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Symposium on
Theory, History, and the Global Transformation
by Barry Buzan and George Lawson

International historical what?

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This essay examines the relationship between history and theory through a historical and political analysis of the rise of distinctly social theories, concepts, and practices in the 'long 19th century'. Sociomania, obsession with things 'socio', is a problem in international theory. It is also a serious missed opportunity for Buzan and Lawson's study of the 19th century. *The Global Transformation* contributes to international theory in showing how mainstream IR has failed to grasp the full significance of this period. But, in this crucial regard at least, so too have its authors. In adopting rather than fully historicizing the rise and expansion of social theories, works of 'historical social science' obscure rather than illuminate the historical and political origins of social forms of governance and thought; underestimate their significance for the history of international theory; and are unable to identify the more fundamental governance form of which the rise of the modern social realm is a concrete historical expression.

Sociolatry and the global transformation

The Global Transformation (*TGT*) is a work of immense synthesis. Buzan and Lawson (2015, 11) wisely make no 'attempt to compete … with those who carry out fine-tuned … historical analysis' of the long 19th century (1776–1914). For this we look to Hobsbawn's trilogy (1962, 1975, 1989), Bayly's (2004) *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914*, and Osterhammel's (2009 [2014]) monumental *Transformation of the World*. Nor, less appreciatively, do the authors seek to advance 'a novel theoretical argument regarding the causes of the global transformation' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 10–11). Instead, they use the scholarship of sociologists, IR theorists, and world and economic historians 'to build a composite picture' of major 19th-century inventions and developments, facts, and events (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 11). The result is a panoramic survey of changing modes of production, forms of governance, and imperial expansion; the revolutionary consequences of industrialization and empire, the rise of bureaucratic states, new forms of class conflict, the shrinking of the planet with steamships, railways, roads, and automobiles. In this synthetic vein, the book succeeds wonderfully. As Dan Nexon wrote for the back cover,

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'Some claims are so compelling, persuasive and simply correct that, upon reading them, we say to ourselves "Of course! How could anyone have ever thought differently?"'. Indeed, many of these 19th-century transformations underpin the organization of core IR undergraduate and graduate study where I teach.

Not a conventional work of history or theory, *TGT* is instead an exemplary work of sociological labour. This is evident not only from the book's fondness for typologies, ideal types, and choice of language: 'stratificatory social differentiation'; 'interaction capacity'; 'meme'; 'differential and interactive development'; 'densely connected networks'; 'uneven and combined development'. *TGT* is also deeply sociological in that it struggles with the historical conditions for the emergence of its central mode of analysis: social and sociological theories. For when, where and how did it become possible to offer social and sociological explanations of history? What kind of theories are distinctly *social* theories?

Buzan and Lawson present particular – and brief – answers to these questions, drawn more from sociology's disciplinary myths than from the actual history of 18th- and 19th-century social thought: a familiar one of methodological advance plus mostly progressive social reform. They argue that the early modern scientific revolution was extended to the 'science of the social' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 97). The effect in *TGT* is a relentless diffusion of sociological terminology: social differentiation, social reality, social change, social forces, social order, social world, social structure, social formations, social power, social content, social infrastructures, social interaction capacity, social technologies, social revolution, social cohesion, social organization, social life, social transformation, social practice, and social legitimacy. Certainly, the authors are not alone in liberally evoking such terms. In common with the wider 'social turn' in international studies, Buzan and Lawson too quickly pass over the historical and political context of the rise and expansion of distinctly social concepts. The object of enquiry in international historical sociology is rarely the history of social theory itself. In this crucial respect, *TGT* is considerably more sociological than historical. Buzan and Lawson practice what Comte (1875, 116) called sociolatry, the worship of things 'socio' (Owens 2015a). In this they are not alone. 'IR', to adapt Reus-Smit's words, 'is a field that privileges [social] theory' (2016). But this sociolatry is an intellectual problem of the first order for *TGT*: it dramatically inhibits the ability to historicize, and therefore adequately theorize, one of the most fundamental and consequential developments of its central period of study. Sociolatry is a problem for international studies. It is a serious missed opportunity for a text on the long 19th century. The Age of Revolution, the Age of Capital, and the Age of Empire (Hobsbawn 1962, 1975, 1989) was also the Age of the Social.

