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RESEARCH NOTES

THE SCOPE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

By FREDERICK S. DUNN

FOUR able and penetrating writers have recently given us their considered views on the nature and scope of international relations as a branch of higher learning.* While each of them starts from a somewhat different intellectual viewpoint, they display a striking similarity of conception of the general place of international relations (hereafter referred to as IR) in the spectrum of human knowledge. I propose here, not to subject these writings to critical scrutiny, but to use them as a starting point for a brief inspection of the scope of international relations as it now seems to be taking form in the work of the leading scholars in the field.

It is necessary to note in the beginning that "scope" is a dangerously ambiguous word. It suggests that the subject matter under inquiry has clearly discernible limits, and that all one has to do in defining its scope is to trace out these boundaries in much the manner of a surveyor marking out the bounds of a piece of real property. Actually, it is nothing of the sort. A field of knowledge does not possess a fixed extension in space but is a constantly changing focus of data and methods that happen at the moment to be useful in answering an identifiable set of questions. It presents at any given time different aspects to different observers, depending on their point of view and purpose. The boundaries that supposedly divide one field of knowledge from another are not fixed walls between separate cells of truth but are convenient devices for arranging known facts and methods in manageable segments for instruction and practice. But the foci of interest are constantly shifting and these divisions tend to change with them, although more slowly because mental habits alter slowly and the vested interests of the intellectual world are as resistant to change as those of the social world.

If one keeps this in mind, it is not difficult to answer the hotly debated question whether IR should be regarded as a separate branch of learning or as just a miscellany of materials and methods drawn from existing subjects. The answer seems to depend entirely on considerations of utility.

* Grayson, Kirk, *The Study of International Relations in American Colleges and Universities*, New York, Council on Foreign Relations, 1947; Klaus Knorr, "Economics and International Relations: A Problem in Teaching," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. LXII, no. 4, December, 1947, pp. 552-68; E. L. Woodward, *The Study of International Relations at a University*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1945; Waldemar Gurian, "On the Study of International Relations," *Review of Politics*, Vol. 8, no. 3, July, 1946, pp. 275-82.

New subjects of learning have always in the past grown out of new bodies of questions that have insistently called for answers by some means other than consulting the stars or tossing coins. Invariably, such subjects were originally attached to existing divisions of knowledge and appeared as mere extensions of them. Eventually, as the complexities of the newly observed body of questions began to mount and the inadequacies of offhand answers became apparent, some adventurous minds put in a good deal of time and effort finding aids to better solutions. Their labors led to the building up of a special body of knowledge which everyone who wanted to become expert in answering questions in the field had to master. As soon as this became a full-time occupation and a proper label was found, a new branch of knowledge was born.

The questions which arise out of the relations among nations are certainly important and difficult. They likewise possess their own coherence and uniqueness since they arise out of relations in a special kind of community, namely, one made up of autonomous units without a central authority having a monopoly of power. Pulling together the scattered fragments of knowledge about them obviously serves to focus attention on them and to encourage the development of more intelligent ways of handling them. Recent events have reinforced the growing conviction that the questions of international relations are too complex and dangerous to be dealt with any longer as sidelines of existing disciplines.

Granting all this, it is also true that IR is still in an early stage of development and that much of what is talked about under the label scarcely deserves recognition as a legitimate subject of academic concern. It is in the nature of international questions that they can be discussed on a wide variety of intellectual levels, from the most amateur to the most highly professional, and the public is not very aware of the distinctions between them. There is still a wide difference of opinion even among the professionals as to what should be included in the subject when conceived of as a separate body of knowledge.

What I shall do here is merely to state certain propositions about the nature and scope of IR which seem to represent the present views of some mature scholars in the field. In setting these forth I do not mean to imply that they incorporate the correct or final form of the subject. In my own view, the present basic divisions of the field are far from satisfactory from the standpoint of creative scholarship and the next few years are apt to witness the development of more imaginative classifications. But in the early stages of any subject it is the wisest course to make use of existing terms and categories. To try to invent a set of new ones at the start usually results in an inability to communicate with anyone else.

The following statements are dogmatically phrased for the reason that sufficient space is not available to express all the possible qualifications. For the same reason, no attempt has been made to squeeze out the last drop of ambiguity from them.

1. IR may be looked upon as the actual relations that take place across

national boundaries, or as the body of knowledge which we have of those relations at any given time.

The latter is always more restricted in extent than the former, and its contents will depend, among other things, upon the intellectual trends of the times and the point of view and purpose of the observer.

2. As a branch of learning, IR consists of both a subject-matter and a set of techniques and methods of analysis for dealing with new questions.

The subject-matter consists of whatever knowledge, from any sources, may be of assistance in meeting new international problems or understanding old ones. It includes both general knowledge about the behavior of political groups or individuals and particular information about events or policy questions.

In the case of questions of general knowledge, the techniques and methods of analysis include the logical devices for arriving at hypotheses and for testing and verifying or rejecting them. In the case of practical questions they include the devices for revealing the issues involved, classifying the value objectives, indicating the alternative courses of action available and their probable consequences, and selecting the one most likely to lead to the desired end.

