

## Introduction to the sociology/ies of international relations

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*Journal of International Relations and Development* (2012) **15**, 90–97.

doi:10.1057/jird.2011.27; published online 11 November 2011

The study of the history of the discipline of International Relations (IR) has come a long way since Stanley Hoffmann's 1977 seminal article 'An American Social Science: International Relations'. With its focus on the development of IR in the United States, Hoffman's analysis sparked an incendiary debate that still goes on today about the discipline's origins, nature, goals, and assumptions. His insights hinged on fundamental questions about our work as IR scholars, ranging from the kind of valid scientific inquiries IR scholarship represents and/or requires (scientific dimension) to the aims of IR scholarship (normative dimensions), as well as the intellectual and social milieux in which IR scholars evolve and the practices they use and enact (sociological dimensions).

In the footsteps of Hoffmann's call for greater 'distance' from the discipline (Hoffmann 1977: 59), the past twenty years saw the development of a rich literature that re-assessed the story of the discipline's development and attacked some of its most beloved myths. Brian Schmidt's and Cameron Thies' work on the interwar era challenged the claim that there ever was a great debate between realists and idealists (Ashworth 2002; Schmidt 2002, 1998; Thies 2002). Robert Vitalis and Siba Grovogui highlighted the unacknowledged and unaddressed racial and colonial origins of the discipline (Vitalis 2000; Grovogui 2006; Gruffyd Jones 2006). Even the myth of the development of sovereignty and the instauration of a new international order starting with the Treaty of Westphalia was shaken up (Hartmann and Heuser 2001; Osiander 2001), as was the assumption that the 1940s and 1950s had been characterised by an unquestioned rise and development of behaviouralism in the study of IR in the United States (Guilhot 2008, 2011). Such an historiographical turn has led to careful re-examinations and contextualisations about the history of the Anglo-Saxon core of the discipline (Holden 2002: 254), but this recent interest for disciplinary



history raises a fundamental question that such works cannot answer in themselves: Why, despite the various successful myth-debunking enterprises of disciplinary history, are these myths still present *and* presented? Why has the discipline not changed or adapted itself to these new findings?

If disciplinary history can give us a deeply needed sense of the discipline's complex developments, resurrect the work of now-forgotten but then-prominent scholars, and challenge some reductionist assumptions on which many theories rest, it is by turning to sociology of science that one can come to understand and flesh out the various power relations, practices, institutional configurations, and scientific developments that made the discipline develop the way it did. A sociology of science, summarises Wæver, 'examines the social mechanisms at play in the social universe of researchers — *internally* in each community as coordination, control, and contestation, *between* fields in processes of delineating disciplines and superseding them interdisciplinary, and *vis-à-vis* the *external* world of economic and political interests' (Wæver and Tickner 2009: 11, emphasis in original). And while IR disciplinary history has now gained recognition inside the discipline to reach high levels of sophistication, and self-reflexive accounts of the discipline now abound, there have been strikingly few works in and on the sociology of the discipline of IR (*ibid.*). Henceforth, this Forum seeks to address this lacuna by initiating a discussion on the use and potential of various sociologies of IR, as well as highlighting possible future research directions for such sociological inquiries.

### **Why a sociology of IR?**

A sociology of IR is involved in a disciplinary self-reflexive process using structured methods of inquiry drawing from one or many sociological traditions. Such reflexivity is not new to the discipline. Indeed, as Patrick Thaddeus Jackson remarks, 'reflexivism lies at the very center of the origins of the IR field' (Jackson 2011: 187), as authors like E.H. Carr acknowledged early on 'the inevitable tensions and conflicts between utopian and realist moments of theorizing' and participated in 'a process of knowledge-production that only makes sense as a contribution to a dialectical transformation of the present' (*ibid.*). To be engaged in reflexive work on the discipline of IR, explains Jackson, thus implies an attempt to examine 'the mind-world hook-up characteristics' of its practitioners even before any empirical claims are made: 'Reflexivists take seriously the notion that the very character of knowledge itself is both inseparable from and not in any simple sense reducible to the social position and organisational practices of the scientific researcher' (*ibid.*: 158).

The reflexive task in which a sociology of the discipline engages itself enables us to shed light on the ways in which the knowledge produced by IR scholars



has, at some level, a functional use not totally disconnected from those who are in power and their preoccupations. Heightened reflexivity in the discipline (and its study) is thus closely tied to the generation of knowledge *on* IR and *about* IR as a discipline: understanding who is marginalised, where, and through which mechanisms allows us to identify sites for potential change and transformation. This potential for transformation affects social hierarchies inside the discipline as much as it produces knowledge about the world. Overall, by focusing on scientific practices, as Christian Büger convincingly argues in this Forum, a study of the discipline allows for a better understanding of the knowledge produced, which might influence political decision making. Even more, he says, disciplinary self-examinations might not only serve useful educational purposes for the discipline's members, but they might also bring important scientific correctives to the discipline's structures of power and authority that end up (over)influencing the legitimacy of some research done in IR while delegitimising other research, thus effectively limiting changes of perspectives that could generate new scholarship on given issues and problems.