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The Age of the Social

Before the late 18th century there were no 'social' explanations for human affairs, or any notion that society or social relations represented the totality of self-instituted relations between humans. Early modern theorists of natural law did not have a concept of society as the ontological basis of all forms of human organization. However, Grotius and Pufendorf had developed a model of fellow feeling – sociable interaction in the sphere of private exchange – in their attempt to theorize the expansion of commerce as distinct and autonomous from despotic states. This particular discourse of 'sociability' would have a profound influence on subsequent theories of bourgeois 'civil society'. By the middle of the 18th century, Montesquieu, Hume and Smith were able to advance a much stronger notion of an autonomous societal logic by distinguishing between the gentle mores of 'commercial society' and the violence of state despotism. Henceforth, society would be conceived as an object of government not reducible to hierarchal and familial household forms of rule (despot means 'master of the house'). Members of civilized society exhibited polite sociability; they could *self*-police. Those outside bourgeois society did not, by definition. Something changed in the Age of Revolution, Capital, and Empire. There was a huge proliferation of social talk (socialize, socialization, social evolution) and activities to which social and socio were appended (socio-economic, social fact, social work). By the turn of the 20th century, it was difficult to escape sociomania.

Why this transformation? What were the historical conditions for the 18th-century emergence and 19th-century proliferation of distinctly social forms of discourse? What new practices emerged through the long 19th century that would call forth such a revolution in language and thought? Buzan and Lawson, and IR more generally, do not have compelling answers to these questions. If IR considers them at all, it assumes that the arrival of social talk was a methodological advance in the human sciences. The history of particular 'social norms' or forms of 'socialization' may be subject to historical enquiry, as Reus-Smit (2016) notes. But there is very little engagement with the historical constellation that gave rise to sociological theories to begin with. Without such an engagement, international theorists are unable to adjudicate whether the merits of sociological approaches are best understood in philosophy of science terms or, as I shall argue below, as competing but unconvincing historical and political analyses of what the rise of the social represents. *TGT* shows that mainstream IR has 'failed to grasp the full significance' of the long 19th century. But so have Buzan and Lawson. They argue that IR 'should take its place as a "historical social science"', and 'restore … historical sociological approaches' to the

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mainstream (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 332). Yet, in adopting rather than fully historicizing the rise and expansion of social theory and practices they have underestimated its significance for international theory, but also, more importantly, the historical and political origins of social forms of governance and thought.

To illustrate, consider the three principal ways in which the relationship between history and theory is presented in *TGT*. First, Buzan and Lawson claim that attention to the 19th century yields better international theory. Realists can appreciate the significance of changing modes of power. Liberals, constructivists, and the English School can all 'carry out research into large-scale ideational transformations' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 329). For obvious reasons, as explicated in the essays by Bilgin and Anievas in this symposium, Marxists and postcolonial scholars are exempt from history tutoring. In this first approach to the relation between history and theory in IR, history largely provides empirical details for pre-existing international theories. Fundamental questions related to historical method, source interpretation, context, or how to do good historical writing are left to one side. However, in a second mode, Buzan and Lawson refer to the more interesting question of whether 'the concepts and analytical tools … used to assess global modernity are … easily transportable to other times and other places' (2015, 32). They leave this issue broadly unanswered. But, of course, the historicity of theory is not simply a question of whether and how to make 'meaningful comparisons' between epochs, of intellectual time travel and anachronism. It is the more fundamental problem of whether the concepts and analytical tools that emerged in a specific historical and political context are adequate for addressing *that context*. It all depends on how and why they emerged, what they reveal and conceal. This is a different 'origins' question than the one raised by Reus-Smit (2016). It is not about the 'origins of global modernity' *per se*, but the forms of social and sociological theorizing that it produced.

The third way that Buzan and Lawson (2015, 44) address the relation between history and theory concerns the advent of 'modern social science', which they write, 'was established to examine the causes, character and outcomes of the global transformation'. They note that 'Condorcet's discipline of "social mathematics" was renamed "Sociology" by Comte, who argued that a "science of the social" could uncover the "laws of society" ' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 97). British liberals founded the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1856. With advice from John Stuart Mill, the American Association for the Promotion of Social Science was founded that same year. The science of the social was part of a wider progressive 'social movement', suggest Buzan and Lawson (2015, 97–98), aimed at improving 'endemic social problems ranging from

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poverty to crime … carrying out public health initiatives, improving educational systems, fostering commercial exchange, and embracing technological change'. In this narrative, the science of the social was a natural and mostly laudable outcome of the radical enlightenment, the movement, they write, that 'sought to harness change through reason, experiment and the professionalization of scientific knowledge' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 97). The authors quickly note that the new science of social engineering could be used for both good and ill effect primarily because Europeans attributed their 'notions of progress to ideas of civilizational superiority' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 98). The same methods of knowledge collection used to improve the lives of Europe's poor served 'as tools for the expansion of European power … Progress abroad often meant a reinforcement of metropolitan superiority through a stark differentiation between Europeans and "others"' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 98). These two sides of progress 'at home' and 'abroad' are linked. But the history to be negated is the racist 'dark side of progress' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 99). There is no matching disavowal of the narrative that social science and policy involved 'progressive' improvement and 'betterment' of populations at home, inverted commas notwithstanding. Why is the history of social science and policy told in this way? What new practices emerged that would call forth such a revolution in language? What enduring activities needed to be given a new name?

