Introduction: The international of everything

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Abstract
This text introduces the Special Issue on Multiplicity. It sets out the broad research programme of Multiplicity, considers some criticisms that have been made of this programme and then summarises the contributions to the Special Issue.

Keywords
International Relations, international theory, introduction, multiplicity, special issue

Introduction

The international of everything

This Special Issue (SI) presents the latest wave of scholarship from an innovative research programme in contemporary international theory: Multiplicity. First set out at the EH Carr memorial lecture in 2015, the programme responds to the widespread view that International Relations (IR) has failed to establish itself as an academic discipline (Rosenberg, 2016). Its central claim is that, just like other human disciplines, IR can be grounded in a distinctive feature of human existence. Yet this has not yet been done in a way that delivers two fundamental requirements: a common ground for what is otherwise often experienced as a dishearteningly fragmented field of IR theory, and a formula for IR’s much needed, but thus far underdeveloped, contribution to the social sciences and humanities at large. It is this curiously delayed aspect of IR’s disciplinary formation – its ontological grounding – that the Multiplicity project seeks to address.

As a research programme, Multiplicity is beginning to come of age. The publication of the 2015 Carr Lecture gave rise to a forum in International Relations (2017) and an International Studies Association (ISA) round table event (Baltimore 2017). In 2018, the potential for multiplicity to provide a new common ground within IR formed one of the themes at the European Workshops in International Studies (EWIS) (Groningen 2018), leading to a special issue of Globalizations (2020). The year 2019 also saw a 10-panel
section on Multiplicity at the European International Studies Association (EISA) conference in Sofia, as well as journal forums in the Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen (2019) and New Perspectives (2019). In 2020, a fresh group of scholars came together (online) in a second EWIS workshop. The contents of the current Special Issue arose from this workshop.

In line with the 2020 EWIS conference theme (‘Together We’re Stranger’), the workshop initially focused on the question of ‘difference’ in IR – the second of the originally identified five consequences of multiplicity. But in doing so, it also increasingly explored the question of IR’s potential contribution to other disciplines such as Cultural Studies (CS), Business Ethics and food in History. Finally, the contributions to the workshop came from a variety of positions – Realist, Liberal, Constructivist, Post-structuralist, Feminist, Historical Sociological and Historical Materialist – providing further indications of Multiplicity’s potential for overcoming the internal divisions of ‘camp IR’ (Sylvester, 2007) – or ‘campfire IR’ as it is often referred to. As these discussions progressed, they cohered around the notion of IR’s value per se – not just to other disciplines, but to understanding the social world in ways those other disciplines do not. The full potential of IR, we suggest, lies in its ability to identify and interpret ‘the international of everything’.

This Introduction describes the articles which compose the Special Issue. But first it takes three steps in order to situate them in relation to the wider programme of Multiplicity research and its contribution to IR. We begin with the question of IR’s disciplinary insecurity: Is this just the local version of debates over self-definition that go on in all disciplines all the time? Or is there truly something peculiar and incomplete about IR’s intellectual formation as a field of study? Next, we set out the problematic of Multiplicity as an ontological foundation for IR, and we address the special liabilities – and possibilities – associated with the idea of ‘societal multiplicity’. Finally, we ask why Multiplicity might be able to define a common ground for IR theory when earlier attempts have been rejected. Does that rejection mean that the search for a shared language is misguided in principle? Or might Multiplicity differ from earlier attempts in ways that alter the possibilities involved?

**The problem of IR**

The view of IR as a disciplinary failure is not, of course, based on the institutional metrics of disciplinarity – numbers of students, researchers, professional journals, annual conferences and so on. For by all of these measures IR has long since arrived in the panoply of Western social sciences and humanities. Rather, the claim has been that, unlike other disciplines, IR brought with it no new viewpoint on the social world. Over the years, it has imported numerous viewpoints from other disciplines – the spatial turn, the historical turn, the linguistic turn, the practice turn and so on. But as Chris Brown (2013), among many others, has pointed out, there has been no answering ‘international turn’, no export of a big idea from IR which has been widely taken up elsewhere (p. 484). As a result, even where other disciplines have sought to address the international dimension of their own subject matter, there has been no stock of imported ideas from IR on which they have drawn.
A clear example of this can be seen in the discipline of intellectual history. As David Armitage (2013) notes, ‘[f]or most of the life span of the historical profession, in most parts of the world, historians were committed to methodological nationalism’ (p. 17). In recent years, however, numerous scholars ‘have been moving rapidly towards studies variously described as ‘international’, ‘transnational’, ‘comparative’ and ‘global’ (2013, 18). To this ‘desire to go above or beyond the history of nationally defined states’, he gives the name ‘international turn’. And yet his own formulation of ‘the international turn’ references not the fact of plural societies and its causal consequences for the history of ideas, but rather the variability of spatial scales (national, imperial, regional, continental, global) at which this history must be told. Thus ‘international’ here signifies the empirical scope of the analysis, rather than identifying ontological or methodological issues arising from the international character of its subject matter; and much less does it serve to reference the use of any ideas drawn specifically from IR. Armitage (2013) also uses the term to refer to the fact that it was in the early modern period that European political thinkers ‘first began to look outside their national borders and envisage a world of competitive, equal sovereign states inhabiting an international sphere’ (p. i). This changing perspective too marks an important historical development, but, once again, it is not the same as a theorisation of the consequences of ‘the international’ for social and political thought. The latter exercise would have to explore the historically much deeper role of inter-societal relations in the formation of key concepts. (An example might be the argument that the modern idea of ‘revolution’ arose specifically out of the experience of uneven development among multiple societies and the peculiar inter-societal pressures to which this gave rise (Rosenberg, 2019; Shilliam, 2006).) Overall, Armitage (2013) is clearly aware of IR scholarship, citing numerous IR theorists (pp. 5–6, 26, 27). And yet, though respectful of them, he does not find in IR a theoretical resource for guiding the international turn in his own field.

