

International Relations as Historical Political Theory

Written by A.C. McKeil

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A.C. MCKEIL, AUG 5 2013

The function of political philosophy is to help to form, sharpen, and critically ground the fundamental understandings that we build up somehow in our minds. Partial theories then elaborate, complicate, and contribute immediate relevance. The first without the second can be sterile; the second without the first can easily produce either chaos or a pseudo-scientific scholasticism.

Ken. Waltz[i]

The History of IR

After nearly a hundred years of systematic academic research in International Relations, since the founding of its first chair, in Aberystwyth, there is a body of knowledge, a body of theory and exegesis, that one can point towards if one is asked what distinguishes IR as a discipline, or what IR is, as an academic pursuit. While there may not have been a distinct theory of international relations, as Martin Wight argued, there is a mountainous body of it today.[ii] What IR is, what its impetus, subject-matter and vicissitudes may be, are to be found in this growing and albeit pluralistic literature.

As one wades through the history of this literature one does not find a Kuhnian pattern of paradigm change, or even a single core question, but rather an intellectual garden, with various species of theory, all reaching, often fighting, for the sun.[iii] One also sees, amidst family resemblances, a topography of ideas and questions forming sub-gatherings in English and other schools of international thought. And, furthermore, looking in the dirt, in the historical memory of the literature, one finds the seeds and intellectual germs of those theories and questions which have fallen, withered or dwell beneath the broad leaves of taller theoretical flora.

Sitting in this sunny and flourishing garden, one begs the question, as to what exactly draws these species and groupings of ideas, questions and theory together, the old, the new and the as yet to sprout. While, there is no evidence of a master gardener's hand, patterns of ideas and questions emerge; a serious theme wanders through it. The question, what is International Relations, may seem dreary, tired and possibly irresolvable, but, it is a question which every student considers, when opening their mind to that curious garden.

I think it was the thorough and deep consideration of this question (what is IR, what coheres and distinguishes its business?), which provided the frame of mind the great thinkers like Kenneth Waltz and C.A.W. Manning needed to make their immense theoretical contributions.[iv] Moreover, it is a helpful question to consider, if IR, as an academic enterprise, is to be an inter-generational pursuit, since the question throws light on the nature of the great prizes of knowledge for which we collectively strive.

The Academic Pursuit of IR

K.J. Holsti argued an ideal discipline, if not every discipline, then, at least the discipline of International Relations, is, or should be, defined and guided in its collective activity, by a single core question or *problematique*. [v] This is interesting, since many disciplines do seem to be cohered by a deep and important question; Sociology, for example, by the question of society's nature, Anthropology by the question of the meaning of being human, and so on. It is also

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interesting how the chief questions of Political Science and International Relations enfold and disperse. If one considers the causal forces or agents in politics within the state or between states, one finds that patterns and connections of behavior overlap between domestic and international politics. Furthermore, if one begins to question the state or the states system, as the preeminent form of political organization, the intellectual provinces of Political Science and International Relations dissolve into Political Theory. Yet, before we carefully consider what exactly IR's core thematic question may be, there are at least four notable alternatives to Holsti's position worth exploring.

One idea is that the discipline of IR, is, like Medicine, a general discipline, composed of a variety of related questions, which form a sort of intellectual division of labour, in the general pursuit of international political health. In this thinking, while every IR student, following basic introductions, quickly specializes their knowledge and skills, their various pursuits are mutually dependent for solving complex real world political problems. By analogy, a person, at least today, cannot be in the same moment an equally competent anesthesiologist, surgeon and nurse, but requires, to perform medical operations, a coordination of specialists.

A second, related but distinct notion, articulated in a fashion by Alfred Zimmern, is that there are various interdisciplinary questions and skills relevant to the study of IR, and that these various questions and skills can be and need be mastered by the IR expert or specialist, with an eye on practicing statecraft, diplomacy or policy.[vi]

The first two alternative positions are related by the notion espoused by C.A.W. Manning, that the gathering of questions relevant to the study of IR, together, due to their intellectual interrelations and practical topics of mutual concern, form an activity, a discipline, that is more than the sum of its parts; where in place of a core question stand core questions of mutual support, the study of which constitutes an undergraduate programme.[vii]

A third view, which Holsti questioned, is that the various theoretical questions categorized under the label International Relations or International Politics are so divergent that no one scholar can master and contribute to them all, nor do they, in all, form an activity greater than the sum of their parts. This is the view that IR, as an academic pursuit, is at best a field of studies, not a discipline with a core body of knowledge concerning a common object of inquiry.