The proliferation of sociological talk through the 19th century originates in a crisis of the modern social realm itself. The social realm emerged towards the end of the 18th century as the intermediary between the newly constituted, newly separated, spheres of public and private attendant the rise of capitalism and imperial state bureaucracies (Arendt 1958; Owens 2015b). 'Public power', in Habermas's words, increasingly 'concentrated in national and territorial states, rose above a privatized society … The "social" could be constituted as its own sphere to the degree that on the one hand the reproduction of life took on private forms, while on the other hand the private realm as a whole assumed public relevance' (1991 [1962], 127). Given liberalism's stated antipathy to non-contractual, despotic household governance, the social realm was initially conceived in the language of bourgeois 'civil society'. However, through the 19th century the social realm and distinctly social forms of thought underwent a major structural transformation. In the Age of the Social, the polite mores of *salons* 'society' were inadequate for demobilizing newly mobilized populations. As Buzan and Lawson also note, 'revolution and fear of revolution were fundamental to the transformation of polities', 'prompt[ing] major reform programmes, partly out of elite concerns over the prospects of revolution, partly because of the militancy of mass publics' (2015, 129, 139, 40, 147). But they were

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also the fundamental context for the 19th-century rise of distinctly social and sociological theories, not just the ideologies of progress analysed in *TGT*.

Briefly consider Durkheim's notion of functional differentiation, adopted as a 'sociological approach' to IR theory by Buzan and a different set of co-authors (Buzan and Albert 2010; Albert, Buzan and Zürn 2013). On this view, the central characteristic of modernity is the rise of specialization, functional differentiation, the evolution of simple forms of life to more complex ones in which different but nonetheless interdependent members of the 'social system' are defined by their different (legal, political, economic, scientific) activity in the capitalist division of labour. The historical and political context of Durkheim's (1984 [1893]) theory was the dual effort to respond to major crises of order and to move liberalism towards an acceptance of state-led social policy intervention into 'society'. Functional differentiation was more than a theory of specialization. It was essential to Durkheim's idea that the different parts of the capitalist division of labour were mutually dependent and essentially *complementary*, just like the organs of a human body. Thus, the violent upheaval of the French Third Republic could not be endemic to industrial capitalism. For Durkheim, these 'social problems' were pathologies, part of the crisis of transition from feudal households to modern 'society'. Revolutionary disorder was a contingency of interdependence that could be ameliorated; it *had* to be ameliorated to prevent the overthrow of the entire system. *Anomie*, tautologically, could be overcome through the creation of new 'norms'. There was a need to *make* certain populations more social, to de-radicalize, to *socialize* them. The mechanism was intervention into segments of the 'social whole' – workers, women, and landless peasants – most threatening its dissolution.

Social policy was a 'secondary and supportive institution' to capital accumulation, state, and geopolitical order (Piven and Cloward 1971, xiii, 3). Durkheim used the language of 'social solidarity' to describe intervention into 'society', a discourse that would make its way into some English School theories of international society (Bellamy 2004) and social constructivism (Kratochwil 1991). Durkheimian notions of social solidarity are also central to much writing on the progressive and humanitarian aspects of 19th-century social welfare 'at home', and are evoked in histories of humanitarian intervention 'abroad' (Barnett 2011). The pioneer of social insurance, Bismarck, was far more explicit about the origins of social welfare. *Socialpolitik* was *realpolitik* and *kolonialpolitik* applied to internal populations. Max Weber drew on and revised Bismarck's answer to the Social Question when he forged a *modern* political realism for the Age of the Social. Was it possible, and if so how, to respond to the revolutionary

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demands of newly organized workers, women, and colonial natives without overthrowing capitalist imperial states? Social reform policies – not just the workhouses, political and media suppression, suspensions of parliament, and leftist purges, noted in *TGT* – were part of the 'expansion in both the infrastructural and despotic powers of the state' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 140). Modern political realism, not just liberalism, socialism, nationalism, and 'scientific' racism, was forged in reaction to revolutionary claims perceived to be emanating from the social (Owens 2015b).

