

Historicizing the International

Written by Xavier Guillaume

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XAVIER GUILLAUME, JUN 8 2013

The international still tends to be thought and presented as a decontextualized, homogenous and universal historical “reality” in contemporary international studies from which International Relations scholars are shopping for events and facts supporting or “falsifying” their theories (see Lawson 2010 for a possible reassessment). Naturally, different traditions and approaches to the international, from classical realism to constructivism or liberal neo-institutional to post-structuralism, vary in terms of how they actually view history’s relation to their theorizations or conceptualizations of the international, yet they all possess in one form or another a certain view as to what history does or does not for them (see for instance the now classic reproach by Richard Ashley to Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism as a a-historical theory, see Ashley 1986[1984]: 290-295). International Relations scholars however are not, with the exception of very few, trained historians and it would be wrong to assume that most of us engaging with historical material and with history are doing so properly; nor that it would be easy to do so. History instead of being a stock of facts and events for each approach to sustain its claims should on the contrary be a source of methodological inspiration in reflecting about the multiple situatedness of the international as a phenomena, i.e. that the international is a series of histories that are connected, or could be connected, in multiple ways.

In effect, history itself is constantly changing, questioning previous historical narratives about the past, opening up new fields of investigating the past by expanding on the type of evidences that may be used to construct such narratives. The historiography of the Great War for instance is a perfect example of the ever changing and competing historical evidences and narratives that can be constructed about a specific event, from divisions in battle to soldiers on the battlefield (see Winter and Prost 2005). This central dimension of history as being much more than a “stock of facts” largely explains the fact that it has only been marginally engaged with by scholars identifying themselves in a larger field such as international studies; as evidenced by the creation only this year of a Historical International Relations section at the International Studies Association. This marginalization, and more often than not instrumentalization, of history is particularly damaging for our understanding of the international because any understanding and conceptualisation of the latter has to be historical. I do not mean that the only way to study the international or international phenomena is to adopt the gaze of the historian, but rather that history – as an analytical mind-set – is central in our ability to understand and study the international precisely because the latter is historical in nature. In this short piece, and bearing in mind the difficulties in doing history or using history adequately in international studies, I present this central aspect of history as an analytical mind-set for scholars of the international and how it relates to our understanding and study of the international.

Thinking in terms of the international is contextually bound. The term itself and the spatio-temporal realities it encompasses, for instance the so-called Westphalian system (see de Carvalho et al. 2011), are bound by their contingency as a particular way to organise a multitude of events (Veyne 1971/1978: 46-47). In Michel de Certeau’s (1975) term, the international is a form of “historiography”, a writing of history. For de Certeau, historiography is a specific social practice inscribing and organising different temporalities (past, present and future) and spatialities (from where one is writing – like the white western Europe – and about where one is writing – like the rest of the world) into a serialised narrative (a his/story) via specific media (such as epic oral tales or scholarly monographs) and knowledge producers (such as the poet or the professional historian) that takes a specific shape according to an epoch’s *épistémè* (on this concept see Foucault 1966). In other words, from a historical perspective, the international is the serialization according to a specific emplotment (see Ricoeur 1983: 127-131) of specific events and socio-political units in an ever going spatio-temporal process (Guillaume 2007). As an historiographic *operation*, the

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international is composed of a multiplicity of historiographic rationalities, that is histories that were written “in their own terms and according to their own canonical veridicity”, that are juxtaposed, entangled, merged, destroyed, emerging, transformed, meeting, or ignoring each other (see Bertrand 2011: esp. 16-20, see also the contributions in Rösen 2001).

One has only to think about the conquest of the Americas and how different forms of travel literatures have translated in different presentations of the Europeans and its others, denying the latter’s historicities (Mackenthun 1997, see also Guillaume 2011 on the effects this has had on IR theory). One can also think about other forms of translation between different worlds, for instance those connected through the Mediterranean, whether they are done by specific translators (slaves, traders, migrants, travellers) or through more banal dynamics of exchange, displacement, exile, travel and so on (see the contributions in Dakhli and Kaiser 2013). History precisely enables us to provincialize (Chakrabarty 2000: 43) the international as something that both needs to be problematized as a specific imaginary about how different entities are not only constituted as such – states, societies, cultures, collective identities, and so on – but also, and maybe more importantly, how they are related to one another conceptually and hierarchically in a specific temporality: the international as a specific unfolding of selected events. This specific unfolding organises – and thus hierarchizes, prioritizes, erases, ignores, and so on – different historiographic rationalities usually according to a dominant one, the latter being at the source of this historiographic operation.

This is not to say that history is relative, for history is about “truth”, in the sense that history is about assembling together evidences, retrievable in various verifiable documents (in its extensive sense), into facts that can only take shape by being assembled to answer a specific research question (Veyne 1971/1978). But rather, that facing a multiplicity of historiographic rationalities and an almost unlimited possibility as to how they can be connected (see Subrahmanyam 1997), history as an analytical mind-set enables us to take distance from the naturalizing and homogenizing effects of the western and modernist historiographical operation as it has been performed from one specific location (in terms of “level of analysis” such as the state, geography such as Europe, gender such as male, class such as the bourgeoisie, and so on). This specific historiographical operation has taken the shape in International Relations (the discipline) and largely in international studies of a specific form of international history the centre of which was the modern nation-state and the shape of which was the diffusion/imposition of this specific mode of governing space and time to other parts of the world and to other historiographic rationalities. While there is no denying that an important part of the current shape of the international is reflected by this specific historiographic operation, the past, as Jean Racine (1697: 9) put it in his second preface to the tragedy *Bajazet*, is also this resource that is a form of spatial decentring. Spatial in the context of this short piece is meant beyond geographical location and more reflective of a specific situation, or situatedness to use Donna Haraway’s concept (1988). And my argument ultimately is that to speak about the international is to speak about it from its multiple situatedness.

As an analytical mind-set, history enables us not only to understand why the international has taken the shape it now possesses but also how; in other words, historicizing the international also is an operation for identifying what is left outside the dominant historiographical rationality and thus an operation of retrieving what is silenced from the later. To put it differently, history is a resource to identify the silences in our own historiographical rationality and how others have been silenced through a specific European/western/male/white/bourgeois historiographic operation. One has only to turn to gender or postcolonial studies and how they have enabled us to think about history beyond its male-situatedness (see Scott 1999) or its euro/western-situatedness (see Chakrabarty 2000) to understand that there are other ways to construct what is the international because the latter is not necessarily linked, as a historical object, to inter-state relations (in terms of war or diplomacy) or to an historical sociology of the state. This short discussion can only finish on a call for the reinforcement and development of different historiographic approaches to the international precisely because only this diversity of outlook about the international can engage with the latter’s core “essence”: a specific historical construction, that is reflective of a multitude of facts that can only be associated together via a specific problematization of what this international actually is constituted by and by whom.

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