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## On the subject matter of International Relations

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## **On the subject matter of International Relations**

### **Abstract**

This article deals with the subject matter of International Relations as an academic discipline. It addresses the issue of whether and how one or many substantive realms could legitimately be claimed as the discipline's prime subject. It first raises a number of problems associated with both identifying the subject matter of IR and 'labeling' the discipline in relation to competing terms and disciplines, followed by a discussion on whether, and to what degree, IR takes its identity from a confluence of disciplinary traditions or from a distinct methodology. It then outlines two possibilities that would lead to identifying IR as a discipline defined by a specific substantive province in distinction to other disciplines: (1) the 'international' as a specific *realm* of the social world, functionally differentiated from other realms; (2) IR as being about everything in the social world above a particular *scale*. The final section discusses the implications of these views for the study of international relations.

### **Keywords**

International Relations – Disciplinarity – Functional Differentiation – Sociology

## ***Introduction***

What is the subject matter of the discipline of International Relations (IR), particularly if seen in relation to its closest neighbouring disciplines: in IR's case Sociology, Politics/Political Science and History? This seems to be a straightforward, if quite basic, question to ask of any academic discipline. Yet in IR, this question is rarely addressed (let alone answered) in a direct fashion. We argue in this paper that systematically engaging with it is a worthwhile exercise required to focus on central research questions for IR as a discipline. The argument is based on the conviction that any discipline functions and *innovates* by always asking basic questions about itself anew. The purpose of this paper is to inquire whether it is possible, particularly with a view to neighbouring disciplines, to legitimately claim one or many substantive realms as the discipline's prime subject. In order to address this issue, the next section first raises a number of problems associated with both identifying the subject matter of IR and 'labeling' the discipline in relation to competing terms and disciplines. The following section approaches the issue of a substantive definition of IR by first of all dealing with the questions of whether, and to what degree, IR takes its identity from a confluence of disciplinary traditions or from a distinct methodology.<sup>1</sup> The section after that then turn to the two possibilities we see that would lead to identifying IR as a discipline defined by a specific substantive providence in distinction to other disciplines. The first possibility refers to the identification of the 'international' as a specific *realm* of the social world, differentiated from other such realms in functional terms. The second possibility refers to IR being about everything in the social world above a particular *scale*, i.e., IR in effect being similar to Sociology in claiming the entire social world as its subject matter, however in contrast to Sociology only in those parts or aspects of it that are 'big' or 'macro' enough. The difference between both possibilities might not be too extensive at first glance, but it might have consequences for how we understand and study international relations. The final section therefore discusses whether and to which degree these two possibilities are mutually exclusive of each other, where they could possibly overlap, and, most importantly, what the consequences of leaning more towards either one of them are for the study of international relations.

## ***Labels, disciplinarity, and a programmatic approach***

In a discipline not known for an inimical relation towards introspection, posing such a question will certainly raise a number of eyebrows. There is indeed no lack of 'state of the discipline' overviews, of heated fights on grand theories or on methods, or of prolonged discussions about

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<sup>1</sup> Or from identifying itself as a social science in the first place. See P.T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011) and Pami Aalto, Harle Vilho, and Sami Moisio, eds., *International Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2011), for an extensive discussion of these issues.

appropriate ontologies or methodologies in IR. In contrast to these debates, fairly little explicit discussion takes place on the long-standing and quite basic question of whether IR's primary subject should indeed be seen as being about an, however broadly defined, area of 'international relations', 'international politics', 'world politics', globalization, etc. Indeed, the uncertainty about IR's subject matter is tracked by variations in the way the discipline is labeled. 'International Politics' is perhaps the narrowest name, implying that that the subject matter is just the macro-scale end of Political Science focusing on relations between states and covering foreign policy, strategy and security, international organizations, and the politics of the international system.<sup>2</sup> 'World Politics' is barely wider, still a subsection of Political Science, but carrying the implication that there is more politics at the global level itself, including transnational politics and global governance. This framing can lead to a division of labour with 'Politics', between an 'International' side and a domestic or 'Government' side, sometimes realized in different departments, as at the LSE. 'International Relations' occupies the middle ground, being comprised of two rather vague terms: 'international', which at least hints at actors other than the state; and 'relations' which opens the possibility of more than just politics. 'Relations' can cover economic and societal as well, opening up the possibility for IR as a multidisciplinary construction. 'International Studies' is broader still, bringing language and culture into the frame. Perhaps the broadest term is 'globalization'/'global studies', which eschews both 'international' and 'relations', and underlines a multisectoral perspective in which interactions of all sorts, and especially economic and common-fate ones, are given prominence. Most of these definitions prioritise the unit level, especially the state, and in so doing they privilege relations amongst the units as being the essence of what is meant by 'world' or 'international'. But globalization makes clear that the primary referent is the global system/society itself, in other words a material and social construction above the units. This distinction goes some way towards explaining the institutional and substantive tensions between globalization and the other formulations of IR, and why globalization is sometimes in competition with IR both institutionally and conceptually. Although some concepts prominent in IR, such as most notably 'international system' or 'international society' appear to mark system-privileging approaches, more often than not they are in fact used as mere reference to the systemic environment in what essentially are actor-privileging approaches. Much of what we argue in the following is that a substantive definition of IR, while not having to solely focus on system and a systemic level, must include a characterization of their It is not all that clear to what extent concepts such as 'international system' and 'international society' fill in the gap between unit- and system-privileging approaches.

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<sup>2</sup> There is of course the oddity here of the word 'international'. The more accurate term would be 'interstate', which is a relatively uncommon usage. 'International', strictly speaking, is almost a nonsense term. The correlation between states and nations is poor, there being only a couple of hundred states, and several thousand nations. By themselves, nations generally have little in the way of actor quality, and do not relate to each other in actor-like modes. There are some things that might count as 'international' relations in this literal sense, such as focused fear/hatred (e.g. between Chinese and Japanese, and Albanians and Serbs or in earlier times French and Germans), or shared identity (e.g. among the nations of the Anglosphere, or the Arab world). But these things are only a small part of what 'international' is taken to mean.

In what follows we will for convenience use ‘IR’ as a generic label to cover all of this, although we will return to these distinctions as necessary. It is notable that most of the big academic associations in the field use the broadest label, ‘International Studies’, in their names: e.g. ISA (North America), BISA (UK), EISA (Europe), NISA (Nordic), CEEISA (Central and East European), KISA (Korea), MISC (Mexico), WISC (world). Exceptions to this practice are the Japan and Taiwan Associations of International Relations (JAIR and TAIR). As yet globalization figures little at this institutional level, although it can be found attached to various institutes and programmes within some universities. Titles of journals are more eclectic. ‘International’ is prominent in most, but challenged by ‘world’ and ‘global’; and ‘relations’, ‘studies’ and ‘politics’ are all widely used. Globalization is also in play in a few journal titles.

