

The Situatedness of Social Practices and the Writing of Violence in IR

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JOÃO TERRENAS, APR 3 2015

What is at Stake in Defining the 'Nature' of IR? The Situatedness of Social Practices and the Writing of Violence

Situating the Stakes

One of the most challenging tasks for all of us as social actors is that of understanding ourselves, making sense of who we are and the world around us. In fact, how we perceive ourselves is always lying in that dialectical (or dialogical) space in-between reminiscence and expectation, past and future, history and projection, memory and forgetfulness (Ricoeur, 2000), ready to be mobilized as a resource to handle the world. When challenged by contingent or structural change, individuals are driven to reflect over the connection between past and future, self and world, and then readjust. Individuals experience the need to be retrospective whenever the sense of 'being oneself' is threatened by social structures or other agents/actors. In brief, a 'coherent' imbrication weaving together perceptions of the past and expectations for the future is key to make sense of who we are, how our identity and interests relate to the social world, and what grounds us there as autonomous selves.

Self-reflection then can be perceived as an adaptive device vis-à-vis social change whereby selves are produced and which, in turn, they produce in an intersubjective manner. And yet, consciousness, reflexivity and identity are not only first order resources among individuals but also strategic resources for social structures. By aggregating a multiplicity of selves and reproducing through dynamic interactions, social structures also depend on consciousness, reflexivity, and identity production for self-understanding and adaptation to challenges that may threaten their self-reproduction. Like individuals, social structures get structured on the basis of perceptions of what they are and where they are going to, and hence disseminate 'coherent' narratives in order to give meaning to such processes, enhance strategic interaction, and secure ontological certainty (see Suganami, 1999).

Scientific fields or academic disciplines, as distinctive social structures in that they enable and constrain the (always situated) production of knowledge, are spaces of interplay and negotiation among multiple selves where contending narratives struggle to present a coherent idea of knowledge, shaping purpose, object, and method. Leaving aside commonsensical understandings framing them as unquestionable loci of knowledge production, and adopting here a clear sociological gaze, academic disciplines can be said to be complex social playgrounds: 'fields', 'domains' even 'realms' where agonistic identities and interests, perceptions and expectations interact and compete in a discursive manner to legitimize their epistemic privilege according to (or against) the scientific cannon. Such narratives are the resources enabling disciplines to (re)produce; they are crisscrossing forces operating at the intersection of social structure (the field itself) and the environment surrounding the field (the social world), thereby vying to discipline disciplines in a succession of revolutions and periods of normal science (Kuhn, 1962).

Consequently, legitimacy is what all competing narratives pursue since legitimate narratives come to be those with the power to (re)define 'fields' and (re)interpret the cannons of knowledge production according to a scientific truth. As Alain Badiou has stressed, 'science' (like love, art, and politics) is in itself a truth procedure, i.e. it produces truth (not unifiable in a metaphysical system) in the process of pursuing it (Badiou, 1988). Therefore, understanding an academic 'field' or 'realm' entails knowing first and foremost who is claiming it by exploring which perceptions and interests underpin the competing narratives building up its (social) knowledge structure as a condition for 'truth'.

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Understanding a 'field' thus demands proceeding along the very critical lines established by Cox (1981), i.e. asking who the 'field' is for and for what purpose – whose truth it reifies – beyond the tacit neutrality of knowledge production. In this vein, History and Sociology turn into self-reflexive tools at the service of a kind of Foucauldian archeology of 'scientific' knowledge (Foucault, 1969), helpful in understanding the mutual constitution of disciplines and selves in the production of purpose, object and method.

In parallel, and in a Bourdieusian sense, such a 'reflexive reflex' enhances the autonomy of social sciences by assisting them in the unveiling of the 'structuring structures' of knowledge production (Bourdieu, 2004). Understanding the self-understandings of academic and scientific 'fields' is pivotal in the unveiling of their normative assumptions and commitments, and for that reason, their role in either complying with or resisting the reproduction of broader social discourses, configurations or structures. Exploring the discursive production of disciplinary purpose, object, and method tells us what fields are for but also exposes the fault lines and flaws that rebuff claims of absolute coherence and truth. In a Žižekian sense, what stands out from a critical and reflexive gaze is not 'objective' truth, "but the self-relating truth about one's own subjective positions; as such, it is an engaged truth, measured not by its factual accuracy but by the way it affects the subjective position of enunciation" (Žižek, 2011: xiii).