We might also note that American Studies too has, for more than two decades, been in the throes of a self-described ‘international turn’ of its own, largely driven by a desire to decentre the overwhelming presence of the United States – both geopolitical and intellectual – in that field (Messmer and Frank, 2015). And yet the scholars involved have had to look elsewhere than IR for their theoretical frameworks, even when titling their studies ‘the international within the national’ (Lowe, 1998). This is a remarkable circumstance given that their ambition is to replace a US-centric focus with one structured in terms of multiple sites, cultures and social formations – a focus crafted, that is, by invoking what we shall argue below is the implicit ontological premise of IR itself.

But the disciplinary failure of IR does not end with its ‘trade imbalance’ with other fields. IR, it is also claimed, has from the start possessed no common definition of its own subject matter. Rather, accelerated by the so-called ‘fourth great debate’ of the 1980s and 1990s, it has supposedly undergone a process of intellectual fragmentation, resulting eventually in that state of mutual incomprehension which Christine Sylvester (2007) called ‘camp[fire] IR’. Importantly, however, this is not the recent development it appears. It reaches back to the early years of the discipline, and, as Peter Marcus Kristensen (2016) has shown, it is even the case that ‘the image of a dividing discipline in crisis and split into fragments is an intrinsic part of the identity of IR’ (p. 260). From the 1940s onwards, if not before, IR scholars already worried that their field was merely
a ‘hodgepodge . . . a kind of mixture, concocted from various subjects . . . an unsystematic putting-together . . .’ It was a study that lacked its own methodology, did not amount to a discipline in its own right and could therefore not produce anything beyond ‘an ill-assorted conglomeration of disjointed pieces of knowledge’ (Gurian, Knorr, Fox, Schwarzenberger, cited in Kristensen, 2016: 248).

One might wonder whether IR is really so unique in this regard. Surely, all disciplines endlessly debate their core subject matter and how to approach it. But there is a difference. Elsewhere, this ferment does not prevent scholars from also expressing positive claims about what it is that distinguishes their field from others. ‘It has fallen to geography’, wrote Robert David Sack (1980), ‘to consider the full range of meanings of space . . .’ (p. 197). ‘Time’, meanwhile, ‘. . . is the special province of the historian’ (Guldi and Armitage, 2014: 15). ‘The idea of social structure is at the very heart of sociology as a scientific enterprise’ (Smelser, 1988: 103). And ‘culture’, in Clifford Geertz’s (1993) words, ‘is the object around which the whole discipline of Anthropology arose’ (p. 4). While IR has tended to point to world politics as key to its empirical focus, it has never been able to identify its own unique angle on social reality in this way. In this sense, Kenneth Waltz (1990) was not exaggerating when he wrote that ‘[s]tudents of international politics have had an extraordinarily difficult time casting their subject in theoretical terms’ (p. 21). And this perhaps also explains why, as Ole Waever (2021) has recently reiterated, ‘[t]oday, articles use lots of theory and apply or test it – only it is not IR theory!’ (pp. 335-336). Perhaps for this reason too, while textbooks on Economics, Geography, Anthropology and Sociology routinely argue that there is an economics, a geography, an anthropology or a sociology of everything, IR textbooks very rarely, if ever, make any such claim for the international dimension of the human world.

Thus, the long history of anxiety about the disciplinary standing of IR is arguably something more than the everyday navel-gazing of all the social sciences. Nor is it, as Kristensen (2016) suggests, simply a rhetorical device used by those who wish to legitimate their own prescriptions for the field (p. 261). It certainly has often played that latter role. But it also seems to reflect a real incompleteness in the intellectual formation of IR as an academic discipline – the very incompleteness that Multiplicity seeks to rectify.

Still, one might also argue that proposing intellectual solutions to problems of disciplinary identity and cohesion makes the naive assumption that disciplines emerge and change in line with their real-world object and according to the cognitive requirements for making sense of it. A more hard-headed approach would recognise that ‘like any social system’, the discipline of IR ‘is a structured field permeated by relations of power’. It therefore will endure or change ‘for reasons better explained by sociology of science than because of the state of the world or the practices of disciplinary cultivation’ (Waever, 2021: 323, 325). There is no gainsaying the picture Waever (2021) paints of this situation: IR as ‘a discipline within a discipline’ (p. 327), trapped inside a US-dominated Political Science that is tightly regulated by senior theorists at elite institutions who control access to the key journals where the peer debates over disciplinary identity take place. But to take guidance from this fact alone would be a counsel of despair, and it would divert us yet again from the actual subject matter of the discipline which has apparently proven so difficult to formulate. In recent decades, it is true, European IR has
sought to forge an intellectual identity that differs from the US model. But this has largely
taken the form of rejecting the distinctiveness of the international in favour of broader
(mostly constructivist and poststructuralist) worldviews. At any rate, it has not pursued a
positive redefinition of the international per se.

