

Science and nonscience in International Relations as a discipline

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Overture

The scientific core of IR is predicated on competing disciplines – political science, international law, history, economics – whose common claim today is to carry out global, international or transnational studies. In this perspective, their common feature is to contest the closeness of the established disciplines, to promote interdisciplinary programmes and to shape disciplinarity on their own terms. In doing so, IR

- is challenged by paradoxical, often unexplained data, its object being frequently undefined;
- fluctuates between descriptive and normative criteria;
- appeals to positive concepts ill adapted to moving objective categories (actors, territories, regimes, environments, societies, communities);
- sets up theories (realism, idealism, functionalism, transnationalism) based on rational concepts (measuring units, flows and developments in space and time) aimed at explanation, while avoiding much of the substrata (sense of belonging to societies and communities, plural loyalties, cultural and ethical values, subjective concern for the public good) required for understanding

The consequence of this is a number of overlapping conceptual/terminological confusions which obscure reliable data. To take one example, current developments known as “globalization” refer to at least four dimensions more clearly defined as:

1. international, with both market and civil society dimensions still deeply rooted in, or dependent upon states and inter-state bodies;
2. transnational, cutting across borders, irrespective of nationalities;
3. global (a), seen as a multidisciplinary outlook drawing on many subjects and levels of analysis;
4. global (b), understood as “worldwide”, whether related to actual developments (such as free trade promoted and regulated by the World Trade Organization) or to normative criteria (enshrined in a cosmopolitan, supranational law exemplified by the International Criminal court)

In the same way “civil society” can be equally defined as (Pérez-Díaz 1998):

1. An ideal type characterized by a set of sociopolitical institutions such as the rule of law, limited and accountable public authority, economic markets, social pluralism and a public sphere;
2. The non-governmental or non-state components of civil society as defined before;
3. The “third pillar” composed of nonprofit, voluntary actors, excluding both economic and governmental components.

From paradoxical data to porous concepts

Obviously, the blame should not be put on supposedly “inappropriate” concepts and terms, but on the non-recognition of the fuzzy, loose and changing relationships between observed or perceived data and available descriptive patterns, possibly explanations. Further examples would be:

- moving boundaries between categories of actors (states, market, civil society organizations), insofar as 1. most civil society entities depend on subsidies, subventions, grants, low-interest loans and services provided by the state (Mosher in Chamber, 219); 2. Democracies cannot survive without a healthy civil society; 3. an excessive deregulation of the market economy leads to a retreat of the state, societal fragmentation, social conflicts and a declining sense of social/communal belonging;
- changing territories identified with political units (any historical atlas will show that national borders have never been stable); some ethnic groups have risen to statehood, while states of the past may have been absorbed into wider units
- territorial v. non-territorial patterns: geopolitical units (states) are confronted with non-territorial depictions (religions and secular ideologies)

The analysis of a familiar conceptual unit such as “state” shows that it covers distinct, sometimes contradictory facts. An illustration of this can be found in Robert Cooper (2003)’s classification into premodern, modern and postmodern states. The “premodern” world (Congo, Somalia, Afghanistan, Liberia) refers to a state that no longer fulfils Weber’s criterion of having the legitimate monopoly on the use of force, as a consequence of past abuse of that monopoly, lost legitimacy, chaos due to domestic violence or international wars, or degeneration of state institutions leading to “failed states”. “Modern” states (US, Russia, China, India) are classical states with strong institutions, firmly identified with the idea of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, retaining the monopoly of force and prepared to use it against each other. Finally, “postmodern” implies interference in each other’s domestic affairs, the acceptance of jurisdiction of international courts and the recognition that state sovereignty and independence have been voluntarily limited (the European Union being a typical, actually a unique case).

Reasonable theories, uncertain philosophies

Paradoxical facts brought into theory will result in a conflict between

- furthering the workings of a universal Reason through abstract, legalistic and formal criteria, what Weber called “instrumental” rationality, conventionally associated with the predominance of states, the ideas of sovereignty and legitimate use of force in the inter-state system (insofar as the concept of “system” can still be used here)
- emphasizing the role of non-state actors, deep historical forces and transnational flows (voluntary associations, cultural and religious communities, arguing that decisions should be made locally, not controlled by the state and its bureaucracies.

Confronted with changing patterns, loose concepts, fuzzy logical relations and conflictive norms, political philosophy has come to raise the essential question of how to restore a sense of community and re-establish both a public and a communal space to mediate the combined, but adverse effects of individualism in the West, religious fundamentalism in parts of the South, the demise of state sovereignty under the pressure of economic globalisation, ethnic violence or as a deliberate supranational option or, conversely, the return of the state under the threat of terrorism and the pressure of regional/ethnic claims.

In this sense, what is called for is an attempt to return to a reasonable (Toulmin 2001) scale of social life, which can deal with the coexisting, competing forms of premodern (requiring state-building), modern and postmodern (seeking to implement universal rights) reason and morality. Various solutions have been promoted: the UN as a philosophical – uncompleted - idea is directly linked with the cosmopolitan vision expressed by Kant. As a supranational body, the Security Council has a right to interfere with national policies to maintain or restore peace in cases of interstate conflicts. However, the UN is not allowed to interfere with domestic policies: state sovereignty implies the right of self-defence against foreign threats as well as an exclusive right to police internal affairs. In the same way, Kant had stated the right of all states to preserve their autonomy within a confederation of states (international law), while erecting a cosmopolitical, or transnational law whose subjects were human beings as such. In this sense, we are not even modern: as recently noted by Brian Urquhart (2005), “The word ‘humanitarian’, as it is now commonly used, is relatively recent; in many languages it does not even exist.”

What is emerging is actually a partial overlapping of international law and global ethic, which leads to a confusion between norms and values, the claims that norms should be just. A second asymmetry appears between the implementation of national norms within democratic states, and the intended transfer of similar norms into a global polity which does not exist. The action of international civil society for the creation of the International Criminal Court is a clear illustration of the clash between ethical demands and their dependency on *Realpolitik*. The challenge before us is to reconcile two opposing rationalities, the Hobbesian and Kantian paradigms. The former claims that disorder and chaos associated with humankind’s “state of nature” can only be solved through social order imposed upon the individual. However, the impossibility of extending the social contract beyond the state’s frontiers leaves IR in a state of anarchy, implying two contradictions: (1) that states have to be sovereign to guarantee internal peace but have to change their sovereign power to seal a pact of peace with other states; (2) that states are to defend their citizens’ interests at the expense of other states. The latter paradigm suggest that states, on the contrary, are to follow the rules of international democracy, at the expense of individual sovereignty insofar as any of them is submitted to a supranational law. Habermas (1998) suggests that such contradictions should be solved by setting up a novel legal hierarchy, a law of law, submitting international law to cosmopolitical law.

Finale: complex thinking

The indeterminacy of the internal and external workings of organisations, societies and communities, the complexity of their strategies, the implied plurality of loyalties for both groups and individuals, the emotional dimension pervading rational arguments make for a multilayered set of references from which citizens will experiment a constant tension, with repeated periods of catharsis. Human behaviour can no longer be one of indifference, a lack of concern even for the world at large, but will involve a constant learning process to strike temporary balances. Interpreting the social environment will be a complex process and processing (Wunenburger 1990), using a methodology based on mediation and negotiation, explicitly recognizing subjective concern for the public good, whether local or global, while maintaining a flexible use of rational strategies.

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