

Introduction: Historicising the Social in International Thought

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International theory appears to be thriving. Two of the most commonly cited sources for this flourishing are the positive influence of a diversity of social theories and a renewed commitment to more historically informed scholarship. From social constructivist and English School work on the history of ‘social norms’ and ‘international society’ and Foucault-inspired genealogical ‘histories of the present’ to Marxist and Weberian international historical sociology and strands of postcolonial and feminist work, much of the most innovative international theory today is deeply beholden to social and sociological thought. Nobody queries the authority of social theory in International Relations (IR). There are only debates about the relative merits of its different forms. Moreover, while international theorists may not be very good historians - tending to anachronism, over-reliance on secondary sources, and a propensity to sweeping generalisation - very few would spurn the significance of historically grounded scholarship and their own need, at some point, to consider the relationship between history and theory. For many, the most promising avenue for international theory is to combine one or other branch of social theory with historical research.

The idea behind this Forum was an intuition that this sociolatry, the worship of things ‘socio’, and a meaningful ‘historical turn’ in IR may be contradictory. The hunch concerned not merely the productive tension between theory building and good historical narrative, but that the kind of sociolatry shaping so much international theory was possible only in the absence of serious questions about the historical origins of social thought itself. When, where and why did social explanations for human affairs first emerge? What new practices called forth this revolution in language and thought? What are the political, international, and imperial origins of the most influential social theories in IR? What difference would it make if international theorists historicised rather than just ‘applied’ their favourite social concepts and categories? How would we begin to write such a history without relying on the narrative told by social theorists themselves, those most vested in the hegemony of social theory? What new problems would be raised and what new solutions would need to be found? This Forum is the first concerted attempt in IR to take seriously the historicity of distinctly social forms of thought, revealing its profound relevance for the diversity of contemporary international theory.

The first contribution questions the notion that the rise of social theory was primarily a methodological advance in the human sciences. Instead, the article situates social theories in relation to the historical emergence and crisis-driven transformations of the modern social realm itself, a new governance domain that accompanied the expansion of European commercial empires and state-forms from the late eighteenth-century. From natural law discourses of sociability and eighteenth-century theories of bourgeois civil society to the proliferation of ‘social’ theories and policies through the nineteenth-century each effort to establish the reality and significance of the ‘social’ was pitted against something variously - and usually mistakenly - understood as ‘political’. The article offers an original analysis of why this was so,

located in the ontology of the modern social realm as a transformed household, the space in which populations are domesticated. The implications for international theory are illustrated through critical analyses of liberalism, social constructivism and Marxism. These different social theories are not all tarred with precisely the same brush; but none of them escape the fundamental problem of sociolatry, a misidentification of the ontology and politics of the modern social realm.

Jens Bartelson offers a lucid genealogy of the concept of 'society' in international studies revealing its too often implicit but nonetheless foundational role in a number of theories, particularly social constructivism, analyses of world society, and the English School. Locating its origins in late nineteenth- and early twentieth century efforts to found a legitimate social science to address the political crises of *fin de siècle* Europe, Bartelson highlights three of the most important functions of 'society' in this context: to distinguish 'social' and 'natural' domains; to refer to spontaneous forms of 'pre-political' order; and to anchor claims regarding communal homogeneity and boundedness. Bartelson criticises the way some international theories project this nineteenth-century notion of 'society' onto alien contexts and locations. The result is a kind of ahistorical and circular theorising that reifies the concept of society into a *sui generis* category distinct from material or spiritual life; obscures how the so-called 'social' aspects of international relations are manifestations of earlier forms of political authority; and co-opts the many other diverse forms of human association across history and cultures that cannot be subsumed under the terminology of 'society' without anachronism and intellectual imperialism. Bartelson's solution is to anchor IR scholarship on encounters between different forms of human association. Building on already existing attempts outside IR to provincialise international 'society', the history of world politics could then be retold in terms of relations between diverse forms of association, including imperial forms, without privileging social or societal theories of such encounters.

Martin Weber highlights the political conflict associated with the rise to intellectual prominence of 'society' as an object of scholarly enquiry in the nineteenth-century. Two major historical events form the backdrop for distinctly social theorising in Weber's account, the rise and expansion of 'market society' and the Haitian and French Revolutions. Both gave rise to the nineteenth-century Social Question, of whether and how order could be maintained in the face of demands by the newly constituted masses, both industrial workers and colonial peasants in revolt. For Weber, the way the Social Question was answered led to a bifurcation in distinctly 'social' theorising with a continuing and problematic legacy in IR. The first strand is most closely associated with Comte's positivist and naturalist sociology, in which society was a totality comprised of interacting and functionally interrelated parts. The task of sociology in this vein was to objectively reveal the mechanisms and laws of social order for the practical purposes of functionally incorporating proletarians and peasants into the core of 'society', conceived as an interdependent whole. Explicit and implicit forms of functionalist and neo-evolutionist social theorising in IR originate in Comte's naturalist theories, though this legacy - and its political implications - are usually ignored or disavowed. Yet Weber holds out hope that the second strand, Marxian 'conflict theory', is better able to explain the origin and modes of antagonistic relations among groups and classes, the sources of conflict and change in international politics.

As to be expected, the contributors to the Forum take different positions on how and whether, in light of its history, to reclaim different strands of social theory.

Certainly, social thought is not the only intellectual tradition with a difficult history and history itself is not a panacea for intellectual and political problems. Nonetheless, this Forum suggests a clear need to radically re-envision one of the most widely accepted tropes - and intellectual crutches - of contemporary international theory - and modern social science itself.