

International Relations Theory and the “Social Whole”: Encounters and Gaps Between IR and Sociology

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This article explores some basic issues which arise from International Relations (IR) theory also being a form of social theory in a broader sense. Many of these issues are related to the question of a “social whole,” that is, whether international relations/International Relations is one of many parts of a social whole, on what grounds it is differentiated from other parts, and whether it operates on a distinct level of social reality. We argue that these questions have been addressed in many forms of IR theory, but mostly only implicitly, and that the failure to make explicit assumptions about a social whole is probably due to the relative neglect of the subject in modern Sociology. The article argues that implicit assumptions about a social whole can be unearthed by looking at the concepts of systems, levels, and sectors, discussing debates about each of these in turn. Openly addressing IR theory as social theory, and spelling out images of a social whole, allows one to gain a sharper understanding of some of the basic analytical categories used, and to judge whether they form plausible delimitations of social reality within a wider social context.

The discipline of International Relations (IR) has tended to become more diverse over the years, analyzing everything from Harry Potter to Star Trek, from issues of global historical depth to those of local politics. Yet, growing diversity also requires efforts to keep communication lines within and across disciplines open. In this essay, we argue that rather than seeking out mythic “common grounds” or “core themes,” a productive way of achieving this is to reflect on conceptions of a *social whole* which theories of international relations either state explicitly, or imply through their definition or use of core concepts. We suggest that embarking on such a reflection will enable theorists of international relations to think more thoroughly about what the specific status of the “international” is, within the context of such a social whole. While it has become commonplace to say that what features under “international relations” cannot be reduced or limited to its terminological origins of relations between sovereign states, considering implicit assumptions about a social whole can help

to indicate what "international relations" as a subject matter could actually be about.

By asking IR theories to think explicitly about how international relations are embedded in a wider social environment, we also seek to contribute to narrowing the still wide communication gap between IR and Sociology. In doing so, there is no mistaking the fact that we draw primarily on segments of contemporary sociological theory which, under the labels of "differentiation theory" and "systems theory," have for many years been vastly more prominent outside Anglo-American Sociology than within it. There is also no mistaking the fact that most IR approaches which are best in actually doing what we call for stem from the days in which (Parsonian) functionalism served as a central guiding post for vast areas of the social sciences in the Anglo-American world. However, our argument for paying closer attention to the issue of a social whole is an argument for thinking more thoroughly about issues of (functional) differentiation, not a call to return to more traditional forms of functionalism.

The present contribution (re-)opens discussions about quite fundamental issues. It is thus necessarily and purposively a contribution that opens up more questions than it answers. Such an approach invariably raises the question of why one should care about the issues raised. The answer to this is quite straightforward: While not advocating a "return" to older forms of systems, cybernetic, functionalist, or macro-theorizing more prominent in IR up until the 1970s, we think that the degree to which such forms of theorizing reflect upon the embeddedness of their subject matter in the social world can only rarely be found in contemporary IR theory, and that this provides an obstacle to the otherwise often applauded call for intensified exchanges with sociological thought about society. From this, it also follows that this essay is about the presence, usefulness, and function of *operative assumptions*—analytical or ontological—about a social whole in, and for, IR theories. It is not to enter into more philosophical arguments about what a social whole "is" or should be—though it will be necessary to briefly address the figure of a whole composed of parts as a general figure of thought.

The argument proceeds in four steps. In the next short section, we pose a number of questions which further illustrate the rather basic theoretical issues at stake when starting to think about international relations in the context of a "social whole." The second section explores some conceptualizations of a social whole which can be found, although mostly in an implicit fashion, in IR and sociological theory. We briefly visit some tenets of IR theory and inquire whether, and to what degree, it makes sense to speak of a social whole in this context. In order to caution against the impression that opening up IR to the question of a social whole can be neatly equated with an agenda of "IR theory meets Sociology," we then briefly demonstrate how the problem of a social whole has been more or less systematically "forgotten" in sociological theorizing as well, with one of the few exceptions being the notion of "world society" in modern systems theory. The third section focuses on explicit statements or implicit assumptions about a social whole that can be detected in notions of system boundaries (how are systems delimited against their environment, what is the entirety of system plus its environment?); conceptualizations of "levels" (what is it that levels are levels of?); and "sectors" (what is it that sectors are sectors of?). The section draws on explicit uses of these notions for the purposes of illustration. The article then concludes with some reflections on how posing the question of IR theories' relation to a social whole actually forces open the issue of disciplinary identity, most notably *vis-à-vis* Sociology.

International Relations and Social Environments: “Core Questions”

The recognition that international relations might have to be seen as operating in a wider social environment—which somehow needs to be accounted for—is now widely acknowledged in the discipline (witness, for example, the interest in “international political sociology,” in transnationalism, in public–private interactions). However, what this embeddedness actually means for pursuing IR theory as something different from social theory in a broader sense is a question rarely addressed in a systematic fashion. We argue that reflecting upon the status of international relations in relation to some kind of a social whole in which it is embedded, or which it tries to represent, requires addressing (and partly reopening) debates on quite fundamental questions of what it means to speak about a realm of “international relations.” These questions include whether international relations forms one of many “parts” of a social whole, and if so what its status is as a particular part both in relation to other parts and to the whole; whether international relations is embedded in a wider social environment, and on what grounds it is differentiated or demarcated within this context; whether international relations operates on a specific “level” of social reality and, if so, a level of what; and whether IR (the discipline) is actually an attempt to represent the social whole rather than just a part of it?

Far-reaching as these questions are, their broad theme has accompanied the discipline of International Relations since its very inception. Probably one of its most succinct statements can be found in Raymond Aron’s opening article in the now classic 1967 issue of the *Journal of International Affairs* (Aron 1967). In this article, Aron identifies the biggest fallacy in the study of international relations as the assumption that any single theory or method is the prime representative of reality. Rather, he alerts us to the fact that the appropriateness of a specific approach can only be judged against an understanding of how this approach treats its subject in context: “No technique of inquiry, no traditional or modern method, should be accepted or rejected a priori so long as the investigator remains aware of the whole into which his individual undertaking is placed or integrated” (Aron 1967:206). Aron points out that any study of international relations needs to be based on the definition of a subject matter which permits “the delimitation of the sub-system that is being considered” (Aron 1967:192) and therefore needs to exhibit both a “sociological” and an “historical” orientation. By a sociological orientation, he means to look for general relationships in the “concrete study of international relations” (Aron 1967:198), and by an historical orientation, he “strives to reconstruct the meaningful wholes that have marked out the course of human development” (Aron 1967:199). We read these remarks by Aron as a forgotten plea that, regardless of the many theoretical debates about what International Relations is actually about, and the sometimes fierce methodological disputes, a continuing self-reflection about the boundaries of what is studied, as well as its contextualization in a wider social whole, are not only cognitive operations which implicitly go on all the time (otherwise it would be impossible to think of something as a “distinct” subject in the first place), but actually are theoretical moves which should be addressed openly as well.

