

International Political Sociology Contributions to International Relations

Written by Hidayet Çilkoparan

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

International Political Sociology Contributions to International Relations

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/05/23/international-political-sociology-contributions-to-international-relations/>

HIDAYET ÇILKOPARAN, MAY 23 2020

International Political Sociology (IPS) based on the famous French philosopher Michel Foucault, offers a different lens to see global politics and explain it. At the outset, I must register my personal view that I do not agree with those who criticize the Foucauldian IR and accuse the Foucauldian scholars of overstressing Foucault's philosophy to explain the international, while Foucault himself expressed limited views on this field. Such criticism, in my view, runs counter to scientific innovation and creativity. In fact, a similar criticism may be made against Marxism as well. As in the international field, in the discipline of IR as well the "anarchy" prevails (and it is good so); that is, there is no higher authority above the scholars to dictate them what to consider, what not to pay attention. In this respect, the main argument of this paper is that the terminological riches of the Foucauldian philosophy and its application to global politics promise fresh contributions to the IR discipline and the study of global politics. Given the debate on the need to broaden and deepen the IR areas of interests, the Foucauldian IR may offer some new perspectives and tools to that end as well. Having noted these views, I now turn to analyze what IPS has to offer to the study of global politics, terminologically, methodologically, and substantively.

Methodological and Terminological Contributions

It may be useful to start by referring to the security studies within the IR scholarship. Regarding security terminology, Ken Booth argues that security scholars keep inventing new terms and consume them and try or need to produce new ones in a continuous cycle (Booth, 1991). I tend to believe that this observation applies to the IR discipline as a whole. To remain interesting and keep its explanatory power, IR scholars of various theoretical strands continually push the limits of their creativity and innovativeness to come up with new terminology to describe and explain different aspects of global politics.

Michel Foucault was innovative in terms of bringing about his original terminological glossary. Accordingly, IPS reflects his productivity and that of the Foucauldian scholarship and offers a broad set of terminology that can enrich the terminological toolbox at the disposal of IR scholars. These include, but are not limited to, subjectification, dividing practices, responsabilization, governmentality, government rationality, governing through freedom / at a distance, political technology, dispositif, power based on its unique types (sovereign, disciplinary, biopolitics), resistance, reversibility, biosecurity, surveillance, panopticon, docility and utility, the conduct of conduct, counter-conduct and state racism.

Methodologically the Foucauldian discourse of genealogy may also serve the IR scholarship well. It may be useful to shift the attention of the IR scholarship from macro issues to micro/mundane practices, international/global regimes of practices, in a historical context. Baert notes that in the 1970s, Foucault switches from archaeology to genealogy and "the genealogist, in Foucault's view, travels back in time aiming to demonstrate that at some point radically new concepts were assigned to concepts". Baert further argues that "genealogy undercuts the present in several ways and draws attention to a consequence of this understanding", which is formulated by Foucault as *the present has not always been*". (Baert, 2010). In this regard, as done by Steve Smith in *The Self-Images of a Discipline: A Genealogy of International Relations Theory (1995)*, the genealogical approach is useful for IR as well to understand the historical evolution of concepts, theories, paradigms, so on.

International Political Sociology Contributions to International Relations

Written by Hidayet Çilkoparan

Substantive Contributions: Looking Through a Different Lens

When asked about why he stayed away from focussing on state theory, Foucault replied by describing such an engagement as “indigestible meal”. The fact that he has paid limited attention to global politics may be an indicator of his perception of this field as yet another “indigestible meal”. Due to his distance to global politics, the Foucauldian scholarship has had to hermeneutically apply his views and concepts to global politics and according to some critics, to refute the assumptions of realism (Selby, 2007). Gradual attenuation of the state as the dominant actor in global politics may open up more space for the application of governmentality.

Michel Foucault explains the transition from the concept of disciplinary power, exercised by the sovereign on the individuals, to the practice of biopower (biopolitics) applied in a generalized fashion on the entire population. While doing this, he notes his observation that this transition of practice was accompanied by the adjustment of the terminology as follows: Instead of “taking life”, “letting die” and instead of “letting live”, “making live” (Foucault, 2003). Giorgio Agamben, on the other hand, argues that “all power rests ultimately on the ability of the one to take the life of another” (Rabinow and Rose, 2006). I tend not to share this view as a global understanding, because I believe that history is progressive, and humanity has drawn many lessons from the practices of the authoritarian and repressive regimes.