This labeling question exposes another oddity of IR as an academic discipline. Most social science disciplines are, as their names suggest, defined by function or the type of activity/behaviour studied: economics, law, politics, psychology, sociology. This scheme suggests, wrongly, that the social world is neatly carved into distinct functional realms, for each of which a specific academic discipline claims prime competence and responsibility. Rather, the more puzzling observation is that this both is and is not the case. On the one hand, modernity is characterized by functional differentiation. Politics, law, the economy, science, etc. form distinguishable, though interconnected, parts or aspects of the social world. This functional differentiation is *partly* mirrored in science as well, as in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology.<sup>3</sup> This supposed division of labour does not stop some from seeing their particular discipline as somehow the master one, that, *Lord of the Rings*-like, binds all the others. Within the Social Sciences, Economics, Sociology and up to a point Politics are all prone to this sort of intellectual hubris. One expression of this is the way in which different disciplines pursue functional differentiation internally. Thus one finds innumerable hybrids and trespassings: political sociology, political history, the sociology of education, corporate law, international law, the sociology of law, etc. etc. One can track this all the way back to the initial formation of the

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most developed example of this way of thinking is Niklas Luhmann’s Modern Systems Theory, in which society is conceived in terms of communicative function systems that are strictly separated from each other by defining conceptual dyads (e.g. legal-illegal for law, true-false for science; powerful-non powerful for politics, having-not having monetary value for economics etc.; see Rudolf Stichweh, ‘The History and Systematics of Functional Differentiation in Sociology’, in *Bringing Sociology to International Relations: World Politics as Differentiation Theory*, eds. Mathias Albert, Barry Buzan, and Michael Zürn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50–70, for an enumeration of function systems). Although function systems are defined by these dyads, they nonetheless share environments and make impacts on each other.

Outside of the social world, and the social sciences, ‘functional differentiation’ is a concept frequently used in cell biology in relation to the study of the evolution of different kinds of cells. While this is more than a mere similarity in name given some of the earlier conceptions of functional differentiation in classical Sociology (*ibid.*), and while quite plausibly the concept can be applied to parts of living matter beyond the level of cells, it would be stretching the concept of functional differentiation in any of its established uses too far if one applied it to nature in its entirety, only to argue that the division between different natural sciences mirrors a functional differentiation of nature in the same sense that the social sciences mirror a functional differentiation of society. However, one could plausibly say that between the natural sciences there is a historically grown division of labor between different disciplines; that however this kind of functional differentiation within the system of science is also increasingly challenged in cross-disciplinary exercises from bio-chemistry to different kinds of quantum approaches.

social sciences, mostly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and how, for example, the study of politics gradually differentiated itself from the study of law.

Whatever label it uses, IR conspicuously does not seem to fit the model of functional differentiation. It is mostly defined not by function but by scale: its defining focus is on humankind and a global social, and mainly political, system as a whole. That makes it either, on the narrow view a subdiscipline of Political Science, or on the broader view, an imperial discipline that seeks to colonize and integrate the macro side of all of the other social sciences and History. History also does not fit the functional model because it is defined not by function but by time. So History and IR have in common (a) that they are not defined by function, and (b) that they therefore necessarily trespass on the territory of other disciplines that are defined by function. This creates a tension that is very visible in academic life. Does the subject matter of History and IR get broken up and absorbed into the functional disciplines (e.g. IR as ‘international/world politics’; economic historians being in economics departments, etc.) or do History and IR float free, and in some senses above the functional disciplines in the social sciences, pursuing their temporal and spatial missions across the whole range? Adding in scale (or space) and time, opens up yet more prospects for the internal differentiation of disciplines. Historical Sociology, for example, combines function and time, International Law combines function and scale, International Political Economy combines two functions and scale, International Historical Sociology combines scale, function and time. Disciplines thus not only differentiate themselves from each other, but also try to reproduce the others within themselves, reflecting an ongoing tension between the need to understand the whole, and the attraction of specializing in the parts. In this sense IR and History act the same as the more functionally defined disciplines, constructing internal differentiations that reach towards the whole.

As Buzan and Little note, this evolution is visible in how IR has unfolded over the past decades:

There is a narrow, somewhat traditionalist view that IR is mainly about relationships among states. This view largely locates IR within political science, confining its scope to the sub-area of ‘international’ or ‘world’ politics. Such a description might have fit early Anglo-American IR, but gradually the understanding of the subject has broadened, albeit with the ‘political’ element remaining at the core. Since the late 1950s, English School (ES) thinkers took both history and ‘international society’ seriously, and from the late 1970s onward, economics made its way back into the IR agenda. The ending of the Cold War saw an explosion of interest in sociological questions of identity, and in moral and legal questions of human rights. Over the last few decades, consciousness has thus grown that the object of study of IR is an international system which is not just a politico-military construct, but also an economic, sociological and historical one.<sup>4</sup>

Posing the question of whether IR can legitimately claim one or more substantive realms as its prime subject is motivated by a wealth of engagements between disciplines and by disciplinary developments that have taken place over recent years. Thus, for example, while IR has (re-

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<sup>4</sup> Barry Buzan and Richard Little, ‘Why International Relations has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to do about It’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, No. 1 (2001): 19–39.

)developed a strong interest in historical international relations and the making of modern international relations,<sup>5</sup> the approach of global history has taken up a wide range of issues on the formation of global modernity and its political orders as well.<sup>6</sup> This immediately raises the issue of potential differences either or both in the subject matter studied or in the methodology applied to it. Similarly, while over the years IR has developed a growing interest in sociological approaches, many sociological approaches – most notably on ‘global’ or ‘world’ society – at least nominally seem to cover similar ground, raising the question of substantive overlaps and differences here as well. In the sometimes bizarre world of academic identity and organization, strange things happen. Historical Sociology, for example, is closer to IR in both respects than it is to either Sociology or History. And while sociologists have busied themselves ‘bringing the state back in’, so trespassing on the ground of Political Science, the ‘English School’ within IR has busied itself with exploring the subject of *international society* (more accurately *inter-state society*), a concept either ignored or rejected by the bulk of Sociology which has only been able to think about *world society*.<sup>7</sup>

Posing the question about the subject matter of IR in this sense means posing systematic-analytical questions. These are neither purely empirical nor purely normative, though they can never abstract fully from both. The empirical question would be about what is (or has been) studied in IR. The normative one would be about what should be studied, and to what purpose. The definition of the subject matter could then be a function of specific normative preferences or of envisaged practical use. The systematic-analytical question probed here, however, is about which subject matter can usefully and distinctively be studied by IR in the light of other disciplines’ approaches.