When addressing the relation between IR theory and a social whole, the IR theories most obviously concerned are “systemic” or “macro”-theories. Of course, these include quite a range of theories, ranging from cybernetic as well as world-systems theory and Waltzian structural realism, through the English School and modern (Luhmannian) systems theory, to Wendtian constructivism and historical sociological approaches. Yet, there is no reason *per se* why theories which seek to understand international relations on the basis of micro-foundations of social order (rational choice, speech acts, discourses, body practices, etc.) could not

also be approached in such a context. In fact, the micro–macro distinction itself refers to some of the most basic features by which a social/IR theory can be characterized. Thus, are underlying conceptualizations of a social whole arrived at by seeing it as a result of an *addition* of actors, interactions, and structures, and possibly emergent properties in this context (in the sense, for example, that a house is made out of bricks, wood, glass, tiles, etc.)? Or are they seen primarily as *internal differentiations* of a social whole (in the sense that the elements used to construct the house do not necessarily determine which room is used for which purpose)? This distinction points directly to a basic problem which has, for a long time, separated different kinds of *theories of society* in which society is understood as a social whole. Is a social whole, and its properties, the result of various components coming together, interacting, and forming some kind of qualitatively new ("emergent") property which makes the whole to be "more than the sum of its parts?" Or is the vague notion of something being "more than the sum of its parts" an exercise in mysticism, and the sum of elements and interactions all there is to the whole? While not necessarily existing in pure form, theories of the first kind usually require some kind of device which cannot be explained within the theory itself and which explains why the whole is mysteriously more than the sum of its parts (for example, the "invisible hand" of the market). Theories of the second kind, on the other hand, require some explanation as to why an agglomeration of a myriad of social "elements" should actually form and be seen as a whole. For this reason, they are also more likely to be deterministic and very likely to come in the form of some kind of structuralism. To reiterate a point made already: when we come to discuss IR theories in these terms later on, our main interest is in how theories, implicitly or explicitly, relate to *concepts* or *images* of what *they* take to be the social whole. We do not engage here with the much larger theoretical or philosophical arguments about what the social whole actually is. We are interested primarily in enriching our understanding of IR theories and, as a result, *the relation* to a social whole *implicit in core theoretical assumptions, moves, and definitions* is more interesting than substantive discussions about the concept of a social whole itself.

In addition to the micro–macro distinction discussed above, there are *two basic types* of theory regarding their relation to a social whole. First, there are those which are very clear about their subject being a limited domain, with its relation to the rest of the world then either being discussed or not. An example of such a *specific* theory would be Waltzian neorealism, which is quite outspoken regarding the fact that it is about the international *political* system only. It does not discuss the relation of this system to others, or to a social environment in which it is embedded, but *ex negativo* its very insistence on being about an international *political* system only implies that this is part of a wider, functionally differentiated social realm. Second, and at the other end of the spectrum, are those theories which actually work on the basis of the view that their field of study actually *is* the social whole, that IR is in fact genuinely about a global social whole. Within this second type of approach, there is another important distinction to be made. On the one hand, are those theories (disciplines) which clearly mirror a functionally differentiated realm of society and its peculiar logic, most notably economic and legal theories. Theories of this type exhibit a *specific universality*, that is, they seek to address the social whole on their particular terms (with varying degrees of reflection on the nature of their particularism). On the other hand, are those theories (disciplines) which clearly do *not* mirror a functionally differentiated realm of society and thus can genuinely claim (or implicitly assume) to be about the social whole without reconstructing it through a (functional or otherwise) specific lens. This is obviously the realm of sociological theory. Yet, much of IR theory also belongs here, although it is probable few would doubt that even where IR theories try to be about a social whole (for example, the

“interhuman system” in the English School) they mostly remain biased toward the macro-side of things.¹

One could argue that the first type of approach we identified actually has nothing to do with a social whole, which is correct if one concurs with suggestions that Aristotle’s take on the subject matter is still the most appropriate one (see, notably, Onuf 1995:45–50). Yet, it is not correct if one sees the system/environment scheme as a valid alternative to the Aristotelian/Platonic scheme (see most notably Luhmann 1997:912–931; also Easton 1965:59–75). In this sense, we are, here, strictly speaking about different ways to “dissolve the paradox of a unity which is at the same time many and one (*unitas multiplex*)” (Luhmann 1997:912f, our translation), not disputing that the alternative Aristotelian solution was historically very successful and remains very effective.

It would be far beyond the scope of this article to go through all the various IR theories to be found on past and contemporary markets of the discipline. Thus, when in the following we pick most of our illustrative examples from variations of “macro-” theories, it is not to argue that other theories would not equally stand to learn from a reconstruction of their assumptions about a social whole, but just to bow to the limits of space available.

The “Social Whole” in IR and Sociology

The Whole in IR Theory

It seems fair to say that contemporary theories of international relations do not usually concern themselves with the issue of whether a social whole exists nor, accordingly, with what it includes and excludes, and how its boundaries are produced and reproduced. Most traditional IR theories are rooted in the foundational assumption that the dominant “social” feature of humankind is its fragmentation into pieces (be they states, empires, races, civilizations, nations, etc.), the internal cohesion of which is vastly greater than anything that exists at the level of the whole. Therefore, IR theory mainly begins from the idea that these parts interact with each other, that these interactions are patterned, and that they are often (not always) more frequent and intense over short distances than over long ones. The idea that there might be a society at the global level in anything like the strong sense of society generally found in classical sociology (that is, a society underpinned by a collective conscience, a “community”) is thus far removed from the empirical realities of the international relations domain. That there might or should be such a global society has, therefore, mainly been a feature of the aspirational, idealist side of the literature. International or world society might, or should, be constructed to improve the human condition, but this is yet to be done, and the social realm at the global level will remain empty, or at most very thin, until such construction is accomplished. Where interaction has been particularly intense on a local scale, as in early modern and modern Europe, it has been possible to talk of “society” on a regional scale (for example, Christendom, or the *grand republique* of Westphalian Europe). Only quite recently has mainstream IR begun to entertain the idea that the range and intensity of interaction on the global scale has become sufficient to justify thinking of humankind as some sort of social system. But talk of international systems, international societies, world societies, and most recently globalization, suggests that the question of the social whole is becoming more pressing for IR.

