

International political sociology, or:: The social ontology and power politics of process

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**International political sociology, or:  
The social ontology and power politics of process**

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# International political sociology, or: The social ontology and power politics of process

STEFANO GUZZINI

(forthcoming in Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin, eds, *Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology*, Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2016 or 2017).

International Relations has been going through repeated ebbs and flows. The emergence of international political sociology as a research field can be seen in this context. It started in the 1980s in response to Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*. Although Waltz's neorealism may look like a mere foil, an easy target that allowed more social and political theory into International Relations (IR), it was not (e.g. Ashley, 1986 [1984]; Walker, 1987; Wendt, 1987). For the context was one where IR had started to move beyond the "diplomatic-strategic chessboard" (Aron, 1962), emancipating itself from its own historiography of the first two debates and the resulting implicit matrix according to which IR theory was to be understood. A now largely forgotten Third Debate of 'Globalism versus Realism' (already sanitised in Maghroori and Ramberg, 1982), which acknowledged the rise of Latin American Marxist and dependency theorists (e.g. Cardoso, 1973; Cardoso and Faletto, 1979; Dos Santos, 1970; Frank, 1966; O'Donnell, 1973), as well as of early International Political Economy (e.g. Cox, 1981; Gilpin, 1975; Strange, 1970, 1971; Vernon, 1971), had provoked an identity crisis in IR, which was unable to define, or rather, contain, its core and boundaries. The acceptance of Waltz as the core the reference by the main discipline, for defenders and detractors alike, put an end to that crisis. It defined an exceedingly narrow field of IR – purely systemic analysis of inter-state politics – and anchored its theoretical underpinnings in a form of utilitarianism: states as value-maximising agents facing each other in a strategic game of cooperation or conflict under anarchy (Guzzini, 1998: chapters 8–9). Waltz and the debate which ensued channelled the mainstream back into well-known waters, as in the neo–neo debate (Wæver, 1996), and thus stemmed the 1970s' scholarly explorations of new terrains. Although perhaps even unfair to Waltz, his book came to epitomise that closure. International political sociology stems from a response to this, and then later attempts at closure.

However varied, these explorations always challenged the narrowness of the subject matter and the underlying theoretical stricture. International Political Economy (IPE) was one contender, in its different attempts to include approaches of historical/economic sociology and non-utilitarian political economy in its theoretical toolkit – from Bourdieu, Granovetter, Polanyi, Simmel to Veblen and Weber, to mention a few. This went straight against the reification of markets, actor interests and market behaviour as common in utilitarian approaches, and

against the liberal division between politics and economics.<sup>1</sup> It also assumed a much larger definition of politics than more classical IR did, such as, for instance, in the commercialisation of more and more spheres of international politics (see Leander in this volume). Hence, IPE threw down the gauntlet not because IR needed to add economics to politics, or reduce political to economic behaviour (see, for instance, Strange's critique of the prevailing "Politics of International Economic Relations" for that point in Strange, 1988); it needed economics to redefine the understanding of politics itself. Similarly, Waltz was wrong not because he focused on international politics, but because his definition of politics was too narrow, since it reduced it to inter-state conflict and cooperation (Guzzini, 1998: chapter 9), leaving out, for instance, the domination through ritualised or habitual mobilisation of structural biases and the very politics that goes into, and comes out of, the constitution of actor interests. By implication, taking international politics seriously meant moving beyond the co-constituted strictures of political science and IR for a wider vision of world society (see Kessler and Tellmann in this volume).

The rise of post-structuralism, critical constructivism/critical realism, feminism and later post-colonialism in IR provided another opening. Although quite different among themselves, they stand outside the core of IR in similar ways, in that the challenge was driven both by (meta-)theoretical concerns and by a different understanding of what matters politically in international relations (allegedly the subject matter of IR). As several chapters in this volume testify, just as with IPE, these are not just external cognates, but also core approaches of an international political sociology (or the other way round, see Krishna in this volume). Insisting on the political constitution of many "forgotten" or eluded *problématiques*, colour or gender lines, this research field meets IPE scholars in their insistence on the stratified nature of international politics, with a shared emphasis on the role of knowledge (regimes of truth) therein, and with a better grasp of the relentless boundary-producing practices in international affairs.