The question, of what the study of IR is, or should be, if we are to adopt one of these three positions, seems to be a very academic and academically provincial question, though the prioritization of some questions over others, if we take Holsti's position, is a political, not only intellectual matter, which is a primary reason why the question of what the academic pursuit or pursuits of IR is or are, matters.

A fourth distinct idea, historically minded, is the position that the discipline of IR is a moving target, that the questions of relevance today or yesterday, may or may not, be of relevance tomorrow; that the things which draw them together and apart, raise and lower them, are historical forces, agents or accidents. This is a radical version of Kuhn's thesis of paradigm change, presuming or discerning historical intellectual movement radical enough to change the very question or gathering of questions we are, or believe we should be, asking. This change is so radical, that it draws the mind to explore the causes of that change, which is the study of political history and historiography.

IR may be a relatively young discipline, yet this position is somewhat too radical, having only limited historical purchase, in an historical survey of the literature and the historiography of IR theory. IR seems to be gathering, accumulating, questions, rather than abandoning some for others. Furthermore, the position does not entirely satisfy the question of what the enterprise of IR is, since the body of IR theory, has a certain historical character, albeit one in perpetual growth; it has a certain coherence of questions that all the various theoretical species have roots in and to which scholarly generations contribute, in various and distinct ways.

Deep and Important IR Questions

Holsti posited the causes of war and peace as the core question to define, or defining, the academic pursuit of IR. Yet, at least two other related questions figure prominently in the literature, as well as in the mind, when considering the dimensions of war and peace. Following, immediately in the mind, from the question of war and peace, is the

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political ethics question: What are the best principles of diplomacy and foreign policy and what are the implications of just war theory? Underlying these vast inquiries, furthermore, is the question or basket of theoretical and historical questions: What is the nature of the international system, is it a society of states, how has it arisen and what is its future? These various historically, ethically and theoretically minded questions have traditionally been the chief questions concerning international relations.

A question, in which these hang together, ultimately intellectually, is the political theory question, reformulated from Plato and the grand symposium of political philosophy: What is the good political world order? What is to be or may be done with political organization, for what, where, when and for whom? Investigations into the causes of war, political ethics, political history and economic and legal studies both are informed by and inform this primordial, possibly irresolvable, possibly dangerous question, -they both yield it sustenance and furnish the chambers of its contemplation. Political philosophy follows naturally in the mind from the findings of IR's chief questions.

Like the discipline of Political Theory, the academic pursuit of IR has pluralized the questions treated in its literature to include those of class, gender, race and culture, amongst others such as environmental management, distributive justice and religion.[viii] These questions are often treated independently and some strive to be predominant. Yet, so too are these questions generally drawn together, ultimately intellectually, in the political mind, to the question or questions of political theory or political philosophy and in this manner illuminate its realms and pathways of thought.

However, the literature of IR expresses more than abstract or philosophical questions of political theory, it is also a highly historical enterprise. The other question, at the other end of the IR stick, which draws these various species of theory together is the historical question itself, which following Ranke, is the simply stated but complicated question of what actually has happened. In this inquiry, determining the causes of events, of determining how and why history happened as it did, is a significant aspect of the IR enterprise. This systematic thinking is traceable, as Butterfield tells us, to the contribution made by the Greek historians, of the forensic comparison of sources.[ix] In this sense, despite social scientific methods, distinctions between IR theory and IR history are superficial, or a matter of approach, rather than substance, since their questions overlap.[x] The various theories of IR are tools designed to elicit specific historical knowledge, which, at least intellectually speaking, relate to, or draw thought towards, political theory questions.