**Multiplicity as IR’s ontological premise**

‘Multiplicity’, then, was a response to IR’s record of a double failure: its intellectual
trade deficit with other disciplines and its persistent sense of a missing common ground
for its internal debates too. Both problems, this new approach argued, can be addressed
by finding and taking possession of the neglected ontological premise of IR as a
discipline.

The argument has three steps to it (Rosenberg, 2016). It begins with a model of how
other, more ‘successful’, disciplines have been able to export big ideas, tracing IR’s
failure to its widely criticised negative self-definition based upon the realist idea of
anarchy – an absence rather than a presence. Next, it identifies ‘societal multiplicity’ as
the unique premise of IR and shows that this is full of consequences for all the human
disciplines. Multiplicity might thus provide the basis for an ‘international turn’ across
the social sciences and humanities – as well as offering a way to revive the international
in IR itself. Relatedly, and finally, it suggests that this same premise also opens up ‘a
new common ground for international theory’ within IR (Kurki, 2017), reinterpreting
the supposed fragmentation of the field and even offering a constructive agenda for its
further development in the future. Let us consider these steps more closely.

If we contemplate the human disciplines, we find that each of them provides an analy-
sis of the human world from the vantage point of one fundamental aspect of it. As already
noted, Geography primarily explores the spatial dimension of human (and natural) phe-
nomena. History, by contrast, is fundamentally premised on our existence in time.
Sociology rests upon the interconnectedness of individual lives through social structures,
while Anthropology (in the view of Geertz, among others) is rooted in the study of culture.
Power is the overriding concern of Politics (or Political Science). The nexus of language
and meaning is the home ground of Comparative Literature, and so on. To be clear, these
disciplines do not view the world only from the vantage points they have made their own.
But in each case they do so first, foremost, and more consistently than do the other disci-
plines. Moreover, each of their specialisms may at times become an unhelpful barrier to
understanding human affairs holistically, producing a false reification of the dimension in
question. And yet these specialisms are also the key to the unending conversation among
the human disciplines. After all, we all exist in space and time; we all use language, and
always in particular social, cultural and political settings.

For this reason, the specialised study of any one of these dimensions has the potential
to produce ideas that can suddenly ‘go viral’ and spread across the human disciplines as
a whole. Examples include the spatial turn, conjunctural analysis, World-Systems
Analysis, the ethnographic method and even post-colonial theory. Each of these mobi-
lised the specialised focus of individual disciplines (respectively: Geography, History,
Sociology, Anthropology and Comparative Literature) to launch a more general transdisci-
plinary debate about the nature of social reality. And it is here, in its apparent inability
thus far to manifest an idea of equivalent significance for all the human disciplines, that
the failure of IR has been most keenly felt. But why has IR failed in this way? And is this
a necessary failure?

The first of these questions may be answered by considering the disciplinary origins
of IR. It mostly began – and indeed remains overwhelmingly located – within Political
Science or (in the United Kingdom, for example) in departments of Politics or
Government. There it has defined itself largely in negative terms: IR studies political
behaviour in the absence of any overarching authority – anarchy. In the most developed
version of this identity – Waltzian Neorealism – IR claimed both that the international
was sui generis (and hence that its ‘anarchical’ logics did not extend into the ‘hierarchi-
cal’ structures to be found within individual societies) and that it was fundamentally a
political phenomenon: international theory was essentially international political theory
and would lose its coherence if any attempt were made to include social, economic and
cultural phenomena as well. Of course, Neorealism was widely criticised within IR, so it
would be a caricature to define the discipline wholly in these terms. But there have been
worse caricatures. For almost all these critiques – whether liberal, Marxist, feminist,
constructivist or post-structuralist – proceeded by importing ideas from outside IR in
order to dismantle Neorealism’s reification of geopolitics. Even neoclassical realism
sought to modify neorealism by re-introducing non-international, unit-level factors,
rather than by reasoning from an alternative definition of ‘the international’ per se.

In the melée, that ground was associated with Neorealism itself and, in effect, sur-
rrendered to it. ‘The international’ came to be seen as the problem to be overcome (e.g.
Nabers and Stengel, 2019). And in this way, both neoclassical realism and critical IR
theorists participated in the general absence of any claims for IR’s transdisciplinary sig-
nificance. The outcome, as recorded in The Sage Handbook of Political Sociology, was
striking: while other disciplines have been keen to promote the wider relevance of their
studies, ‘the way in which IR defines its object isolates the discipline from other social
sciences’ (Mateos and Laiz, 2017: 172).

Can a partial exception to this situation be seen in the founding texts of the English
School? Certainly, Martin Wight (1966) revolted against ‘the intellectual prejudice of the
sovereign state’ which reduced the international to ‘the untidy fringe of domestic poli-
tics’ (p. 21). And Hedley Bull sought to overcome ‘the domestic analogy’ which implied
that study of the international should be modelled upon our assumptions about municipal
political life (Bull, 1966). But not only do these reflexes reinforce the idea of an uncom-
fortable lodging for IR within the field of Politics or Government (where most British
International Studies have indeed been conducted and taught). But even when Wight and
Bull then asserted the sui generis nature of IR in positive terms – ‘international society’
– the resulting formulation (just as with Waltz) did not produce a distinctive ontological
premise about the social world in general, one that could spill over into the subject matter
of other disciplines. (After all, no-one made a stronger claim for the distinctiveness of
international politics than Kenneth Waltz. And the contrast between British and US inter-
national theory has arguably been more about choosing a humanities-based rather than
social scientific orientation for political studies.)

