The historical sociology of the future

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John Hobson’s article presents us with a paradox. He upbraids international relations for not catching up with the second wave of historical sociology. But in order to remedy international relations’ failure to understand state–society relations, he advocates a historical sociology which is rooted in the same old international, pre-global categories of realist international relations. Only the explanations of these categories differ from realism.

Thus although Hobson’s vision of historical sociology (I shall not use capitals or initials) is undoubtedly an advance on realism, it is in quite fundamental senses insufficiently radical and contemporary. Indeed, it has hardly kept up with critical trends in either international or sociological theory, since it almost completely ignores the emergence of global theorizing of all kinds (except for world-system theory).

Each of Hobson’s six principles has an important element of truth. However, not only do I see little evidence that they are applied in a way which can help us to understand the world of the twenty-first century, but the archaism of Hobson’s categories affects the very presentation of his approach. Taking the principles in turn will help to explain my disagreements; from these criticisms I draw the conclusion that we need a third wave of historical sociology, which breaks free from national–international dualisms and helps us to understand the transformations of the emerging ‘global age’ (Albrow, 1997).

1 History and change

Hobson is right to insist that we approach state forms as Weberian historical sociologists have done, not as ‘a natural product of an alleged liberal social contract’, but as ‘forged ... in the heat of battle and warfare’. Nor indeed ‘should the anarchic system of sovereign states be regarded as natural’. But he seems to miss the fact that this is not a purely abstract point, but one with a colossal, extremely radical contemporary relevance.

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Out of the heat of the Second World War came fundamental modifications of the state system. Weber’s definition of the state as an institution claiming a monopoly of violence in a given territory, with its implication that the borders between states were demarcated by violence, was a reasonable working assumption (even if it can be refined: see Mann, 1993: 55) for nation-states and empires before 1945.

Since 1945, however, the borders between western ‘nation-states’ have no longer been markers of the potential for war. On the contrary, the borders of violence shifted first to the Iron Curtain between two Cold War blocs and then, after 1989, to the much less clearly marked divisions between a globalized western state power conglomerate, utilizing globally legitimate interstate institutions, and various local centres of violence, state and quasi-state.

In the course of this half-century transition, including its latest phase, the ‘international system’ and relations between its ‘state’ members have been transformed almost out of recognition (although similarities of form mean that some historical sociologists, like many realists, continue to recognize continuity rather than change). National state institutions have become much more universal, but they no longer denote genuinely autonomous centres of power. (For a fuller discussion, see Shaw, 1997.)

There are two partial, and ultimately inadequate, theoretical responses to these transformations. One is that represented by many strands of international political economy, which downplays the military context of state power and argues that realism has overstated its significance. But such political-economic approaches at least analyse the changing economic and juridical aspects of the state – ‘competition’ state, ‘offshore’ state, etc. – which result from the changed relations of violence in the emerging global period, even if these relations are not explored.

The other flawed response is represented by Hobson’s article: a continuing Weberian characterization of the state but presented as though the changes of the last half-century had not occurred. Accounts of state–society relations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are offered as models for contemporary international relations. The dualism of state and society is tackled but its sister error, the dualism of national and international, remains firmly in place. The global is not in view.

2 Multi-causality

Historical sociology à la Hobson is thus informed by a curiously limited sense of history. It is the historical sociology of the past, where the present is acknowledged only through the prism of prior ages and the possibility of a radically different future is absent. Its abstractly correct insistence on multi-causality recognizes the variables of the old
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order – ‘states, state systems, the international economy and social forces’ – but not those of the new – globalized authority networks, globally legitimated policing, global markets, global communications and global social movements.

3 Multi-spatiality

In this old-fashioned world, ‘societies, states and international systems (both political and economic) are inherently linked’. Mann’s perspective, quoted by Hobson, suggests a very important view of societies as ‘constituted by multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power’: this could lead us to an understanding of the highly complex relations of a global world. But its significance is systematically limited by Hobson’s desire to incorporate historical sociology into ‘international’ relations.

Thus the argument that ‘societies are not bounded entities which are self-constituting’ (actually societies are bounded, but only in a partial and relative sense) leads Hobson only to Skocpol’s case concerning the role of the international in determining the domestic, and Giddens’s dated concept of ‘inter-societal relations’ – superseded in his own later work on globalization and modernity. Hobson sums this up by collapsing Mann’s multi-spatiality into the idea of the dual reflexivity of the ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ spheres.

Hobson is fighting yesterday’s battles – against the ‘national’ determinism of the Marxists, the ‘international’ determinism of the world systems theorists and the determined separation of the two by neorealists. The standard of ‘dual reflexivity’ may be relevant to a world in which these are the two main spatial dimensions. But in the emerging global world they are intersected by many others – conventionally described as local, regional, transnational, world-regional and global, although these terms only partially capture contemporary ‘sociospatial networks of power’.

