

## Confessions of a sociolator

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## Confessions of a Sociolator<sup>1</sup>

One of the most stimulating recent developments in radical IR thinking is the appearance of a spirited critique of ‘the social turn’ in international theory.<sup>2</sup> Led by Patricia Owens, this critique argues that attempts to ground ‘the international’ in a wider ontology of ‘social’ structures and relations, (attempts which range from constructivism through scientific realism to Marxism in all its varieties), court an enormous danger. Even if their own intentions are critical, these advocates of a ‘social turn’ have been importing a nomenclature whose centre of gravity lies in the emergence of reactionary discourses of control from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. This emergence was itself a constitutive part of the rise of new, historically specific forms of domination associated with capitalism. The attempt therefore to elevate sociological categories into a general language of (trans)historical explanation serves only to naturalise these new forms of domination whose exposure is the key to a genuinely critical approach in IR. ‘Sociolatory’, not Sociology, is the unflinching, if unintended, result.

Is Owens right to argue that the language of ‘social’ analysis is necessarily ideologically loaded in this way? In this short note, I would like to revisit a contribution of my own to ‘the social turn’ in the 1990s that was made by using C. Wright Mills’ famous book *The Sociological Imagination*.<sup>3</sup> Mills argued that the achievements of classical social theory – including Durkheim, Weber and Marx – comprise an enduring foundation for the modern social sciences. His savage critiques of what he called ‘grand theory’ and ‘abstracted empiricism’ were all about the ways that *later* social scientists, often under the pretense of making new advances, were in fact falling short of the promise embodied in that earlier tradition of what he called Classic Social Analysis. And he argued that the tools of Classic Social Analysis were not the source, but rather the antidote to the ideological liabilities incurred by the academic disciplines of his day. Looking back on this a further two decades on, I still believe that classical social theory provides essential resources for IR. Yet I also think that Owens is right to suggest that even (or especially) these resources need to be treated critically so as to expose any hidden liabilities. I even agree that the importing of Classic Social Analysis does bring serious liabilities for IR – a problem to which my earlier use of Mills’ work was oblivious. However, as I shall indicate below, for me these liabilities lie in a quite different direction from those that Owens proposes.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an edited version of a presentation delivered to the *Millennium* Symposium on ‘The Global Imagination: Sociology and Philosophy’, held at LSE on June 20<sup>th</sup> 2015. I am grateful to all the participants, and especially to the Editors who invited me to submit the presentation for publication in *Millennium*.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Owens, ‘Method or Madness? Sociolatory in International Thought’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol.41, no.4 (2015), 655-674. Owens’ article is part of a forum on ‘Historicising the Social in International Thought’. See also: Jens Bartelson, ‘Towards a Genealogy of ‘Society’ in International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol.41, no.4 (2015), 675-692; and Martin Weber, ‘On the History and Politics of the Social Turn’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol.41, no.4 (2015), 693-714.

<sup>3</sup> Justin Rosenberg, ‘The International Imagination: IR Theory and “Classic Social Analysis”’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol.23, No.1, 1994, pp.85-108. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

So what was the breakthrough that Mills attributed to Classic Social Analysis? In a word, it was the discovery of society itself. It was the growing conviction that human affairs were not governed by supernature – by the existence of a transcendent divinity. And nor were they explicable by reference to a biologically fixed human nature, as appeared to be the case for other animal species. In between the realm of supernature above and the groundedness of human life in organic nature below, lies the *social* construction of reality. And from Montesquieu onwards, classical social theorists used comparative historical analysis to show that the variability of human societies was much wider than could be accounted for by any notion of a fixed human nature. They also argued that the causal and explanatory significance of these different forms of society reached all the way down from their political, economic and belief systems, through their artistic styles and practices, and right into the shaping of individual psyches. And from these twin perceptions – about the historical range and the constitutive depth of the social construction of reality – there emerged, according to Mills, three basic premises that together compose ‘the sociological imagination’.

The first premise was the idea of *social structure*. What did Mills mean by this term? He meant that every individual human life is lived out within a particular historical configuration of collectively reproduced relationships, ideas and situations. This particular configuration, he argued, is fundamental to explaining social behavior. And that is because it shapes both the way that individuality is differentially produced in different times and places and the wider social issues that individuals face in their interaction with the world around them.

