

# Introduction

---

Let me start with a fundamental question in social sciences: how can we consider social change by using always the same paradigms, even if they have from time to time been amended or adjusted? The international relations (IR) discipline was progressively created as a science after the First World War, but was really stabilized around its main theories and concepts just after 1945, at a time when power politics appeared as mostly efficient and even ethically good as it succeeded in delivering the world from the Nazi monster. At this time, the world population amounted to 2.5 billion people, the United Nations (UN) counted 51 members, the word “environment” was ignored ... Nowadays, we have moved from an international world to a global world: the world population amounts to more than 7.5 billion people, the UN is constituted by 193 members, Europe is no longer the battlefield of the world, while the main conflicts, international issues, social needs, threats to human security, and demographic pressures are located in the Global South. Power is becoming powerless, the US superpower does not win the wars and even weakness seems currently more efficient than power: is “weakness politics” about to be substituted for “power politics”?

## WHAT IS INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATISM?

Before arguing about this major and troubling transformation, let us consider the amazing conservatism impacting both science and political action. Obviously, IR has been enriched by new paradigms, like transnationalism, constructivism and post-modernism, but is the first of these able to really provide a new interpretation of the world or does it bring only a new dimension to the international arena by including new transnational relations? Do the two latter theories offer a new theory or are they more simply proposing a new epistemology? While the realist and liberal theories are still strongly dominant, Western political actors are reassured in their conservatism: they behave in a global world exactly as they did at the time of the Vienna Congress (1815). We find nowadays the same commitment to an oligarchic vision of the world: the G7 is

substituted for the European Concert; the nineteenth-century interventions in Europe or Near East are reproduced with the same faith (but not the same efficiency) in Vietnam, Iraq, Mali and Afghanistan; the main Western rulers stick to the idea that a new Waterloo (or a new Austerlitz) would be able to solve all the problems they face ... The more they try, the more they fail, but they persist in their error.

This last point deserves a special account: the international conservatism is not an accident in our contemporary history; it is even less a fact of individual incompetence: it is a major parameter of our current international arena. The present rulers of the old world fear that a new international order would trigger a loss of status, a kind of decline. The previous "Westphalian" system was invented by the Europeans, for the Europeans, and pretended to extend its norms and its rules to all the world for the sake of their own interests: changing it would mean sharing its resources and then losing a part of their preeminence. Conservatism is not only a matter of science: it is also a matter of strategy; it is not only a matter of emotion, but also of rationality.

When the IR discipline was constituted, its founding fathers forgot that social sciences were historical sciences, and they banished from their minds that a social fact is shaped in a particular historical context which makes it unique and creates it as an "historical individual" (Skocpol, 1984; Tilly, 1984). This failure to consider History is grave in IR, as this discipline must, by definition, take into account cultures and histories which cross each other at different moments inside the world arena. If we observe a micro-political object without taking into account its historical dimension, we take the risk of occulting its genesis and missing an important part of its explanation. But if we ignore the historical background of the international arena, we are currently running a double risk: that of providing a poor explanation of its genesis and misperceiving its nature and its way of working as we deliberately marginalize or even ignore the complex systems of meanings which are facing each other in every sequence of its operation.

## FOR AN HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

This persistent a-historical conception of IR theories can be explained by several factors: the behaviorist epistemology which was dominant just after the Second World War and throughout the Cold War, the euphoria of the 1945 victory which attributed to power politics a capacity which transcended any kind of temporality, and the new mission for containing

Soviet totalitarianism which immediately introduced an idea of continuity. But something much more important played the major role: the famous “Westphalian system” was then considered universal and permanent as it was deemed to be based on reason. Created and conceptualized by Hobbes and the Enlightenment philosophers, all its thinkers and actors were sincerely convinced that it was a product of human progress, independently from any cultural context. The Westphalian system was clearly *monocultural* as it is trivially the case for the major part of social facts, but it was commonly perceived as *transcultural*. This misperception was obviously enlarged to the whole IR conceptual system. In his major book, probably founding the scientific identity of IR, Hans Morgenthau admitted the plurality of morals and ethics in the world, but considered that it was precisely overcome by “nationalistic universalism” which was reducing any kind of cultural relativism (Morgenthau, 1964 [1948], pp. 225ff., 335ff.). The postulate was weak and fragile at a time when decolonization had hardly started; but it became strongly perilous when the multiplication of Pan-Asian, Pan-African, and Pan-Islamic congresses anticipated future cultural tensions. Overall, it gave to power a natural capacity to be the mold or the matrix of international dynamics, without paying attention to what nation meant beyond the old continent, and particularly for a Sahelian shepherd or a Yemeni tribesman.