One consequence of this weak sense of a social whole in IR, and indeed foundational to the development of IR as a distinct field of study, has been an easy

¹One reviewer remarked that s/he kept asking her or himself what whole it was that we are talking about: The answer is that it is not a specific whole, but the uses of different kinds of whole in various theories.

acceptance that it is legitimate to analytically isolate the relations between states as a specific type of relations. Since states appeared to be the strongest type of unit, and the most capable of generating interactions, and since there was little or no global cohesion at the human level, defining "the international" in terms of interactions between states seemed a reasonable move. This resulted in a focus on military (war), political (recognition, diplomacy), societal (national, religious and civilizational identity), and economic (trade, investment, production) modes of interaction between states. Different versions of realism place themselves in relation to a wider social world by anchoring to specific levels and sectors of analysis, using the state as the key point of reference for politics, and delimiting the international level as the system of states. Others (for example, Ferguson and Mansbach 1996) reject the levels distinction, and therefore for them, the delimitation of the "international" as a separate realm is problematic. Thus, while Hans Morgenthau points out, right at the beginning of *Politics Among Nations*, that his purpose is to "present a theory of international politics" (Morgenthau 1985:3; emphasis added), just a paragraph later he asserts that such a theory of international politics cannot be devised without addressing issues concerning "the nature of *all* politics" (Morgenthau 1985, emphasis added). It is in this sense that "international politics" is clearly understood as a subset of at least the entirety of the political. Even within the political domain, the idea of a global whole is recent. As Bull (2002:19) notes, "before the nineteenth century, there was no single political system that spanned the world as a whole." Also, the simple fact that most of *Politics Among Nations* (not to speak of Morgenthau's other works) concerns itself with issues way beyond the caricature reading of Morgenthau's work as mere power political realism—that is, issues of international law and morality—demonstrates a high degree of awareness that both international politics in particular, and politics in general, must be seen in the context of a wider social environment (which can be more than just politics). That said, the idea that thinking about international politics needs to take place within the framework of a broader understanding of politics in general, seems to remain the only concrete specification by Morgenthau as to the relevant conceptual environment of his theory. Most notably, as he does not address the question of whether law and morality form the *most relevant* or rather the *only* social environments of the political system, the most that can be said here is that although Morgenthau does not concern himself with the shape and boundaries of a social "whole," he is clearly aware of the existence of a wider social context for (international) politics.

Particularly within realism, the situation regarding the conceptualization of social wholes could be seen to change somewhat if one takes into account attempts to ground a theory of international politics less on substantial accounts of the political, but rather on their characteristic as forming a *system*. The system idea seemed more appropriate than the notion of society as a way to approach the thin global realm dominated by interactions between states. The concept of a system requires identifying what is part of a system and what is not, that is, the system elements and the system boundary. Without an idea of system elements and boundary (which is required regardless of whether the system is an open or a closed one), the notion of a system makes no sense at all conceptually (although probably more often than not it is used in this unreflective sense in the IR literature). Also Waltz (1979), as the most fervent supporter of a systems approach to international politics, in the end remains remarkably silent about system boundaries in an explicit sense. Rather, the answer is given implicitly and can be reconstructed from the emphasis which Waltz places on the idea that what is at stake is a theory of international *politics*, that is, a theory about the international political system. As we have argued elsewhere (Buzan and Albert 2010), this demonstrates that the system boundaries are primarily read in

functional terms (always “international” or “world” politics, as against an implicit other of an economic, a legal, etc. system). However, it is at this external reading and reconstruction of Waltz’s theory where an engagement of the *Theory of International Politics* with the idea of a surrounding “social whole” arguably ends. Quite often, the many criticisms leveled against the inability of Waltzian theory to explain the fundamental change of (as compared to change within) the international system play on exactly this point (see, for example, Sørensen 2009).

It would create the wrong impression to argue that IR theory was not concerned with some kind of a “social whole.” This is, however, mostly true for those contributions which arguably play a much smaller role in disciplinary debates these days than they did until the 1970s and 1980s. One good case in point is Karl W. Deutsch’s emphasis on the *political* system more generally, rather than on the specificities of an international political system. Deutsch is clearly aware of the concept of functional differentiation, particularly in its Parsonian version, and indeed reflects on the embeddedness of the political system in a wider social context. In contrast to Waltz, many years later, he very thoroughly conceives of the political system in systems theoretical terms, including ideas about the operative closure of the political system (that is, specifying the system boundaries). It can be inferred from frequent references in *The Nerves of Government* that Deutsch sees society as the “social whole” of which the political system, the economic system, etc. are subsystems (Deutsch 1966:120ff; see also his explicit reliance on Parsons in Deutsch 1968). However, to our knowledge, he never explicitly addresses the issue of whether this means that “society” is therefore imagined to be singular on a global scale. Although empirically he clearly has national political systems in mind, his more general systems theoretical approach would appear to make it more difficult to limit the notion of the political system and its social context to the national level.

Probably the most systematic attempt to think explicitly about social wholes as “the context of world politics” in IR has been provided by George Modelski. Culminating in his *Principles of World Politics* (1972), he describes world politics as an evolving nation-state system, with this evolution needing to be understood in the context of the long-term historical sequence of different world orders. This sequence is characterized by an inbuilt account of differentiation on a very large scale, where the social is first differentiated from the cosmic-natural (“life in the universe”), historical world orders are then distinguished according to their variation in relation to a dominant mode of economic reproduction (“agrarian world orders”), and finally, the emergence of a specific world political nation-state system is seen as being underpinned by the merger of a multiplicity of world societies into one (“globalization”). This account of world politics as a social system depends on an account of a social whole as a social system in which, in the words of Nettl and Robertson (1968:141), “actor-relations are mediated and defined in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared values, beliefs, and symbols.” Against this, Nettl and Robertson pin an understanding of a social whole which is essentially understood in *processual* terms (according to Parsons’ AGIL-scheme) as *modernization*, in which they nevertheless come to the (equally Parsonian and non-Modelskian) conclusion that “[t]he international system at the moment is best characterized as ... system of interaction” (Nettl and Robertson 1968:186). Starting most notably with Kaplan’s earlier *System and Process in International Politics* (1957), the late-1950s/1960s heyday of structural functionalism and cybernetic systems theory witnessed a large literature in which issues of a relevant social whole, while often enshrined in methodological arguments, are discussed in terms of relevant boundaries of social systems against the natural world, and particularly the relevant boundaries of either the political system more generally, or international relations/the international political system more specifically (see, most notably, Kaplan 1969:57ff; the methodological

thoughts in the introduction of Rosecrance 1963; and particularly the contributions in Knorr and Verba 1961).