Parts of these two traditions came to meet in international political sociology (from now: IPS, not to be confused with the homonymous journal). Consequently, there is no single path to IPS, and no single way to define it. Moreover, it is not clear how these different streams would converge. And yet, when reading through the variety of contributions in this volume, almost all the chapters relate to two components. As the first section will show, they mobilise a certain type of social theory for the analysis of international relations. Certain names frequently recur, like Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Mustafa Emirbayer, Michel Foucault, and Bruno Latour, not just because they are fancy for some (and reviled by others); they stand for something fundamental, namely an ontological commitment to see the social as constituted by practices, as relational, processual, assembled. These are ontologies which are wary of fixations and reifications (see Bleiker in this volume), and see the world instead in terms of the processes through which things become the way they are, borders and identities are

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<sup>1</sup> Gilpin went so far as to say that 'liberalism lacks a true political economy' (Gilpin, 1987: 45).

constituted, lines re-drawn. As the second section will develop, the chapters see in those very becomings/makings the potential for an analysis of politics. Things could have been otherwise; and they are not innocent in their effects. Not all of these processes may be political in a strict sense or have political significance. But they could be. Hence, besides a certain ontological stance, there is an almost insatiable curiosity to explore politics. This does not refer to political processes in a narrow sense – i.e. connected to political mobilisation, decision-making and implementation – but to the potential politics that pertain to the way the fixtures of social reality are constituted. Indeed, sometimes it reads as if politics were defined by *being* those processes in the first place (at the level of action), and then also in making them visible through scholarly analysis (at the level of observation).

## Social theory from a processual and relational ontology

In IPS, a cacophony of gerunds often makes native speakers cringe, so relentless is the presence of matter materialising, properties emerging, dis/empowering relations, medicalising (Howell in this volume), bordering (Burgess in this volume), othering, Campbell's sighting/siting the Darfur conflict (as cited in Lisle in this volume), archives as record-ing process (Lobo-Guerrero and van 't Groenewout in this volume). Nothing in this world seems to be there as a fixed phenomenon, certainly not "structure", for which we get Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration; or agents, for which we have Michel Foucault's approach of subjectification; and least of all, "nature" which is continuously de/naturalised. Reality inevitably appears in a form which shows its processual and constituted character. As the previous chapters show, this is not simply a fad or predilection for fancy jargon. It stands for a distinct ontological vision in the mobilisation of social theory for the study of international relations, or more precisely, a certain vision of *theory* and of the *social* in such theory.

This vision of theory is based on an ontology that is relational (see in particular Rajaram in this volume). A relational ontology takes its starting point not from units as fixed items, but from the relations through which their actual properties are continuously constituted (for IR, see Guillaume, 2007; Jackson and Nexon, 1999). Such an approach may look like holism, in that it requires the prior understanding of the set of relations in order to understand the units. But that set of relations is not following a closed logic (for an early critical realist take on ontological openness in IR, see Patomäki, 1996). Hence, rather than asking for a holistic approach in a strong sense, a relational ontology prompts a configurational theory (see also Abrahamsen in this volume on assemblage).

In a Bourdieu-inspired take (for a short introduction, see Leander, 2008), relations are seen in the context of a social field (of economics, of arts, of bureaucracy, and so on). The field has some continuity through the *habitus*, that is, the historically sedimented and shared dispositions of "visions and di-visions of the world", which generate different social positions and practices which, in turn, affect the set of relations or the social field as such. This being primarily a

theory of domination, Bourdieu is interested in processes of stratification in which positions are staked out, but also evolving: agents share a different habitus across fields which necessarily affect each other; the overall structure of societal differentiation affects the boundaries of the fields; the positional struggles affect the field of power; and this, in turn, affects the conversion rate of different capitals and hence positions and hierarchies. Positions, capital and habitus provide a certain identity and continuity to the field, but they are always in the making and not reproduced in a closed system.