In this general intellectual way, all the theoretical flowers in IR's garden, as R.B.J. Walker famously argued, are themselves objects of study, as objects of world politics, rooted in political theories that have their own social and political location in the historical sociology of knowledge.[xi] If all our theories are tools for historical investigation, as well as products of history and ideational forces in history informing questions of political theory, then Chris Brown's idea, that IR can be understood as applied political philosophy, is compelling.[xii]

But what do we mean by applied? By applied we mean, depending on the problem or question at hand, either the application of political theory to history itself, as an heuristic, to understand the past, or we mean the application of it to contemporary ethical real world problems, to decide a course of action or policy. In this way, the theories of IR are at once historical and ethical. Yet, they also, intellectually, draw the mind towards more philosophical political theory questions, which are informed by our understanding of the past and ethics of the present, which are oriented to outcomes in the future. In this intellectually broad sense, what IR is, as a combination of political and historical questions, can be understood as historical political theory.

IR as Historical Political Theory

What, then, exactly, is historical political theory? By political theory, I mean the investigation of what is to be or may be made of, done with or understood about political organization, government and law, what it is for, when, where, how and for whom. By history, I mean investigation of the past and relations, causal or otherwise, between what was, is, and possibly, also, for some thinkers, what may come to be. The idea of IR as historical political theory means a combination of these investigations. The IR questions of the causes of war, the principles of diplomacy, the nature of the international system, the international political implications and nature of class, gender, race and culture all draw from historical questions and contribute to political theory questions. In this way, IR may be understood as

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interdisciplinary, but interdisciplinary because its broadest questions of History and Political Theory are that in which the knowledge of International Law, Economics, Psychology, Geography and all the rest, are all drawn together.

There does not seem to be a right end by which to pick up this historical-political theory stick, to use a phrase Butterfield often employed, since one end leads the mind wandering to the other and that the majority of IR literature resides somewhere in the middle, drawing from and speaking to both ends. The connection of History to Political Theory, with an international spin, gathers a variety of deep and important questions, which form an intellectual and academic pursuit teachable as an undergraduate programme and post-graduate pursuit that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Philosophy of Science and IR

Like the notion that there should be a right end by which to pick up the stick of IR inquiries, an objection to this idea of IR as historical political theory, however, is that social science has certain epistemic methods of validity, which not every IR theory, nor international political philosophy, are fit to use or incorporate. The philosophy of science is another tired, dreary and possibly irresolvable question, but one, which illuminates a support for the idea of IR as applied political philosophy or historical political theory. Under careful examination, the philosophy of science, at least in respect to IR as a social science, is equally torn between historical and philosophical questions.

Critiquing King, Koehane and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry*, P.T. Jackson's *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* has clarified the various forms of validity available to social scientists, which supports theoretical pluralism in IR theory, if one accepts a broad definition science.[xiii] There may be no single, best or correct social scientific method for IR, or principle by which we can prioritize them.

In these general divisions, while neopositivist and critical realist methodologies continue to seek forms of causal or historical laws or regularities, in their own ways, analytical and reflexive methodologies, hold onto opposite ends of the IR stick, or continuum from historical to political theory questions. While analyticists construct theory to divulge counter-factual lessons from history, reflexivists pursue dialectical examination of the self, the scholar's place in the sociology of knowledge, and examine their research problems and political presuppositions critically in a movement to open the mind to political alternatives.[xiv] While this discussion is somewhat complex, or terminologically heavy, the point is that the philosophy of social science, in respect to the academic pursuit of IR, does not limit methodological pluralism and is itself partially divided along lines, which support an understanding of IR as historical political theory.

The Philosophy of History and IR

In the same way that the philosophy of science is divided by kinds of questions, or, different kinds of knowledge pursuits, so is the philosophy of history. Lawson eloquently distinguishes scriptural from butterfly approaches to history, which, respectively, seek from history abstract lessons, maxims and causal laws, or, on the other hand, understanding of the randomness, happenstance and aloofness of agency and meaning in history.[xv] Both seek to know what happened, but for different sorts of reasons, and so, produce different sorts of narrative. As in the philosophy of science, there is no consensus on a science of history.