While it seems safe to say that, with the demise of structural functionalist and systems thought in Anglo-American sociological theory, the receptiveness toward issues of the nature and boundaries of political/international systems and their relation to a (social) whole around them ceased to be *en vogue* in IR as well (see Albert and Cederman 2010), it would be wrong to say that some conceptualizations of a (social) "whole" have played no role in more recent IR scholarship. However, it is worth taking a closer look here: while Alexander Wendt, in one of the most acclaimed books of contemporary IR theory, *A Social Theory of International Politics*, argues for a "holist" approach (Wendt 1999:26ff, 139ff), and while an increasing body of work in post-Marxist IR scholarship thinks in terms of "totalities" (see, for example, Teschke 2003), these differ markedly from other traditional or contemporary IR theories which still need to think about their relation to a social whole. For the latter, thinking more explicitly about the way in which their central concepts imply some social whole, and most notably, the way it is differentiated, could function as an orienting device for sharpening the understanding of these central concepts. The "social whole" remains an *operative-analytical* point of reference. Wendtian and post-Marxist thought, however, works with a deeply *ontological* understanding of a whole. In this respect, both remain firmly anchored in the tradition of German (Hegelian) idealism, where the "whole" is seen as an original unity. The philosophical difference seems narrow, but it is fundamental, in that the whole here is not something which can only be understood in and through differentiation, but rather differences are only articulations of a pre-existing unity (see Halfwassen 2004:275).²

Moving on from these works, the more heterogeneous body of work in IR theory which is usually summarized as the "English School" (ES) would at first glance seem an unlikely contender in terms of thinking about a social whole. Yet, taking up Schouenborg's (2011) lead that in fact Buzan's *From International to World Society* (2004) can be explicitly understood as being about a social whole, we think that the prominent ES distinction between international system, international society, and world society has always entailed and been predicated upon important implicit references to a social whole, although all traditional ES thinkers have avoided addressing the issue in an explicit fashion. Thus, to use but one prominent example, reading through Bull's *Anarchical Society* (Bull 2002 [1977]) from this perspective provides a number of statements which can be read to refer to some kind of a social whole, yet these statements do not seem to relate to each other in a systematic fashion.

What puts an established international system, international society, and world society in the same class and makes them comparable remains an ambivalent issue in English School thought. They could variably be seen to comprise different realms of social and political activity, that is spaces occupied by quite different actors (this particularly referring to the fault line between international system and society on the one hand and world society on the other), different logics of structure formation, different normative orders defining the legitimate spaces for political action, or as different logics of appropriateness. However, they form parts or mutually non-exclusive articulations of "something" which remains, by and large, unarticulated in ES thought. Nonetheless, it is perfectly possible to argue that the notion of international society in itself, and particularly its relation to various notions of "world society," carries within it a very strong implicit idea about a social whole whose internal differentiation it expresses.

²For an interesting and critical recent discussion of the difficulties entailed in imagining "world politics" in terms of a positive whole, rather than a "whole" of international politics characterized by its internal differentiation, see Walker 2010.

The issue of a social whole by and large marks a conceptual absence which continues to lurk in the background when, for example, the conceptual and empirical boundaries between the international system of states and its environment are thematized or questioned. While IR theorists have spent much time slicing their subject, they have not thought much about the nature of the whole out of which they are slicing their analytical domains. However, before turning to the issue of how conceptualizations of the social whole could be inferred from specific uses of concepts which are logically dependent on such a conceptualization, the next subsection will look at the state of sociological theorizing in order to argue that this lack of attention toward the “social whole” is not the fault of IR alone.

Sociology and the Social Whole

If the aim of sociological theorizing is to explain everything social, then this would seem to entail an intrinsic reference to a social whole, which of course fully depends on the very definition of the term “social.” Depending on that definition, what is not social can then variably be defined as the natural world, the divine, the psychic world (in the sense of individual consciousness), etc. While of course not all (in fact relatively little) sociological theorizing concerns itself with definitions of the social or a social whole (much as only a fairly small amount of theorizing in IR raises basic questions about the nature of the international or what distinguishes the international system from the rest of the world), most of classical sociological theory has identified that social whole to be *society*.

There are countless definitions of society which variably seek to describe the “entire thing,” or which, through composite terms, argue that society is particularly characterized by a specific feature (the “information society,” the “network society,” the “disciplinary society,” “risk society,” etc.; see Kneer, Nassehi and Schroer 2000 for a selection), or at least that some specific feature assumes particular importance in society. Yet, it seems fair to say that dealing with society in a more comprehensive theoretical fashion, and devising *theories of society*, has become much less fashionable in the discipline over the last couple of decades (basically after Parsons).³ However, this development is part (and of course partially constitutive) of a general backlash against systemic or macro-level theorizing in the name of a new micro-level, rationalist consensus. The latter has been established across the social sciences since the 1970s and, exceptions confirming the rule, up to the present day has only been partially mediated by various institutionalist and constructivist “turns.” It is difficult to assess the degree to which this development happened in conjunction with, was driven by, or formed in reaction to, the problem of “methodological nationalism.” Yet, we would argue that, in general, the remarkable turn away of large parts of sociological theorizing from theorizing society also rests on a failure of most theories of society to overcome a deeply entrenched *particularism*. We deliberately choose the notion of “particularism,” as the now quite common term of “methodological nationalism” only captures one part of the story, namely the fact that many basic concepts in the social sciences in general, and the concept of “society” in particular, are so deeply intertwined with the consolidation of the modern nation-state that it is difficult to dissociate them from thinking in terms of a world in which a normatively integrated nation-state serves as the primary structuring device of the

³Important national differences in the disciplinary landscape persist in this case. Theories of society seem to be unfashionable in much of contemporary sociological theorizing in the Anglo-American world, the main exception probably being Giddens’ work. In German sociology, on the other hand, *Gesellschaftstheorie* (that is, “theory of society” in the singular) is still seen to be a legitimate subfield of the discipline.

social (see Chernilo 2007). The other part of the story lies in the almost complete ignorance of "the world" on the part of the discipline-forming theoretical designs commonly known as "classical sociology." As aptly summarized by Touraine (2007:186), "Classical sociology did not study the world in its entirety, but only what was called the civilized world, introducing a sharp opposition between civilized and savage or colonized peoples."