Many of these critiques of both Neorealism and the dominance of Political Science
had particular institutional effect in Canada and, especially, in the United Kingdom and
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Europe. There, interpretivist, constructivist and critical approaches of various stripes now constitute a significant body of the discipline, if not its mainstream, as can be seen, inter alia, at the EISA Pan-European conferences. Yet the rejection of ‘traditional’ or ‘rationalist’ approaches also often came hand in hand with the rejection of ‘the international’ (including as an analytical prism) (e.g. Bartelson, 2018; Edkins and Zehfuss, 2009). Nabers and Stengel (2019) argue that the previously ‘hegemonic’ understandings of ‘the international’ that had been ‘the nucleus of IR activities for decades impeded our understanding of politics rather than stimulating it’ (p. 27). But once again the contrast with Multiplicity should be clear. For Multiplicity proceeds not by rejecting the international as a framework, but by offering an alternative account of what the international is. And it is an account that need not reproduce the fixation on anarchy and sovereignty, nor the state-centrism that critical IR has problematised so well.

This brings us to the second question raised above: Does IR actually lack an ontological premise of its own? Does there exist for it no possible equivalent to the premises of space, time, social structure, culture, power and language which have proven so fruitful in the interactive evolution of other disciplines? Or, unlikely as this sounds, might we be facing largely a problem of articulation: have we simply not yet found a way of formulating it which brings out its full meaning for the human disciplines? Here we come to the crunch. For if we ask what such a premise could be, the answer seems undeniable: in the final analysis, IR is based upon the fact of societal multiplicity. Realism is not wrong to say that human social existence has never been a unitary phenomenon. But the result is not that this social existence suffers an absence which must be analysed as a purely political phenomenon – anarchy. Rather, what follows is that human society has always been distributed across a plurality of interacting instances, with manifold consequences both for these instances and for the overall historical process their collective existence comprises. Without this hugely significant feature of human history, IR would have no object, something which applies to no other discipline – not even Political Science. Multiplicity, in this deep and broad sense, is thus the unique ontological premise of IR. And – once released from IR’s sealed-off identity in ‘anarchy’ – its (and hence IR’s) implications for the human disciplines as a whole are enormous. The question is: how to articulate them in a way that brings out both their disciplinary and their transdisciplinary significance – and which, ultimately, gives both IR and the human disciplines at large a better way of understanding the world? This is what the Multiplicity project attempts.

Five such consequences have been identified. First, the coexistence of multiple societies adds an additional layer of social reality beyond (but also through) the national frameworks of daily life. Moreover, not just politics but economics, social structures and culture too take on different characteristics in this decentred, lateral field of inter-societal coexistence. In this sense, multiplicity generates the international itself – IR’s object – as a many-sided dimension of the human world.

Second, multiplicity also entails difference as an elemental feature of social reality. This is not just an empirical happenstance. For on the one hand, even if we reject reified borders and bounded essentialisms, multiple societies necessarily differ in their geographical location, with the result that each is unique both in its ecological setting and in its relation to all the other societies. And on the other hand, multiplicity also makes it possible for more than one society to develop, in different ways, but at the same time.
And this converts the comparative diversity of sociocultural evolution into a historically concrete configuration of difference at any given time. Of course, difference also obtains across historical time: different configurations coexist in different ways in different periods. And such contrasts do play importantly into the identities of polities and cultures. But the synchronic configuration of difference remains crucial because it leads directly and unavoidably to a third consequence of multiplicity: interaction in real time.

The reason for this is simple. Under conditions of multiplicity, every society confronts the fact that the human world extends beyond itself. And this circumstance is both a danger (because events occurring outside may turn into a threat) and an opportunity (because other societies have different physical and cultural resources which can be accessed through exchange of various kinds). The management of this external environment through interaction (via warfare, trade and diplomacy) gives us the international as IR has traditionally conceived it: geopolitics and interdependence. But it also points to the much broader significance of the international beyond IR itself.

Here lies the fourth consequence of multiplicity: through interaction, every society evolves as an ongoing combination of local practices with external influences of all kinds. This applies not only to politics and economics but also to social structures, technology, language, culture, cooking and fashion – every social practice evolves in the wider context of multiple interacting (and therefore entangled) societies. This means that ‘the international’ is more than just an ulterior, external condition: via the consequences of multiplicity, it reaches into the inner constitution of societies themselves. It may even entail that IR holds the solution to that pervasive problem of ‘methodological nationalism’ which has plagued Western social thought ever since it fell under the spell of national state formation in the era of classical social theory.

And this leads to the fifth consequence, which is indeed a methodological one. If human societies are multiple, varied and interactive, then the study of social phenomena – whether at the world level or at the level of its many parts – cannot be unilinear or even multi-linear in its method. It must be fully relational (or dialectical) – attuned, that is, to how multiple sources of causality interact creatively to produce phenomena that none could have produced internally on its own. For IR, this dialectical premise of historical analysis is inscribed in its own deep ontology – the ontology of multiplicity. Tracing it into all aspects of social life is arguably IR’s unique contribution to the human disciplines, sufficient to fuel an ‘international turn’ as enriching as any of the spatial, historical and cultural turns that have preceded it.

