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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AS « NORMAL » POLITICAL SCIENCE

This paper draws the attention of political scientists to the need for enhancing the empirical analysis and knowledge of substantive international topics in order to lift International Relations up to the rank of “normal” political science. Existing empirical analysis on disparate topics of international relations notwithstanding, International Relations (IR) is perceived by all as “special” political science, i.e. as the discipline of a community of scientists which are primarily concerned with theory debate rather than positive research. In particular, this paper advocates the empirical study of the structure of government of the world political system in the believe that only this study will form the backbone of IR as “normal” political science. Actually, empirical knowledge on how authoritative decisions and public policies are made, implemented, and changed at the world level is scarcely developed, and much needed in order to enhance IR as “normal” political science. By looking at the world *as if it were* a political system, and researching on the world government, international relationists will make the IR discipline consistent with political science as the scientific study of “who governs and how”.

In the common view and IR mainstream approaches, international relations are located in a space of no political organization and institutions of government, i.e. an anarchic and disorganized system where sometimes scanty forms of governance come into existence. At odds with this view, a few international relationists sees the world *as if it were* a political space in which actors compete for issuing binding rules and collective policies issued in order to regulate the use of common resources. Consequently, they acknowledge the existence of the world political system in which a set of government institutions make possible the production of collective norms, standards, and policies for managing common problems. In other terms, the world is an organized political system whose actors make use of a structure of government in order to solve common problems by authoritative decisions, and normally conform their actions and relations to these decisions.

In agreement with this view, the structure of government of the world system can be thought of as consisting of shared principles, world-wide practices, and political roles and

institutions for producing rules and policies of global reach. Over the past centuries, this structure has been passing through an evolutionary process that, among other changes, produced formal institutions and the expansion of the world public space. In the course of the 20th century, the structure of government of the world system has been enriched with a framework of institutions, which encompasses organizations like the United Nations, and regimes, like the monetary and commercial ones, which have formal and tangible nature. At the same time, the world public space widened under the influence of world-wide social processes, and today comprises issues like environment protection, human rights and democracy promotion, and the repression of transnational organized crime.

In the present paper, I want to underline the importance of paying more attention to, and making more scientific work on, isolating the organization-and-government institutions of the world system, and discerning the scope of the political sphere/competence of the structure of government of the world political system.

Defining the political institutions of the world system, and isolating the organization-and-government institutions

In the study of international politics, some scholars concentrate on institutions - like diplomacy, international law, and war - that serve the primary interest of the states for having ordered and predictable relations. In fact, diplomacy serves to communicate and negotiate in fair and certain conditions; international law, to avoid conflicts of interest by referring to shared principles and norms; war, to solve serious conflicts and nonnegotiable interests by an agreed form of violence. These institutions, which emerged from the continuous interaction among states, are usually named as *primary (and constitutive) institutions* because they brought into existence the world system as an expansion of the European international system.

At odds with this view of world institutions, scholars concerned with the long-term analysis of the global system draw attention to the existence of a different type of institutions, known as *global reach institutions*. These are linked to the constitution, operation and reproduction of the world/global political system as distinguished from all the small-range, *local* international systems. Two global reach institutions, global leadership and global war, are isolated in world politics by these scholars. Global leadership gives uniform direction to the system by selecting and executing coherent programs and strategies for the government of shared problems and inter-state relations. Global war is (maybe, has been) the macro-decision institution for the change of authority in the system. As such, global wars have been the key turning point of world history, and the main event of institutional change. They introduced new leadership, and shaped the political structure of successive world systems. Other

institutions of global reach, like the leading industries of the world economy and world-wide social movements, are also important in the operation and reproduction of the global political system, but they belong to the economic, cultural, and social sectors of the world system. All the institutions of global reach emerge from both world-wide processes/structures and the agency of the state- and non-state-actors that are able to perform on global scale.

Besides these two types, a third-type institution has been created by states in order to intentionally face with collective issues and problems, and give political organization to the world system over a period of time shorter than that of the global-reach institutions. These *organization-and-government institutions* are formed, and reformed, on the initiative of many states, but especially the most powerful ones that, on occasion, create coalitions of governments in order to respond to persistent and new problems. The great-power concert of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth century is an example of organization-and-government institution. Initially an institution of the European international system, it also served as institution of global leadership. The League of Nations and the United Nations are examples of institutions formed to cope with global problems in the Twentieth century. Other contemporary institutions, created to deal with current global problems, are the regimes that regulate currency, trade, environment issues, and other international problems.