This particularism on the part of many classical theories of society should *not* lead to the conclusion that they are outdated and redundant and should, as Ulrich Beck (2002) in particular seems to advocate, be replaced by a deeply *normative* theory of cosmopolitanism. But it highlights a possible *systematic* reason which explains why traditional theories of society, developed in the context of a primarily *national* definition of societies,⁴ went out of fashion at exactly the time when global interdependencies became more visible. These global phenomena would seem to require to be thematized by sociological theory, rather than leaving them to some—from the standpoint of most sociologists, rather obscure—special discipline of "International Relations" (sitting within or somewhere close to Political Science).

If this diagnosis regarding the state of sociological theory is formulated in somewhat harsh terms, it is to underscore the fact that here exceptions confirm the rule. Part of the rule in this context is a tendency—both in research monographs as well as in textbooks—to describe a social whole as a "world society" or a "global society." This move demonstrates at least some *awareness* regarding the necessity to embed sociological observation and theorizing in a global or systemic context. But then the actual task of such a construction is left aside (see, for example, Smelser 1997), and all that is done is to pursue a problem analysis or provide rather fragmented (most notably ignoring the international politics part) analyses of the formation of specific global social structures, for which the notion of a global society is used as little more than a summarizing term (see, for example, Cohen and Kennedy's textbook 2000). An interesting case in point here is the work of Talcott Parsons, who repeatedly ventures into the realm of international and global politics. While clearly very much interested in the issue of whether the international system could be described in the same fashion as other social systems, Parsons' analyses of the international order in general, and of the East-West conflict in particular (see, for example, Parsons 1961, 1964, 1967a,b), remain deficient. This is partly because they almost completely miss IR approaches to international politics, partly because, in the end, they are not able to analyze the international system as the same kind of social system as a national society—let alone conceptualize them together as "one." This is due to the fact that throughout his writings, Parsons never abandons the requirement for a *Gemeinschaft* underpinning a society as a kind of "societal community." While his work does not rule out, in principle, that such a societal community could exist on a global level, it remains empirically pegged to the nation in Parsons' thought (see Parsons 1967a). Arguably, the main exception here, reminiscent of a notion of *international society*, is Parsons' idea that some kind of normative order needs to underpin the international system in order to account for the ability of states to normatively interact with each other (concluding treaties, etc.; see Parsons 1961). Yet, despite this opening, Sociology has conspicuously failed to take any interest in the idea of a distinctive society of states, leaving this terrain to be occupied first by the English School, and later also by IR constructivists. Sociology's neglect of the

⁴It is true, as one of the reviewers for this article remarked, that in classical sociology the nation-state was very often not explicitly addressed as the "container" of society, but that the notable focus was more on modern or industrial society. However, most classical sociologists play on some variation of the *Gemeinschaft*-theme, which in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cannot be thought of as *not* referring to the nation.

global level begins to change somewhat starting in the late 1960s (see Moore 1966), and a number of more comprehensive attempts to think through a global social whole in a theoretically rich fashion, be it in the form of world-systems theory, Luhmann's (1971) first formulations of his ideas on "world society," or, more on the political science side of things, John Burton's (1972) similarly labeled attempt. The relative marginality of comprehensive accounts of a social whole in sociological theory in the 1970s and 1980s is, then, somewhat reversed in the shadows of the globalization hype boosted by the end of the Cold War. Despite many rich accounts of the global condition, and theorizations of the globalization process (for just one notable example, see Robertson 1992; for an overview, Robertson and Scholte 2006), the main conceptual link seems to be that between theories of modernization and globalization (see Featherstone, Lash and Robertson 1995), and only less, and implicitly, one that links notions of the global to a social whole (in the form of a world society, for example).

In sum, and not unexpectedly, the "social whole" in the form of "society" is far more present in Sociology than it is in IR. However, the argument presented above in bold strokes suggests that, with a few exceptions and notable national variations, it is featuring less and less prominently in what seems to be nothing less than a demise of theories of society in Sociology, at least after Parsons. As hinted at already, there are of course many reasons behind this, but it has resulted in a situation not dissimilar to the one in IR where the content and boundaries of a "social whole" reside more in the background and are rarely spelled out. The next section will now seek to do exactly this, to shed some light on those assumptions about a social whole which reside in central conceptual formulations in various IR theories.

The "Whole" Behind It: System, Levels, and Sectors

While conceptualizations of a social whole exist in various IR theories, but are rarely made explicit, let alone in a very specific sense, it is quite likely that these specifics can be inferred from a number of important structural features and central concepts of different theories. Thus, while a specific theory might avoid addressing the question of a social whole explicitly, it may nevertheless work on the assumption that the various parts it addresses actually add up to a social whole. Reading IR theories in this way, however, requires quite a bit of additional reconstructive work. That implicit views of a social whole can be expressed by rather visible additive relations (such as, for example, international system of states + international society of states + world society = social whole, in some English School cases) seems to be more the exception than the rule. In most cases, a concept of the social whole can only be inferred through conceptualizations about how it is structured, layered, and differentiated. IR theories have a lot to say about what an international system is, they have debated the issue of levels for a long time, and they have carved up their field of inquiry into various sub-fields, functional realms, levels, and sectors. Yet, mostly they have avoided addressing the explicit question of what the international system is a subsystem of, what the levels are levels of, or whether there is some kind of a whole that sectors are sectors of. In other words, they have avoided specifications of their relation to a social whole and thus the reflexive contextualization in the sense called for by Aron (see above). In the next section, we offer an exemplary reading of the debates on the notion of "system," "sectors," and "levels" in IR theory in order to reconstruct a range of notions of a social whole implied therein. The main purpose in doing so is to lay the groundwork for, then assessing the advantages of, making conceptualizations of the social whole more explicit in IR theorizing. While the notion of "system" seems to be a rather straightforward

candidate for inquiry in terms of its placement in relation to a social whole, this is less obviously so in the case of "levels" and "sectors."