Reflexivity then is a tool to be mobilized in the production of more conscious understandings of the social world and for the emancipation (autonomy) of subjects and social sciences. It also allows the knower to grasp the intersubjective and contingent condition (instead of nature) of every 'field' (more so within the social sciences) and what makes the process of knowing one of constitution instead of natural causation. Producing knowledge on the social world cannot be separated from the social world itself; knowledge is shaped by and (re)shapes the object it seeks to unveil, in what turns it into a situated phenomenon, i.e. product and producer of social orders. As a result, reflecting upon the process of 'knowing' raises broader ethical concerns and debates about the complicity between knowledge and power. In this sense, 'knowing how we know' (Wæver, 2009) turns into a privileged locus for questioning the reification of social orders, the (re)production of social inequalities and privileges, the criminalization of certain forms of violence and the legitimization of others, and the routinization of exclusion and subjection as crucial practices in the ordering of the 'political'. In brief, it is a technique for unveiling the normative underpinnings of dominant social structures, and how knowledge is complicit in the normalization and routinization of specific forms of truth as domination.

It is within this broader context that we ought to ground the specific problematiques guiding this essay in answering the two questions that work as starting point. Asking what the nature of the 'field' or 'realm' of IR is amounts to questioning what IR is for and leads subsequently to exploring what is at stake – the purpose, the interests – in the social practices that end up defining the 'realm' in a discursive manner. By framing the question this way, this essay assumes that a basic divide regarding notions of what IR is and what it is for separates positivist from post-positivist approaches and that ascribing an intrinsic nature (or otherwise) to 'IR' is contingent upon the epistemic standpoints that ground competing conceptions of social science. On the one hand, positivist approaches take empiric international relations to be a fixed or ahistorical domain ruled by natural and unchanging laws. Academic IR is, therefore, assumed to be the locus from which to uncover truth, i.e. to produce knowledge in a neutral way about an object 'out there' and uncover the universal laws of causality linking agents and structures.

On the other hand, post-positivist accounts of the 'international' assume the contingent, situated and discursive character of the social world and question the connections between knowledge and interests to challenge the possibility of a neutral, objective knowledge. IR is thus deprived of an intrinsic nature and becomes contingent upon the discursive practices of specific individuals and institutions acting according to specific social identities, purposes and interests. Arguably, post-positivist academics have been privileging IR as a locus for critique and reflexivity upon the very practices of knowledge production about the 'international'; against mere problem-solving and aiming at uncovering and changing all forms of exclusion, inequality, and power relations (George, 1994; Walker 1997). This is probably the crucial divide today separating understandings of IR as an academic 'field'. And yet, what stands out from exploring IR's self-images as a discipline is that "[i]t is a domain defined by its own practices [and that] our rationalization of the international is itself constitutive of that practice" (Smith, 1995: 3). Drawing on Steve Smith then, exploring the stakes of defining IR as a field – the locus of knowledge production about the 'international' – implies exploring what the self-images of the discipline in fact tell about us all as knowers, or knowledge producers, situated

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in different social-institutional settings.

In line with the arguments introduced so far, the essay shall now focus on a number of non-positivist voices that privilege interpretation over explanation, critique over problem-solving and situatedness over neutrality in order to advance a more refined rendering of how the field has been constituted discursively. From them, it intends to seize the critical ideas allowing for the conclusion about the condition of academic IR (instead of its nature) as a situated structure of knowledge and what is at stake in the complex social processes that end up defining what the 'international' is and how to study it. By opting for 'condition' instead of 'nature' the essay intends to stress historicity in Walker's sense, i.e. "the historically constructed and continually reconstructed character of human existence" (Walker, 1995: 307), thereby endorsing a de-essentialized and open-ended approach to the 'Realm' (of IR).