And we should perhaps add immediately that this invoking of ‘structure’ does not amount to a denial of agency. On the contrary, it involves a massively *enlarged* perception of human agency because the enormous variability of these social structures in time and space indicates that they are themselves expressions of the social construction of reality in different forms.<sup>4</sup>

And for this reason, although he was not starry-eyed about the relation between reason and freedom, Mills did believe that uncovering the role of social structure was a key to people taking political responsibility for their lives and achieving self-determination: ‘the social task of reason is to formulate choices, to enlarge the scope of human decisions in the making of history’.<sup>5</sup>

The second basic principle is the awareness that these social structures are always *historical* in a double sense. On the one hand, there is no such thing as ‘social structure’ in the abstract – there are only particular historical structures that exist in the world. This is ‘what Marx called the “principle of historical specificity”’.<sup>6</sup> And it entails a special role for comparative historical analysis. Only

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Mills argued that this social construction of reality differentially configured even the human senses themselves: ‘[w]ithin the broad limits of the physiology of the sense organs, our very perception of the physical world, the colors we discriminate, the smells we become aware of, the noises we hear, are socially patterned and socially constructed.’ (ibid., 162)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 149.

when we compare a given society with others in history do we discover what is specific to it, and therefore exactly what it is that we need to explain in order to understand how this kind of society works.

On the other hand, Mills also argued that social structures are historical in the additional sense that they are not static. And not only do they change over time, but also they have different *mechanisms* of historical change, and these too are rooted in their historically specific forms as social structures. This is what Marx meant when he argued that social formations had differential 'laws of motion', or what Max Weber meant when he talked about the role of 'ideal-typical developmental constructs' in historical explanation.<sup>7</sup> And for Mills, this perception too had a deeply political significance. The realization that social change is structured in historically specific ways enables us to see 'the present as history' and thereby, he thought, to intervene in it to enlarge the scope of human choice and freedom.

Finally, Mills also drew from the classical tradition a premise of social *totality*. By this he did not mean there was a single deterministic theory by which everything about a society could be explained. What he meant was that the modern academic disciplines have divided up social reality 'more or less accidentally' in self-limiting ways.<sup>8</sup> Each has tended to form free-standing theories of the particular aspect of society in which it has specialized – whether that be politics, economics, psychology, or even comparative literature. In reality, however, these aspects are profoundly interconnected with each other because they are all parts of a single social structure at a given point in time. And a key part of the sociological imagination is its ability to transcend these disciplinary divisions and to grasp how the different aspects of social existence are interconnected with each other – as Marx, and Weber and Durkheim all did.

In the context of the present-day critique of 'the social', it is perhaps especially important to emphasise the implication of this point: Mills' book is not an advert for the discipline of Sociology at all, or even for the social science disciplines alone. In his view, the sociological imagination can equally be found in the disciplines of Politics, Anthropology and History – and even in journalism and fiction. And of course about half the book is made up of attacks on dominant approaches in the Sociology of his day.

Put more positively, Mills was trying to recover an inheritance that Classical Social Analysis had bequeathed to all the social sciences and humanities in common. And this inheritance was the ability to perceive the social construction of reality, the historicity of social structures and the interconnectedness of

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<sup>7</sup> As Ellen Wood points out, Marx believed that every kind of society 'has its own specific mode of economic activity, with its own laws of motion, its own logic of process'. (*Democracy Against Capitalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.150). Meanwhile, Max Weber argued that developmental ideal-types had 'unique heuristic significance' (ibid. p.103) so long as they were not conflated with the real historical process. ("Objectivity" in Social Science', in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, (New York: The Free Press, 1949), pp.102-03).

<sup>8</sup> Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p.140.

individual and collective forms of human agency. Or to use his own terms, it was about how biography and history intersected in social structures to produce 'all the social worlds in which [people] have lived, are living and might live'.<sup>9</sup>

By extension, the value of the sociological imagination to the study of global politics is that it reconnects IR to the founding premises of modern social thought itself. And it challenges us to operationalize these premises in the study of the *global* social structure so as to reveal its historical specificity and to discover 'the present as history' at the level of *world* development.

I first read the Sociological Imagination just after completing my PhD in 1992. And what struck me most of all was how Mills' diagnosis spoke so powerfully to the debate between neorealism and its critics which had dominated the discipline of IR in the previous decade.

Neorealism, in fact, seemed to violate every premise of Classical Social Analysis.