4 Partial autonomy

The claim that ‘power forces and actors’ constantly ‘interact and shape each other in complex ways’ and hence are not ‘wholly autonomous and self-constituting’ is important. But once again its significance is partially lost in examples drawn from the nineteenth-century world of Mann’s second volume, rather than from today. States and classes are Hobson’s models: one looks in vain for recognition that today’s major power actors can no longer be characterized in any simple way by the domestic–international distinction. Increasingly states as much as firms, movements and communication networks take global and
regional forms – some may be only residually national or international in character.

5 Complex change

By this point, the contradictions are becoming unbearable. Historical sociology, we are told, understands ‘both societies and international politics’ as ‘immanent orders of change’ (Elias); it emphasizes ‘discontinuity’ (Giddens); it indicates moments of ‘tracklaying’ and ‘converting to a new gauge’ (Mann). But development, for Hobson, is still defined by the dualism, ‘national and international’: it is apparently inconceivable that historical change might disrupt these very categories which international relations has taken as constitutive. There is no sense of contemporary changes, discontinuities or the moments of tracklaying we are currently living through.

6 ‘Non-realist’ concept of state autonomy

Historical sociology introduces the important notion of state embeddedness within society, developed particularly in Hobson’s own work. But the significance of even this notion is diminished because it is presented only in the context of cross-national comparisons, as a means of understanding ‘foreign policy and international relations’. Hobson assumes the relationships of a state and a society, of the state to its society. He is unable to conceive of state forms larger than this framework – global or regional in character – or of ‘nation-states’ which are embedded not merely in ‘their’ societies but in the multi-layered socio-spatial networks of an emergent global society.

TOWARDS A GLOBALIST HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

The source and end-point of all these restrictions on the scope and meaning of historical sociology become apparent as Hobson argues ‘the case for bringing neo-Weberian historical sociology into international relations’. His conception of state and society is fundamentally flawed by a loyalty to the idea of international relations which regresses from critical conclusions reached by many international theorists. He has simply failed to get to grips with the transformation of international relations itself – the transformation which pushed Rosenau (1990) towards the idea of postinternational politics and which propels many advocates of ‘critical’ international relations towards the global.

It is anachronistic to present Halliday’s ‘trinitarian’ conception of an ‘international–national–international’ chain of causality as the basis of a non-realist international relations. The datedness of this approach is
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apparent in Hobson’s study of relations of war and revolution. On the
cusp of the twenty-first century, war is no longer chiefly interstate, while
classical revolutions are virtually a thing of the past. Hobson gives the
game away when he argues that ‘the spatial trinitarian approach can
provide an alternative perspective for understanding traditional IR
concerns’. Precisely.

What we need today are theoretical approaches which go beyond
‘traditional IR concerns’. We need sociological approaches, historical in
character, which address the fundamental transition towards a different
world order which is under way in our times. Many of the ideas of the
neo-Weberian historical sociology which Hobson presents can be inte-
grated, with critical transformation, into a new globalist historical
sociology. The authors whom Hobson claims for his approach are by
no means as restricted in their interpretations as he assumes – Giddens,
obviously, has moved into an account of the globalized world of late
modernity which Hobson has ignored, and I have tried to indicate
that Mann’s formulations are also more open than Hobson allows, even
if Mann’s approach is closer to Hobson’s. Mann (1997) is at least
prepared to engage with global theory.

Let us examine the outline of an alternative agenda, beyond Halliday
and Hobson, for a contemporary account of state and society informed
by a historical-sociological approach:

1 to analyse the rise and development of the integrated, transatlantic
western state from around 1940 to 1990 and its transformation into
the core of a global state from about 1990;
2 to analyse the mutual constitution of globalized state and economic,
social and cultural forms during these periods – how the western
state created conditions for economic, social and cultural globalization
and how the transformation of states is increasingly conditioned by
rapid economic, social and cultural changes;
3 to analyse how the adaptiveness of states is today accomplished
within the framework of globalized interstate integration, although
often still haphazardly regulating the transformation of economy and
society on a global scale, and how well this is embedded in global
society;
4 to examine the transformation of ‘national’ forms of state in the
context of global and regional state forms and power networks;
5 to examine how the national or ‘domestic’ society is transformed by
globalization of power relations of all kinds, and how national states
attempt to manage ‘their’ societies in the context of global relations
of authority and the emergence of global society.

This is an agenda for the historical sociology of the present and future.
This sociology can learn from the historical sociology of the past which
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Hobson presents, but only by critically transforming its concepts and approach. A globalist sociology will contribute not to international relations as a given subject, with traditional questions and given categories, but to the transformation of international relations into global theory and analysis.

REFERENCES