System

Definitions of an "international system" would seem like a promising place to start when looking for ideas about a social whole in which international relations are embedded. As hinted at already, such ideas will probably only be found through references to how such a social whole is differentiated, and not through more simplistic and ontological accounts of what it actually is. Here, once again, Waltz serves as a useful illustration through his insistence that his *Theory of International Politics* is exactly about the international *political* system, and nothing else, thus identifying a social whole in which the international political system is embedded to be functionally differentiated. Though miles apart from Waltz on other theoretical issues, such an account of functional differentiation can also be detected in many of the older systems theoretical conceptualizations of world politics, which quite often set out to identify the basic characteristics of *social* systems, only then to think about the specifics of the *political* system as a particular type of social system (see, for example, Deutsch 1968:12ff; Kaplan 1969:57ff). However, we think that the most direct hint toward a social whole might actually be found in the traditional English school triad of *international system*, *international society*, and *world society*. In a structural reading of this triad, international system represents the raw interactions among states, international society adds in the rules, norms, and institutions of the society of states, and world society completes the picture by adding in the totality of humankind collectively. This world society sense of a social whole of humankind is strong in the classical English school. As Manning (1962:177) wrote: "Within, beneath, alongside, behind, and transcending, the notional society of states, there exists, and for some purposes fairly effectively, the nascent society of all mankind." Bull (2002:269) further observed that "the concept of world society ... stands to the totality of global social interaction as our concept of international society stands to the concept of the international system."

Yet, although this seems to suggest an English School claim to represent the social whole, it is also easy to interpret these texts as talking mainly about the political sector. Bull's concern was the intrinsically political one of world order, and he often refers to "the world political system" (Bull 2002:20). The concept of world society in this discourse was mainly about human rights and the need to find a normative grounding on which to base an evaluation of the functioning of the society of states. There is almost no discussion of the world economy or transnational actors in this literature. A more recent attempt to set up the structural side of the English school in more rigorous terms (Buzan 2004) opens the way to a clearer claim to representing the social whole. The attempt proceeded in two stages. First, it moved toward a more sociological position by folding the system idea into society on the grounds that, in practice, pure systems were very rare and very marginal in world history because all "international systems" reflect a degree of social order. Second, it redefined the classical triad into three domains based on their type of dominant unit: interstate, transnational, and interhuman. In principle, this formulation contains no restriction to the political sector and could encompass every type of unit and relationship.

Despite these reconstructions of the relations between different variants of English School thought with the notion of a social whole, there remains a high degree of theoretical imprecision. Buzan's reformulation of the triad into domains notwithstanding, there is a remaining ambiguity regarding world society (society of mankind, totality of mankind). Sometimes, world society seems to be seen as the social whole, in which international society (and national societies)

form the most visible parts of structure formation, whereas other forms of structure remain underdeveloped or indeed “nascent.” Then, at other times, it seems as if world society is addressed as some kind of social relations existing *in addition* to international society. The problem can probably not be solved by moving to higher levels of abstraction, by—in this context—arriving at a positive identification of what the social whole *is*. But as with the other approaches referred to it can probably be solved if one *ceases to associate any image of an ontological unity with the idea of a whole*. Any social whole which is not in the end the expression of some Hegelian *Weltgeschichte* is not an integrated whole, but appears as a whole only through its internal differentiation. It is an important, if not necessary reflection point for social theorizing, and it is in this way that we are interested in it. Whether it exists is an entirely different question.

Levels

While the notion of “levels” remains one of the most persistent issues in IR theory, it possibly also remains one of the most persistently under-theorized ones. Yet, the notion of levels quite directly leads to posing the question of an assumed social whole, as the notion of different levels seems to imply that levels are levels of something. Of course, such an implication only follows if levels are *not* seen as purely analytical tools, as most prominently implied in J. David Singer’s presentation of “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations” (Singer 1961). However, even a cursory reading of Singer’s piece, and even more so of Waltz’s classical introduction of the levels-of-analysis issue as “images” in *Man, the State, and War*, reveals that in probably no case are levels seen as purely analytical cuts or perspectives through whatever kind of reality. To varying degrees, all discussions of the problem assume that levels of analysis mirror the most important structural layers of such a reality, where the relevant causal forces driving change are located. And although numerous studies operate only on one level, most explicit treatments of the subject argue that in the end only a combination of analyses on various levels can provide satisfactory results. To quote Waltz, “Some combination of our three images, rather than any one of them, may be required for an accurate understanding of international relations” (Waltz 1954:14). As Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998:5f) point out, the most frequently used levels of analysis in IR (from “top” down) are international systems, international subsystems (often regions), units (mainly states), subunits, and individuals. Probably the most frequently used distinction within that group is that between units and international system.

If seen as purely “analytical” devices, then it seems to be an almost universal feature of the conceptualization of levels in IR theory that levels are conceived to be *exclusive*: phenomena and structures exist on one level only, and not on two or more. That means: individuals make up groups as subunits, subunits make up units, units make up international subsystems, etc. Only in a very abstract sense would it be possible to say that through this chain individuals, for example, are also included in the international system. After their enumeration of the most prominent levels in IR theory, Buzan et al. (1998:7) correctly point out that thinking in terms of levels has been criticized both for reinforcing state-centric thinking in IR, as well as for neglecting agents (for example, transnational actors) and structures (for example, capitalism) which cannot be neatly attached to one level. However, if seen not as a purely analytical cut through a social whole, but as an attempt to say something about important layers structuring such a social whole as well, then the problem is not one of using levels in general, but probably has more to do with their conceptualization as exclusive. Buzan and Little (2000:76–78) seek to solve this problem by putting sectors and levels together as a matrix. This avoids the implicitly “political” framing of much

of the levels literature and allows most of the apparent exclusions and state-centrism of levels thinking to be handled by showing how levels work differently in different sectors.