Here then is the claim being made for multiplicity: by exploring its consequences as a fact about the human world, we open out a problematique that not only defines the disciplinary identity of IR, but also reveals its place among the wider human disciplines. And yet within our exposition so far, there lurks – in full view – an apparently arbitrary assumption that threatens, once interrogated, to bring the whole argument down. As Viacheslav Morozov (2021) put it, ‘there is no discussion of what constitutes a society’ (p. 1).

The problem is easily stated. The term ‘society’ conjures up a unitary, territorial entity whose members share a common political authority, language and culture, clearly marked off from others around them. But such entities – nation-states – have predominated only in the modern world and even then only in very incomplete and even deceptive ways. It
must therefore seem that to propound a general, transhistorical concept of ‘societal multiplicity’ cannot avoid falsely reading modern conditions back into the past while simultaneously reinforcing the ideological legitimation of the nation-state in the present (Nabers and Stengel, 2019; Wimmer and Schiller, 2002). Does this not entail that ‘societal multiplicity’, far from addressing IR’s disciplinary problems, is in fact a very engine of reification that must make those problems definitively insoluble?

In order to avoid this outcome, we need to think for a moment about how the concept of ‘societal multiplicity’ relates to its object, with regard to both its specificity and its generality. To begin with the former: if IR is to have a specific disciplinary focus and identity, that focus cannot be multiplicity of just any kind, for IR would then be indistinguishable from Sociology which studies the multiple structures (of economy, politics, gender, ethnicity etc.) that coexist and intersect within any society, or History which likewise can be pursued at multiple scales. By contrast, IR’s object must be the multiplicity of social entities, and in the first instance, the relations between them rather than within them. For this purpose the term ‘societal’ is in fact more precise than the apparently safer term ‘social’ because it specifically references this coexistence of more than one entity. Moreover, by doing so it includes the element of ‘political multiplicity’ while avoiding the narrower focus that would result from using that term alone. (Perhaps this is why Morozov (2021) too, despite his criticisms, concludes that the approach ‘is right in foregrounding societal multiplicity as opposed to the wider approach that would include all entities playing a role in politics’ (p. 15, original emphasis).)

And yet the problem remains: given what we have just said about the misleading model of the nation-state, how are these entities – or ‘societies’ – to be defined? To this the answer must be: ‘not at this highest level of abstraction’. Such a step can be fully taken only at the next level down, when we start to examine historically specific cases. And before we go there, we must first extract what we can at this most general level of contemplating our subject matter. For it turns out that the crucial premise we need is already available before we formulate the object of ‘society’ historically (and hence in different ways in different cases). This is because we know from world history in general that human existence has always been plural. It has always comprised a multiplicity of instances, whether these instances have been hunter gatherer bands, tribes, chiefdoms, city-states, agrarian empires, industrialising nation-states or a shifting mix of all six and others besides. Thus, there may well be, as RBJ Walker (1992) (among others) has argued, all kinds of specificities to the modern ‘sovereign’, statist ‘resolution’ of the universal and the particular in our political existence, but the phenomenon of ‘inside/outside’ also has a general existence across human history, for the simple reason that no social entity has ever been coextensive with the species. Here lies the irreducible essence of ‘societal multiplicity’, whatever its varying historical forms. And for this reason alone, the focus it provides will always find an object, in the plurality of socio-political formations that coexist and interact.

This obtains even in a case like European feudalism. There, it is true, overlapping sovereignties and the peculiar interweavings of temporal and spiritual authority appear at first to make any clear definition of either half of the term ‘societal multiplicity’ quite impossible. But this appearance tells us only that we are too much in the thrall of nation-state definitions. If we ask instead ‘was European feudalism plural?’, we shall immediately be
on the path of saying what the term refers to in that socio-historical setting. And the fact that its referents will look radically different from their modern equivalents is no counter-argument: it merely shows that our general abstractions are after all capable of revealing and specifying historical difference while nonetheless describing a general object in human history.

Perhaps a better solution would be to change our terminology and replace ‘society’ and ‘the international’ altogether – but with what? All the alternative candidates (‘polities’, ‘entities’, ‘units’, ‘groups’, ‘collectivities’, ‘cultures’ etc.) bring problems of their own. And, as noted in an earlier, extended discussion of this topic, current usage ‘certainly keeps the problem squarely in our sight’ (Rosenberg, 2000: 77). Like the concept of ‘society’, ‘international’ denotes the modern form of a more general property of human existence for which – due to its extreme historical variation – no universally agreed term exists. ‘[I]f I could’, wrote Michael Mann (1986) in The Sources of Social Power, ‘I would abolish the concept of “society” altogether’ (p. 2). But he could not. And neither can we: even ‘multiplicity’ has to be specified afresh whenever it is applied historically. Thus, jettisoning the term ‘international’ would not remove the challenge (of historical specificity) raised by its use. Retaining it as an obviously limited placeholder, however, keeps the danger of anachronism in view, while nonetheless giving a rudimentary empirical definition to IR’s subject matter in the contemporary world. And thus far, this is also a definition that is both more recognisable and less cumbersome than the available alternatives.

