralling

52. Mills, *op.cit.*, in note 2, p. 65.

metabolism which we call the world economy. They also include the distinctively modern way of conceiving and organizing space, the interlocking borders of absolute jurisdiction which we take for granted whenever we read a political map of the world. No other civilization either imagined or organised the known world in this way—as the most rudimentary knowledge of premodern and non-European maps will testify. Even time, though seemingly anonymous and inexorable, has been experienced in a rich historical variety of social forms, each of them needing to be understood in terms of the kind of society involved. This holds for our modern temporality too. It did not seem obvious to other epochs to think in terms of the clock-time which regulates our daily lives, or indeed the historical time which suffuses our conception of 'modernity'. Hence we must ask: *why* do we think in this way, and what specific forms of social power are characterised by and reproduced through such a temporality? When we do this, the timetabling of our international system is seen to be far more than just a technical issue.

Few writers have been more disturbed by these questions than Max Weber. For him, the harder he looked at the universal, self-evident forms of Western culture—now extrapolated unevenly into the institutions and dynamics of the modern international system—the more it seemed that their very universalism was the signature of a particular and utterly strange historical mentality. Calling it 'rationalization' was, he knew only too well, an inadequate answer. But *not to see the questions*, not to sense how profound was the gulf between modern Western society and any historical precedent—this would be to forfeit the basic co-ordinates of any sociological understanding of the modern world.

The international imagination is also concerned with the narrative history of the modern international system. This is not because it seeks to impose a teleological straitjacket upon events, but rather because, without such a narrative, it is impossible to recover the dynamic social content of the processes which we study in International Relations. Without that content, we cannot see what those processes are actually about. We cannot, in short, have an orientation to the present as history. And just as the denaturalizing of the sovereign state was the start of a long trail of comparative historical understanding, a similar role may be played here by recalling the discussion of the twenty years' crisis earlier in this section. There, the conventional reading in terms of the conflict between Realist and Utopian policy prescriptions was contrasted with the possibility—and the necessity—of comprehending Europe's general crisis as a conjuncture in its broader historical development. Only then could we begin to understand the rise of fascism and the mighty conflict which ensued. This, however, applies more generally. It applies to the preceding era of imperialism, too often abstracted by IR theory into an arid debate about the primacy of economic or political factors. And it applies to the postwar period, the home ground of most IR theory. Behind the measured debate over order and justice, there lies, after all, the tumult of decolonization and Third World revolution. Emerging today from beneath the pile of theories of deterrence is the question: what, in the end, was the historical character and meaning of communism? Most IR theory treats the social content

of the Cold War as mere background noise to the operative logic of power politics. Yet the presence of this phenomenon not only determined the central structural fissure in the postwar world, domestic and international; it was also the European fulcrum of the Second World War itself. Finally, standing in a somewhat uncertain relation to theories of hegemonic stability is the question of 'the American Century'. For while it is now becoming possible to ask, 'what was the Soviet Union?', the familiarity of the present has perhaps deadened our senses to an even larger question, one which is even more momentous for the course of our age, namely, 'what exactly *is* the United States?' This question requires an historical depth of field in order to be visible. It requires us to remember that the modern United States did not emerge in the same way as other great powers. Rather, it was in large part *produced* in the course of the nineteenth century as an outgrowth of precisely that 'gigantic revolution' which we mentioned above, and which was then transforming Europe.⁵³ This in turn is vital to an understanding of both the dynamics of its expansion and the new forms of geopolitical power which it elaborated and which now lie at the heart of the international system which we in International Relations seek to study.

Imperialism, general crisis, cold war, revolution, capitalist development and social transformation—here are some of the processes which have made up the real content of international relations. These processes are interrelated with each other, not so much in theory as in the actual historical development of the international system which is their outcome. And because those real interrelations are dynamic and transforming, they cannot be grasped except through a narrative format of explanation. Such narratives are the precondition for understanding the present as history in IR.