As already hinted at in the discussion of sociological approaches to society, and as confirmed by putting sectors and levels into a matrix, social reality is not neatly cut up into a few distinct levels. Nonetheless, one could argue that out of almost innumerable level-distinctions some are more important than others (such as the distinction between a national and an international level). Yet, although the notion of "levels-of-analysis" contains (if only implicitly) claims about these levels of analysis somehow referring to quite important levels of social reality, there seems to be a persistent difficulty in mapping one onto the other. Part of this difficulty may stem from the mostly unresolved ambiguity in the concept of levels in IR theory. Seeing them as levels of analysis only makes them *exclusive* in a way in which, without doubt, levels as *relevant levels of social order or structure formation* are not. Thus, for example, interactions among a few individuals may primarily be taking place at the level of groups, yet at the same time on a global level. This is very much what is at stake in notions such as "global microstructures" (Knorr-Cetina 2005) or "glocalization" (Robertson 1992). Given that it is more the rule than the exception that IR theories are not clear about whether they use levels in the first or in the second (or in both) senses, it is actually quite challenging to infer references to a social whole from a distinction or enumeration of levels. And, as was the case with the notion of system, these references remain operative and implicit references to an internal differentiation of the social whole. As even Onuf, in his interesting discussion of the subject matter—which nevertheless differs greatly from ours due to his insistence on the contemporary applicability of the Aristotelian parts-whole scheme⁵—has to admit: "Which of many boundaries we see, and how clearly, depends on where we stand" (Onuf 1995:51).

Sectors

Although it is acknowledged in principle that "Knowledge is a unity" (Reynolds 1994:1), it is accepted in practice that a division of labor is needed to study the world around us. The division of social and other sciences into disciplines such as Economics, Politics, Law, and Sociology is premised on the need for such a division of labor. But these divisions also reflect a widely held belief that reality can be meaningfully segmented into different analytical sectors. Yet, the practice of thinking in terms of sectors generally takes for granted that economy, society, history and politics can and should be discussed separately, without really thinking too hard about the consequences of doing so.

One way of understanding sectors and distinguishing them from levels of analysis is to see them as views of the whole system through an analytical lens which selects one particular type of relationship and highlights the types of unit, interaction, and structure most closely associated with it. The metaphor of a lens is a useful way of understanding what sectors represent, and how they can and cannot be used (Manning 1962:2).

In analyses of the social world, there are at least five commonly used sectors: The *military sector*, the *political sector*, the *economic sector*, the *societal* or *sociocultural sector*, and the *environmental sector* (Buzan and Little 2000:73–74). From the analyst's perspective, sectors might be understood as follows. The military strategist looks at human systems in terms of the use of force, highlighting the offensive and defensive capability of actors, and justifying restrictive assumptions such as the motivation of behavior by opportunistic calculations of coercive advantage.

⁵See above, footnote 2.

The political realist looks at the same systems in terms that highlight sovereignty and power, and justify restrictive assumptions such as the motivation of behavior by the desire to maximize power. The economist looks at them in terms that highlight wealth and development, and justify restrictive assumptions such as the motivation of behavior by the desire to maximize utility. The sociologist will also see power and states, but in addition will see patterns of identity such as clan, class and nation, and the desire to maintain cultural independence. International lawyers see states, and to a lesser extent other legal persons such as firms and individuals, but focus on the customs, rules, and contracts that should constrain their behavior. The environmentalist looks at the system in terms of the ecological underpinnings of civilization, and the need to achieve sustainable development. Each is looking at the whole, but seeing only one dimension of its reality. As already hinted at above, theories which exhibit this kind of specific universality then vary according to the degree in which they incorporate observations of their own specificity (making them both more reflexive yet also more complex).

The use of sectors/lenses, whether singly or in combination, has the advantage of highlighting, and therefore making easier to see, certain qualities of whatever is being observed. It is a way of unpacking the complexity of the whole, and is therefore a very appealing device when one is faced with the vast and many-faceted social whole. Sectors serve to disaggregate a whole for the purposes of analysis by selecting distinctive patterns of interaction, and also to facilitate theorizing by restricting the number of variables in play. Yet, while the things identified by sectors do not necessarily have the quality of some kind of “independent” existence, they can be seen to reflect what are held to be important forms in which the social world is structured. In such an understanding, they *cease to be purely “analytical” devices*.

In purely taxonomical terms, sectors map quite comfortably onto functional differentiation in the sociological sense. On closer inspection, however, there are important differences between sectors and functional differentiation.⁶ As so far used in IR, sectors comprise a set of general analytical categories, and do not bind these to the particular nature of social practice at any given time. They are types of relationship that can be distinguished in all complex, larger scale, human societies. Functional differentiation, by contrast, is a category defining the basis of social life and is therefore historically specific in the sense that it exists or not. Functional differentiation is used to define and theorize a basic type of society in a way that sectors are not, and it is accompanied by quite strong arguments about causation and the drivers of social change. However, it is helpful here to recall that sectors were originally introduced in the context of security analysis. Here, functional differentiation first comes into play as a background reminder that securitization as a social practice first and foremost takes place *within* the political system as a functionally differentiated realm of modern society. “‘Security’ is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version or as above politics” (Buzan et al. 1998:23). Securitization may take place in other functionally differentiated realms, but then takes on an entirely different form specific to that realm (that is, “securitization” within the economic system as a way of addressing credit). The important point here is that, as addressed in the Copenhagen School context of “international security,” securitization is an operation which takes place *within* the political system. And it is here where one could argue that the “broadening” of the security agenda implied therein, as well as the identification of sectors, reflect that how the political system is differentiated

⁶See Albert and Buzan 2011 for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

internally also changes over time. In addition to elements of segmentation (into states and nations) and stratification (hegemons, empires, regional powers, etc.), which have been the traditional focus of security, an increasing reference to securitizations as forms of political communication to the environment, the economy, the "societal" factors, etc. would then reflect the fact that functional differentiation has become more important within the political system, both at the unit and the global system levels.

In effect, one begins to see a pattern of linkage between, on the one hand, the changing balance of sectors in the securitization processes within contemporary international society and, on the other, the complex and changing structure of differentiation in the international system as a whole. Put (too) simply, the leading political units within the international system are increasingly dominated internally by functional differentiation (modernity and post-modernity), while the system as a whole remains dominated by segmentary (sovereign equality) and stratificatory (hegemony) differentiation, but also shows emergent signs of functional differentiation (most obviously, but not only, in terms of a global economy). The traditional agenda of international security relates mainly to the segmentary and stratificatory differentiation of the international political system, and the mainly political and military types of securitization that these generate. The wider-deeper agenda of international security relates mainly to the functional differentiation both within the leading states and increasingly within the system as a whole (on the traditional and wider-deeper agendas see Buzan and Hansen 2009). The issue of identity security, which has been an important theme in the Copenhagen school's work, has a complicated position in this scheme. Identity securitization relates in part to different, potentially complementary, but often competing forms of segmentary differentiation (state and nation); in part to stratificatory differentiation between weak and hegemonic cultures (the fear of being absorbed or transformed by another culture, as in Westernization); and in part to the encroaching process of functional differentiation both within states and in the global system (where any kind of segmentary differentiation is under pressure from the new social forms, as worried about by those who take a decompositional view of functional differentiation).