First, it violated the premise of totality by cordoning international politics off into a separate object domain and claiming that any attempt to reintegrate it into the wider social world must end in a retreat from theory into thick description.<sup>10</sup>

This separating out meant, secondly, that the logic of IR was abstracted from *any* historically specific set of social structures – in fact neo-realists took pride in asserting the timeless, unhistorical nature of the international.<sup>11</sup> Mills of course had argued that the ultimate focus of modern social analysis lay in its attempt to relate the world around us to the defining historical process of the contemporary era: namely the rise and spread of modern industrial forms of society.<sup>12</sup> In effect, the leading theory of IR had simply abdicated from this responsibility.

And finally, neo-realism even made a nonsense of the idea of social structure. In Waltz's hands, the term social structure no longer referred to configurations of relations between people. It now referred to relations between states as irreducible actors. So, rather than enabling us to deconstruct reified forms of human agency, it became a recipe for reproducing the reification itself at the level of theory.

The sociological imagination struck me as the perfect antidote to this situation. And in my 1994 article, I argued for its immediate application in IR theory. Looking back on it now, I still agree with Mills that classical social theory provides indispensable premises for social analysis, and therefore for IR too. I

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>10</sup> For Waltz's defense of this latter assumption, see 'Interview with Ken Waltz', conducted by Fred Halliday and Justin Rosenberg, *Review of International Studies*, (1998) Vol. 24, 371-386, especially 377ff.

<sup>11</sup> See for examples: Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.211; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley 1979), p.66; 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, 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 152-53.

also think that these premises (of structure, history and totality) largely survive the critique of 'the social' made by Owens today. After all, not only does Mills share her view that most sociological 'analysis' *participates in* the ideological naturalization of modern forms of domination; but also, her own constructive argument (that these forms are rooted in a specifically modern re-articulation of 'household' governance) is itself an instance of the sociological imagination: that is to say, it analyses the contemporary human condition by identifying a particular kind of patterning or structuring of social relations, by asserting the radical historical specificity of its modern form, and by then tracing the significance of this form for the interconnected realms of gender, politics, war and knowledge production. It would be hard to imagine an intellectual procedure that is truer than this to the spirit of Mills' sociological imagination.

However, I also believe that Owens is nonetheless quite right to warn that the importing of the language of 'the social' into IR may be freighted with assumptions we need to excavate and challenge. And in respect to my 1994 article, a kind of 'sociolator's confession' may indeed be in order. That article was entitled 'The *International* Imagination'. And yet it contained no suggestion at all that the word 'international' brings with it any real *addition* to the three premises (of structure, history and totality) that already compose the *sociological* imagination.

Like so many critical interventions, it was too busy importing ideas from outside IR to notice that IR itself might be rooted in an aspect of reality that is as ontologically significant for social analysis in general as are those three other premises.

What I mean by this is the condition of internationality itself, the fact that the human world is made up of *multiple interacting* societies. And I suppose the reason I did not notice the significance of this is that Mills had not noticed it, which in turn is probably because the Classical Social Theorists had not noticed it either.

So, although Mills *talks about* the modern era as being one in which different worlds are brought into intense interaction,<sup>13</sup> he does not integrate this interaction into his conceptualization of the social. The multiplicity of societies, the international, simply does not reach that far down in his worldview, just as it did not for the classical social theorists. And yet we know empirically not just that human social existence has always been both multiple and interactive, but also that interaction between societies adds a completely extra dimension of causality to the social world and its development.

On the one hand, societal multiplicity – that lateral field of more than one co-existing society – justifies the existence of a discipline of IR because it generates an entire range of specifically international social phenomena, (from war and

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<sup>13</sup> 'It is perhaps one defining characteristic of our period that it is one in which for the first time the varieties of social worlds it contains are in serious, rapid, and obvious interplay. The study of our period must be a comparative examination of these worlds and of their interactions.' (Ibid., 150)

peace through diplomacy, international law, world trade and processes of collective identity formation). And these cannot be fully grasped using the categories formulated to analyse their 'domestic' equivalents. But on the other hand, those domestic phenomena themselves – including language, culture and the structures of social, economic and political life – are chronically shaped by the consequences of inter-societal co-existence. The human social world is thus not only *illuminated* by the *comparative* fact of difference among societies in space and time (as Classic Social Analysis perceived so well); it is also partly *shaped* by the *interactive* consequences of inter-societal co-existence. The widely noted neglect of this by Classic Social Analysis has meant that scholars across the social sciences who draw on this tradition have been burdened with an apparently insoluble problem of 'methodological nationalism'<sup>14</sup> – a problem which mirrors in its inner shape the equal and opposite *reification* of the international produced by neorealism.