The sociology of the discipline has first garnered interest from scholars who sought to understand whether IR was indeed an 'American' discipline, as Hoffmann had early suggested. In this respect, Ole Wæver's 1998 analysis of publishing patterns in IR's top journals stands as the first entry of sociology of science inside the discipline. Yet, as Christian Büger notes, Wæver's article garnered much more attention for its conclusion that American and European IR communities were drifting apart than for its introduction and use of a new literature borrowed from sociology of science to analyse the discipline (Büger 2007: 18). If it did not lead to a growing interest in the use of sociology of science to study IR as a discipline, Wæver's article nonetheless paved the way to a series of books and articles analysing IR in terms of national communities and comparing them on various grounds, from their respective main theoretical commitments to the historical development of their academic structures and their access to the American publishing market (e.g., Zhang 2002; Friedrichs 2004; Jørgensen and Knudsen 2006; Tickner and Wæver 2009; and the JIRD's 2009 Forum on IR in Central and Eastern Europe). Finally, the implantation in the United States of the 'Teaching, Research, and International Policy Project' IR survey, which has produced and published various surveys on the state of the discipline in the United States and abroad since 2005, marks the latest development in trying to assess 'the state of the discipline'. However, it is remarkable that even this last sociological reflexive endeavour to investigate the nature of the relationship between teaching, research, and policymaking in the field of international politics is characterised by an absence of reliance on methods or theories proper to the sociology of science. The fact that its results are published in the influential *Foreign*



*Policy* magazine along with an analytical piece, and that the project has extended its surveys to more than twenty countries in 2011–2012, suggests a growing interest in the sociology and representation of the discipline in the United States and abroad.

### **Lines of inquiry**

This trend requires us to pay greater attention to theoretical and methodological aspects involved in assessing the current practices, power structures, and configurations inside the discipline. It is on this level that a sociology of science has more to offer. However, as IR scholars know, addressing this idea of ‘power’ is not as straightforward as it might seem: what does power refer to or even encompass in a sociological account of the discipline? How does it affect people in constructive, oppressive, and enabling ways? Because power is central to the discipline, yet can be understood and assessed differently (e.g., Barnett and Duvall 2005), each contributor in the present Forum addresses how power matters in a sociology of the discipline. This crucial question of power cannot be uncoupled from the question of engaging in the work that we do at the time that we do: why is it that we engage in a sociology of the discipline? Why, even, *should* we engage in it? And how could we explain resistance to such work, sometimes discredited as being ‘distractions’ from other, more pressing issues? Encompassing these considerations, three clusters of research that build on earlier analyses and extend them further have caught our attention:

- (1) the links between space and knowledge production;
- (2) the turn to an analysis of practices inside the discipline; and
- (3) specific areas of study to which a sociology of the discipline needs to turn, namely practices, institutions, and language.

Up to this day, bibliometrical analyses and journal-content analyses have been at the centre of most research done on the sociology of IR. Yet, to live up to its potential of better elucidating and illuminating the nuts and bolts of knowledge production, such mapping practices are insufficient. Developing what he sees as the three main contributions of a sociological approach to the discipline (namely, highlighting IR as a constitutive element of global politics; bringing its power relations to the fore to reconfigure them in more ethical ways; and strengthening disciplinary self-evaluation and education), Christian Büger argues that a sociology of the discipline should focus on one of the three dimensions of discipline, namely, single practices; the interplay between specific practices and the institutions in which they take place; or the development and circulation of specific concepts that connect



various branches of IR and actors together. Bürger's account testifies to the fact that though the study of national communities of IR remains an important aspect of the sociology of the discipline, if only for the fact that most work done on national communities has focused on European ones, issues of space and power in relation to knowledge production — the geopolitics of knowledge, in other words — do not have to be restrained to such boundaries.

The focus on individuals and authorship in the aggregate has precisely been the hallmark of a first wave of scholarship on the sociology of the discipline, with its focus on attendance to conferences and geographical distribution of authors in leading journals. Yet, note Oliver Kessler and Xavier Guillaume, what these individuals actually do in their scholarly everyday life, which contributes to the establishment of disciplinary structures, gets lost. They suggest that organisations and the people within them, rather than being seen as simple scientific transmission belts, have a power of agency that needs to be taken into consideration. Kessler and Guillaume detail how we should analyse institutions in IR as being entities of their own, responding to their own logic and complexity. They conclude by highlighting that an alternative sociology of IR could consider how people evolve inside these institutions. To recover this lost individual agency, they see a turn to oral history as a productive direction of inquiry for both historical and sociological disciplinary accounts. Yet this begs the sensitive question as to *who* can engage in such work without possible drawbacks.