Third, the international imagination is committed to understanding the social world in general—and our international system in particular—in terms of a complex but recognizable totality of real historical relations between individuals. This does not mean that it downgrades the importance of institutional forms such as the state and the market. On the contrary, it tries to read in these phenomena the play of individual and collective agency constituted in a particular form. But, for this very reason, it cannot settle at the 'level' of these derived categories and accept the restrictive Realist definition of IR as the study of relations between states. In order to see what is being accomplished through these forms and hence to avoid reifying them, it must work instead with some conception of a society *as a whole*.

This is one sense of the term 'totality' as used here. But there is a second. For if the international imagination rejects the Realist abbreviation of the social world, nor does it assume—in the manner of philosophies of history—that the international system comprises a homogeneous social structure or a single purpose working out some inexorable path of development. On the contrary, it

53. For further brief discussion of this point, see J. Rosenberg, *op.cit.*, in note 23, Chapter 6.

history is that of the combined and uneven development of a large number of different kinds of society. As Mills put it:

It is perhaps one defining characteristic of our period that it is one in which for the first time the varieties of social world it contains are in serious, rapid, and obvious interplay. The study of our period must be a comparative examination of these worlds and of their interactions.⁵⁴

The societies that make up the modern international system are linked together (in varying degrees) by definite institutional structures. In differing ways, they are all subject to the forces that are transmitted across those structures. That their interrelations form a whole is therefore a simple, objective fact. It may even be the founding fact of our discipline. But to try to formulate *that* whole theoretically, to try to pre-empt its actual historical development by methodological fiat, would be 'to mistake one's own capacity to talk for all that is meant by the work of social investigation'.⁵⁵ For totality in this second sense—meaning the actual interrelation of processes and forms which comprises the reality of the international system at any one given point—is precisely what we have to find out empirically by looking at the world.

Thus, the international imagination distances itself from the mainstream definition of IR theory as oriented to modeling and prediction. Instead, it seeks to discover the social basis of modern geopolitical forms, and then to use that discovery to understand the ongoing course of international history in concrete human rather than abstract technical terms.

Finally, the international imagination does not eschew ethical judgement; yet nor does it suppose that an intellectual method exists which can itself resolve moral dilemmas. Its principal contribution is the illumination of the objective, structural responsibility of individuals and groups for particular outcomes—whatever formal bonds of obligation are held to obtain. Its purpose is to educate moral choice by drawing out the real human relations involved—not to replace it with philosophical guarantees or technical formulae.

The implied requirement to tie ethical speculation much more closely into the concrete specification of structures of social power finds an immediate purchase within IR. For it follows that a normative debate between communitarians and cosmopolitans about whether moral obligations extend across national borders would have to be grounded in a serious theory of territoriality in a capitalist states-system. This is because the kinds of social power that extend across borders in the modern world are both historically unique to capitalist social relations and arguably very different in reality from how they appear to the naked eye.

This by no means entails that there is no role for systematic moral reasoning in IR: after all, if a particular social world is reproduced through certain definite

54. Mills, *op.cit.*, in note 2, p. 150.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

relations of power, then one would expect that the ethical dimension of those relationships would be encountered by the members of that world recurrently in particular ways, familiar moral dilemmas which are characteristic of that particular historical form of collective human agency. What systematic moral reasoning could do is explain why they recur in this form and what is at stake in them; what is their social content. What arguably it cannot do is to provide an intellectual resolution of those dilemmas—for the simple reason that those dilemmas are not at root intellectual: rather they reflect *real* tensions and contradictions in the characteristic social relations of the society in question.

It should also be said that since these relations are often quite different from how they appear, and may well cut across formal lines of obligation, this is far from being the quietist doctrine it might seem. But in Mills' case, it does resist any automatic requirement to produce solutions:

First one tries to get it straight, to make an adequate statement—if it is gloomy, too bad; if it leads to hope, fine. In the meantime, to cry for 'the constructive program' and 'the hopeful note' is often a sign of an incapacity to face facts....⁵⁶

Moral reasoning, like social thought more generally, must be grounded in substantive problems. It must begin and end, in Wordsworth's rousing cadence,

Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us,—the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!⁵⁷

Conclusion

What is the precise relationship between 'the international imagination' and the categories of Realist theory? The question merits a moment's further reflection; for the answer is slightly more subtle than might at first appear. And it bears upon the question of the persistence of Realism raised in the introduction.