TGT is right that the major theories now dominant in international theory are heirs to the 19th-century 'ideologies of progress', which 'rationalized vast programmes of social engineering' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 101). However, more specifically and importantly, Marxism/socialism, the new 'social' interventionist liberalism (including solidarism and social constructivism), and modern political realism should be understood as paradigms of social regulation, 'different ways of imagining the social realm – and its fault lines, or trying to (re)organize it' (Steinmetz 1993, 41). Thus, rather than view the 19th century as *a source* for the main IR theories, as Buzan and Lawson suggest, these theories should be viewed as *fragments* of the 19th-century Social Question. Instead of objective theories of modern society and their interrelations, they are better situated *within* the history of the late 18th-century rise and 19th-century violent transformation of the social realm. That is to say, with the important but nonetheless problematic exception of Marxism, distinctly social theories and accompanying political ideologies originally developed to counter various forms of insurgency (Owens 2015b). Distinctly social policy intervention and accompanying social discourses were projects of *domestication*. The Marxist, more radical, exception is problematic because it struggled to develop an adequate theory of politics and, *pace* Buzan and Lawson (2016), joined social theory as a whole in failing to identify the fundamental ontology of the modern social realm itself. It is not enough to point to the factual diversity of social theories when, in their different ways, they suffer from a common problem.

Implications and conclusions

The implications for the full spectrum of IR theories are significant. Indeed, contra the suggestion in the Introduction to this symposium, they go far beyond historicizing concepts for its own sake, though, of course, 'the historicizing practice' does have 'a theoretical integrity of its own' (Reus-Smit 2016). Histories of thought are indispensable. But to historicize social theories and concepts is not – and should not be – independent of larger theoretical projects.

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In too quickly embracing social discourses, social, political, and international theorists have been unable to grasp the more fundamental governance form of which the social realm is the modern expression. Through the course of the long 19th century, relations of power and dependency previously rooted in – and understood to be rooted in – feudal households became a matter of public state regulation and administration in the core of the major European empires. This was a significant transformation. The destruction of feudal households was the foundational assumption of *all* strands of classical social theory. Contra Buzan and Lawson (2016), this is also true of 'Marx, Engels and their successors', who did not, in fact, 'oppose *everything* that Comte [and] Durkheim stood for' (emphasis added). For *pace* Comte, Durkheim, Marx and Weber, the rise of the social did not signal the end of large-scale forms of household governance as such. The emergence of capitalism and imperial state bureaucracies scaled up and transformed the units of rule in which populations were domesticated: households.

Thus, recalling the different conceptions of change outlined by Reus-Smit (2016) in the opening essay to this symposium, my argument is that the historical rise of the social was only a partial transformation rather than a complete 'breakpoint'. The organizational and administrative techniques of household rule took on new forms and ideological rationalizations when the management of life processes acquired its own public domain: the modern social realm (Owens 2015b). Buzan and Lawson are correct that there are, indeed, processes and relations that are usefully understood as social. But analyses of these relations need to be understood as the distinctly modern and capitalist variant of the science and practice of household governance; they are modern forms of *oikonomikos*, from the ancient Greek for household. International theory has long been interested in debates about the 'domestic analogy'. But the ahistorical embrace of social and sociological theories, including by various strands of critical theory, has obscured the much deeper significance of households and domesticity for rethinking power and politics in the modern age. This is the 'larger theoretical project' requested by Reus-Smit.

How, as non-trained historians, can IR theorists write more convincingly about the past? Buzan and Lawson wager that the answer is international historical sociology. In contrast, I have argued that international theory needs to radically rethink – and historicize – what it understands by distinctly social and sociological theory. *TGT* theorizes history through a sociological lens. As such it continues and, to some extent necessarily, underestimates something more fundamental: the historicity of social theory itself and what a different account of this history reveals about the character of governance in 'global modernity'. The point is not that entire

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of bodies of social theory should be dispensed with, or that international theorists should completely abandon social terminology. This issue depends on the kind of claims being made and to what end the canon of classical social theory is being used. The historical origins of theories and concepts do not *necessarily* constrain their every use. The question is what these origins mean and whether it is possible to escape the problems and constitutive omissions associated with them. It has to be shown, rather than assumed, that the concepts that emerged in a specific historical and political context are adequate for addressing that context. *TGT* suggests that, for all its many improvements on mainstream international theory, international historical sociology remains inadequate to understanding the historical rise of the social. Still, to date, international theory is unable to begin to address, let alone escape, the political and historical problems associated with the rise of distinctly social thought.

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