Another trap has to be considered: by ignoring history, we ignore or we underestimate, in our turn, how those actors who circumvented history were wrong and triggered dramas and failures, by naively exporting the Western model of government, by arguing that the Clausewitzian war was able to solve any problems, by reinventing the old European concert, or by strengthening the ancient Hobbesian dogma of sovereignty. History must then be taken into account in two directions: for explaining how, where, and why the main IR concepts, practices, and institutions appeared at *a given time*, and for explaining also why several moments of discrepancy between international decisions and social behaviors generated crisis and failures. For instance, NATO was created at a time of structural bipolarity, when alliances had a clear meaning which contributed to shape them: its maintenance after the fall of the Berlin Wall produced a dissonance which became an important and lasting parameter of the post-bipolar international arena.

We understand then that the critical impacts of those transformations have to be found in the meaning of the concepts, more than in their institutional or material incarnation. Human objects have an apparent stability which can be explained by the conservative nature of human

beings. A political system can be called a state, by conformism, imitation, or trickery, as is currently the case in many African or Asian countries: but it will not necessarily *work* like a state, it will not get the same kinds of commitment and will not generate the same kinds of public policy and particularly the same foreign policies. Conflicts which take place in the Middle East, Sahel, Congo or in the African Horn are currently named wars but no longer exhibit the main aspects of the Westphalian wars: if they are treated as such, the attempts made to solve them will not stand a reasonable chance of resulting in a successful and lasting peace. They should therefore be considered as “new international conflicts” (NIC) and they imply a new concept, with new significances, new norms and new practices.

From this point of view, power was erected from the start of this scientific adventure as the key concept of IR and was really the background of Westphalian competition: inside Europe, it was understood and used in the same way by the Habsburg Charles V, by the French king Louis XIV, and by the German Chancellor Bismarck: but are we sure that it has the same meaning nowadays in China, in the mind of President Xi Jinping, in Iran or in Africa? Does it keep the same significance when it is played out in a system constituted by five or six actors who are similar in their culture and their capacity, than when it concerns a high number of players who are unequal and totally different? Is sovereignty the same when it is mobilized by a “superpower” and by a weak state, by a people claiming its independence and by a constituted state?

Let us keep in mind that the main source of irrationality in international relations comes from these misperceptions and these dissonances which are all the more pernicious in that these confusions have a strategic dimension: imitation, conformism and even trickery are considered as useful for achieving international status, or quite simply for keeping it when it is threatened by global change. Status is nowadays even more important than a power which is becoming more and more powerless (Volgy et al., 2011). But status has overall a strong symbolic orientation (Linton, 1945): the competition for status is deeply impacted by the conditions of interplaying and also by the self-consciousness of each international actor. For all these reasons, I will follow here Clifford Geertz who considered that politics is mainly a matter of meaning and who redefined culture as a “system of meanings” which organizes social interactions (Geertz, 1973). In this perspective, IR nowadays faces a crisis of meaning: first, because of this inflation of various symbolic dimensions inside the international arena; second, because globalization is accelerating social change; and third, because it merges more and more

different cultures coming from different histories. Obviously, this transformation is not only subjective: as we already mentioned, meaning is also generated by the contextual changes impacting the arena, the nature of the international issues, the balance of power, and the technological progress. That is why I will say that a sequence in history will be determined by both these aspects, subjective and objective, which cannot be treated separately. In the present context, the balance of international power does not have any more the same meaning as the players are not the same, and do not refer to the same culture as they did at the time of the European Concert, but has also another objective aspect, due to the technological change in armaments and the growing inefficiency of power when the strongest no longer win the wars they wage.

## REAL AND IMAGINED INTERNATIONAL SYSTEMS

The combination of these two – subjective and objective – dimensions constitutes a kind of international configuration that we currently call the “international system.” An international system can be defined as the combination of international interactions which take place in a given moment of world history: it will be considered through significant variables that we build up as a hypothesis. I postulate that IR as a science was impacted by the (first) Westphalian system, while all the transformations that followed weakly impacted a science which, for this reason, became more and more conservative and, overall, more and more cut off from the real world and weakly reactive to it.