In sum, we can indeed never say in advance what form ‘society’ or ‘the inter-societal’ will take, with what historically and culturally specific dynamics and consequences. But this is not a flaw. On the contrary, it is only by being so ‘empty’ of particular historical content that general abstractions (like ‘spatiality’, ‘temporality’, ‘culture’ etc.) are able to pinpoint without reification something that obtains in different ways across different historical settings. (And as a result, such concepts always have to be re-concretised historically in order to be applied at all.) What we can say, however, is that if the general abstraction holds, then the five consequences of multiplicity – coexistence, difference, interaction, combination and dialectical change – will always apply in some form. We can further say that this is the dimension of human social existence that IR brings into focus. And we can even suggest that, in the end, social explanation (of almost anything) will always be incomplete and defective if this dimension is excluded. Thus, in ‘societal multiplicity’, (now relieved of its reifying dangers by no longer conflating different levels of abstraction), we find both the distinctive identity of IR and its unique contribution to the human disciplines.

The question of ‘common ground’

Finally, if Multiplicity enables IR to contribute to the other disciplines, can it also address the internal problem of fragmentation within the field of IR theory? It can – but only if we overcome an important objection in principle to any such exercise. For Multiplicity is by no means the first intellectual framework that has been offered as the language for a common ground to bring IR’s fragments back into conversation with each other. Similar claims were made for the ‘practice turn’ in international theory, an approach which, it
was argued, could overcome the dichotomies (between rationalist and reflectivist, abstract and concrete, structure and agency etc.) which are responsible for the proliferation of incommensurable paradigms in IR (Adler and Pouliot, 2011). In ‘practices’, argued Adler and Pouliot (2011), we can see both sides of these dichotomies as they operate together in real life. And for this reason, practices ‘may be considered the ontological core concept that amalgamates the constitutive parts of international life’, thus finally enabling ‘an inter-paradigmatic research programme’ (p. 10).

This proposal, however, was sharply criticised by Erik Ringmar. As Ringmar pointed out, the conceptual language of practices was simultaneously too broad and too narrow. It was too broad because by drawing attention to common features of all social phenomena, it ended by lacking any determinacy: ‘[b]y meaning everything, practices come to mean nothing’ (Ringmar, 2014: 6). And it was too narrow because by assuming that science proceeds through the facilitating of dialogue between feuding paradigms, it made epistemological assumptions of its own that were necessarily at variance with those of the approaches it sought to bring together: hence, ‘the more successful [Adler and Pouliot] are at bridging the gaps, the more their solutions will raise eyebrows, and blood pressures, across the profession’ (Ringmar, 2014: 22). And from this, he drew the conclusion that ‘there can be no inter-paradigmatic practices, no grand syntheses and no new start for the academic study of International Relations’ (p. 23). How then can the idea of Multiplicity, proposed similarly as ‘a new common ground for international theory’ (Kurki, 2017), not fall victim to this same criticism?

The answer lies in a quite fundamental difference between the two proposals. Adler and Pouliot suggested that by overcoming dichotomies such as agent/structure and discursive/material which have proven so divisive in IR, as elsewhere, the idea of practice could help ‘draw disciplinary boundaries and bind different communities into a single discipline’ (p. 10). And yet, however, much it addressed issues that are shared across the social sciences, the idea offered nothing that was specific to IR. True to this, Adler and Pouliot (2017) were themselves agnostic on the question of ‘what counts as an international practice and what does not’ (p. 7). And when they set out their opening illustration of an international practice – the holding of G8 international summits – not one of the five dimensions which defined it as such related to its specifically international provenance. (The five dimensions were that this practice, like every other, is performative, patterned, competent, knowledgeable and a fusion of the ideational and the material.)

This perhaps explains how the practice turn could be experienced as both too broad and too narrow to provide a common ground for international theory: it recognised no special identity for IR while nonetheless imposing a very definite methodological fiat on how IR’s subject matter should be approached. By contrast, the idea of Multiplicity is not prescriptive at all on the general question of social scientific method. If it suggests that realists, liberals, Marxists, post-structuralists, post-colonial theorists, foreign policy analysts and so on can speak to each other, this is not because the epistemological differences among them are resolved: it is because, by being in IR, they orbit a common theoretical and real-world object which is ultimately definitive for this discipline: the coexistence and interaction of multiple social formations. And it is a remarkable fact about the history of international theory that earlier proposals to orient the discipline – from the behavioural turn through the linguistic turn, the relational turn and up to the
practice turn today – have all proceeded by importing alternative solutions from elsewhere, rather than by asking what follows from the nature of our subject matter itself. They have sought to bridge real disagreements, rather than pinpointing something the different parties – however, unwittingly – already hold in common.

And here lies the basic difference with the idea of Multiplicity. The fundamental divide within IR theory today remains that between so-called ‘rationalist’ (or explanatory) approaches and ‘reflectivist’ (or constitutive) ones. And yet a closer look at the main protagonists reveals that they are already standing, in their different ways, on the common ground of Multiplicity. Most obviously, Realism is a sustained reflection on the geopolitical consequences of societal multiplicity, albeit under the self-limiting title of anarchy. But this is a focus it shares with Poststructuralism, which was launched in IR by writers such as Rick Ashley and Rob Walker who explored the constitutive role of conceiving of multiplicity in particular ways. Liberal internationalism has from the start concerned itself with whether and how far the realist vision of multiplicity as anarchy could be moderated by the effects of democracy, interdependence and international organisation. IR Constructivism too was, in its origins, squarely focused on the political consequences of multiplicity, arguing that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ (Wendt, 1992). Meanwhile, Marxist IR has returned again and again to its central question: How is the integration of human existence in a single capitalist world economy connected to its enduring fragmentation in a multiplicity of states? And feminist IR has not only exposed the gendered nature of realist conceptualisations of multiplicity. It has also sometimes explored the impact of societal multiplicity on the formation and reproduction of gender identities themselves (Hooper, 2001). Thus, if we release this idea from the negative, self-limiting form that it has for so long assumed in its realist guise, we can see that it already unites all branches of IR theory on a shared, if disputatious, ground. Despite the understandable concerns of some commentators (e.g. Drieschova, 2019; Kinnvall, 2019), the implication of Multiplicity is not to suspend these disputes, much less to impose disciplining limits on what approaches are allowable; it is rather to make visible their common object, and thereby to legitimate their variety by revealing the actual conversation in which they are already collectively engaged. And it even points to a two-part constructive agenda for this field in the future, an agenda that could finally displace existing anxieties about the ‘failure’ or ‘end’ of international theory (Buzan and Little, 2001; Dunne et al., 2013).

