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The Intellectual Foundations of Global Studies

May 15, 2007 | Volume 1 | Issue 1
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The field of Global Studies is growing in institutional terms rather rapidly. Yet beyond an interest in interdisciplinarity, and a desire to go beyond the parameters of traditional international relations, the intellectual core, parameters or

central problematique of the field has not been very well defined. In one sense, this is a significant opportunity. Apropos to the spirit of Kuhn, much of the study of international relations (IR), and the social sciences in general, has fallen into often insular disciplinary debates. The "important" questions, and the tools to address those questions, are largely predetermined and deeply institutionalized. Yet it is not enough as a response to simply call for interdisciplinary work, but to define what that in a fundamental intellectual sense means, and what opportunities it provides analytically and, potentially, in policy terms. Global Studies is itself an opportunity as it allows us to think de novo-a primordial moment, as it were-unbound by disciplinary intellectual and institutional constraints. This is not simply an academic issue: the pressing global challenges-from the environmental to cultural conflict-demand much better analytical tools and, where possible, more effective policy.

Microeconomics had a fundamental impact on the study of international relations, through IR realism (and its focus on unitary agents and the ensuing international structural effects), and this in turn has framed the responses as well. So much so, we would suggest, that subsequent critiques have maintained the structural pivot from liberalism to constructivism to even poststructuralism. But in so doing, the field of international relations has (as have other social science fields) imported much of the limitations of mainline economics as well, limitations highlighted by the work of the Nobel Laureate in Economics Ronald Coase. For Coase, the study of economics concerns the substantive workings of the economic system, as opposed to the formal view where economics is, in essence, a set of versatile tools, detachable from the subject matter they apply to. Coase argued that the method should be defined by the substantive issue in question rather than the method defining the problem. Coase asks, "Do we concern ourselves not with the puzzles presented by the real economic world but with the puzzles presented by other economists' analysis?" By extension, that question can be applied to just about any social science.

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Crucial is the optic we apply to our study. The smoke and fire of internal disciplinary debates, such as that between neorealists and IR constructivists, hides the essentially shared optic of those trajectories of thought. In a curious way, the early

driver of the social sciences to be applicable to state and policy made it so ineffective for analysis-or policy. The stress on uniform first principles of human behavior, standardization, parsimony, simplification, universality and on "norms" and "means" led to blueprints for organizing forests to designing cities to agriculture to polities. Except in certain culturally appropriate conditions, this involved top-down planning and massive dislocation and suffering-notably, in the communist and fascist upheavals of the 20th century (so vividly described in James Scott's work). We social scientists have retained the tools and the optics, if not the ambitions or morals, of this foundation of the social sciences.

The problem is that optic is flawed analytically and for policy. Through first principles, uniform assumptions and abstracting and averaging human behavior, social science creates a method to simplify understanding of society. With a mighty hammer in hand, as the saying goes, we turn every problem into a nail. Ernst Mayr gets to the core of the problem when he notes, that of the some six billion individuals in the world no two individuals are the same, even identical twins: "It is this variation among the uniquely different individuals that has reality, while the statistical mean variation is an abstraction."

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The structural pivot of the social sciences, alluded to earlier, is critical to our collective astigmatism. Structures can be broken down to constituent parts. The parts are inorganic, and thus universal in their import. In the social sciences the constituent parts are variables. By pulling our variable of universal import—democracy, income, etc.—human entities can be broken down into constituent parts, but the scientific interest is in determining relationships. The assumption of universality and causal ties is endemic and impacts other methodologies as well. This needs little illustration in the assumptions and calculations of variants of realist theory, liberal institutionalist approaches, or in the democratic peace arguments.

The structural hammer extends to policy. Societies are "built," constitutions are proffered, uniform "best practices" are promoted-and have a long history of failure. Nations and their borders were created de novo in colonial Africa and we are still

living with the consequences, politically as well as economically. After the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, structural recipes were put forward (notably by Jeffrey Sachs) to transform centralized economies to free market economies. It was proposed that with the right structural changes—stock markets, private property, currency exchange, a legal system to match, etc.—the spirit of capitalism would flourish, regardless of the setting. But the results have been mixed and the approach was in effect ad hoc and indifferent to local cultural and social institutions.

Instead we suggest an optic that we refer to as "organic thinking." We comprehend our subject matter—in this case global and local relations—endogenously; where method is determined by the subject matter rather than the other way around; and to consider the concatenations of social and political relations in their own terms. Methodologically, this demands the careful study of the evolution of social forms on different scales, and the process whereby the form changed through contingency or adaptation; to study it as an "interactive" organism; to use a direct approach of study, focusing on the particular and the local (not assuming, for example, first principles as to human motivation); and delineating institutions on their own terms.

Organic thinking also does not presume, a priori, a structural kind of reductionism, by which complex structures and processes are broken down into component parts and then, as Stephen Jay Gould notes, seek to explain the complexity as a function of properties and laws regulating the parts. Nor are institutions necessarily presumed to be additive or linear, as opposed to non-linear (where the larger order cannot be deduced from considering the components separately). Reductionists claim that, if we understand the components sufficiently, we can still predict this form additively in a basically deterministic world. This is not to preclude one method or approach, but to use them as a function of the subject matter, not vice-versa. Gould notes, where molecular physics explains simple compounds, the physiology of individual neurons may not generate an adequate theory of memory. We must dispense with a one-size fits all approach.

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Against the mechanical and overly deterministic thinking embodied in the structural approach, organic thinking stresses the individuality of actors and institutions-their identity, relationships, and so on. Issues of trust and mistrust, for example, become central. Consider, for example, the finding of Stephen Cornell that in Indian reservations where there was a strong "cultural match" between the social form that existed prior to federal control, and the constitutional form of governance established under the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934, patterns of governance and economic development are relatively healthy. Where there is a mismatch, the results tend to be less salubrious. This illustrates the organic quality of society: in this case, the central importance of trust in (and legitimacy of) government.

We will tease out the practicalities of organic thinking, research and policy in a future article.

Tags

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