In a more Foucault-inspired take, a relational ontology is not only visible in the positioning of agents and their properties, but also in producing their very subjectivity. Again, such an approach could be read in closed holistic terms, here in a certain functionalist take of (early) Foucault. When Foucault analyses the modern political order, which conservative thinkers of the time saw threatened by the centrifugal forces of personal autonomy and individualism, he shows the astonishing reproduction of political order and an ever more sophisticated division of labour. How could more individual freedom give rise to more collective order? The solution to the conservative puzzle is the emergence of regimes of truth and internalised self-control as a more efficient path to order than classical top-down discipline. The functionalist twist arises when Foucault also seems to argue that these micro-processes which pass through and use subjects for establishing order produce an almost teleological “economy of power” (Foucault, 1975), where new, more efficient forms of domination develop from older ones. It is easy to see how this can be read in a determinist or closed manner. That liberal freedom produces its own type of oppression is a plausible enough idea. It is a further step, though, to analyse any form of politics in terms of the functional equivalences, and increasing teleological efficacy, of reaching political order (a vision feared also by liberals, see Jouvenel, 1972). More convincingly instead, and particularly well developed in the Foucaultian take in gender studies, Foucault’s sets of relations, i.e. “discourses”, are not closed. This analysis would insist on the “unsystematic interplay of discourses that converge as well as conflict with one another...[and in the] understanding of the multiplicitous, infinitely detailed, and above all incomplete or haphazard content of particular regimes of truth governing and constituting subjects” (Brown and Scott, 2014: 343). It is this Foucault which is present in many chapters of this volume.

As this open relational character makes clear, such ontology is almost necessarily processual. Everything is potentially moving, all is in the making. In other words, continuity is not to be confused with stability, but with ongoing processes that (re )produce that stability. Agents’ properties, such as preferences and interests but also beliefs, are not to be assumed before the analysis, but treated as emerging in the process. And if properties are emerging, the process needs to be included in the analysis, i.e. endogenised, and not simply taken for granted. Indeed, properties are not the stable point from which an analysis can start in the first place.

In IPS, this relational and processual ontology is also accompanied by a specific take on the social as a way to deal with the infamous idealist–materialist divide. The increased reference to “practices” did not only happen to focus on socially



shared deeds, but also to qualify a (pure?) discourse-oriented analysis (see Büger in this volume). Like Marieke de Goede (in this volume), I find the difference overplayed: one used to speak of “discursive practices” to refer both to the practice component of discourses and to the net of meanings necessary to see practices as intersubjectively shared (see Dunn and Neumann in this volume). All previous chapters make reference to the interpretivist tradition in which we try to reconstitute the different meaning-worlds in IR. This notwithstanding, a certain decentring from human agency has happened with the advent of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and new materialism (see Schouten and Mayer in this volume), and it is hopefully even clearer now that the world is inevitably “social” in that ideas and matter cannot be divided in the first place: discourses are always also material and matter does not come with a meaning tag attached. The issue is how they combine with or indeed constitute one another.

To sum up: this is a relational and processual ontology which endogenises interest or identity formation, resists different forms of reifications of structures, institutions or agents/subjects, as well as materialist or idealist reductionism. But such a stance poses problems for building explanations. Explanations are usually termed in ways where one thing is related to (or explains) the other. If all is in flux, or all combined, the explanation may never find a starting point from which other phenomena are to be understood/explained: there are only explananda, no explanans. The solution to this problem cannot be articulated solely on the level of an explanatory theory itself, however. What can be taken for more stable, what may be more “solidified”, “crystallised” (see Rajaram in this volume) or habitual, which subjectivity may be more constant than another, is open to a historical and empirical assessment. At the same time, that very assessment cannot be done independently of the frameworks of analysis (the conceptual lenses) applied. But that does not change the fact that which processes will be bracketed at any point of the analysis is established in this interaction between theory and empirics. Theory will circumscribe a series of possibilities, but nothing more. The empirical wealth of the above chapters testifies to this need for an empirical analysis which does not assume fixity before the analysis, but where a certain fixation or closure, if precarious, can be achieved in the empirics.