3. The distinguishing characteristic of IR as a separate branch of learning is found in the nature of the questions with which it deals.

IR is concerned with the questions that arise in the relations between autonomous political groups in a world system in which power is not centered at one point.

4. An IR analyst is one who purports to have some skill in dealing with the questions that arise out of the relations of nations.

The core of his interest lies in the conflict, adjustment and agreement of national policies. When he concerns himself with related subjects, such as demography, anthropology and sociology, it is to the extent that these throw light on international questions. This distinguishes his interest in these fields from that of the professional demographer, anthropologist or sociologist.

5. The technical knowledge of IR is not merely the extension to a wider geographical scale of knowledge of social relations inside the national community, but has unique elements of its own.

Thus international politics is concerned with the special kind of power relationships that exist in a community lacking an overriding authority; international economics deals with trade relations across national boundaries that are complicated by the uncontrolled actions of sovereign states; and international law is law that is based on voluntary acceptance by independent nations.

6. Since the questions with which IR deals arise primarily out of social conflicts and adjustments, its approach is in large part instrumental and normative in character.

IR is concerned primarily with knowledge that is relevant to the control and improvement of a particular set of social conditions. Its goal is not

merely knowledge for its own sake but knowledge for the purpose of molding practical events in desired directions. In this sense it is a policy science. As such it does not differ from traditional politics, economics, jurisprudence, and similar social disciplines, all of which had their origin in a desire to improve a particular segment of social relations.

7. The normative character of IR refers to the kinds of questions dealt with and does not imply that the subject-matter is associated with any particular ideal conception of the international community.

The study of IR has been inspired from the beginning by a deep interest in how wars may be avoided. The early students of IR tended to conceive of ideal social systems in which wars did not exist and then to evaluate existing practices in the light of these ideal conceptions. The present tendency among scholars is to give primary attention to the ascertainable facts of international life and the forces and conditions that influence behavior among nations, as well as the ways in which these can be used for desired ends.

8. Foreign policies can only be understood in the light of knowledge of internal conditions of the states involved.

For many purposes it is possible to talk about the relations of states as if they were relations between solid bodies with wills of their own apart from human wills. Thus it is possible to discuss the operation of the balancing process among sovereign states, the relative value of different power positions, and, to some extent, the legal rights and duties of nations, without looking beneath the surface of the state.

In general, however, it is not possible to understand the course of international events without a careful study of the local factors and influences that enter into the formation of national policies.

9. All international relations can be described in terms of decision-making by identifiable individuals or groups of individuals.

This reveals the fact that the study of IR is basically the study of human behavior in a particular social setting.

10. By focusing on decision-making it is possible to devise ways of improving the chances of getting more intelligent decisions.

The study of decision-making reveals the specific kinds of skills and talents needed in staffing the government service. It indicates the kinds of training that should be undertaken by those who intend to follow professional careers in the field. In addition, it helps us to understand the extent to which the personality and predispositions of the decision-maker enter into his choices of action.

11. It is equally important to study the processes of decision-making in other countries.

Decision-making in IR generally involves the interaction of the officials of two or more states. Agreement is facilitated by a knowledge of the factors and considerations that influence the policy-makers of other countries.

12. The average decision-maker tends to operate on the basis of a speculative model of the general type of decision-makers from other communities he expects to meet in international negotiations. The accuracy of this model determines in large degree his success in achieving his objectives.

In the past such models have tended to follow two extreme types: the "Machiavellian" character whose sole aim was the enhancement of his own power or that of his nation and who used any means, however immoral, for these ends; and the "statesman" who paid little attention to power considerations but sought the settlement of issues solely on the basis of law and justice and the good of the greatest number.

Neither of these speculative models has been of much use in calculating action, since only a few policy-makers met in actual life resemble them to any extent. The study of decision-making should greatly improve the mental pictures which negotiators have of those whom they are likely to encounter in their negotiations.

13. The question "What is the scope of IR as a body of knowledge?" is different from the question "What is the proper scope of an educational program in the subject?"

The kind of a program to be offered by any particular institution should depend primarily on whether its aim is to offer IR as a cultural subject, or to train professionals, or both.

14. As a cultural subject, the aim should not be to turn out skilled decision-makers but to introduce the students to the general field and the methods available for analyzing its problems.

The subject-matter of IR has high cultural value both in teaching the ways of effective thinking and in enabling the student to come to terms with an important part of his environment. As a citizen in a democracy he is constantly faced with the necessity of arriving at sensible opinions on questions of foreign affairs.

15. As professional training for those who intend to follow careers in the field, IR contains an essential core of five subjects: international politics, international economics, international law and organization, diplomatic history, and political geography. In addition, it calls for some knowledge of the socio-psychological subjects—sociology, anthropology, psychology and social psychology, and ethics.

The IR analyst must acquire enough knowledge of the core subjects to enable him to move freely across the boundaries that separate them and to be able to think effectively about whole questions. In addition, he should have mastered at least one of the accepted disciplines so that he may become familiar with the basic intellectual virtues. Only after such training will he become sensitive to the need for maintaining the highest standards of rigorous scholarship if IR is to earn its place as a useful branch of higher learning.