That is why one of the main facts, nowadays, in international relations, is the strange overlap of the two systems: the *real* system expressing the international interactions in the present world, and the *imagined* system which is generally the recollection of an old and obsolete system which is all the more presented as real in that it is served and illustrated by the main concepts and theories shaped by political scientists. International actors, observers, even public opinion are permanently torn between their vision, coming from another world, and the real system which they have difficulty apprehending.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

This book aims to fight against this imagination which is terribly costly. It will suggest revisiting some parts of IR in order to update it. In this perspective, I will strive first to clearly identify and define the original

Westphalian system: we will be able then to understand the main principles on which the first international system was founded and so to point out the real basis of the dominant culture of international politics. Through this, we will discover how the major concepts of IR were invented, coined, and shaped, what their real meanings are and their present status. Thomas Hobbes is here the central actor by setting up three pillars structuring all contemporary IR theories: power, state, and competition (Chapter 1). From this observation, I will try to single out three historical variables which nowadays severely challenge the Hobbesian order: decolonization, globalization, and depolarization. All of them deeply disturbed the Westphalian system and modified the founding concepts, opening progressively the way to a major conceptual crisis in IR theories (Chapter 2).

This new sequence will be the main focus of the present book. I will deal with its impacts on the main structures of IR theories. My hypothesis is that the new configuration resulted first in a new conception and a new practice of the territories. The Westphalian order was based on a territorial conception of politics which was consecrated by the famous definition given by Max Weber: this definition was challenged and partly demolished by these new sequences, and particularly by globalization. The process of *deterritorialization* was clearly underestimated by both the scholars in social sciences and the political actors, even though it consequently modified the rules of the game: we will consider it as an *intermediate variable* (Chapter 3). I will then access the main aspects of the new international configuration by stressing five major *explained variables*: the “socialization of the international arena” through the proliferation of (new) social actors and new international social issues, opening the way to *inter-social relations* (Chapter 4); a new meaning given to power, as it gets more and more inefficient, opening the way to what I call “weakness politics” which is directly challenging traditional power politics, redefining the state as well as its functions and the sovereignty which was its main attribute (Chapter 5); a new spatial dimension of politics, through its “regionalization” which started with the European integration process and was imitated everywhere around the world with varying degrees of success (Chapter 6); a new syntax of international conflicts which are more connected to “weakness politics” than to power competition (Chapter 7); and the formation of new diplomacies, some of which are still controlled by states, but in new ways, while others appear as “private diplomacies” which are actively promoted by private actors in contradiction with the major Westphalian principles (Chapter 8).

## THE ILLUSION OF AN “INTERNATIONAL CHAOS”

I then use the five explained variables and principles to understand the “real international system” and its present configuration. The interplay of these five new principles draw the outlines of the present “real system” and helps to explain the gap between it and the “imagined system” still in play among international actors and rulers. This gap probably explains why the idea of an international “chaos” or a “great disorder” has been commonly shaped and is abundantly used by both observers and political actors. The hypothesis of chaos frequently appears when the classic conceptual systems are not able to explain in a convincing way what happens in the world. The 9/11 attacks, the new international conflicts, the development of a new kind of international violence, as well as the new threats to environment and to different forms of human security, or even the crisis of national, regional, or international institutions should not be considered as elements of a new world chaos, but as social facts which can be easily explained provided that we look in the right direction.

In line with Émile Durkheim’s analysis, *deviance* should be regarded as a normal property of any kind of society, since none of them is exempt from it. I will use the definition that the French sociologist shaped: deviance is a transgression of norms which occurs when these norms are not deeply accepted and shared in a given society (Durkheim, 1982 [1895]). I consider here that the same can be true in the international arena, and deviance can occur on the initiative of a state or a non-state actor. In the common vision, these kinds of deviance are not properly understood and are most frequently attributed to the powers of evil. However, even though these deviances are totally blameworthy from an ethical point of view, they should be explained in sociological terms, by weighing up the role of emerging new actors, their common marginalization, their alienation, the lack of integration and even the humiliation and the contempt they face: the more these new aspects of the international arena are understood, the more they will be possibly contained. From a classic realist perspective, this deviance is underestimated: while a sovereign state is permitted to use violence with only very few limits, violence coming from non-state actors is, on the contrary, considered as pure crime and assimilated to criminal chaos. But when we reconsider the real present system, this dichotomy becomes meaningless, requiring a deep transformation in the IR paradigms.

I argue here that the historical changes which have taken place in the world have brought an end to the exceptionalism that the dominant IR

theory claimed: as states have lost their monopoly in the international arena and are presently joined by a high diversity of social actors, international relations should be considered, in this third millennium, as normal but highly complex social (or inter-social) relations, with their interactions, their cultural background, their norms, their values, and all the elements which constitute normal human behaviors, such as frustrations, humiliations, quests for status and recognition, transgression, anomie, and so on.