Situating the Social Practices of Writing IR

A starting point for understanding the condition of IR as a situated structure of knowledge is definitively Stanley Hoffmann's "An American Social Science: International Relations." Written in 1977, this article uncovers the connection between the emerging discipline within Political Science and broader social transformations in the United States after WWII. What Hoffman does is unveil the geography of knowledge production underlying the very foundational claims of IR and the normative assumptions that go with it. The author maps academic IR in the US as a product of the (i) intellectual predispositions, (ii) political circumstances, and (iii) institutional opportunities located in the US political environment after the war.

As the argument goes, intellectual predispositions were linked to a certain celebratory mood in the social sciences based on 'the conviction [...] that all problems can be resolved [by using] the scientific method' (Hoffman, 1995: 219). The broader implications of this claim to the forging of IR lead us to the crucial divide between critique and problem-solving introduced later by Robert Cox (1981). As illustrated by both authors, the conviction that all problems can be solved is a sign of positivist IR, which has led to accept that social science can/should produce non-normative and universal knowledge claims developed through the systematization of hypothesis validated through empirical testing. While Hoffman saw this feature as an outcome of a broader instrumentalization of social science in the achievement of 'progress,' Cox (1981) argues that such epistemological stance serves the purpose of specific social forces, assisting in the social management of reality. In brief, Cox claims that positivist accounts are political tools mobilized to solve specific problems and enabling "relationships and institutions to work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble" (Cox and Sinclair 1996: 88). Therefore, what Hoffman frames as innocuous and neutral faith in progress, when viewed with Cox's lenses assumes the form of a 'scientific' instrument complicit with the reification of certain social arrangements, i.e. always serving someone and some purpose.

Claims like these also relate to the political circumstances identified by Hoffman. According to positivist cannons, the emergence of IR was due also to the success achieved by economics in providing adequate answers to contingent political needs. Under a critical gaze though, this feature clarifies the structural colonization by the economic sciences and their methodological resources of fields such as the political sciences, patent in recurrent arguments and claims used by traditional IR theories (rational choice and game theories, microeconomics, utility). Arguably, to consider circumstances is useful in understanding IR's conceptual obsession with power (which replaces the role of money in economic theory), reason, and explanation over sensitivity and interpretation in dominant accounts of the 'political' and, ultimately, the approach to theorizing as a quest for universal laws governing the social world, or what Hoffman describes as the 'chimera of the masterkey' (1995: 219).

Hoffman's argument is also helpful in exposing the complicity between power and knowledge production. Focusing on the contingent evolution of the discipline, it is possible to understand the 'chronological convergence' of developments within the academic IR and US foreign policy needs. By providing an 'intellectual compass' to justify the political options and a guide to the international strategic challenges facing the US, IR could be mobilized as a political tool ready to explain the need to "[e]xorcise isolationism, and justify the permanent involvement in world affairs; rationalize the accumulation of power, the techniques of intervention, and the methods of containment" (1995: 223).

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Critically enough, one can grasp through Hoffman how the convergence of IR and American scientific culture and political needs was enabled by the institutional opportunities provided by the American academic setting. On the one hand, the post-War emigration wave brought trained social scientists into the American intellectual milieu, eager “to find the meaning and the causes of the catastrophe that had uprooted them” (1995: 221) and, therefore, favouring an academic enterprise putting ‘violence’ and ‘war’ as foundational problematiques. On the other hand, recurrent interactions between academic and policy-making circles, the financial independence of universities, the increasing specialization of scholars and the competitive research environment within which they interacted made the US the privileged setting for the flourishing of IR as a separate ‘field’ and US foreign policy needs the ‘right’ incentive for the hierarchization of research programmes. Ultimately, this argument unveils how pragmatic political needs, social perceptions, and American normative commitments came to be universalized, framing IR as an ‘international’ science but privileging specific geo-epistemological guidelines reflecting specific political interests and cultural-strategic identities. Even more relevant for this essay, and by exposing situatedness to the full, this argument allows us to start de-essentializing foundational claims and myths upon which traditional conceptions of IR have been grounded. Drawing on Smith (1995) and Schmidt (1998), the historiography of IR gets grounded on situated categorizations that always create privilege, “that is to say primary and dominant, understandings and interpretations” (Smith, 1995: 1).

