

The limits of historical sociology: Temporal borders and the reproduction of the ‘modern’ political present

European Journal of
International Relations
2016, Vol. 22(1) 99–121
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1354066115575399
ejt.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article develops a poststructuralist critique of the historical sociology of International Relations project. While the historical sociology of International Relations project claims to offer a more nuanced understanding of the state and the international, this article argues that it lacks critical reflection on the notion of a common ground on which ‘history’ and ‘sociology’ can successfully be combined. In order to problematize this ‘ground’, the article turns to Jacques Derrida’s critique of attempts to solve the history–structure dichotomy by finding a perfect combination of historicist and structuralist modes of explanation. Exploring the implications of Derrida’s critique, the article considers how the combination of ‘history’ and ‘sociology’ can be linked to a sovereign politics of time, which reaffirms rather than challenges the limits of the ‘modern’ political present and its relationship to the past, as well as the future. In response, it is suggested that a more radical critique is needed, one that seeks to *disrupt* the ‘modern’ political present and the contingent ground on which it rests.

Keywords

Derrida, history, poststructuralism, sociology, sovereignty, time

Introduction

This article develops a poststructuralist critique of the historical sociology of International Relations (HSIR) project. The primary aim of this critique is to explore the constitutive

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limits of historical sociology, as a theory and a method seeking to locate a series of events that can be woven together to produce coherent patterns of history. Historical sociology now comprises a heterogeneous body of literature, which includes a range of different perspectives. While some stress the linearity of time and the progressive order of history, others emphasize non-linearity and the uneven stages of history. However, in this article, I shall argue that irrespective of the particular approach to historical sociology that is adopted, there can be no easy escape from or solution to the problems that emerge from assumptions concerning the existence of a separate 'ground' on which 'history' and 'sociology' are supposed to coexist. Any attempt to combine history and sociology, it is argued, is vulnerable to a critique that questions the nature of this ground — what it consists of, how it can be found, where it is to be found and who has the legitimate authority to determine its presence and meaning. In order to critically engage with these questions, this article draws on the work of Jacques Derrida and specifically his early work on the history–structure dichotomy in Western thought and metaphysics.

For Derrida, the more we search for the origins of history, becoming and genesis, the stronger our desire seems to be for a return to structure, a structure that can hold together individual events and give them a sense of purpose, meaning and direction. However, a structure can never provide history with a stable ground on which to study individual events and the links between them. A structure is always marked by an opening that renders it incomplete.¹ The 'ground' of history, therefore, cannot be found in structure alone, but only in the processes of constituting such a ground, that is, in the processes of grounding.

When taking Derrida's deconstructive critique seriously, any attempt to make claims about the past in relation to the present becomes deeply problematic. That is not to say that we cannot or should not make any claims about the past. In fact, we do it all the time, and without doing so, there would be no politics (or history) in the first place. At the same time, it is important to recognize that there can be no stable or superior ground for making such claims; as with all grounds, the ground of history is necessarily haunted by its lack of self-presence and therefore always already deconstructible. In this respect, one of the most serious shortcomings of the HSIR project is its tendency to gloss over the problems inherent in assumptions of an already-constituted ground. Any attempt to challenge this project and push its limits must therefore begin with a thorough examination of the problem of grounding, which is precisely what this article seeks to do.

The first section examines the limits of historical sociology as a 'critical' approach to International Relations (IR), with special emphasis on the notion of an already-constituted ground on which history and sociology are supposed to coexist. The second section turns to Derrida's deconstructive critique of the history–structure dichotomy and demonstrates how it calls for a shift of focus from the ground to the grounding of history. The third section explores the implications of Derrida's critique for analysing historical sociology, mainly by demonstrating how the latter can be linked to a sovereign politics of time that relies on the inscription of 'temporal borders' — borders that are used in order to separate the past from the 'modern' political present, and a future that is deemed worthy of being aspired towards. In the fourth section, it is noted that the potential of a more 'critical' historical sociology is to be found in the more recent attempts to construct a non-Eurocentric HSIR. While this approach demonstrates more critical potential than its predecessors, it is argued that non-Eurocentric HSIR ultimately fails to address the problem of the

sovereign voice of history and reason, which is silently reaffirmed whenever the attempt is made to determine the origins of our being and becoming by mastering the complex relationship between time, temporality and singular events. A more radical form of critique is therefore needed: one that refuses to reaffirm the sovereign voice of history and reason and, rather, seeks to *disrupt* this voice. In the final section of the article, I explore what this critique might entail and how it can be used as a radical alternative to current versions of HSIR for studying the past and its relation to the present and the future.