Skipping through journals, conference programmes, and book catalogues, IR seems to be a discipline of a rather hermaphroditic nature. On the one hand, there is a wealth of scholarly activity that deals with a specific sub-set of a functionally defined realm of the social world, that is various aspects of international politics as a specific form of politics. On the other hand, and particularly when it comes to ‘thinking big’ about issues of global society, the making of modern international relations, a capitalist world-system etc., IR frequently ventures into directions where it becomes quite difficult to say what is *not* included in its subject matter, and how IR then differs most notably from Sociology as a discipline with more universalist theoretical ambitions to understand the social world. IR would seem to be squeezed into the space created by the inability of Sociology to conceptualize second order societies (those composed of collective social units rather than of individuals).

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<sup>5</sup> For example Jennifer Mitzen, *Power in Concert: The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Global Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity, and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Mathias Albert, *A Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15.



While not without reference to empirical description and normative argument, the question explored here is about *the substantive realm underpinning the claim of disciplinarity*. It is not about the question of whether IR ‘is’ a discipline in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it is about the claim that engaging with the subject of a discipline as a substantive matter provides a marker of difference from other disciplines. As Rosenberg argues, in the social sciences disciplines legitimize themselves by being rooted in ‘a specific feature of social reality’ that enable them to function in a division of labour with other disciplines.<sup>9</sup> The issue at stake here then is the question of self-identity, which has troubled IR for so long, and makes it a bit embarrassing to be a member of it when facing disciplines with clearer and more robust identities. In other words, how can IR more effectively rationalize, and therefore ‘sell’ itself?

Engaging with these issues requires one to develop a position on the question of whether it makes sense at all to speak about ‘IR’ as a single ‘thing’, where this singularity could be asserted not only on the grounds of the existence of academic departments, people identifying with it professionally, conferences, journals etc., but on substantive grounds. There seems to be a remarkable gap between, on the one hand, IR textbooks that answer this question in the affirmative (this being their *raison d’être*), and, on the other hand, explicit reflections on this question that usually tend to come up with a skeptical answer.<sup>10</sup>

## ***The subject matter and the traditions of IR***

### *Intellectual traditions*

In a first step, we will in an exemplary fashion survey some identifications of a subject matter explicitly stated or implicitly given in the IR literature itself. As a useful point of departure that deals intensively with the question of the disciplinarity of IR we refer back particularly to Quincy Wright’s *The Study of International Relations* from 1955.<sup>11</sup> Despite the perennial

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<sup>8</sup> Debates about the question of whether IR is a discipline mostly are normative about whether it *should* be (seen as, organized as, etc.) as a discipline (see, for example, the recent discussion on the identity of IR in Félix Grenier, H. L. Turton, and Philippe Beaulieu-Brossard, ‘The Struggle over the Identity of IR: What is at Stake in the Disciplinary Debate within and beyond Academia?’, *International Relations* 29, no. 2 (2015): 242–244.

Our starting point on that matter is quite simply institutional-empirical: if now, and already for quite some time, a quite significant number of people treat IR as a discipline, prepare publications as if it was, organize conferences, professional organizations, and university departments as if it was, and find monthly salaries in their bank accounts paid on the assumption that it is, then for the time being it seems fair to treat it as such. The present contribution is a contribution to the debate on whether what is actually should be a discipline in that it probes one possible good reason for this, namely the existence of a substantive realm in the social world best studied by a discipline for IR.

<sup>9</sup> Justin Rosenberg, ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’, *International Relations* 30, no. 2 (2016): 6.

<sup>10</sup> See, among many others, K. J. Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), or succinctly in a recent interview, Onuf in Peer Schouten, ‘Theory Talk #70: Nicholas Onuf on the Evolution of Social Constructivism, Turns in IR, and a Discipline of Our Making’, *Theory Talks* (2011). Available at: <http://www.theory-talks.org/2015/07/theory-talk-70.html>. Last accessed July 2, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Quincy Wright, *The Study of International Relations* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955).

question of whether to treat IR as a mere sub-discipline of Political Science, or as a discipline in its own right,<sup>12</sup> it is quite clear that in terms of intellectual traditions IR is the result of a process of the disciplinary organization of knowledge. While increasingly recognized as an important field of study in the 1930s and 1940s, talking about some kind of ‘interdisciplinary’ dialogue between IR and, for example, International Law, Psychology, Economics, or International History at that time would have been rather meaningless for most of the contemporary students of International Relations. It was always clear that studying IR was something that either emerged from within one of those disciplines, or something that fed on any combination of them. The disciplinary ‘closure’ of IR, on the basis of which it becomes possible to talk about a relation to other disciplines in the first place, is a process that took place in the 1950s (and into the 1960s), although the status of discipline would continue to be contested long thereafter and until today.<sup>13</sup>

The history of IR has been written in many different ways and need not to be repeated here.<sup>14</sup> The interesting thing to observe in this context, however, is that in this process of disciplinary consolidation, there always remained a considerable unease regarding the proper subject matter of IR. Wright’s (1955) *The Study of International Relations*, probably remains the most elaborate early treatise reflecting this unease. The uncertainty about international relations as a subject and a field is aptly summarized in the preface to that book, when Wright observes that ‘there might seem to be little doubt that international relations exists. Yet there is some doubt on this point or, at least, on the sense in which it exists’.<sup>15</sup> He subsequently goes on to demonstrate that doubt pertains to both the subject area of International Relations (‘International Relations as a Condition’, Chapter 2) as well as to its status and development as a discipline (Chapters 3 and 4).

While on these issues Wright echoes many of his contemporaries (and later writers), it is Chapters 5 and 6 of his book that warrant closer inspection for the purpose of the present argument, that is the chapters in which he deals with ‘The Root Disciplines of International Relations’ (Chapter 5) and ‘Disciplines with a World Point of View’ (Chapter 6). In the former chapter, Wright is quite straightforward in identifying International Law, Diplomatic History, and Military Science as ‘root disciplines’ of IR, on which he remarks that as a discipline it ‘has

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<sup>12</sup> Rosenberg, ‘International relations in the Prison’.

<sup>13</sup> To pick but one pronounced statement by James N. Rosenau: ‘the field [of International Relations; the author’s] is not a discipline, but rather a conglomerate of foci, preoccupations, skills, and disciplines’ J. N. Rosenau, *International Studies and the Social Sciences* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1972), 22.

<sup>14</sup> See notably Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline. Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory*, and B. C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).

The disciplinary histories of IR vary according to the intensity in which they portray thinking about international relations in the context of a long-standing history of ideas. The most intensive and voluminous treatment of the development in this regard to our knowledge remains the unpublished 3-volume ‘Habilitationsschrift’ of Reinhard Meyers from 1986 (available only as manuscript through Bonn university library; Reinhard Meyers, *Paradigmata der internationalen Gesellschaft: Perspektiven einer Theoriegeschichte Internationaler Beziehungen*, 3 vols., (Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Habilitationsschrift, 1986).