## DURKHEIM VS WEBER

Such a theoretical mutation revives the cleavage between Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. The former obviously won the first round, as he strongly influenced the emerging IR theories, even if the pioneers of the discipline loathed quoting either of them: for instance, Hans Morgenthau, in his major book, referred to Weber only once, about the concept of interest (Morgenthau, 1964 [1948], p. 9), while he never quoted Durkheim. However, the Weberian sociology is everywhere present, particularly in the dominant realist theory: in the privilege given to the state as a rational actor, in stressing the territorial dimension of politics, and overall through the postulate of a shaping power politics and the use of the concept of *macht* to describe the role of force and physical constraint inside the international arena. We can trace the logical evolution which took place from Hobbes to Clausewitz leading to the Weberian sociology, even though the essential part that the German sociologist devoted to legitimacy was left aside. Power politics in IR then appeared as exclusively constituted by strategies which would be stripped of any consideration of justice.

While Durkheim should not be listed among the founding fathers of IR, even as a stowaway, he obviously had many things worth saying in the field (Badie, 2016). The reason for his marginalization is evident and plays a central role in the development of the discipline: the French sociologist considered that power could not be the cornerstone of society and preferred to give priority to social integration. The state does exist, in his vision, but as a function, more than as a constraint (Birnbaum, 1976, p. 248). On the other hand, the social order is inconceivable in his mind without a minimal social integration. From a realist point of view, this perspective would not be acceptable, as it is prejudicial to sovereignty and overall to the postulate of a permanent competition among states. Conversely, we can imagine that Durkheim would be at home with globalization, which gives a great importance to integration and brings it

into the bright light of international debates, particularly through the human security issue (UNDP, 1994).

We can say that Weber was the first source of inspiration when the Westphalian system was established, and throughout the twentieth century and especially during the Cold War, while Durkheim would play the same role for interpreting globalization and its main functions, including integration, satisfaction of basic human and social needs, creation of common social norms, management of transgressions and international anomie, and consideration of new kinds of conflict. This shift from Weber to Durkheim also sheds light on one of the main features of the new international relations: the common and growing defeat of power and the ascending role of integration. This transformation does not mean at all that power has died out: on the contrary, its resources are more and more sophisticated. It does not imply that competition for power has faded: it is evidently obsessing all the rulers in the world. It signifies that power has lost its efficiency, that it may be defeated and is not sufficient for ruling the world and granting the international order and stability: power is no longer the unique counting unit that it was up to the fall of the Berlin Wall; it is no longer the benchmark commonly used by all the players in the international arena. As Durkheim put it, function is nowadays more determinant than constraint or coercion: the conditions for a successful or failed integration are more decisive than power competition.

Obviously, violence and coercion will not disappear; no one can even bet on its reduction. First, because violence is not only a component of power, but is, more broadly, a common part of social behaviors. Second, because political actors are still mainly conditioned by a Westphalian culture which gives a kind of priority to power for managing and trying to solve the main issues which are at stake. In fact, international violence is still active, but is more social, fragmented, and disseminated than political, centralized, and organized by competing states. For the same reasons, power becomes a much more complex attribute of competing states. Its nature is changing as it is no longer exclusively bound to military resources; its capacity is uncertain, as the major powers are commonly defeated by the weakest actors; its achievement is less and less clear, as globalization and depolarization are weakly compatible with building up a strong hegemony run by one state over all the others. Paradoxically, globalization gives a kind of bonus to micro-powers, private tyrannies, that is to say those who are able to block the system, while the traditional state power is mainly bogged down by the complexity of the global system. Thucydides is dead, probably along with the old

concept of hegemony: the same would be true for Hobbes, Clausewitz, and many others.

## REFERENCES

- Badie, Bertrand, "Durkheim," in Richard Ned Lebow, Peer Schouten, and Hidemi Shuganami (eds), *The Return of the Theorists: Dialogues with Great Thinkers in International Relations*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Birnbaum, Pierre, "La conception durkheimienne de l'État: l'apolitisme des fonctionnaires," *Revue française de sociologie*, 17/2 (1976), 247–258.
- Durkheim, Émile, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. Steven Lukes, New York: Free Press, 1982 [1895].
- Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Linton, Ralph, *Cultural Background of Personality*, Oxford: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1945.
- Morgenthau, Hans, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: A. Knopf, 1964 [1948].
- Skocpol, Theda (ed.), *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Tilly, Charles, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984.
- UNDP, *Human Development Report*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Volgy, Thomas J., Renato Corbetta, Keith A. Grant, and Ryan G. Baird (eds), *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.