Such an approach will also require a rethinking of causality in social science explanations (see also Bleiker in this volume). In particular critical realist scholars have been working on different versions of causality (Kurki, 2008; Wight, 2004, 2006). Instead of a Humean causality in terms of constant conjunction and/or Hempel’s covering-law model for causal explanation, they analyse causality in open social systems. Others have been developing similar ideas either by looking at constitutive explanations (Wendt, 1998) or examining the historical or narrative approaches to causation in the social world (Suganami, 2008, 2013), by exploring historical paths, counterfactuals and non-efficient causation (Lebow, 2010, 2014) or investigating indeterminate causal mechanisms in interpretivist process-tracing (Guzzini, 2011, 2012, 2017 *forthc.*). That may sound rather abstract for present IPS which, as the chapters clearly show, is far more empirically driven and often informed by anthropological and ethnographic methods. But precisely for the closeness to the field and for its empirical focus, a more historical, process-attuned

and non-deterministic understanding of explanation (and hence causality) is called for, and becomes a necessary underpinning for some purposes of IPS.

All this may give the impression that international political sociology does no theory, the latter being squeezed out, as it were, between ontological tenets and empirical detail. Yet this is mistaken, or only valid for a specific understanding of the different modes of ...(cringe)... theorising (Guzzini, 2013a). The preceding chapters testify to the presence of theory in different ways. Besides empirical theory in its widest sense, international political sociology refers in particular to one other way of theorising that refers back to classical political theory (or constitutive/ontological theorising) and which has often been neglected in the rather crude 'normative-empirical' divide in the social sciences. Such theorising is surely related to normative questions, but it is not its main aim. At the same time, rather than trying to operationalise major *problématiques* for empirical analysis (as so often done with 'democracy', for instance), it is concerned with establishing what constitutes their defining features: What *is* a state? What *constitutes* sovereignty, peace and war? And since IPS's ontological tenets insist on a social reality that is understood through its "becoming", such theorising of central political practices and institutions in IR is to be conducted in their historical dynamics. This is where political theory touches concept analysis and history, since it touches the fundamental building blocks in which we think the international (Berenskoetter, 2016). In this way, this political theory is empirical and not normative (in the sense of moral philosophy), in that such understanding is informed by, and feeds performatively back to, historical processes. As in Foucault, where epistemology informs history, there is only a theoretical hiatus between empirics and meta-theory if theory is understood as a certain form of explanation theory.

But once this other form of theorising is taken into account, IPS is highly theoretical, a bit in the way anthropology meets political theory – as, for instance, in Marc Abélès (1990, 2000) or James Scott (1985, 1999) – because the eye for the relevant borders drawn, the social rules and institutions, draws on a capacity for abstraction (which does not mean generalisation). And those abstractions, in turn, are not reified in scholastic discourse, but developed through such grounded analysis that is reflected in our reconceptualisations. As Leander (2011) put it on a panel dedicated to international political sociology, theory here is not about cookbooks, but unfinished dictionaries.

## Process as politics

The previous chapters are driven by a strong curiosity for and defence of politics. This may appear counterintuitive for all those who are used to seeing in IR realism the major defence of the political sphere. After all, the lawyer Morgenthau spent considerable effort defining and defending a realm of politics as different from law and economics (Morgenthau, 1933, 1946). Any attempt to rethink IR is usually seen as pushing politics out of the centre. Is IPS not primarily opening up to other "cognate" fields, an endeavour where the sphere of politics dissolves into the

great sea of the “social”? At the same time, the special focus on politics may seem trivial in the eyes of all those who see in IPS nothing more than yet another critical turn, where virtually all can be related to politics.

None of these views of politics in IPS – counterintuitive and trivial – are entirely wrong if used precisely. IPS is surely not about the conservative sphere of politics, and it has a critical bent more often than not. But reducing it to this would miss the main point, namely how an ontology of process translates into a politics of process. I think it is fair to read many of the chapters of this volume as attempts to see politics in more spheres than the strictly “political”. But this is not meant to say that the sphere of politics *de facto* encompasses all, only that political processes also take place elsewhere, and that hence understanding the very sphere of politics is more horizontal or transversal. Rather than politics being defined as the effect of a functional differentiation in an autonomous sphere, it appears throughout the different social fields. It is constituted through these processes.