Furthermore, possibly underlying, watching over, or simply related to these two vast strands of historical thinking, is another form of historical wisdom, which leads the mind down the path towards questions of political theory. It is a wisdom based on the idea that history is not a natural spectacle for the historian to observe and record, but rather history is mind; that history exists in the logical imagination of the historian, not merely in the documents, bones and war wrecks beneath the earth and sea. History, at least since Bergson, as R.G. Collingwood tells us, involves striving to understanding, or coming to know and reflect upon, via the historians historical anthropology, her logical imagination, the minds of the past in the mind today.[xvi] That is to say, the ontological existence of the past, the kingdom of the dead, resides in the mind of the historian, since what has transpired no longer exists. Whether we study the lives of the obscure and common or great and powerful, it is from this historical idea that the mind is drawn to connect the past with present, and from there, to future, which, with respect to the history of international relations,

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reaches and grasps questions of political theory.

Perhaps, as Martin Wight famously pondered, there is no sort of international theory except that sort of thought called the philosophy of history.[xvii] Yet, IR, as historical political theory, has deep and important worth, not only providing lessons and prudential wisdoms for statesmen and women to observe, but the capacity to fashion fuller existences if we can consciously imagine all the minds of the past, their ways of life, their ambitions, their struggles and final entrances into the past. In the completeness of their stories, individual or collective, containing beginning and end, and meaning all its own, is found a kernel of life, in the narrative of humankind, with which to inform the pursuit of our own completeness and place in the broader narrative, lying at the ends of our ambitions and struggles. Bertrand Russell, worth quoting at length here, tells us,

[History] enlarges the imagination, and suggests possibilities of action and feeling which would not have occurred to an uninstructed mind. It selects from the past lives the elements which were significant and important; it fills our thoughts with splendid examples, and with the desire for greater ends than unaided reflection would have discovered. It relates the present to the past, and thereby the future to the present. It makes visible and living the growth and the greatness of nations, enabling us to extend our hopes beyond the span of our own lives. In all these ways, a knowledge of history is capable of giving to statesmanship, and to our daily thoughts, a breadth and scope unattainable by those whose view is limited to the present.[xviii]

History does not simply provide us with the story of our past, prudential truths, and antidotes to hubris, but perhaps more significantly, a greater capacity to craft our own collective and individual life stories, political or otherwise, as we strive to join the past and provide for the future. It is the pursuit and ambition of this sort of valuable knowledge that I think fertilizes the garden of IR most richly and I am presently inclined to think it is the combination of this historical wisdom, as well as the others, with political philosophy, that coheres IR's theme.

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[i] Kenneth Waltz, 'Political Philosophy and the Study of International Relations' in William T. R. Fox (ed.) *Theoretical Aspects of International Relations* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), p.67.

[ii] Martin Wight, 'Why Is There No International Theory?' in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.) *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), pp.17-34; Duncan Snidal and Alexander Wendt, 'Why There Is International Theory Now' *International Theory*, 1(2009), pp.1-14.

[iii] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); for a thoughtful and compelling treatment of the history of IR, see, William C. Olson, 'The Growth of a Discipline' in Brian Porter (ed.) *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics 1919-1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); for another, see, Nicolas Guilhot, *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

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[iv] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979); C.A.W. Manning, *The Nature of International Society* 2nd edition (London: MacMillan Press, 1975).

[v] K.J. Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985).

[vi] Alfred Zimmern, *Learning and Leadership: A Study of the Needs and Possibilities of International Intellectual Cooperation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928).

[vii] C.A.W. Manning, 'Varieties of Worldly Wisdom' *World Politics*, 9(1957); pp.149-165.

[viii] See, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig and Anne Phillips (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[ix] Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of History* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p.133-134.

[x] See, Hidemi Suganami, 'Narrative Explanation and International Relations: Back to Basics' *Millennium –Journal of International Studies*, 38 (2008), pp.327-356.

[xi] R.B.J. Walker *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[xii] Chris Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Chris Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice: International Political Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

[xiii] King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference on Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); P.T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: The Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[xiv] Hidemi Suganami, 'Meta-Jackson: Rethinking Patrick Thadeus Jackson's Conduct of Inquiry' *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 41(2013), pp.248-69.

[xv] George Lawson, 'The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations' *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 18 (2010), pp.203-226.

[xvi] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p.187.

[xvii] Martin Wight, 'Why Is There No International Theory?' in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.) *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), p.33.

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[xviii] Bertrand Russell, 'History' in *Philosophical Essays*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p.65.

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