Today, despite some circumstantial setbacks it faces, globalization is a key phenomenon that can facilitate the global application of governmentality and open space for the contributions of IPS to the study of global politics. In fact, in *Globalisation, Governmentality and Global Politics*, Lipschutz notes that “globalization moves fast and impacts on the life of all nations with accelerating force”. In this respect, he underlines “the importance of politics centred on the direct participation of the individual in social choices that affect the quality of life, working conditions and the global future” (Lipschutz, 2005). All these, in my view, call for closer attention to possible contributions of IPS.

In this regard, M. Dean argues that “ultimately government/governmentality is about the *“conduct of conduct”*, which means to shape the behaviours and actions of people, according to a defined set of norms and variety of ends”. In his view, “government in the final analysis aims to ensure happiness and prosperity of the population”. In this respect, the notion of population plays a key role, as the government claims to encompass “each and all” (Dean, 1999). In this sense, Jaeger argues that the reform process in the United Nations (UN) in 2004-2005 aimed to re-design the UN in such a way that it pursues a rationality to manage and regulate the global population. In this regard, he further noted that, based on the Foucauldian concepts of biopolitics and governmentality, “the vitality, security and productivity of global population would become a fundamental objective, displacing the state sovereignty” (Jaeger, 2010). In this connection, Hindess argues that “neo-liberal international system closely linked the government of populations within states with the government of states within the international arena” (Hindess, 2002). The population replaced the family as the model of government (Foucault, 1991).

Regarding international security, a debate has been carried out based on the concept of (global) risk society, which was coined by Ulrich Beck after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Some scholars find this new concept as an overstatement and argue that the ‘war on terror’ is “a new form of governmentality. In their view, this new security approach combines “knowledge and decision at the limit of knowledge, war and strategies of surveillance, injunctions to integration and drastic policies against anti-social behaviour” (Aradau and Van Münster, 2007).

As far as human rights are concerned, Foucault is not considered as “a theorist of human rights in the conventional sense”. Foucauldian discourse of human rights rests upon “several disparate figures such as rights as ungrounded and illimitable, rights as the strategic instrument-effect of political struggle and rights as a performative mechanism of community”. Accordingly, the Foucauldian approach to human rights is described as “a *critical affirmation*, which refers to neither a full embrace nor a total rejection of human rights”. In essence, for Foucault, rights discourse should enable the creation of new rights as a result of social/communal dynamics (Golder, 2011).

Challenges and Obstacles Before the Foucauldian IR

David Chandler claims that the concept of “global governmentality” does not rest on a sound basis; it is hollow and

International Political Sociology Contributions to International Relations

Written by Hidayet Çilkoparan

not meaningfully applicable to the international politics, which is significantly different from the national domestic political, social and economic environment (Chandler, 2009). On the other hand, Kiersey argues that the concept of governmentality is not hollow and can find some room for applicability to the international domain as well (Kiersey, 2009). In the opinion of Jonathan Joseph, Foucault's concept of governmentality faces limitations as a social theoretical explanation and also as an account of the international domain. In this respect, he underlines, as a major limitation, "the unevenness of the international domain in terms of social and political development and argues that governmentality can be meaningfully applied only to those countries and areas, where governmental techniques based an advanced form of liberalism prevail". In the efforts to introduce governmentality in Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Afghanistan, Joseph argues that the lack of a liberal capitalist social base to encourage the self-regulation of populations has been indicated as a major reason for failure (Joseph, 2010).

Selby believes that "for IR's narrow engagement with Foucault derives from the distinctive problems of internationalizing a thinker whose focus was primarily on the domestic social arena". In his view, the "traditional concerns of international relations theory seem a long way from Foucault's preoccupation with the micro-politics of power relations and subjectivity". Therefore, the scaling up of Foucault from the domestic liberal arena onto a global plane, where realist dynamics remain strong, Selby argues, is problematic and in such an attempt, "the world system's its unity, evenness and indivisibility" should also be considered. Because the contemporary world order has not been fully liberalized, there are limits to the internationalization of Foucault within IR theory. (Selby, 2007)