13. Wright, *Study of International Relations*, vii.

developed synthetically and this has militated against its unity'.<sup>16</sup> His remarks become rather less straightforward, however, and immediately attest to the difficulties surrounding this subject matter, when he discusses the role of *International Politics*. While all of the root and other disciplines have dealt with International Politics, Wright seems to claim that International Politics constitutes a specific discipline, that in practice is usually treated as a sub-discipline of Political Science. The important point here is the observation that International Politics (and, in parallel developments, international trade and the conduct of foreign policy) has developed 'as a distinct discipline in the modern world',<sup>17</sup> whose origins he dates to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The emerging discipline of International Relations, as a 'synthetic discipline' in this sense is composed of a number of root disciplines and a range of modern disciplines geared to studying things that are somehow 'international' (international politics, international trade). But the sense clearly is that International Relations is a synthetic and *encompassing* discipline when it comes to the international, and particularly cannot be seen as limited to International Politics.

This impression is reinforced in the chapter on 'Disciplines with a World Point of View'. This chapter distinguishes between disciplines that take the division of the world into nation-states as a starting point, and those that take a view of the world as a whole. While initially introduced as a normative difference, the enumeration of disciplines in the chapter turns that into a mostly analytical difference. While this is not the place to discuss in detail all of the 'disciplines with a world point of view' discussed by Wright (and including, for example, also biology, operational research, and pacifism), it is most notable that he includes World History and Sociology under that rubric. Regarding the latter, he observes that although it has concerned itself more with smaller-scale phenomena, it has the potential to say more about larger-scale issues such as international relations.<sup>18</sup> As a result of these observations, Wright argues for *further synthesis*, meaning that the discipline of International Relations should integrate insights from the mentioned disciplines. Although not stated explicitly, from the thrust of his argument it is clear that this is to serve the purpose of establishing International Relations as a *discipline with a world point of view*. The unity of the synthetic discipline, in distinction to other disciplines with a world point of view, is then clearly derived from a *substantive* area: 'It should be the function of a discipline of international relations to analyzed the entities, processes, forces, and relations in the international field...'.<sup>19</sup> International Relations, then, is the discipline that specializes in studying the international field as a distinct realm of the social world. The question then becomes, of course: what is that field, and how is it delineated from others?

Wright himself, in Part V of his book, proceeds 'Toward A Unified Discipline of International Relations'. After outlining that each discipline as a form of knowledge is ultimately closely

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, 52-54.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 59.

connected to worldviews and conceptions of what could be called a ‘social whole’,<sup>20</sup> he professes a range of ideas of the many and multi-disciplinary ingredients for an encompassing and synthetic discipline of International Relations. However, while he goes to great lengths to discuss the dependence of scientific knowledge on particular worldviews and comes up with a unified, if internally diverse, scheme for a discipline of IR, he ultimately fails to specify the meaning of the ‘international’ as the reference point for the unity of his endeavor.

This observation is not meant to criticize Wright. In many respects, he was far ahead of his time in methodically discussing central issues of the study of international relations. Revisiting some of his arguments here primarily serves the purpose of identifying a point where one can usefully take off again when thinking about a discipline of IR. This is of course not to deny that much ink and useful thought has been spent on the subject during the last sixty years. However, what we claim is that starting with some basic questions is still relevant, and that basic questions about a discipline cannot be answered by referring to internal disciplinary developments or introspection alone, but need to reflect on a discipline’s subject matter(s) in the light of the subject matter(s) of neighbouring disciplines, and particularly in the light of the disciplines of other disciplines with a ‘world point of view’.

### *Methodology*

It is not uncommon for there to be a relationship between methodology and disciplinarity. Functional disciplines often legitimize their specific claim to knowledge in methodology: Economics has econometrics, Sociology has an orientation towards classical sociological theory on the one hand, and survey data on the other, and even Political Science, especially its American variant, has attempted to validate itself by turning to positivist methods. History, IR’s companion in not being a functional discipline, rests its claim to disciplinarity not just on being about the study of things in time, but also on historiography as a particular method. The behaviouralist turn in various other social sciences might also be understood as a move to stake methodological claims, though of course there is also a discipline-dissolving aspect to the adoption of a common set of ‘scientific’ methods: all reduced to branches of mathematics. IR might be in some trouble here. If its basic claim rests on scale, then it more or less cannot go for a single methodology, but has to accept that it is multidisciplinary and therefore multi-method, unless of course some method is particularly suited to the study of scale. That is why some prefer to refer to it as a field rather than a discipline.

Put in positive terms, the argument developed here is that theoretical and methodological plurality is something that could and should be embraced, including a plurality that crosses some

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<sup>20</sup> Albert, Mathias, and Barry Buzan, ‘International relations theory and the ‘social whole’: encounters and gaps between IR and Sociology’, *International Political Sociology* 7, no. 2 (2013): 117–135.

of the boundaries that restrict the social sciences.<sup>21</sup> However, it proceeds on the basis of the view that every theoretical and methodological plurality can only flourish if there is at least a minimal sense of substantive focus in order to prevent an ‘anything goes’ attitude leading to a study of all kinds of ‘contingency without practice’.<sup>22</sup>

That said, the argument pursued here is not meant to exclude inter- or transdisciplinary work. Quite to the contrary, it proceeds on the assumptions that inter- or transdisciplinary work requires an understanding of the substantive aspects of the disciplinarity of knowledge. We acknowledge that the reproduction of disciplinarity as well as obstacles for inter- and transdisciplinary work often stem not from substantive or methodological issues, but from the *institutional realm underpinning the claim of disciplinarity*. More often than not, it is people, departments, grant applications and jobs that count in this respect rather than substance. While we focus on the latter aspect, we acknowledge that the disciplinary organization of knowledge in the faculties and its further departmentalization in modernity constitute a tightly connected complex of substantive and institutional issues.

It is in this sense that we probe two, at first seemingly very different understandings the subject matter of IR. The first of these argues that IR is about a specific realm, a part of social reality which can be clearly delineated and that warrants being studied comprehensively and ‘synthetically’ – this includes the possibility that the specific realm of IR is defined in terms of functional differentiation after all. The second argues that IR is not primarily about a clearly demarcated realm of the social world, and therefore different from clearly functionally defined disciplines such as Economics or Law. Rather, it is first and foremost about thinking about ‘big’ things. It is first about synthesis and, more than other disciplines, about the ‘world point of view’. We will at first introduce both understandings, not denying that these are highly stylized introductions, due to them being partly extractions of thoughts (if sometimes in the form of implicit assumptions and understandings) in our earlier work. In the next section, we will reflect on each position’s character as a world point of view and its relation to neighbouring disciplines.

