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Guillaume Devin
Editor

Resources and Applied Methods in International Relations

Translated by William Snow

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Editor

Guillaume Devin
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PREFACE

The idea of this book corresponds to developments in what is commonly known as the sociology of international relations.¹ If one accepts that international facts are social facts, it is hardly surprising to submit them to a study using the tools of the social sciences. As Jacques Vernant said over 60 years ago in a forgotten text: “by acknowledging the connection that international relations studies have with sociology and the human sciences [...] a field is opened up to sociology where the intrusion is justified by its methods and concern for thinking correctly, more in depth than on the surface, and for understanding.”² This firmly and simply stated observation shows that a great deal of the discussion about what a “sociology of international relations” might or ought to be is a tedious and useless exercise. On the other hand, reflecting on sources and the issue of adapting methods deserves our full attention, whereas they have remained relatively neglected. Why are they so late in coming? Probably because theories in the field of international relations, mainly Anglo-American in origin, have always exerted a powerful influence on research by favoring inter-paradigmatic debate at the expense of empirical-deductive approaches. This does not mean that theories are not suggestive, that they are not based on a certain number of empirical observations, but they have wound up acting as pre-established frameworks for thinking, numbing scientific curiosity for anything not answering their general proposals. From this standpoint, arguing for more empiricism is not an anti-theoretical proposal, but a research program preceding theoretical development, or at least certain generalizations. Here, the study precedes conceptualization.

Frankly, this is the approach applied by many international relations researchers. Furthermore, there is a gap between the massive focus on major theories in teaching (realism, liberalism, constructivism, etc.) and the far more limited use of these paradigms in research.³ And one might say that with the trend toward constructivism, both a theory and a research method, in-depth knowledge of the “field” will become increasingly necessary for international relations studies.⁴ In any case, that is the conviction shared by the authors of this book.

The project consists in becoming acquainted with certain empirical research methods when the subject relates to international relations, understood very broadly as “*all* forms of interaction between the members of separate societies, whether government sponsored or not.”⁵ While the subject is “complex” (in the sense of being composed of multiple links and several levels of action that must be connected and considered together), it is no different from most social facts. We must then reduce its complexity by identifying the enigma to be solved in the research and by doing what is needed to carry out the study. Thinking clearly and having the ability to demonstrate it are not self-evident.

There is no blueprint. You do not start the research with an engineer’s drawings. The adventure begins with trial and error: you describe, observe, collect, question, compare and interpret, trying to gradually give your questions a coherent and logical form. So it all starts with what looks at first like an experiment. In that sense, according to Claudio Magris’ fine Hegelian formula, the method lies in constructing the experiment.⁶ The path is steep. The first moments in one’s research are not automatically comfortable from an intellectual standpoint (not to mention material conditions during research which can be trying). What stands out at first is the impression of being overwhelmed by one’s research, of no longer knowing what its scope is, and even less, its outcome. If handled well, that uncertainty can turn out to be full of promise. You have to get lost to find your way. The apparently scattered readings and data enable one to begin again with new hypotheses. Opening up one’s research (looking for comparable subjects and phenomena) or exposing it to the perspective of different disciplines is always a stimulating exercise. This decentering provides a way to keep active the principle according to which research must always strive to offer conclusions with a more general scope than those relating to the study’s specific subject.

Research is an exercise in freedom: an appeal to imaginative intuition and critical curiosity. But contrary to essayism, intuition and curiosity are

controlled here by applying evidence obtained through a rigorous approach. Many international relations “experts” pay little attention to this. And yet we would like to know more often how they have constructed their interpretations: according to what method(s), and with what sources? It is to this approach that our book invites you, proposing after some preliminary reflections a panorama of resources and methods applied to international relations research.

The work as a whole does not pretend to be exhaustive. Applying quantitative methods to international relations studies and the debate around the triangulation of methods would fill up a large volume in themselves. And the book is not meant to be read as a lesson on what internationalists may not be doing or what they should explore. Our ambition is more modest, but the orientation is clear: empirical research on international relations is based, as Robert K. Merton would have said, on “disciplined eclecticism”⁷ and should be gauged by the results.

Paris, France
June 2017

Guillaume Devin

NOTES

1. Guillaume Devin (ed.), *Dix concepts sociologiques en relations internationales*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2015; Guillaume Devin, *Sociologie des relations internationales* (Paris, La Découverte, 2013), pp. 3–6; Bertrand Badie, *Quand l’histoire commence*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2013; Frédéric Ramel, “Sociologie,” in Thierry Balzacq and Frédéric Ramel (eds.), *Traité de relations internationales* (Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2013), pp. 499–522.
2. Jacques Vernant, “Vers une sociologie des relations internationales,” *Politique étrangère*, 17 (4), (1952): 232. Our translation.
3. In the 2009 TRIP survey on the field of international relations in ten countries (not including France), it appears that while 70% of introductory courses in international relations are devoted to presenting major paradigms, nearly 25% of those interviewed indicated not using these paradigms in their research. See Richard Jordan et al., *One or Many? TRIP Survey of International Relations Faculty in Ten Countries*, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg (Va.), 2009, available at: https://www.wm.edu/offices/itpir/_documents/trip/final_trip_report_2009.pdf (accessed on March 24, 2017).
4. A trend seen not only in work by political analysts, but also very prevalent among historians of international relations. See Pierre Grosser, “État de la littérature. L’histoire des relations internationales aujourd’hui,” *Critique internationale*, 65 (2014): 173–200.

5. Kalevi Holsti, *International Politics. A Framework for Analysis* (London, Prentice Hall, 1992), p. 10.
6. Claudio Magris, *Danube* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).
7. Robert K. Merton, *Sociological Ambivalence* (New York (N. Y.), The Free Press, 1976), p. 169, quoted in Arnaud Saint Martin, *La Sociologie de Robert K. Merton* (Paris, La Découverte, 2013), p. 58.

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Jourdain, C., “Classroom Simulator, a new instrument for teacher training. The case of mathematical teaching,” in G. Futschek & C. Kynigos (eds), *Proceedings of the 3rd international constructionism conference*, 2014, pp. 145–155; Douaire, J. & Emprin, F. (2015). Teaching geometry to students (from five to eight years old), in K. Krainer & N. Vondrová (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the European Society for Research in Mathematics Education*, CERME9, 2015, pp. 529–535.

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