Similarly, Sam Ashman, a Marxist political economist argues that "the global accumulation process leads not to the evening up of economic differences predicted by neoclassical theory, but rather to the spatial concentration of investment, markets and skilled labour in certain privileged regions of world economy" (Callinicos, 2010). Given this, there seems to be a need to overcome the obstacle of the uneven development of state and civil society around the world (Joseph, 2010). Future development and coherence of a global civil society may be helpful for further elaboration and extension of Foucauldian IR to broader geographies. In this respect, Nancy Fraser argues for the existence of "a *multilayered system of globalized governmentality*". Based on Fraser's argument, the author thinks that the concept of different scales and layers of governmentality is helpful in pointing to the unevenness of the international (Joseph, 2010). I find this observation and suggestion realistic and reasonable. In fact, even within the EU, an advanced form of regional integration, sometimes it is debated whether the integration process should continue at multiple speeds because member states have different capacities of development and adaptation. François Debrix suggests that by taking the Foucauldian notion of "panoptic regimes of governance" to heart, "a different approach to the problem of social order in international relations can be introduced" (Debrix, 1999).

Conclusion

IPS needs to pay attention to the theoretical diversity within the discipline of IR. As there is no grand theory of IR to explain everything in international relations/global politics, the IR discipline carries out its studies based on a disciplinary multiplicity. This inevitably leads to theoretical pluralism which some IR scholars have been trying to overcome through several methods like eclecticism and integrative pluralism, but so far with not much success. In this respect, the Foucauldian IR may find its niche and place in this theoretically diverse discipline and demonstrate its usefulness in explaining global politics through an alternative lens. The critique of dealing with "how" of the global politics, instead of "why" of it appears worth considering from a theoretical perspective. Joseph seems to suggest an eclectic solution to address this issue. In this regard, Joseph argues that "while the neo-Gramscian approach tells us a lot about neoliberalism's social and historical context, governmentality tells us more about its rationality" (Joseph, 2010). The critique of dealing with "how" of the global politics, instead of "why" of it appears worth considering from a theoretical perspective. Joseph seems to suggest an eclectic solution to address this issue. In this regard, Joseph argues that "while the neo-Gramscian approach tells us a lot about neoliberalism's social and historical context, governmentality tells us more about its rationality" (Joseph, 2010).

The traditional mainstream IR theories, particularly realism, are often criticized for not paying enough attention to the society and social aspects of global politics. In this respect, IPS may be helpful, together with scientific realism, constructivism and World Historical Sociology, so on, to fill this important shortcoming of IR discipline. Such an approach may be useful to link the domestic social with the international in a new way. In such an effort, the

International Political Sociology Contributions to International Relations

Written by Hidayet Çilkoparan

Foucauldian IR scholarship needs to consider taking bolder steps and start engaging with not only liberalism/neoliberalism but with Marxism, realism and other major IR theories as well. Many Foucauldian terms have already found their way into the IR glossary. For instance, “counter-conduct” is a term used to describe the movements which seek a different form of conduct (Dean, 1999). In this regard, global movements that can be described as counter-conduct like a recent movement protesting the violence against women or difficulty of access to drugs used against infectious diseases (Braun, 2007). Similarly, some scholars argue that, when applied under the Foucauldian notion of ‘dispositif,’ ‘precautionary risk and risk analysis’ would serve as “helpful conceptual tools to explain various security practices put in place by different countries after the 9/11 attacks” (Aradau and Van Münster, 2007).

Antonio Gramsci wrote that “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms” (Booth, 1991). In the context of the IPS’ contribution to the study of global politics, it may be the case that Gramsci’s “the new to be born” represents an ideal model of global governmentality and the Foucauldian IR would be the most suitable approach to explain the global politics in the future. In fact, governmentality is an alternative understanding of political power, which “seeks to draw attention to a different way of thinking and acting about the ways and means to know and govern the wealth, health and happiness of populations” (Rose and Miller, 1992).

Regarding the issue of rights, Foucault’s understanding to keep the development of new rights possible and open-ended, in my view, is a reasonable and useful approach. In this respect, the right of individuals to intervene in international affairs, in fact, exercised in one way or another, represents a good example. As the post-territorial global civil society gets stronger and more effective, some other new (post-)human rights, like the right to a stable and predictable climate, may also emerge so that the behaviours of states and all other actors. Damaging the climate can be constrained not only through mitigation and adaptation, but if necessary, by precautionary security measures.