## **Two substantive paths to singularity**

Our core question is about what particular parts, aspects of, or perspectives on the social world warrant treatment by a specialized academic discipline of IR. With the discussion above in mind, the next step turns to the issue of disciplinary boundaries in relation particularly to neighbouring

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<sup>21</sup> Alexander Wendt, in his *Quantum Mind and Social Science* (Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)) recently has pushed, or even transgressed, these boundaries to a remarkable degree.

<sup>22</sup> Luhmann, Niklas, “‘Was ist der Fall?’ und ‘Was steckt dahinter?’“ Die zwei Soziologien und die Gesellschaftstheorie“, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 22, no. 4 (1993): 245–260. With the ‘anything goes’ Luhmann explicitly refers to Feyerabend’s *Against Method* (Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge* (London: New Left Books, 1975).

disciplines, probing two lines of thought towards the possibility of delineating the boundaries of IR. In a first line of thought, we will probe the idea that IR is best identified as a discipline about a specific realm, ‘the international’, a part of social reality which can be clearly delineated and that warrants being studied comprehensively. In a second line of thought we will probe the idea that IR is not primarily about a clearly demarcated realm of the social world, but rather first and foremost about thinking ‘big’ in relation to other disciplines via the concept of international system. In the conclusions, we will weigh the merits and disadvantages of both lines of thought in relation to each other, also outlining the degree to which they are compatible with each other.

*IR’s subject, Mk. 1: The ‘international’ as a specific realm of the social world*

It is probably fair to describe IR’s disciplinary origins – combining insights from other disciplines, yet at the same time distancing themselves from those – as being built on some core idea that international politics forms a *distinct* realm in the world of politics in general (and, *inter alia*, in a wider social world). While this *never* meant that international politics was seen as a social reality completely (i.e. causally disconnected from domestic politics, the economy, and international law), it meant that the relations between states were governed by a distinct logic or dynamic not to be found in the domestic realm, thus constituting IR as some discernable sphere of its own. The existence of a distinct international realm is supported within IR by the longstanding discussion of an inside/outside differentiation based on the inside being a realm of order and progress, and the outside being a realm of anarchy and stasis/repetition.<sup>23</sup> Within International Law it is supported by the standing debate, hanging on questions about who makes and enforces law, about whether international law is law in the same sense as domestic law. While this of course means generalizing to an extreme degree, it is probably also correct to describe the disciplinary evolution of IR, from its disciplinary (as opposed to its ideational) origins in idealism and in political realism broadly conceived, as a long process of *widening* its substantive scope of inquiry. While ‘widening’ here from the perspective of the sociology of science means an almost inescapable process that comes with the institutionalization, specialization, and growth of any discipline, in IR it has arguably taken a quite extensive form. Attention to actors other than states, to various ‘levels’ of analysis, to a range of philosophical traditions, and to a wealth of functional realms and policy areas beyond the traditional confines of security and power politics to some degree would seem like an almost natural development in that sense. However, even a superficial inspection of book titles and journal articles under the ‘IR’ rubric reveals that over time almost no actor, philosopher, or realm of the social world has been able to avoid being discovered and put to use by an IR scholar. Without having engaged in a systematic count on the question of whether and to what degree this is really true in

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Wight, ‘Why Is There No International Theory?’, in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, eds. Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), 1-33, and R. J. B. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

comparison to other disciplines, there is an impression of a relatively high and recurring demand for introspective ‘state of the art’ projects in IR, and that is likely due to the high degree of diversity mentioned.<sup>24</sup>

When we talk about a ‘realm’ or a ‘subject matter’ as the ground for distinguishing IR, then there obviously is a vast array of explicit proposals or implicit assumptions that have been made over time in this respect. IR could, in that sense, be about specific things that states do in relation to other states (as realism would have it when it comes to power); it could be the maze of political and economic entanglements in the world (as IPE would have it, as long as these entanglements do not remain confined to processes taking place solely within the boundaries of single states); or it could be about basically *any- and everything*, as long as it somehow involves something that spans or crosses a state boundary (which is what IR as a discipline, taken together, mostly feels like). Of course, the variations of defining a subject matter in such a substantial fashion are extremely high in number and extremely nuanced – as much as are their possible (or actual) criticisms.

Nonetheless, one part of all substantive definitions of IR’s subject matter more than others has withstood the test of time, and that is the ‘international’. Whether seen in a substantive fashion itself – ‘the’ international – or as an attribute of something else: no IR without the ‘international’. This observation even holds for the problematization of the international, be it in relation to its historical contingency or appearance, or in critical approaches regarding the disciplining power (both in terms of social practice and in terms of knowledge). One may not like the ‘international’ at all, but ‘doing IR’ seems to imply having to live with it one way or the other.

Taking such an open-ended and ever-present use of the ‘international’ as a common bond would of course seem a very minimalist definition of substance. Yet all substantive ‘rescue operations’ in this respect would seem to imply a fallback to a narrower definition of some international (even if only in the negative form of problematizing such definitions without a positive alternative statement). What all such rescue operations face is the task to actually say how a specific substantive realm of an international is distinguished from its environment.

IR arguably has not been tremendously good thus far in providing such a basic distinction and a substantive definition of its subject matter on the basis of describing how in the social world this subject matter is distinguished (or differentiated) from its environment in the social world. Some approaches, such as idealism and political realism are quite strong in this respect given their concentration on power political and (in the case of idealism) legal relations between sovereign states. This ‘traditional’ understanding of what ‘international relations’ are about is one that all but the hard realist faction in the discipline would find to be very limited analytically. Yet it

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, introspection is present in all disciplines; and all debates like the one that the present article seeks to contribute to, necessarily beg the question of whether really every special addition in the literature was necessary on substantive grounds. Yet we wish to emphasize that we are not engaging here with issues of academic legitimacy and prudent resource allocation.

certainly is the most unproblematic one in terms of substantive parsimony: the substantive matter of IR here is no more and no less than relations between sovereign states. It should be added, however, that such views of the international are rarely made very explicit, let alone are those espousing them often reflective about them. Almost all allusions to an international ‘system’ suffer from the fact that they usually do not define the system by identifying a relevant system/environment distinction, but by rather simplistic understandings around the ‘regular and patterned interaction’ motif. They build a sense of international system from the bottom up by looking at the interactions of units, and in the process neglect to specify both what the environment of this system is, and with what other systems it coexists.