First, the uncovering of multiplicity as the deep ontology of IR opens the way to that missing ‘international turn’ across the social sciences and humanities. IR scholars should always have been in the vanguard of the interdisciplinary critique of ‘methodological nationalism’ while providing better ways to understand ‘the national’ (as well as the regional and the local) by illuminating their international constitution and reproduction. The problematic of Multiplicity now equips us for this role, for the five consequences listed above apply to the subject matter of all the human disciplines.

And second, there is here an agenda for intra-IR debates too. Even today, IR tends to imagine its disciplinary evolution via a series of four ‘great debates’. But as Kurki and Wight (2021: 15ff) suggest, a striking feature of these is that all four were either (as in the first of them) limited to a sheerly political definition of multiplicity or (as with the other three) preoccupied with fundamental philosophy of science questions: respectively,
the claims of behaviourism, the incommensurability of paradigms and the critique of positivism. As a result, the fundamental challenge of theorising the coexistence of multiple societies and working through its constitutive implications for social reality in general has been only half engaged.

Arguably, the ‘great debate’ on the international itself, a self-consciously ontological debate in which rival positions reason equally but differently from the fact of societal multiplicity, has yet to occur. But if a fifth ‘great debate’ did take this form, it would surely be a sign that the evolution of international theory was not ending, but making a new beginning.

In catalysing that debate, Multiplicity makes a positive case for IR’s disciplinary identity as a means of realising its potential in interdisciplinary scholarship. Yet, as the articles making up this Special Issue illustrate, it also makes the case for a plural and contestable field in which many different ways of doing IR can flourish, in conversation with each other, rather than estranged around their own ‘campfires’.

The special issue

In the first of the articles below, Olaf Corry addresses a key objection that has been raised against the claims made for Multiplicity – namely, the fear that defining the ontological foundations of ‘the international’ will bring about a disciplinary closure, preventing the freedom that IR could otherwise enjoy as an inclusive field of study open to insights arising across the human disciplines. This fear, argues Corry from a Foucauldian perspective, is born of bitter experience but also reflects a naive understanding of academic disciplines. While recognising their inherently problematic nature, it misses their generative role in knowledge production and mistakenly assumes that work outside them would be free of power/knowledge relations and coercion from other disciplines. In fact, by comparison with existing definitions of the international, Multiplicity, though not without its own problems, involves a substantial expansion and potential diversification of the subject matter of IR, and one that opens it up further to continuous interaction with other disciplines. After weighing up three other potential disciplinary strategies for IR – remaining a subdiscipline, being an interdisciplinary field and abolishing disciplines – Corry favours the Multiplicity approach because it is ‘hard to see a route to broader themed and more diverse and critical scholarship about the international without an independent discipline of IR with a general purchase on the social world’ (p. 2).

This intellectual significance of the international beyond IR – and its usual subject matter – is taken up by Benjamin Tallis. Using debates over the influential band Kraftwerk as a case study, he demonstrates Multiplicity’s – and thus IR’s – value to Cultural Studies (CS) and (International) Political Sociology. The simultaneous labelling of the band as both typically German and thoroughly cosmopolitan is not paradoxical (as some have claimed) but rather, as Tallis shows, reveals an under-explored international politics at work. He illuminates Kraftwerk’s international dimensions in order to develop Multiplicity’s insight that all societies are inter-societal and all nations international, and the article thus rejects recent calls to abandon ‘the international’ in favour of ‘the global’ (e.g. Nabers and Stengel, 2019) in International Political Sociology (IPS). In practice, this would also ignore ‘the national’ which, as CS scholarship on Kraftwerk and recent
sociological work shows, remains an important mode of meaning-making (e.g. Malešević, 2019). Yet these same literatures dismiss cosmopolitanism or afford no constitutive role to the international, meaning they slide back into methodological nationalism. Working through the consequences of multiplicity, Tallis addresses both the national and the cosmopolitan aspects of the band and their relations to Germany and German-ness, thus suggesting a new co-ontological conception of identity and difference for IR. Sketching Kraftwerk’s genesis, innovations, inspirations, influence and wider importance, he illuminates the international politics of the musical ‘re-birth of Germany’ from the 1960s to the 1980s and shows how multiplicity helps IR find its (interdisciplinary) voice.