But then, what does that mean? If an ontology of process becomes a politics of process, and if processes are ubiquitous, are we not back to square one: all is politics again? Not necessarily. For one, politics does not need to be considered as synonymous with process. All it takes is that something in this dynamism is considered “political”. The classical way to define that political part is connected to the idea of power and domination, or the nature of order. This is surely visible in those parts of IPS which pay tribute to Bourdieu and Foucault, but also in references to Norbert Elias or Georg Simmel (see also Guillaume, 2009). And although some of the interventions in this volume are not openly about power, many drive one part of their relevance from the way knowledge interacts with social reality. And this is a core component of political power. “The theory of knowledge is a dimension of political theory because the specifically symbolic power to impose the principles of the construction of reality—in particular, social reality—is a major dimension of political power” (Bourdieu, 1977: 165). In a relational and processual ontology, boundaries are not given, but their very constitution becomes the core of the analysis. When this drawing of boundaries is related to the constitution of order and/or to the dis/empowering of people, they constitute politics (see also Burke in this volume).

## Transversal politics

If boundaries are not given, an obvious starting point would be to enlarge the picture of where politics applies. Its sphere expands. A traditional way to think about new developments in the sciences is to reflect on the real-world issues that may have prompted them. If sociology developed from the autonomisation of civil society from the state and hence the need to research its nature and dynamics, if political sociology in particular focuses on agents and more diffused power structures outside the state, then IPS could be easily seen as a reflection on the development of a global civil society. If sociology is about society, IPS, so the argument goes, is about political society which went global.

There is some plausibility in this, although not so much with a simple reflection of a society gone global, but with an increasing awareness in (Western) international society about the role of global society actors (see Sending in this

volume). As many of the chapters in this volume stress (see in particular Halperin and Krishna), a global society is not something recent. And it would have been easily visible were it not for the intellectual strictures of the inside/outside divide, and for the many blind spots created by a discipline which has a narrow take on what constitutes politics and what is international. In other words, “global civil society” is not some new development to think society in a global sense; the development of international society has been going on for a very long time, once one includes colonialism, transnational trade and elites in a world of horizontal stratification (for this see Halperin; on elites see also Krishna, Kauppi and Madsen, Dezalay and Garth). For most “domestic societies”, the idea that they are autonomous and sovereign, joining a system of self-help that only then constitutes the “international” makes little sense.

In terms of analysis, that means that in IPS the “domestic” is brought into IR. Yet, this comes in a kind of “Weltinnenpolitik” (to use a phrase by Willy Brandt from the 1970s), a world domestic political sphere (Senghaas, 1992). It happens exactly not in the way done by comparative politics, or sociology for that matter, but by getting rid of the very inside/outside divide (Walker, 1993) on which both IR and comparative politics are based (see Krishna and Shepherd in this volume). Simply scaling up our concepts from the analysis of domestic societies to world society will not do (see Kessler in this volume).

Consequently, the historical constitution of these divides, i.e. the conditions for the possibility of IR, comes into focus: a historical sociology of the practices, including knowledge practices, that made and make international relations and IR (see Leira and de Carvalho in this volume). As Krishna states, in this way IPS joins post-colonial studies, a call which has also found support in the self-reflections of disciplinary knowledge and institutional politics (Hobson, 2012; Vitalis, 2015). It can also draw on gender studies that have been prominently following exactly this kind of approach (see Stern in this volume). It also joins the self-reflection in sister disciplines like International Law (see Aalberts and Werner in this volume, in particular their reflection on Koskeniemi’s work). In this way, it is not that IPS enlarges the field of politics; it sees in the constitution of things the potential for politics, and this across different fields.

## Order as power processes

IPS does not revise the boundaries of politics by expanding them, but by making the drawing of boundaries a potential issue of politics. Yet this leaves the “political” in those processes under-defined. Hence, besides a transversal analysis of processes of constitution, the previous chapters also had to deal with the very content of politics. It is this concern which often appears to observers as its critical bent. In my view, much of IPS seems to combine a classical and modern concern of politics.

The classical focus on the common good is not so much dealt with in clearly normative terms, discussing the role of and weighing up different values and their organisation. Rather, it shows in the attempt to unveil, or make public, what is or can be considered part of the *res publica*. This contributes in itself to the normative debate by asserting un *droit de regard* on processes that no longer appear

inevitable.