Perhaps the most systematic contemporary attempt to come up with a substantive definition of ‘the international’ is Justin Rosenberg’s<sup>25</sup> project to use the theory of uneven and combined development (UCD) deriving from Trotsky, precisely, and in his view for the first time, to theorize ‘the international’. He sees ‘the specific feature of social reality’ captured by ‘the international’ as being the coexistence within that social reality of more than one society, which he shorthands as ‘multiplicity’.<sup>26</sup> Rosenberg argues that UCD is a powerful way to theorise ‘the international’, in that the political and economic dynamics of its operation necessarily generate ‘the international’ in the sense of multiple units linked together in ways that reproduce the differentiation amongst them. This formulation both provides the basis for IR’s place in the division of labour of the social sciences. It addresses the ‘environment’ question of within what ‘the international’ is located: it is one aspect of the social whole, and it is constrained and shaped by geography and technology. It also delivers on providing new perspectives and research agendas: whereas Waltz sees a tendency towards homogenization and ‘like units’, Rosenberg sees dynamics of differentiation.<sup>27</sup> What is less clear is how Rosenberg’s formulation of ‘the international’ plays into the ‘parts versus wholes’ division within the discipline. Its emphasis on multiplicity seems to privilege parts, but at the same time there is a strong role of combination and dialectics that leans strongly towards the global social system.

For Rosenberg, unevenness is universal and always present in international systems, though its degree may vary a lot. There are two drivers for this universal rule: 1) the geographical separation of political units within a diverse physical environment; and 2) the differential impact on units of being combined. Combination is intrinsic to the definition of international system, and can also vary a lot. In the premodern world, combination varied mainly with geography, which facilitated it in some places (most notably the availability of sea and river transportation

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<sup>25</sup> Justin Rosenberg, ‘The International Imagination: IR Theory and “Classical Social Analysis”’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 23, no. 1 (1994): 85–108; ‘Problems in the Theory of Uneven and Combined Development Part II: Unevenness and Multiplicity’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23, no. 1, (2010): 165–89; ‘Kenneth Waltz and Leon Trotsky: Anarchy in the Mirror of Uneven and Combined Development’, *International Politics* 50, no. 2, (2013): 183–230; ‘The “philosophical premises” of uneven and combined development’, *Review of International Studies* 39, no.3 (2013): 560–97., ‘International relations in the P..

<sup>26</sup> Rosenberg, ‘International relations in the Prison’: 11-15.

<sup>27</sup> K. N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979). Rosenberg, ‘The “philosophical premises” of uneven and combined development’: 193-201.



routes) and obstructed it in others (e.g. land barriers). Agrarian technology made a difference to the degree of combination (e.g. the quality of ships and knowledge of navigation, up to a point the construction of roads) but did not dominate it. By contrast, in the modern world combination is heavily determined by industrial technology. Under the impact of steamships, railways, highways, aircraft, spacecraft and electronic means of communication from the telegraph to the internet, geography falls away, and combination intensifies rapidly, and probably permanently.<sup>28</sup> Combination therefore increases directly with the third element of UCD: development. Combination is both a homogenizing force (e.g. around a dominant idea or model such as Westernization or ‘standard of civilization’) and a differentiating one (e.g. the dialectics of varied impacts and responses in the process of diffusion from core to periphery).

The spread of a new power configuration produces diverse outcomes. Each social order that encounters the new configuration has its own way of adapting to it. The ‘whip of external necessity’<sup>29</sup> produced by a new power configuration is often coercive, occurring through force of arms, as in the surge of Western imperialism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But inter-societal dynamics also take the form of imitation. Some societies do not take on the new configuration at all, or do so only weakly, either because of internal resistance to the social changes it required, or because of attempts by leading-edge polities to maintain inequalities between them by denying access to elements of the transformation: e.g. China during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Others succeed in developing indigenous versions of the new configuration: e.g. Japan during the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. ‘Late’ developers are not carbon copies of the original adopters, but develop their own distinctive characteristics. In this sense, the interactions between different social orders produce not convergence, but (often unstable) amalgams of new and old: German industrialization was not a replica of British development, and Chinese development has distinctive ‘Chinese characteristics’. The scale and intensity of combination within the international sphere has increased, meaning that every society becomes less self-contained and more exposed to developments elsewhere. As societies become larger in scale and more functionally differentiated, differences between them are accentuated and interactions between them intensified. The mutual constitution of combination and unevenness is thus intensified by development, producing larger, more complex social orders bound together in denser, more interdependent ways.

Rosenberg’s account tells us how ‘the international’ arises, and how it works. In that sense, it is both a clear advance on realism, which just assumes the international into existence along with states, and a radically alternative vision to neorealism’s ‘like units’ assumption. Rosenberg’s ‘international’ is not just political, but also deeply social and economic. It makes a powerful case for the distinctiveness and importance of the international as a social realm.

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<sup>28</sup> Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity, and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto, 1997[1932]), 27.

Against the background of these observations, it is clear that coming up with a definition of the subject area of IR on substantive grounds is not in itself a problematic exercise. However, one might legitimately wonder whether and to which degree even a more complex attempt to define the ‘international’ as in the works of Rosenberg can in the end be successful if such a definition is supposed to serve as a substantive foundation for underpinning a disciplinary delineation for IR. UCD is quite close to theories of modernization and thus might be claimed by Sociology – though not until it can overcome its aversion to the idea of second order societies. UCD might also be seen as an outright version of International Political Economy, though that raises the question of whether IPE is inside IR (as is mostly the case institutionally) or something more encompassing than IR. Rosenberg might well claim that UCD settles this old question by forcing IR and IPE to integrate.

But even ‘the international’ is not without its problems as the signifier for a discipline of IR. Mathias Albert’s recent *A Theory of World Politics* identifies ‘world politics’ as a distinct substantive realm of the social world, that is as one specific subsystem of the political system of world society. One could take the view that this actually provides for a substantive definition looked for in the present context: IR would then simply be the discipline concerned with everything that takes place within the system of world politics (as a ‘narrow’ definition), or somehow in relation to it (as a ‘wide’ definition). Such an approach also fulfills the requirement of a definition that it needs to account for how the subject matter as a part of the social world forms a *distinct* part of that social world and on what (historical and systematic grounds) it is thus distinguished (or differentiated).<sup>30</sup> The problem that comes up immediately then is that while by all means *A Theory of World Politics* is an ‘IR book’ in institutional terms, it is only partly so in substantive terms: in fact, it arrives at its substantive definition of world politics almost exclusively through the reading of sociological and historical, and not IR literature. Would this then lead to the conclusion that History and Sociology necessarily remain the more general disciplines, with IR bound to be more ‘specialized’, and forever remaining incarcerated in the ‘prison of political science’?<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> We have argued earlier (Albert and Buzan, ‘International relations theory and the “social whole”: encounters and gaps between IR and Sociology’) that most IR theory makes at least implicit assumptions about what that wider social realm as a ‘social whole’ is. Spelling out these assumptions invariably would be a first step to then ask how within it the subject matter of IR is distinguished. We admit that the observations presented here might sound a little odd in light of the fact that one of the authors has just written a book in which he deals with ‘world politics’ as a clearly substantively identified subject matter meeting the criteria outlined. Yet it should be clear from reading that book that it struggles quite hard to argue that it is of interest to IR readers, but *not* an IR book (and rather an exercise in ‘world society theory’).