On the other hand, critical appraisals of the IPS should also be taken and engaged with seriously. For instance, M. G. E. Kelly argues that “the *global governmentality* perspective is far from unitary, because of the ambiguities in the term *governmentality* as developed by Foucault” (Kelly, 2010). Also, Joseph argues critically, that “the absence of an international equivalent of the state to apply the micro-practices of governmentality in different parts of the world seems like another problem and moreover, even though civil society plays key roles in governmentality, the existence of a global civil society remains a contested point” (Joseph, 2010). There are several other scholars who also critique the Foucauldian IR in several ways.

In this regard, one important risk for the Foucauldian IR scholarship is the apparent close association of governmentality with the neoliberal government model. The Foucauldian scholarship may do itself a favour by giving some thought to how to decouple their scholarly efforts from this contemporary model of government. This way, the Foucauldian IR can continue to exist even after neoliberalism becomes an outdated political fashion someday in the future. The main objective of the Foucauldian IR, I would suggest, should be to clearly present the possible original contributions to the IR discipline in understanding and explaining global politics. Only this way the Foucauldian IR can prove its explanatory (and maybe also constitutive power) and its place among many IR theories and be regarded as a “new lens” through which one can see and interpret the world politics in a different way.

Reference List

Aradau, C., & Van Munster, R. (2007). Governing Terrorism Through Risk: Taking Precautions, (un)Knowing the Future. *European Journal of International Relations*, 13(1), 89-115.

Baert, P. (2010). *Social theory in the twentieth century and beyond* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Malden, MA : Polity, 185-214.

Booth, Ken, (1991). Security and Emancipation, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Oct., 1991), pp. 313-326, Cambridge University Press.

International Political Sociology Contributions to International Relations

Written by Hidayet Çilkoparan

- Braun, B. (2007). Biopolitics and the molecularization of life. *Cultural Geographies*, 14(1), 6–28.
- Chandler, D. (2009). Critiquing Liberal Cosmopolitanism? The Limits of the Biopolitical Approach. *International Political Sociology*, 3(1), 53–70.
- Callinicos, Alex (2010). "Does capitalism need a state system?", *Marxism and World Politics: Contesting Global Capitalism*, ed. by Alexander Anievas, Routledge.
- Dean, M. (1999). *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*. London: Sage, pp. 9-39.
- Debrix, François, (1999). Space Quest: Surveillance, Governance, and the Panoptic Eye of the United Nations, *Alternatives* 24 (1999), 269-294.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 87–104.
- Foucault, M. 2003 "Society must be Defended". *Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*. New York: Picador, pp. 239-63.
- Golder, B. (2011). Foucault's Critical (Yet Ambivalent) Affirmation: Three Figures of Rights. *Social & Legal Studies*, 20(3), 283–312.
- Hindess, B. (2002). Neo-liberal citizenship. *Citizenship Studies*, 6(2), 127-143.
- Jaeger, H.-M. (2010). UN reform, biopolitics, and global governmentality. *International Theory*, 2(1), 50-86.
- Joseph, J. (2010). The limits of governmentality: Social theory and the international. *European Journal of International Relations*, 16(2), 223–246.
- Kelly, M. G. E. (2010). International biopolitics: Foucault, globalization and imperialism. *Theoria*, 123, 1-26.
- Kiersey, N. J. (2009). Neoliberal Political Economy and the Subjectivity of Crisis: Why Governmentality is Not Hollow. *Global Society*, 23(4), 363–386.
- Lipschutz, Ronnie D. (with John K. Rowe), (2005). *Globalization, Governmentality and Global Politics: Regulation for the Rest of Us*, Routledge.
- Rose, N., & Miller, P. (1992). Political Power beyond the State: Problematics of Government. *British Journal of Sociology*, 43, 173–205.
- Selby, J. (2007). Engaging Foucault: Discourse, Liberal Governance and the Limits of Foucauldian IR. *International Relations*, 21(3), 324–345.
- Smith, Steve (1995). 'The Self-Images of a Discipline: A Genealogy of International Relations Theory', *International relations theory today*, ed. By Ken Booth and Steve Smith, Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1-37.

Featured image by Wood Chess – Disadvantages

About the author:

International Political Sociology Contributions to International Relations

Written by Hidayet ilkoparan

Hidayet ilkoparan is a PhD candidate at the Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara. He has vast diplomatic experience gained throughout his employment at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Ankara and several duty stations abroad. He worked in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna as an international staff member from 2006 to 2012. He received his Master's degree (MSc) from METU in October 2018. His master thesis is on European Security Challenges and Transatlantic Relations.