Arguably, the significance of Hoffman’s article is that it opened new pathways for re-thinking the social practices of writing IR. The bottom line here is not just that academic IR has always reflected situated and contingent interests and identities and that disciplinary practices are always complicit in broader social discourses. More critically, the argument draws our attention to the fact that whoever defines what IR is does so by validating their epistemological choices of the field as a social science, thereby shaping not only the questions to be asked but also how to proceed to give answers to them. By unveiling how the field’s boundaries have been drawn up discursively, a critical approach has the power to reveal IR’s responsibility in broader social practices and to expose, as Hoffmann put it, the ethical closure of trying “to know as much as we needed in order to act – and rarely more” (1995: 238).

Situating the Institutionalization of Writing Violence

The following critical knot in enquiring about the condition of IR as a situated structure of knowledge stands out from the writings of Steve Smith. Delving into the significance of Bauman’s comments on Sociology’s silence about the Holocaust, he has emphasized the crucial epistemic lack in IR as the dismissal of the link between social practice and the constitution of social knowledge. Re-reading the positivist credo about a value free, detached, and neutral science of IR, separating theoretical reasoning from the ‘unreason’ of international anarchy, Smith deems silences to be the discipline’s loudest voices: “just as sociology remains silent about the Holocaust, so international theory remains silent about massive areas of the social reality of the international [...]” (Smith, 1995: 2). In his 2003 ISA Presidential Address, amidst the global war on terror, the author underlined the connection between ethical commitments and theoretical perspectives, thereby disclosing the way some of IR’s foundational claims and myths have made the discipline complicit with distinctive forms of violence. The overarching claim is that violence, as a situated concept, has specific historical and cultural underpinnings and as structuring feature of the social world is built up via the ordering practices that frame and are framed by the disciplinary boundaries of ‘scientific’ enquiry. Smith’s claim captures the full significance of broader social discourses in the reification and legitimization of a specific knowledge field (with its object, method and purpose) in what recalls Brian Schmidt’s argument about the political discourse of anarchy (Schmidt 1998). For the latter, IR has always been guided by a rendering of politics devoid of central authority – anarchy – which has put violence at the center of debates about the ‘international.’ According to Schmidt, the problematique of anarchy “is not an external category of historical description, but an idea that has served as a connecting discursive thread throughout the field’s evolution” (1998: 16).

Drawing on Smith, and taking my argument further, it can be argued that distinctive notions of violence rest on underlying structural divides both delimiting and legitimizing the borders of knowledge production in IR, or what Smith calls “the disciplining power of the border” (2004: 504). Violence is then perceived along ontological rifts separating economics from politics, ‘inside’ from ‘outside’ and public from private spheres. Accordingly, the implications of the positivist tradition structuring the field are inherent in the restricted understandings of violence that have rendered IR complicit with more pervasive violent practices while representing the former as scientific, neutral,

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universal, and value free (Smith, 2004: 499-500).

It is against such 'scientific' discourses reifying the nature of IR and its object as something 'out there' that Smith argues that the social world is shaped (and should be understood) by resorting to notions of "negotiation, perspective and understanding" (2004: 499). Furthermore, Smith's argument is unambiguous about what is at stake in defining the 'nature' of a field and how emphasizing the situatedness of violence ultimately structures international relations as an empirical realm and IR as academic field with a fixed nature. All discourses reifying the 'nature' of the field according to the 'scientific' cannon (instead of its open condition) privilege and legitimize implicitly specific epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies over others, thereby defining, in an exclusive way, what can and cannot be known as IR. They structure the discipline along hegemonic social interests and ultimately render the discipline a tool of dominant social forces, thereby silencing the particular forms of violence and exclusion they inflict upon the world. Arguably, the agonistic process of defining the field is particularly acute in IR since "there is no possibility of a neutral observation of the world of international relations; all engagement is partial, all engagement carries with it a set of ethical consequences that rest, in the final analysis, on violence" (Smith, 2004: 504).