<sup>31</sup> Rosenberg, ‘International relations in the Prison’. It would be possible to argue whether Rosenberg’s and Albert’s approach indeed belong to the same category in this context. For the time being, we have decided to leave them together: Rosenberg sees the international as a ‘dimension’ of social reality, Albert sees world politics as a (communicatively constituted) social system. Both delineate a substantive realm from its relation to, and distinction from, a social environment (through either some kind of ‘dimensionality’ or through a system/environment distinction), so for the purposes of this article seem to belong into the same batch.

*IR's subject, Mk 2: Things large and big: the international system*

The previous section was concerned with defining IR through a substantive realm of the social world that by and large was defined through being distinct from other parts of that social world. Regardless of whether this distinction historically and theoretically is seen to be the result of, for example, a functional differentiation within a wider system of politics, or a segmentation within the political system that allows for an 'international' to emerge in the first place: the important point is that there is a distinct realm that is *not* wholly covered by other social science disciplines – although they might be interested in aspects of it.

The second way of defining IR's subject in substantive terms discussed above would in a strict sense also pertain to identifying a specific realm in the social world. However, this realm would not be delimited from other realms in terms of, most notably, functional differentiation or segmentation. It cuts across these forms of social differentiation and includes all those parts of the social world that are structurally relevant. The realm of 'international relations' would then be seen purely in terms of levels. The subject of IR would, in that sense, be *all* the subjects of disciplines defined by functional differentiation, but *only* those parts of those subjects that pertain to a certain scope (variously defined as 'systemic', 'global', 'international', 'macro' etc.). IR would be the discipline for things 'large and big'. Without necessarily pegging such an understanding of things 'large and big' to specific concepts of *systemic* quality, Waltz's transposition of an analogy from economics to the study of international politics provides a useful heuristic here. Waltz remarks that just like understanding the (world) economy (as an issue of macroeconomics) cannot function by analyzing individual firms (as the prerogative of microeconomics), the study of international system cannot succeed on basis of studying (the behavior of) individual states.<sup>32</sup> We have something similar in mind with the second definition. The two main and fundamental differences between our understanding and Waltz' first pertains to the fact that the realm studied is not limited to (international) politics, but cuts across all kinds of social relations (e.g. economic, legal, scientific etc.). And our definition leaves open the possibility that both differentiations among actors, and variations in interaction capacity, do matter on a structural level.

As we are interested in a possible substantive definition of IR, it almost goes without saying that 'levels' here can only mean levels in a basic structural sense. This is not a point of mere scholastic sophistication. A definition of a discipline's substantive realm through a 'pure' level of *analysis* (if there can be such a thing at all), in the end privileges a methodological definition over a substantive one. Levels of analysis by definition pertain to a specific perspective, a specific angle of looking at the social world. They do not make explicit statements about what the most relevant levels of structure formation are.<sup>33</sup> While this is not the case with a definition

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<sup>32</sup> See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 88–93.

<sup>33</sup> It is an entirely different matter that many contributions who claim to be 'only' about perspective proceed actually on the assumption that the perspective in question mirrors the most relevant ways in which social reality is

through levels at which distinct forms of structure formation takes place, this does not mean that this would allow identifying the relevant levels and structures in a completely straightforward or easy manner. This not only pertains to the fact that structures are notoriously easy to talk about, but at the same time notoriously difficult to observe and describe in empirical terms. It particularly also pertains to the fact that meaningful analysis regarding this level cannot be limited to the description of the existence of specific structures, but requires an account of processes that lead to the constitution and transformation of structures. Complicating matters further, a ‘structural level’ does not even necessarily pertain to ‘macro’-structures alone, as, for example, singular ‘world events’<sup>34</sup> or ‘global microstructures’<sup>35</sup> can have immediate structural effects as well.

We suspect that there is no specific threshold of what in that sense counts as ‘large and big enough’ for constituting the proper subject matter of International Relations, particularly as larger structures can be influenced and ‘punctuated’ in their transformation by seemingly ‘small’ developments and events. We would rather think of this threshold as a kind of analytical ‘burden-of-proof’ rule: that it is necessary to make it plausible that some issue or question has relevance on a structural level. The important point is that a reference to a structural level and analytical rule of ‘large and big’ is completely indifferent to functional specification – the structures in question can be legal, political, economic etc. It is relatively indifferent to historical scope. And it is at least somewhat indifferent to geographical scale (with a tendency towards a larger extension, but bearing in mind that important things often start at very specific localities).<sup>36</sup>

Although it might be impossible to identify an exact ‘scale’ in this respect, the term ‘international’ might in fact serve as a useful heuristic here in two respects. On the one hand, structural effects need to be observed by a significant number of observers on a recurring basis in order to become structural in the first place. It is thus, at first, not even necessary that any interaction spanning nation-state boundaries takes place. Some local politics and events might have a structural effect if reported and remembered world-wide, whereas much international interaction will not arouse much interest or will be forgotten in the public quickly. There is, however, quite a high degree of likelihood that there is a positive correlation between interaction intensity and scale on the one hand, and the intensity of its observation on the other. Put differently: it is more likely, but not necessary, that international interactions have structural effects on a larger scale rather than local interactions having them.

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structured; see Mathias Albert and Barry Buzan, ‘Securitization, Sectors, and Functional Differentiation’, *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 4-5 (2011): 413–425.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. eds. Stefan Naeke, René Unkelbach, and Tobias Werron, *Weltereignisse: Theoretische und empirische Perspektiven* (Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Karin Knorr-Cetina ‘Complex Global Microstructures: The New Terrorist Societies’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 1 (2005): 213–234.

<sup>36</sup> Which means that ‘large and big’ might have a tendency to be ‘global’ as well, but this is not necessarily so and arguably significant structures existent in one world region only would also count.

On the other hand, however, the ‘international’ can serve as a useful reminder that not all structural effects need to be ‘global’, and that in fact quite a lot of structure formation takes place in regional or other non-global (but not necessarily regionally bundled) international systems.

It could be argued that such a description comes relatively close to what IR actually ‘does’, if what is published in academic journals and presented at large conferences is to serve as a useful guide in this respect. However, we would like to point out that scale here should be important. Using the illustrative analogy drawn from Waltz again, one could say that while international business practices are certainly worthwhile studying, they would meet the ‘large and big test’ only if they can be seen to have a structural impact on the world economy (which, for example, is mostly not the case in small or medium-sized companies, even though they might be very active on international markets). Equally, the many cases of an unequal distribution of income and other assets between groups or even states would only meet the test if it contributes to an overall picture of global inequality or is of a scale that it obviously has effects way beyond local contexts (e.g. the boundaries between rich and poor in the Mediterranean, the US-Mexico border etc.). Taking this illustration closer to one of the perennial discussions of the discipline, that is the question of whether foreign policy analysis is or should be a part of IR, the answer is obviously that this depends primarily on whether the policy decisions analyzed can be argued to have significant structural effects (although in many cases this might often only be ascertained with the benefit of historical hindsight).

It should be clear by now that seeing IR as being about ‘things large and big’ does offer a heuristic, but not a clear-cut definition of what is definitely ‘in’ and what is definitely ‘out’ under such a definition. The ‘large and big’ does not, however, refer to the issue of whether we are talking about ‘grand theory’ in this respect, i.e. comprehensive conceptual and theoretical frameworks for making sense of the worlds of IR.<sup>37</sup> Although both aspects often are related, they are not necessarily so. The difference here is neatly captured in a distinction that is less prominent in English than, most notably, in German, that is the distinction between ‘social theory’ (‘Sozialtheorie’) and ‘theory of society’ (‘Gesellschaftstheorie’). While the latter is often translated into ‘social theory’, there is a marked difference here. Social theory in whatever guise refers to fundamental characteristics of sociality. It can take its starting point in individual face-to-face interaction settings, assumptions about the rationality of actors, signs and signification, the relation between humans and things etc. In that sense, any theory of society will invariably have an underlying social theory, but it takes its starting point in the assumption that large-scale social structure formation has taken place and is mostly interested only in those parts of social theory that contribute to understanding society.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> And beyond; see the lively debates on this issue in Colin Wight, Tim Dunne, and Lene Hansen, eds., ‘The End of International Relations Theory?’ Special Issue of the *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>38</sup> Although there are of course differences between theories of society as well, with some claiming comprehensiveness not only in relation to explaining society, but everything *in* society as well.

### *Two substantive worlds of IR and their consequences*

At first glance, the two substantive worlds of IR sketched above differ fundamentally. However, they are not completely mutually exclusive of each other, as we will argue in this concluding section. We assess their relation to each other by discussing the analytical as well as institutional consequences for doing research in IR and for organizing it as an academic discipline that follow from leaning more towards one or the other version. To summarize the two substantive worlds: the first is where IR is concerned about a specific realm that is distinguished from other parts of the social world through forms of social differentiation and the quality of social relations (where approaches explicitly drawing on theories of social differentiation would emphasize the former, and the concept of uneven and combined development would emphasize the latter, as precondition for differentiation to take place). IR would be the discipline that studies that specific realm. The second world is a world viewed through the lens of levels – not only analytical levels, but levels of social structure. IR here would be the discipline that studies what goes on at the higher levels of the social world, quite irrespective of functional specification. In analytical terms the first world seems to require specialization, and an in-depth knowledge about a specific (if admittedly still rather huge) part of the social world. It would not discount the connections between that part of the social world and other realms (most notably the economy and law), but would always see these connections through the lens of relevance for, and the question of how they feed into, the dynamics of world politics or the international. The second world seems to take the opposite (and in this sense also ‘wider’) analytical approach, basically considering everything in the social world irrespective of the specific quality of the international or functional specification, if only it is ‘big’ enough. Both worlds also entail specific delimitations of what constitutes the relevant social environment for the analyzed subject. If the first world is seen in Albert’s terms, the relevant social environment would primarily be everything in the political and other functionally differentiated systems of society that it not ‘world’ or ‘international’ politics. If it is seen in Rosenberg’s terms, geography is the primary environment, plus those aspects of social reality that are not driven by UCD. In the second case it would be all processes in the social world beyond a specific macroscopic scale.<sup>39</sup>

Albert’s option points more to a subject that could be seen to be located somehow ‘within’ political science, whereas Rosenberg’s is necessarily multi-disciplinary, though quite how far the scope of UCD reaches is not wholly clear. Does it cover the social totality or are there parts of social reality outside it? The second world would see IR as a far broader and encompassing form of social science. However, we do not subscribe to such a view. Leaving open the question, for the time being, whether and to which degree the substantive ‘worlds’ of IR that we have introduced in the end cannot be reconciled with each other: *all* would fulfill the requirement to see IR as a discipline that can actually claim to rest on the basis of historically evolved social

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<sup>39</sup> We are talking here about most relevant environment in the sense of being constitutive of a system/environment-distinction that is required to identify a system in the first place, i.e. the environment *of* a system – of course, there are always myriads of other systems *in* a system’s environment.

realities, underpinning a disciplinary identity at least ‘equal to’ other disciplines. Whatever ‘world’ of IR – and whichever version thereof – one favours: the message which this contribution seeks to convey is that a delineation of IR as a discipline in substantive terms requires asking a range of quite fundamental questions: how are relevant social systems delineated from their environments and what are these environments? How is a social whole structured, differentiated, carved up into ‘parts’, ‘levels’, (micro-/macro-) ‘sizes’. Which of those systems, parts, levels, sizes are or should be the substantive focus of IR as a discipline?

We are aware of the fact that these basic questions are simply put yet complicated to deal with, as much as we are aware of the fact that they are not at all novel questions: in the history of IR as a discipline they are actually quite old questions. Asking these questions anew is however not out of nostalgia about outdated issues; nor is it out of nostalgia for a discipline that according to many prominent (if not necessarily correct) storylines once clustered around ‘great debates’ on central issues before it became utterly complex and fragmented.<sup>40</sup>

We do not expect that raising basic questions anew will automatically lead to clear and easy answers, let alone that the possible answer that we have put on the table will be satisfactory for everybody. However, we wish to reiterate the point that we see asking these questions as important for constructing disciplinary identity and keeping up reflection on this identity. A discipline that ceases to ask these questions is at risk of getting lost in a maze of ‘normal’ science, using utmost methodological efficiency to steer a boat on the high seas without any navigational reference points other than itself.

That it is possible to use different such navigational reference points should have become clear from our delineation of the two ‘worlds’ of IR and from the different emphases possible even within those worlds. Both authors of this contribution might have somewhat different preferences on which navigational reference points they would rather use in sailing the ship. However, we hope that we have made an argument that it is the delineation of such substantive navigational reference points that makes IR a discipline.

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Marcus Kristensen, ‘Discipline Admonished: On International Relations Fragmentation and the Disciplinary politics of Stocktaking’. *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 2 (2016): 243–267.