World political institutions, then, are divided into three types, the primary or constitutive, global-reach, and organization-and-government type. They are linked, complementary to, and to some extent overlapping, but also divisible from, one another. Type-one and type-two institutions have continuous existence, whereas type-three institutions are discontinuous and system-specific. At odds with the institutions of the world systems of the past, the organization-and-government institutions of the current world political system have their own statutes, administrative structures, and material and human resources. The formal nature of the current organization-and-government institutions is recognized by those scholars that represent the present global system as institution-based hegemonic system. In such a perspective, the United States, the leading power of the victorious coalition of the Second World War, sustained the formation of institutions that have been, and continue to be, the essential instrument of organization and government of the present global system.

Formal-legal and practice institutions of government

The reluctance of IR scholars to use ‘organization’ and ‘government’ as concepts appropriate to analyzing the world political system, and theorizing on world politics are explained by the intimate relation existing between these and the ‘authority’ and ‘legitimacy’

concepts, and the consequent belief on their inappropriateness to the world system. More precisely, this belief is founded upon the double assumption that (a) only formal–legal institutions have political authority and legitimacy, and (b) system members accept political submission to government only on condition that formal–legal institutions are constituted by the same system members. Contrary to this view, social scientists commonly acknowledge that authority is the legitimate political role founded on practices that are accepted as good by the system members, irrespective of the transformation of practices into legal–formal institutions. Granting that both views are right, and political authority can be formal–legal and/or practice authority, three kinds of political systems are distinguished, i.e. those, like the state, that rely only on legal–formal authority institutions; those, like past international systems, that rely only on practice-authority institutions; and those that rely on both formal–legal and practice-authority institutions, like the contemporary global system.

Authority and legitimacy

It must be added, however, that despite the diatribe on the formal and informal base of authority institutions, political scientists take very much into consideration the relation existing between power/authority concentration and political authority legitimacy. For example, domestic political regimes are classified as democratic and authoritarian on the basis of the relation between power concentration and legitimacy. Accordingly, also international political systems can be classified upon the criteria of power concentration and legitimacy, and various forms of political organization of international systems can be differentiated from one another. Incidentally, it is noted here that the term “political organization” will be used in international political analysis as homologous to the term “regime” in the analysis of domestic politics. In fact, the term ‘regime’ cannot be used in international political analysis with the meaning it has in domestic political analysis because “regime”, in IR, has the meaning of complex of norms, practices and international organizations for the control and management of issue-specific problems.

In order to claim the importance of the relation between power concentration and authority legitimacy as instrument to distinguish different types of international political organization, it is here reminded that all political organizations in world history – even those characterized by high power concentration – have been stable as far as the system members considered the authority of one or few of them as legitimate. On this belief, the school of international hegemony has been thought up, and the study of institutionalized hegemony/leadership has emerged. Organization-and-government institutions, then, are key

to explain the world political system. They make clear the power concentration and legitimacy of the vertical structure of the system that set in action the strategies of government of the world problems

Hegemony and leadership

Something can be said here about contention on the use of ‘hegemony’ and ‘leadership’ as terms appropriate to conceptualize the vertical structure of government of the world system. Preference for the term ‘leadership’ is founded on the assumption that the term ‘hegemony’ has been used to designate coercive power, while organizational capabilities and participatory decision-making are vital to contemporary global government. However, the two terms can be taken as interchangeable in the IR discourse since Gramsci and Gramscian authors have rightly underlined the importance of consent in the hegemonic relationship.

Global leadership/hegemony, then, is the practice that underpins the structure of government of the world system. This practice is founded on three fundamentals. First, the leadership willingness and control of global reach (political, military, cultural) resources by one state. Second, procedural legitimacy, i.e. recourse to formal institutions (international organizations and regimes) for issuing shared rules and policies. Third, appropriate strategies for managing the problems of the public space, and earning the benefits of output legitimacy. Attention is called here below on the third requisite because it is the one much overlooked by IR students.

Discerning the scope of the world public space and political sphere

To remark the importance of the public space in the analysis of world politics means to remark the *limited nature* of leadership as government of the global system. Political systems differ from one another in the scope of the legitimate action of their government, i.e. the number and range of issues that are debated in the public space and transformed into objects of politics. The areas of the values, interests and problems the system members reserve to the private space, i.e. the areas that the political authority cannot legitimately enter into, and the areas of the values, interests and problems that the system members agree to process as public space matters, i.e. the areas of collective discussion and authoritative decisions, are neither the same in all political systems nor along the history of one political system. Generally speaking, in the last few centuries, state political systems, especially the most advanced ones, have enormously increased the scope of the public space. Instead, world system actors have increased the number of matters in the public space only moderately, and in the very recent past. State governments, international organizations, and non-state-actors

have been enlarging the world political sphere to encompass issues as new as environment protection, international organized crime repression, and democracy promotion.

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