In close conversation with Smith's argument about exclusion as epistemological violence, and Walker's argument about the 'inside/outside' tension (1993), one must turn to Ole Wæver when he portrays academic disciplines as loci of interaction of social and intellectual structures, and IR as a distinctive field where "[b]oundary drawing is usually less about actually ensuring the continuation of IR than it is a part of power struggles within the discipline about who are to be excluded/included" (Wæver, 2009: 310). Arguably then, more than the merits (or the 'scientific truth') of knowledge itself, the stakes in ontological and epistemological struggles within IR have to do with more basic power and boundary politics (inclusion versus exclusion) for control over an intellectual 'realm' viewed as a piece of land. Drawing on Weaver, it must be underlined that this 'realm' reflects the changing shape of its two distinctive structures, social and intellectual. The former is embodied in universities, academic journals, and institutions while its "central social mechanism of organization [...] lies in the control by theorists of the leading journals" (2009: 307). Competing theories, paradigms and methods form the bulk of the latter, whose main structuring structure consists in the "recurring 'great debates'" (2009: 307).

The 'Realm': IR as a Situated Knowledge Structure

Writing international relations scientifically (and IR, for that matter), as the positivist argument goes, can never be a biased exercise. And yet, narratives of the 'international' appear to be spatial framings of political life (Walker, 1995: 309) with practical consequences both in the social world and the production of IR as political 'realm'. Harm, the routinization of violence and the reification of social orders have been occluded by the alleged neutrality that positivist accounts still claim to provide.

In the course of the argument, it became clearer how traditional IR has been complicit with the very social forces that have shaped its discourse and how IR's own historiography and self-image have often colluded with great powers (especially the US), dominant interests and attitudes towards the world. The 'realm' and its dominant voices can be located in specific social and institutional contexts, privileging particular geo-epistemological cannons (distinctive cosmologies and rationales of knowing) and often resorting to brute reality (direct, structural or cultural violence) or immutable essences and necessity to impose and reify their boundaries. And yet, as Walker (1995) reveals, the stakes are high and no political life is imaginable without 'deployments of metaphysics.' In fact, what hides behind the alleged neutral and scientific claims about reality and necessity is that "they depend on, and work to affirm, a very restricted repertoire of metaphysical possibilities, while pleading innocence of all metaphysical responsibilities and thus of all responsibility" (Walker, 1995: 311).

The bottom line is that addressing 'field' questions and the stakes thereof requires reflection upon the self-understandings of IR in order to make explicit "the relationship between social power and questions of what, and how, we study international relations" (2004: 499). In the Bourdieusian grammar, it takes a critical stance to "objectivate the subject of the objectivation" (Bourdieu 2004: 86) and uncover the way the imputation of a tacit 'nature' to IR produces insidious material and moral effects, closing the discipline unto itself and to relevant areas of the social world. After all, reflexivity becomes a much needed exercise for exposing foundational myths and

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disclosing institutional contingency, i.e. how the boundaries of academic IR mirror “more than categories in the organization of knowledge” (Wæver, 2009: 309). It becomes as well the tool to be mobilized on behalf of the critique of exclusivist power-knowledge relations and the consequent opening up of the ‘realm’ to a multiplicity of unheard, absent and excluded voices. Hence, to intellectual quarters avid for self-awareness and committed to disclosing all ethical implications of writing-cum-doing IR, the crux of the matter lies in that:

The challenge is not to achieve knowledge, but how to understand the multiplicity of it, and this is only possible when we understand both the world and the processes through which our understanding of it came about. By knowing how we know, we know more about what we know (Wæver, 2009: 318).

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