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Historical Sociology and International Relations: The Question of Genocide

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MARTIN SHAW, MAY 5 2013

Although most International Relations scholars recognise in principle the historical variability of their subject matter, IR theory is often written as though relatively timeless qualities of the modern international system are the most significant. The system is commonly described as 'Westphalian', as though the principles of sovereignty established by the 1648 treaty have defined its fundamental structure to this day. Although this understanding has been described as a 'myth' from a Marxist perspective (Teschke 2006), and scholarship from the English School (e.g. Buzan and Little 2000) has increasingly offered historically richer understandings, systematic integration of macro-historical perspective and international theory remains relatively rare. On the other side, although international historians offer voluminous interpretations of the recent past of international relations, most are deterred by the pervasive empiricism of historical studies from theorizing macro-historical frameworks.

IR's problem with history is, of course, a variant of a common problem of the social sciences, long answered in principle by Max Weber's (2011 [1949]) proposal for a division of labour between the generalizing, concept-producing social sciences and a historical field concerned with explaining particular events and patterns. This left, of course, the question of how the division was to be bridged. Answering mid-twentieth-century's sociology's own version of the grand theory-empiricism dilemma, C. Wright Mills (1959) proposed that the social sciences should focus on mid-range, macro- and meso-historical trends. Mills' answer has informed the sub-field of historical sociology, some of whose practitioners (like Michael Mann 1986, 1993, 2012) have tackled international change and have stimulated proposals (e.g. Hobden and Hobson 2002) that historical sociology is the answer to IR's theory-history problem.

Historical sociology frames international relations together with social relations in general, refusing the exaggerated separation of international from domestic relations that has been the hallmark, not only of realist, but also of some constructivist IR.

So far however, historical-sociological interpretations of international relations have been modest in scope. Moreover, like historical sociology in general, historical-sociological IR has often focused on earlier periods of modernity and offers little direct assistance with the task of framing the present that is the focus of most IR research. This is a serious lacuna because history comprises the present and the future as well as the past. The idea that only the past can be studied historically is fallacious because history is the interconnection of all three phases: our relationship with the past is mediated by our present concerns and future projections as much as the latter are laden with ideas of what has happened before.

As an example of these challenges and possibilities of historical-sociological IR, I outline my latest study of the problem of genocide (Shaw 2013). This is generally the subject of interdisciplinary study, in which concepts developed in international law and by sociologists have been deployed mainly by historians studying specific cases. The field suffers, however, from a domestic fallacy, according to which even episodes like the Holocaust – in which Nazi Germany destroyed Jewish and other populations mainly conquered through international war – are frequently described as 'domestic' genocides. The stage is then set for a definition of the field as the comparative study of discrete national episodes, which are studied transhistorically rather than in historical international contexts. Thus the

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Holocaust and Rwanda have frequently been compared in the literature, rather than the former being linked to Stalinist and other genocide in Europe during the Second World War, or the latter to genocide elsewhere in the African Great Lakes in the late twentieth century.

IR has been a late-comer to this topic, as to most, and has adapted to this domestication of genocide by conceptualizing the international relations of genocide primarily in terms of the *responses* of Western powers and international organizations to the domestically-produced genocides of authoritarian and failed non-Western states. A few IR-influenced studies (e.g. Midlarsky 2005) have proposed that the *production* of genocide should also be studied in international context, but the idea has not been followed through in a systematic way. Rather, the running has been made by historians, primarily those working on colonization, who have confronted the evident difference between the diverse patterns of often small-scale 'colonial genocides', over several centuries and continents, from the European stereotype derived from the Holocaust. Mark Levene (2005) has proposed that the international system, in the Westphalian sense, is generally implicated in genocide. However, I argue that it is not the system, in the most general sense, but particular historical complexes of international relations – such as the one international historian Donald Bloxham (2007) examines in 'the great game of genocide' in south-eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – which are determining.

My study starts from the premise that genocide (which I define as the targeted destruction of civilian population groups) is chameleon-like, in the sense that Clausewitz described war, changing its nature as well as its appearances from one period to the next. In this perspective, I develop a narrative of genocide in a relatively short historical frame, from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, and identify substantial changes in this period. Just as genocide changed between colonial contexts and contexts of imperial crisis in Europe in the early twentieth century, it changed again in the Cold War, decolonizing and post-colonial genocide of the late twentieth century. It is mutating once more in the state-fragmenting, civil war-linked and democratizing genocide of the twenty-first century. Where the early twentieth century saw as statization of genocide, later developments have seen destatization, with non-state actors increasingly important components of complex coalitions of state and non-state actors. I examine different types of international structuring of genocide: for example, the regional generalization of genocide in Europe resulting from the global war-system of 1939-45, and the more limited patterns resulting from the regional war-system in former Yugoslavia and transnational, refugee-fuelled conflicts in the Great Lakes and elsewhere in Africa.

My thesis is therefore that different patterns of genocide are broadly synchronized with major historical changes in the international system. I focus on two important transitions, from the inter-imperial to the Cold War system, and from the latter to the post-Cold War global system. I examine the patterns of genocide in the three periods defined by these watersheds: the climax of inter-imperial conflict in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century; the period of the Cold War, decolonization and post-colonial states in the second half; and the post-Cold War period of global democratization and international institutional-building. I pay particular attention to the transitional phases themselves: the immediate post-1945 years of international order-making in which the Genocide Convention itself was adopted; and the post-1989 years in which hopes of global genocide-prevention were raised. I argue that each of the three main periods shows sharply different patterns of genocide, which can be related to the different characters of the international system. I support this by contending that transition periods in the international system are also periods of transition in the history of genocide, in which projects for overcoming genocide have been dwarfed by new manifestations of the problem.

Without the historical perspective at the core of this study, it would, I contend, be difficult even to identify the changing forms of genocide. It would be even more difficult to offer a coherent explanation of diverse and complex patterns, and to make sense of their relationships to the international system. Without the thick concept of the system which a historical-sociological perspective offers, it would be difficult to connect the anarchy of inter-state relations to patterns of violence. This kind of historical-sociological IR perspective involves more, however, than a connection of international relations theory with international history, although historical work forms an invaluable resource. In approaching the present and future, as my study does, the work carried out by other social scientists (political scientists, sociologists, geographers and anthropologists) becomes more important than that of historians. A historically framed IR needs to be historical-sociological if it is to fully grasp the questions of transformation which

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must lie at its heart, and it needs to enrich international theory from a variety of sources.

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