In this, the previous chapters relate to a less normative and more Machiavellian take on politics, centring on the mechanisms of order rather than its normative content. They often refer to one of the many concepts related to the cluster of power concepts, in their wider sense, like authority, agency, cause, influence, autonomy, domination, capacity, hierarchy, government (in the old sense) and order (Guzzini, 2013b: 8–11). It may not be fortuitous that a relational ontology which focuses on the things as they become reality ends up in a political and/or critical stance. Ian Hacking (1999: 6) contends that social constructivism is about questioning the inevitability of the social status quo. There is a parallel to power analysis. In our political discourse, the notion of power is attached to the idea of the “art of the possible”, and of attaching agency and responsibility (Connolly, 1974). If there were no power, nothing could be done, and no one could be blamed for it. Yet, reconceptualisations of power often have the purpose of widening what falls into the realm of power for, again, showing that things were not inevitable; not doing anything about it requires public justification. In this way, attributing power politicises issues (Guzzini, 2000, 2005). Here the ontological stance meets the purpose of power analysis. An ontology that focuses on the constitution of things tends to historicise and denaturalise issues. And in showing how it was not inevitable, it drags into the open the domination that goes into, and the modes of legitimation that follow, social facts. Mobilising different power terms is an attempt to get a handle on these different facets of politics now visible (see, in this volume, Burke on international political theory, and Sending on governance).

By implication, its partly more Machiavellian take on politics is not to be understood in an individualist or utilitarian key. Power is less about the conscious manipulation of outcomes than about the practices that constitute political order. Power is not in the Prince, but in the processes that constitute order. Or, put more sharply, the process itself is the Prince, where the process is not teleological, but open.

To capture this dynamic order, the reconstruction of the political in these processes tends to be specific. This explains why the ethnographic turn has been so important, since it allows the context-sensitive reconstruction of practices. As Megan Daigle notes in her chapter, “[t]he upshot of all of this is that field research augments what we know as the political ... because it can take issues like sexuality, interpersonal violence, or cultural practices that are often seen as better suited to disciplines like sociology, anthropology, or gender studies, and demonstrate the way they are contested and constructed in fundamentally political ways.”

Besides a micro-approach, the constitution of order is also seen in its wider context, stressing aspects of performativity (see also Tellmann in this volume), as in “the material and discursive practices of governance and their various attempts to create and regulate subjectivities and social groups, to divide, appropriate, utilize, and exclude” (Burke in this volume). Or as Kessler put it in his chapter: “Political processes are at the heart of the formation or (re)production of ‘observers’, spaces, temporalities and identities. The political thus relates to the ‘making of worlds’”. In this way, IPS is characterised by the parallel exploration of the micro and macro levels (see de Goede in this volume). It acknowledges that no



field research can truly function without a vision of the overall order, and that such overall order is only understood through reasoned abstraction from the analysis of local processes and practices.

## Conclusion

In IPS, an open social ontology leads into an analysis of international order as the power politics of constitutive processes (as in the study of identity in IR, see, for instance, Bially Mattern, 2001; Zarakol, 2011). This challenges the self-understanding of IR and of comparative studies in their definition of the international, the political and the social. The international is thought beyond the inside/outside divide, and rather in the way that the boundary in this divide is constantly renegotiated; there is no fixed starting point where one side of the divide is the negation of the other. IPS also challenges the conception of politics as related to a specific autonomous sphere or mere decision-making process, but retains the central focus on power and domination, dutifully reconceptualised, for understanding global order. Finally, at least in my reading, the social does not stand so much for a reference to global civil society, but for the intricate way constitutive processes of identity or interests combine the intersubjective and material.

Understanding world order follows the many micro-processes of boundary-producing power politics, and yet not in a purely inductive way. Here, IPS links social and political theory with social and political anthropology/ethnography, field research and abstraction. Such a stretch needs regular attempts at temporary synthesis or at least synergies. A handbook is both a moment in which one can take stock, and yet also prepare for the way ahead in which different tracks will be tested. If so, IPS can contribute to keeping thinking space and novel inspirations alive in a disciplinary environment where funding (public and private), ranking hierarchies and publication templates increasingly encourage, if not impose, a mainstreaming professionalisation.

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