Nonetheless, even if one can relegate sectors to the political system in the Copenhagen School's approach, the problem remains that both sectors and functional differentiation fail to give a full, definitive set of differentiations from which one could compile the complete social whole. This is interesting, because the principle of differentiation for both sectors and functional differentiation is quite clear. Both slice up the social whole on the basis of distinctive types of activity within it. In the case of sectors, these slicings are generally close in character to the subject divisions of disciplines within the social sciences, but like those disciplines, there are no explicit rules defining the criteria for inclusion or exclusion: a sector (or a discipline) can be anything that people find analytically useful as a tool for investigating the social whole by slicing it into more tractable parts. What is not provided by this principle of division is any way of adding up to find the social whole. Different types of activity can be abstracted out of the social whole without giving a clue as to what the social whole is overall. The same is true for functional differentiation, which likewise has a practical focus on some clearly agreed major functions, but no sense of closure and no clear rules about how to identify a functional subsystem. Both sectoral and functional differentiation approaches know how to slice out useful social parts, but they do not provide a way to know the whole. This mirrors a rather basic issue which resembles a chicken-egg problem, or what in sociological discourse more specifically is addressed as the "decomposition" vs. the "emergence" view. While the former starts from the social whole which is ascertained on a rather simple basis (that is, the totality of all interaction or communication) and then asks how

structures form and subsystems differentiate *within* that social whole, the latter asks how higher orders of social reality (up to the social whole) are formed through the interaction of parts. The problem is probably best captured in Luhmann's (1997:145ff) idea that world society (as a social whole) achieves its unity only through its internal differentiation, that it is not possible to have one without the other.

Thinking About the "Social Whole": IR as the New Sociology?

As stated earlier, we are not interested in what the social whole "is," but in how theories implicitly or explicitly relate to a social whole. And many do so implicitly since carving out a subject matter by identifying (systems) boundaries, levels, and sectors (but also, for that matter, "relevant" or "rational" actors, networks, or rationalities) invariably contains some assumptions about what it is carved out from. Yet what remains missing in most cases are accounts of how such assumptions reflect conceptualizations of a social whole, and the general way in which this social whole in itself is "carved up." The difficult part to swallow for most theoretical thought, still firmly wedded to the Aristotelian parts-whole scheme, is that any social whole thus conceived and referred to can hardly be understood as something with an independent existence or as something which is a whole, because it would be somehow integrated. This points us into the direction of Luhmann's understanding of world society as something which can be observed as whole in the first place only through observing the form of its internal differentiation. Yet, by pointing in this direction, we do not argue for IR theories to orient themselves toward the particular figure of world society, but to consider reflecting on this specific mode of thinking about a social whole. While we argue that this requires thinking more thoroughly about issues of social differentiation, including most notably functional differentiation (see Albert, Buzan and Zürn 2013), this does not mean that we call for, as one reviewer of this article has suggested, a rejuvenation of *functionalist* theorizing, which arguably always operated against the background of the assumption of a somehow integrated social whole.

If IR theories embarked on the suggested journey of thinking more explicitly about their implicit assumptions about a social whole, then this carries potentially far-reaching consequences, particularly for their relation to Sociology. Certainly, reflecting more openly about IR theories' stances in this respect could enrich our understanding of how these theories conceive of international relations being "plugged into" the social world. Yet the more IR theories come to the conclusion that there are no meaningful distinctions to be drawn here, and that actually they are about a social whole, the more difficult it becomes to identify substantial differences between IR and Sociology in this respect. Leaving disciplinary traditions aside, and granting that the vast majority of work in the two disciplines is not about the grand scheme of things, it becomes difficult to say why a theory interested in the great society of humankind should be so vastly different from a sociological theory of world society. There is, of course, no problem here if the agenda is to foster interdisciplinary dialogue between IR and Sociology, of which there has been a tremendous increase over recent years. Yet there is a continuing problem in establishing such a dialogue on a more than sporadic basis, which primarily has to do with the characteristics of these disciplines in society itself. Unlike economics and law, disciplines which exhibit a specific universalism in that they try to reconstruct the social whole in their (economic, legal) terms, Sociology and History are universalistic disciplines in that they claim to be about the social whole itself. Of course, despite this in-built universalism, both Sociology and History for a long time developed as very nationalist disciplines (Sociology was mainly the sociology of nation-state societies, while History was very much national history). Also while some divisions of

labor *between disciplines* mirror the functional differentiation of society (into politics, law, economics, etc.), in universalistic disciplines, it is usually mirrored *within* the disciplines (political sociology, economic sociology, legal sociology, etc.; the same holds for history).

IR is the odd man out here in at least two respects. First, and somewhat ironically, its universalistic ambitions have arguably always been more hidden and less pronounced than in other universalistic disciplines. Second, IR remains a nationally fragmented discipline in the sense that while in some places (for example, the Anglo-American world), it is sometimes a discipline of its own with little to stop universalist ambitions, in other places (for example, in Germany, and also much of the US), it remains firmly embedded as a sub-discipline of Political Science, in which case possible universalistic ambitions are restrained almost by definition. Yet when IR comes to dealing with a social whole, then disciplinary distinctions become extremely difficult and can possibly only be ascertained by referring to the most abstract distinctions by which disciplines operatively draw their subjects' boundaries, that is the distinction between past, present, and future in the case of History, between the social and the natural (biological/physical) in the case of Sociology, or between the national and the international in the case of IR. These "prime" distinctions go a long way toward explaining long-standing differences, but they do not erect systematic boundaries. If social theories (thus leaving History aside here for the time being) claim to be about a social whole, then they in principle should be able to relate to each other. That this is easier said than done, and first of all requires the ability to learn on many sides, is a truism. Yet after reflecting on the commonly shared problem of relating to a social whole in sociological and IR theories, we feel convinced that this is an exercise which needs to heed Aron's call, quoted in the opening paragraphs of this paper, that "the investigator remains aware of the whole into which his individual undertaking is placed or integrated" (Aron 1967:206). As a modest addendum, we propose an obligation to try to lay open her or his understanding of what the relation of this individual undertaking to the social whole may be.

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