In the course of his celebrated discussion of 'commodity fetishism', Marx observes that 'the categories of bourgeois economics', categories which the entire labour of *Capital* is dedicated to undermining, are nonetheless 'forms of thought which are socially valid'.⁵⁸ By this he meant that a mental image of the world as a set of self-adjusting price relations between things does indeed correspond

56. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

57. William Wordsworth, 'French Revolution, as it appeared to enthusiasts at its commencement' (1804), in T. Hutchinson (ed.), *The Poems of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 208.

58. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 169.

to the way that individuals experience their material relations with each other in a capitalist society. In the end, of course, a society is a totality of relations between *people* (not things) and is truly understood only in those terms. But since, in *this* kind of society, those relations find expression only *through* relations between things, the economic categories which detail the latter's movement still describe something which is real enough—even as they simultaneously obscure its actual nature. And while the discovery of the underlying human relations remains both the true object of social science and the universal currency of any explanation, that discovery itself does not change the form in which they are experienced—any more than 'the scientific dissection of the air into its component parts' changed the actual physical composition of the atmosphere.⁵⁹ For it is a discernable property of those human relations themselves—not an accidental or conspiratorial misconstruction on the part of the beholder—which causes them to assume this form. Confronted with the categories of economics, the task of the social theorist is therefore not so much to refute them as to get to the bottom of them in order to grasp the human relations which they express.

Something similar seems to apply to Realism. Like 'the categories of bourgeois economics', it is a 'socially valid' form of thought. It faithfully mirrors the form in which we experience modern international relations: impersonal, necessitous, power political. If we wish to see the logic of that form isolated, abstracted and systematised in a manner directly analogous to the procedures of neoclassical economics, we may turn to the classics of American Realism, and in particular to the work of Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin. But it is a topsy-turvy world of appearances that we find in their pages—a theoretical universe in which people relate to each other only through the material agency of states, while states themselves are invested with self-activating drives and enter into direct social relations with each other. As with Marx's commodity fetishism, this mental image is both real and misleading. And the fact that we are so thoroughly accustomed to it by the experience of everyday life should not prevent us from recognizing how bizarre it is when we confront it as a proposition in social theory. For here too, the paradoxical appearance of 'material (*dinglich*) relations between persons and social relations between things'⁶⁰ is something to be explained. And yet if we do seek to know *why* modern geopolitics assumes this historically distinctive form, what are the actual relations between individuals which find dynamic expression in this way, and what therefore is the real content of international relations, then we must turn elsewhere. For by posing the sovereign state as an irreducible, elemental category, Realist theory denies itself the possibility of breaking through to such an explanation. Like neoclassical economics, it halts at the tangled border of appearances and maps the contours of the visible world.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

As a result, the intellectual status of Realist theory is actually somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the fact that it mirrors so uncritically the shapes and patterns of the modern social world means that it can never show us the real relations between people which underlie them. On the other hand, precisely because these shapes and patterns are not themselves unreal, but are rather the form through which those underlying relations find expression, Realism seems destined to remain both the natural starting point and the recurrent theoretical reflex in the study of modern international politics.

Yet if this means that we will never banish Realism from International Relations, it also entails that International Relations can become much more than Realism—and precisely in the ways that its critics have always demanded. If we revive the tradition of classic social analysis, it can indeed become a site of critical reflection on our modern social world, a world whose current turmoil so cries out for the illumination of reason. We can try to show how the international actors and processes around us are not the work of some timeless disembodied necessity but rather the ongoing products of individual and collective human agency constituted in specific historical forms. We can begin to understand the historical meaning of our own lives by locating them within the earthquake of social transformation that is modern world history. And, on the basis of this, we can form ethical and political judgements rooted neither in the spurious reifications of Realism nor in an Idealist yearning undisciplined by the facts. If, as Mills argued, 'the history that now affects every [person] is world history',⁶¹ then no discipline is better placed to take up this vocation today than International Relations. To do so, however, we must turn not to Realism, but to the international imagination.

*Justin Rosenberg is a Lecturer in International Relations
at the London School of Economics, Houghton St.
London, WC2A 2AE*

61. Mills, *op.cit.*, in note 2, p. 4.