It is these twin problems that are arguably overcome by the idea of uneven and combined development (U&CD). This idea retains the classical insistence that social phenomena are always the expression of structured, historically specific forms of human agency (and hence of social 'development'); but it reimagines these in the context of multiple ('uneven') and interacting ('combined') societies. It thereby builds the inter-societal back into the foundational premises of social theory from which the Classic Social Analysts had unwittingly excluded it.

U&CD is thus arguably what the sociological imagination looks like when its inherited problem of 'internalism' or 'methodological nationalism' has been overcome. And in recent years, it has dramatically outgrown its origins in Leon Trotsky's explanation for the Bolshevik Revolution. A growing literature has applied it to a lengthening list of historical cases – from the phenomenon of 'globalisation' in the 1990s, through the Iranian revolution of 1979, the world wars and revolutionary upheaval of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Meiji Restoration and the 'Eastern Question' in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (as well as the overall 'global transformation' of international relations in that period), the yet earlier 'rise of the West' that created the shape of modern world affairs, and even the world history debates about the prehistoric emergence of geopolitics itself.<sup>15</sup> At

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<sup>14</sup> The term was originally coined by Herminio Martins in 1974 in 'Time and Theory in Sociology', in J. Rex (ed.) *Approaches to Sociology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. However, its referent – the failure of classical social theory to address the international – has been identified many times, both previously and subsequently, and under numerous different names. See, for examples, Gianfranco Poggi (1965) 'A Main Theme of Contemporary Sociological Analysis: Its Achievements and Limitations', *British Journal of Sociology*, 16(4): 283-94; Theda Skocpol (1973) 'A critical review of Barrington Moore's Social origins of dictatorship and democracy', *Politics and Society*, 4:1, 1-34; Neil Smelser (1992) 'External and internal factors in theories of social change' in Hans Haferkamp and Neil J Smelser (eds) *Social change and modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 369-394; and perhaps above all, Friedrich Tenbruck (1994) 'Internal history of society or universal history', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11, 75-93.

<sup>15</sup> For examples of these different applications, see respectively: Justin Rosenberg, 'Globalisation Theory: a Post Mortem', *International Politics* 42:1 (2005): 2-74; Kamran Matin, *Recasting Iranian Modernity: International Relations and Social Change*, (London: Routledge 2013); Alex Anievas, *Capital, the State, and War: Class Conflict and Geopolitics in the Thirty Years' Crisis, 1914-1945*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press 2014); James Allinson and Alex Anievas, 'The Uneven and Combined Development of the Meiji Restoration: a Passive Revolutionary Road to

the same time, its methodological implications for thinking about social causality, about the problem of Eurocentrism, and about the wider vexed relation of theory and history have been gradually unfolding too.<sup>16</sup>

Naturally, the many contributions to this research programme have also been engaged in a healthy internal debate about the ontological and epistemological scope of the idea. Nonetheless, their continuing accumulation is a welcome sign indeed: for the idea of U&CD makes it conceivable that the ultimate – albeit too long delayed – result of the ‘social turn’ in IR is not that we trap ourselves in an ideologically compromised language of explanation; it is rather that ‘the international’ itself is finally released from the realist prison in which it has been incarcerated for so long.<sup>17</sup>

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Capitalist Modernity’, *Capital and Class*, No. 102 (2010): 469-490; Kerem Nişancioğlu, ‘The Ottoman Origins of Capitalism: Uneven and Combined Development and Eurocentrism’, *Review of International Studies* 40:2 (2013): 325-347; Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Alex Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*, (London: Pluto Press 2015); Justin Rosenberg, ‘Basic Problems in the Theory of Uneven and Combined Development, Part II: Unevenness and Political Multiplicity’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23:1 (2010): 165-189. For a comprehensive listing of the contemporary literature on uneven and combined development, see [www.unevenandcombined.com](http://www.unevenandcombined.com)

<sup>16</sup> See for examples: Luke Cooper, ‘Can Contingency be ‘internalised’ into the Bounds of Theory? Critical Realism, the Philosophy of Internal Relations and the Solution of Uneven and Combined Development”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:3, (2013): 573-597; Kamran Matin, ‘Redeeming the Universal: Postcolonialism and the Inner Life of Eurocentrism’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:2, (2013): 353-377; Justin Rosenberg, ‘Why is There no International Historical Sociology?’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3, (2006): 307-340.

<sup>17</sup> Justin Rosenberg, ‘IR in the Prison of Political Science: is there a way out?’, EH Carr Memorial Lecture, Aberystwyth, October 2015. An edited version of this lecture is planned for publication in *International Relations*, Volume 30, No.2, June 2016.