Further demonstrating Multiplicity’s utility in engaging questions of identity, Xavier Mathieu explores how it can be used in situations characterised by precarious boundaries between self and other. Investigating the discursive representation of French ‘foreign fighters’ in Syria and Iraq, Mathieu argues that multiplicity can emerge in ‘strange’ places and remain unstable, with important consequences for the notion itself. For instance, multiplicity can be both reaffirmed and erased simultaneously, and its fluidity can lead to extreme policies as well as complex politics of coexistence. This piece therefore resonates with Benjamin Tallis’ analysis of the politics of difference (and thus identity), which Multiplicity can understand not simply as a fact, but as a result of various processes of differentiation – whether imposed or desired – and complicated by processes of interaction and combination. Moreover, both pieces point to the malleable, yet still identifiable and effectual borderings that Multiplicity can illuminate, from the level of the individual through the societal to the geopolitical. Overall, this analysis shows that multiplicity is always in the making and that its five ‘consequences’ could equally be understood as constitutive processes – rather than simply as the results of an already existing multiplicity.

Christian Scheper applies the Multiplicity problematique to debates over human rights in global value chains (GVCs). Large parts of the current legal and policy-oriented debates on this, he argues, suffer a real limitation: they view the issue of human rights in GVCs primarily as one of ‘governance gaps’ needing to be filled pragmatically. While this is an important angle, it tends to naturalise the phenomena of transnational corporations and value chains and thereby to occlude both the international production of these phenomena and the human rights issues that they generate. As an antidote, Scheper takes up the five consequences of societal multiplicity and shows for each of them in turn how it uncovers a constitutive role of the international not only in producing the global corporation and its practices, but also in historically constructing the separation and detachment of the public discourse on human rights from the increasing power and agency of private corporations. Finally, and in contrast to the idea of ‘governance gaps’, he identifies three political consequences (associated with the specific international dimensions of the division of labour under competitive conditions, the legitimation of corporate practices and the production of knowledge for their regulation), through which the problem of human rights and GVCs is actively produced and perpetuated. Multiplicity as a core premise of IR thus makes a clear integrative contribution here to connecting heterodox International Political Economy perspectives with pragmatic legal and business-ethical policy
discourses on human rights, bringing into view the international productive processes that generate the ‘global’ and the ‘transnational’.

Antje Wiener notes a gap in global governance studies: they prioritise the constitutive effect of regulatory practices in building global governance while bracketing customary practices. Here, she argues, Rosenberg’s call for societal multiplicity as a central object of IR offers a welcome tool to fill the gap. Against this background, Wiener proposes a bottom-up perspective to develop a research programme on building global governance from below (i.e. through inter-societal interactions). In detail, she discusses building global governance through studying societal interaction with a view to renegotiating the social contract as a central organising principle. The argument can be illustrated with reference to norms research as a central off-spring of the Constructivist turn. Here, the societal multiplicity proposition carries special potential for novel research on inter-societal (re)negotiations of the social contract as a core norm of sustainable global governance. Wiener’s perspective on societal multiplicity puts less emphasis on establishing IR ‘as a field in its own right’, than dedicating attention to the invitation to further develop the concept of societal multiplicity as a ‘singular ontological premise’ for IR (Rosenberg, 2016: 128, 2019: 111, respectively). She argues that when viewed as a follow-up from Adler’s Constructivist move towards embracing the social more consistently, Rosenberg’s societal multiplicity proposition is more consistent with an epistemological than an ontological move.

Nicholas Lees introduces a crucial gender dimension into the study of multiplicity. Moreover, he inserts this element into the very foundations of any general IR theory: namely, an account of how the nucleated units which make up the political multiplicity of the international may originally have emerged. Drawing on an innovative combination of feminist writings, rational choice analysis and anthropological studies of stateless peoples, Lees shows how the organised subordination of women could have played a key role in enabling male groups to overcome the famous ‘stag-hunt’ obstacles to cooperation. But ‘[r]ather than the social contract providing a means to escape the war of all against all, implicit pacts within male fraternities may have created the conditions in which war was a permanent possibility’ (p. 18). If so, the significance of gender reaches into the ontological premise of Multiplicity itself. Exploring this not only helps put the gender, causes-of-war and Multiplicity literatures into conversation on common ground, but constructively adds to and extends their prior insights, while illuminating issues that have long lurked in IR’s shadows.

Finally, and as already suggested above, under conditions of societal multiplicity, all aspects of social life have an international dimension, in which the five consequences play out in distinct ways. This is arguably the key to IR’s potential contribution to all the other human disciplines. A fascinating example is provided here by Alex Colas’ study of ‘food regimes’ through which the exercise of international power finds its way into the hybridising of ‘food pathways’ and ‘national’ cuisines across the world. Reviewing the Spanish conquest of the Americas, British rule in South Asia and the US occupation of Japan, Colas shows how food played a key role in the structures of domination involved – while simultaneously unleashing dynamics of interaction, combination and dialectical change. A key element of the argument is its insistence on incorporating the element of hierarchy as an additional characteristic of multiplicity.
Overall, then, these papers further develop three key strands of the Multiplicity research programme: the possibility of a distinctive disciplinary definition of IR that is expansive rather than restrictive; the ability of multiplicity to speak to other disciplines beyond IR from this unique position; and its simultaneous ability to provide a common ground for creative interaction among the many strands within IR today.

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Notes

1. In what follows, the word ‘multiplicity’ will be capitalised when it refers to the research programme discussed in this Introduction. It will be left in lower case when it refers to the real-world property of social existence which provides the focus of that programme.

2. Arguably, the paradigm debate presented three rival accounts of what shapes the international, rather than competing theorisations of the international per se. And a key point at issue was the epistemological standing of these accounts. The debate was, after all, named after the Kuhnian problematic of scientific paradigms.

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