For Anne-Marie D'Aoust, the use of the discipline's dominant language, English, is not simply about enabling scholars to understand each other across linguistic lines: it corresponds to one of the most hegemonic practices of the discipline. Turning to the work of postcolonial scholar Walter Dignolo, and using the case of French-Canadian scholarship for illustrative purposes, D'Aoust proposes a multilayered illustration of power relationships that cut across language issues. Even though earlier sociological accounts of national IR communities have taken notice of the material and intellectual state of enablement and marginalisation stemming from an engagement with Anglophone literature, she suggests that they have not extended this analytical focus to the *choice* of English or the implications of intelligibility and (scientific) legitimacy gained in the discipline *through* the use of English or the adoption of its structure. For example, 10 years after the launch of the German journal *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* (*ZIB*), Thomas Risse noted that the times of the long German essays that slowly develop a thesis over 35 pages are now (thankfully) gone and that articles published in *ZIB* now read as any article published in *International Organization* or *APSR*, following the same *textual* structure, though written in German (Risse 2004: 289). How can we sociologically account for this



linguistic imperialism, which, as postcolonial scholars have already noted, is neither simply repressive nor enabling?

In a final reflection, Kevin McMillan wisely warns that sociological analyses of the discipline run the danger of paying too much attention to the various power relations that characterise the discipline at the expense of adequately characterising its hegemonic content or 'substance'. McMillan calls for sociological accounts of the discipline to take up the challenge of providing a substantive account of disciplinary 'hegemony' rather than take it for granted. *Contra* Kessler and Guillaume, perhaps, McMillan argues that reducing knowledge production to outputs of social processes is misleading, as knowledge itself should be conceived as a social entity. Whereas analyses limited to the discipline's formal intellectual processes of (re)production thrive, he argues, an engagement with the identification of the nature, contours, features, and functioning of such disciplinary hegemony is currently lacking. Yet, both should go hand in hand.

### **Beyond the forum: further lines of inquiry**

This Forum seeks to open the dialogue on the current state and (potential) use of the sociology of IR. Understandably, it raises perhaps more questions than it can answer and leaves many avenues unexplored, such as the gradual generalisation of the 'Humboldt university model' and its transformation in a global market of knowledge production, or the inclusion of specific sociologists of science like Randall Collins or Bruno Latour in the sociological study of the discipline. However, all the interventions here show that in spite of the claim that debates and dissent about the discipline can represent a challenge to achieving a truly 'global' discipline of international studies (Biersteker 1999: 3), the potential costs on research development makes understanding the ins and outs of disciplinary intellectual history and the sociology of the discipline even more noteworthy. Because in the end, as Donald Puchala cautions, one should not forget that the debates are far from being trivial in their consequences for the scholars who take part in it: 'Scholarly careers have been (and are today being) established, challenged, and in some cases ruined depending upon academic partisanship. Journals have been turned into ramparts, book reviews into cannonades, tenure and promotion processes into inquisitions, graduate students into foot soldiers or pawns and idealists into cynics' (Puchala 2003: 216–17).

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## From epistemology to practice: a sociology of science for international relations

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*Journal of International Relations and Development* (2012) **15**, 97–109.

doi:10.1057/jird.2011.28; published online 2 December 2011

Without question there is no shortage of reflexivity in the discipline of International Relations (IR), to the extent that after several ‘grand debates’ and numerous ‘turns’, it seems to have reached a certain intellectual ‘surfeit’. One of the reasons is certainly that many of the questions concerned are not logically solvable, and that debates on reflexivity tend to become affective if not religious from time to time. Another reason is that debates are often scholastic, and have nothing to do with either the social life of the researchers or the objects studied. This surfeit should not, however, be an argument for refraining from reflexive exercises. After all, standards of reflexivity are what distinguish scientific practices from those of other knowledge producers. Instead, this observation should lead us to reconsider the connection between the abstract, theoretical, conceptual and the practical everyday. Therefore, this contribution argues for an extended understanding of reflexivity centred on practice and taking advantage from works in the sociology of science.

Reflexivity that wants to connect better the intellectual and the practical needs to pay attention to many more aspects than epistemology. The promise of reconnecting theory to practice has been demonstrated in recent epistemological debates. Scholars drawing on ‘old’ or ‘new’ pragmatism (e.g. Kratochwil 2007; Pouliot 2007; Hellmann 2009) have elaborated perspectives