The limits of historical sociology as a ‘critical’ approach to IR

In his article published in 1999, Stephen Hobden raised the following question: ‘Can historical sociology be critical?’ His starting point for addressing this question was Robert Cox’s paradigmatic view of what constitutes ‘critical theory’ in IR. For Cox, one of the main characteristics of ‘critical’ IR is its ability to question assumptions about the static nature and eternal laws of interstate relations. Critical theory, in this sense, ‘does not take institutions and social power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing’ (Cox, 1986: 208). In this respect, Hobden noted, historical sociology does indeed provide scholars of IR with a ‘critical’ approach. Referring to the work of Charles Tilly, Michael Mann and Theda Skocpol, he argued that instead of ‘seeing the state as a transhistorical feature, historical sociologists have investigated processes — both those that have led to state formation and those (domestic and international) that have resulted in contemporary forms of state’ (Hobden, 1999: 403).

Since the publication of Hobden’s article, many attempts have been made to develop historical sociology as an alternative to mainstream IR theory, in particular, to neorealism and neoliberalism. A key publication in this context is the edited volume *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Hobden and Hobson, 2002), in which different scholars discuss how ‘historical sociology’ might contribute to the study of IR. While doing so in a variety of ways, most of the contributors to this volume take their inspiration from earlier attempts outside the disciplinary context of IR to bring history and sociology closer together. Influential authors include Tilly, Mann, Skocpol, Immanuel Wallerstein and Norbert Elias — often referred to as the ‘first wave’ of historical sociology.

As Tilly (2001) has noted, the term ‘historical sociology’ refers to the idea of adding the insights of history to sociology, and vice versa. While the turn towards sociology in the 19th century, initiated by French sociologist August Comte, was based on a critique of more traditional historical approaches for their lack of structural explanations, Comtean sociology was, in turn, criticized for its overemphasis on structure and neglect of history. In trying to respond to the shortcomings of *both* historicist *and* sociological modes of investigation, history and sociology were brought together under the same umbrella. The main sources of inspiration behind this move were Karl Marx and Max Weber, both of whom had sought to combine the power of structural explanations with more detailed historical accounts (Hobson, 2002: 4).

Building on the insights of the ‘first wave’ of historical sociology, most of the chapters in *Historical Sociology of International Relations* seek to problematize the narrow

focus on eternal laws and structures that is to be found in neorealism and neoliberalism. In his introductory chapter, John Hobson (2002: 4) writes that:

while international relations is currently undergoing a ‘sociological turn’, often equated with the rise of constructivism, we argue here that the ‘sociological turn’ can only be *fully* realised by bringing ‘history’ back in. Indeed the primary purpose of this volume is its calling for an ‘*historical sociological turn*’ in international relations. The volume, therefore, acts as a kind of *historical sociological manifesto* [emphases in original].

Although this ‘manifesto’ was published more than a decade ago, this article will show that many of its central claims remain highly relevant for thinking about the more recent literature on HSIR as well, including some of those who identify as non-Eurocentric historical sociologists of IR. Perhaps most importantly, different ‘waves’ of historical sociology are based on a similar critique of the neorealist view of international history ‘as a static, monolithic entity that operates according to a constant and timeless logic, such that structural change becomes entirely obscured’ (Hobson, 2002: 10). Hobson and Lawson (2008: 423) have aptly referred to this reductionism as ‘history as scripture’, thereby pointing to what they see as one of the most serious limitations of an overemphasis on structure: the tendency to obscure the important role that history plays in *shaping* the modern sovereign state and the modern states-system. In reducing everything to a timeless logic, neorealism fails to appreciate the uniqueness of the contemporary political present, how this present differs from previous periods in history and how its emergence was, and still is, conditioned by long-term/large-scale historical processes and patterns.

As Hobson notes, the neorealist view of history expresses a particular form of ‘tempocentrism’, which projects the uniqueness of the political present onto history as a static and coherent whole. This view of history is famously illustrated by Robert Gilpin’s (1981: 7) controversial remarks about the classical history of Thucydides being as ