

## ABOUT THE SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

by

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At the Sixth World Congress of Sociology, held at Evian, France, 4th-11th September 1966, the sociology of international relations played a considerable role. It was the subject of a plenary meeting, as well as of a number of sections and working groups.

It seems possible to distinguish three trends in the emerging sociology of international relations. In the first place, as advocated by Professor Angell, University of Michigan, it can be regarded as the application of empirical sociology to international phenomena, mostly in the non-governmental sphere. Secondly, it is possible to analyze international phenomena in terms of its carrier-group. As such, Professor P.N. Fedoseyev, of the University of Moscow, suggested the class group. In the third place, it is possible to deal with world-society as such and to analyze international phenomena in terms of a structural sociology which reasons from world-society as an interrelated whole. In this case, it is of importance what concept of structure is used and in how far it can interpret dynamic processes in terms of a structural concept.

There are also intermediary approaches like interpreting the sociology of international relations as the comparative study of social systems.<sup>1</sup>

There is some analogy to the developments of thinking in relation to international law. This science can be interpreted traditionally as dealing with the legal relations between nation-states; it can be interpreted in terms of a "world-law" (Clark, Sohm, Larsen); it can be seen as a transnational law, bearing upon specific groups within national societies (Jessup).

The three possibilities for the sociology of international relations seem closely related to the basic approaches of science in general: fact-finding and classification; theory-building in a more general and in a more limited fashion. In regard to the latter, it is perhaps essential that macro-sociology should precede micro-sociology in regard to international phenomena because it has become uncertain in many sociological theories whether the concept "society" refers to national societies or to society in general. In the latter case, it would become preferable to use the term "world-society" in order to avoid confusion. In the early systems of sociology, the term "society" was used in a general evolutionary sense, but in many cases later investigations and theories used the term more as if referring to national societies, although this was not made specific.

It is therefore useful to make a conceptual distinction between

"world-society" and national societies if one endeavors to construct a sociology of international relations. Whether this should be made explicit by speaking about the sociology of world-society rather than the sociology of international relations is a matter of opinion. It would be possible to assert that the term "world society" carries the suggestion of a fully integrated social system, but this certainly is not implied if the term is used in the sociological sense in the context of a structural theory which only posits the existence of a system of interrelated variables, and this certainly applies to world-society as it exists in the present time.

If a fully elaborated science, like sociology, is applied to a new set of phenomena, it is all the more pressing to revert to general theory as already now the sociology of international relations has separated itself into the sociology of international law, the sociology of international tensions, conflictology, polemology, irenology, social psychological approaches dealing with aggression, hostility, anxiety, frustration, conflict, etc.<sup>2</sup>

It is, of course, quite essential to raise the question of the relation of the sociology of international relations to other disciplines like political science, social psychology, etc. and to take into account whether it would be preferable to have a separate science of international relations instead of dealing with international phenomena within the framework of already existing sciences. As this is also a problem of academic organization, it is hardly possible to answer this question.

If international problems are dealt with by a number of academic disciplines, they are brought within the ken of more students, but the process may often result in confusion rather than clarification.

If the other possibility, viz. separate departments for international relations, is considered, the question becomes whether there is a meaningful relationship to society itself. In plainer language, are there enough functions for which the study of international relations is meaningful. For the larger countries, this question seems to deserve a confirmative answer while for medium and smaller countries the situation is dubious. In addition one would not like to think of specialists in foreign relations who would have little knowledge of the inner workings of the society they belong to.

Most of the questions which have been raised so far point in the direction of the need for sociology to contribute to a general theory of world-society as there seem to be more than enough partial and specific approaches of numerous disciplines between which there is little or no coordination and no general frame of reference.

In short, it is quite justified to say that the present study of international phenomena is rather confusing.

Policy-oriented theories, based upon national interest, present themselves as general theories; image-thinking frequently takes the place of analysis; dynamic thinking and fact-finding are often contradictory, etc.

The need for general theory, but a theory which can be related back to the individual is therefore quite essential, next to empirical and comparative studies.

The first question which needs clarification is what should be regarded as the basic factor in a sociology of international relations. Is it the individual, the class-group, specific functional groups in terms of decision-makers, the nation-state, regional groups of states, power-blocs, civilizational groups, ideological groups, "global" groups, etc.? If only one of these is regarded as essential, the resulting theory tends to become static as in the thinking of international law in the conventional sense.

Can the various groups be somehow weighted or how do we arrive at their reality? Or should the role-concept be used: national roles versus regional or global ones? How do we determine the interrelationship of the roles? What is the reality behind what we call "international"?

In most people the term "national" creates more of an image than the word "international" which seems rather vague and non-descript. "National" can be related to the life-goals of an individual like the protection of his family, the security of his economic position, the status of his nation-group in the world. His government is supposed to look after these interests.

A nation in this sense is not more than a group of people within a given territory under a government which is not subservient to other governments. This applies only to powerful countries in the strict meaning of the word as smaller and medium countries tend to be at least influenced by more powerful ones in a variety of ways.

A great deal depends therefore upon the identification of the individual. He may in many cases have an inclination to identify himself with non-national groups, but the power of national governments limits and controls this identification with other groups. In this sense, there is nowhere "freedom from governments" although there may be a number of "specific freedoms" in the political, economic, ideological realm, etc.

Governments also control, stimulate or prohibit expansionistic movements which they may undertake via their own organs or which might be left to economic, cultural, ideological groups or a combination of them.

If life is seen as a process in time and space, it is obvious that all human activity takes place within these categories. It will always require and has always required control groups that are ecologically limited as well as operating within a time-span which can be determined or non-determined.

The salient point is therefore how these control groups are formed. Their existence is undoubtedly not due to any rational decision, but to a process of social growth which in many cases reaches back into a remote past. Territorial social groups - to substitute this term for the expression "nation-state", originated in certain places and went through a process of social growth. The transition from tribal groups to nation-states occurred when all people within a given territory were considered as "citizens" rather than as members of kinship systems. This process was very gradual and not completed until quite recently.

As the world at present consists of a considerable number of these "territorial social groups," existing side by side, the sociological problem is that of their interrelationship which can be that of superordination, subordination, or relative independence.

All these forms obviously occur although political and legal thinking places great stress - too great, in some respects, - on the latter form. Governments lose face if they admit to be in a subordinate position to other governments, and they prefer to speak about alliances, unions, supra-national integration, etc. in order to retain the illusion of their freedom and independence.

Nevertheless, there are obviously very great differences between intra-state structure and inter-state structure. The intra-state structure depends upon a complex division of labor; is hierarchical in structure; has a coercive control-system and a considerable amount of shared values in relation to inner order, outer defense and an equitable distribution of the national product.

The inter-state structure has very few shared values, no coercive control-system, is horizontal rather than hierarchical while there is no purposive division of social labor. In short, inter-state relations are in a condition of chaos.

The shared value system seems to be limited to the avoidance of a general nuclear war. Starting from this point, it would be logical to expect a gradual extension of the shared values as foreseen in the pattern of the international organizations. The values of the international organizations are, however, not universal as a sizable part of the world-population is outside the international organizations. The fact that their values are not universal reduces their efficacy as a sort of "as-if universality" takes the place of real universality. Rigidly speaking, the values of the international organizations are only shared values in regard to the members while, in addition, their "weight" has to be measured in terms of national self-interest. The shared values are basically moral values whose efficacy depends upon the relationship between national self-interest and universal mankind-awareness. It is doubtful whether the latter value can play an important role in a period which regards itself as "highly dynamic".

By "highly dynamic" we mean that neither intra- nor the inter-state structure strive for equilibrium or stability. The intra-state structures in many cases strive for a high level economy while the inter-state structure operates in terms of a disequilibrated power-structure.

For a sociology of international relations it is not decisive whether nation-states strive for a low-level, medium-level, or high-level equilibrium, but it is essential that equilibrium is a shared value. If it is not, the intra-state disequilibrium is not likely to have a favorable influence on the inter-state pattern although this is not excluded theoretically. It is far more serious, however, that a power-equilibrium is not a shared value in world-society because this leaves the emergence of such an equilibrium to the blind play of natural forces without any purposive, volitional human control or efforts thereto.

It is frequently argued in modern systems theory that the innate controls and the feedback-mechanisms of complex societies are sufficient to maintain a certain equilibrium.

This may be so, but it would still leave the question unanswered whether added volitional controls would not be useful. It can be argued philosophically that automatic mechanisms operate better by themselves, but as we do not apply this philosophy to the inner workings of our national societies, it is not justified to leave the much more hazardous inter-state system to this type of control.

On the contrary, a volitional intra-state structure geared to a non-volitional inter-state structure creates the hazard that any misfiring of the volitional inner controls automatically transfers itself to the interstate structure. In common parlance, this is called the danger of "non-volitional conflict," but the term as well as the thinking behind it only present an incomplete image of the real situation.

The influence of the relationship between volitional and non-volitional control-systems seems to be underrated in the sociology of international relations.

If the volitional control-system of our national societies create unrealistic and over-optimistic images via the political system, they become equilibrium-disturbing. This disequilibrating tendency could only be compensated by volitional controls operating in the inter-state system and acting as a brake on disequilibrating tendencies within national systems. This interlinkage seems to be largely ignored in the present time.

The image of a coordinated world-society is not operative within national societies, and this could only become different if an equilibrated world-society were to become a part of national value-systems so that there would no longer be the tension between domestic and foreign policy.

The existence of global organizations has some influence on these tensions, but only a slight one as they have no communication-channels which enable them to communicate directly to populations.

As long as national interest is interpreted in terms of dominant power there is no real possibility to achieve better coordination in world-society.

National societies have shared values, like inner order, outer defense, an equitable distribution of the national product; an extensive division of labor, a hierarchical social order; a common civilizational basis; a coercive social control-system. World society has few shared values: the only evident one at the present time being the avoidance of total nuclear war; there is a competitive order but not much of a purposive division of labor; an equalitarian legal order which has little influence on the power structure; no common civilizational principles, except a vague belief in progress and prosperity; a mostly moral control-system in terms of world-opinion and deliberative assemblies.

In other words, "national society" and "world-society" are totally different sociological types. If this were recognized as such, the

situation might be more favorable than the "as-if" attitude which treats world-society as in the process of becoming an enlarged national society.

As they are different social systems, it would be more useful to ask what the probabilities are for a better coordinated world-society, and whether there is an image which is communicable to national societies and, ultimately, to the individual.

One of the important aspects seems to be that social evolution operates in the direction of greater complexity so that we should visualize world-society as a highly differentiated structure rather than as an egalitarian one. It also involves that we recognize the power-radiation of the most complex social systems, and that we devise social mechanisms to regulate the power-radiation instead of ignoring it, or considering it legitimate only in the case of certain countries. It is a "natural fact" in the relationship of more complex to less complex social systems as even a very superficial study of history would confirm.

A sociological approach to international problems can interpret these relations in terms of national capability-structures and compensate for the political and legal tendency to regard national societies as separate, abstract, self-determining entities. This attitude belongs to the political societies of the past but is not sufficient to regulate the complex interrelationships of industrial societies whose capabilities must be regarded as a largely non-volitional factor for which we must as yet devise a social control-system.

Maximization of capability might create inner as well as outer tensions as it ignores the innate structural attributes which every society possesses and which may be obscured but not basically altered by capability increases.

A national society is a relational structure: the higher the capability of the society the more complex the structure. It is also obvious that changes in capability produce structural tensions unless the capability increase corresponds mainly to population increases.

As modern society has no definite mechanism for the regulation of capability in regard to the basic need-structure of the population, the process is a mechanical one: competition operates toward capability increases; capability increases beyond a certain limit produce structural tensions within the society; these inner tensions create outer tensions which prevent world-society from reaching an equilibrium whether this be interpreted as a volitional or a mechanical one.

As was said before, it must be admitted, however, that the capability increases are a volitional process which is tension-producing. Whether an image of capability-stabilization is possible is largely a political matter which has different aspects for every national society.

Economics in its early stages was termed "the dismal science." It seems as if the sociology of international relations might merit the same designation. By being "dismal", however, it may perform the same service economics did, namely to point out that if natural tendencies are left to operate freely without purposive social control, no functioning social system will result.

A functioning economic system has been reached by a compromise upon the basis of group interests. In the same way a functioning global system can only be reached by compromises upon the basis of the interests of national groups. These compromises can only be reached in terms of given situations and for a limited period. It is not possible to establish stable boundaries between unstable social systems, but the boundary-building process can be based upon compromise as the only realistic possibility. Any social change which upsets the inner equilibrium-seeking tendencies of complex social systems would tend to make the boundary-seeking process more difficult and more risky in terms of inner as well as outer stability.

The reason for this is not far to seek: modern society depends upon largely mental processes of adaptation. Any reversal to more primitive techniques of social control leads to disturbances within the system and endangers its outer as well as inner functioning.

Greater social complexity means greater vulnerability to system-disturbances. In other words, it could be perhaps formulated as a sociological hypothesis: the more complex the social system, the higher the cost and risk of expansion beyond certain structural limits.

The impact of the modern social sciences in foreign policy-making seems to be extremely small, if not non-existent. If the social sciences bring about very gradual changes in the modes of social thinking and of social behavior, the conclusion would be that it will be a long and difficult process to achieve any impact at all upon a field which is as much change-resisting and traditional as foreign policy.

Nevertheless, there is no reason to be overly pessimistic as social reality itself forces a re-thinking of the processes by which modern society is controlled and which undoubtedly will undergo changes as the society does itself. We need a much higher degree of awareness of what actually goes on in our society, and the certain restiveness which prevails in regard to the traditional patterns of thought is an encouraging sign.

The transition from instability to stability cannot be achieved by formulas, treaties in the traditional political pattern, etc. A certain empathy in regard to the thinking of other nations and other peoples is most essential. We have to "understand" situations before we can cope with them. As soon as we begin to approach international problems with the desire to "understand" them, we may take a significant step forward. In this respect sociology has something to recommend itself, even if it presents itself more in a speculative than in an empirical form.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cp. Talcott Parsons. Societies, Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives. Prentice Hall, 1966.
2. Cp. J.K. Zawodny, Aina Z.B. Kruger. Man and International Relations. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1966.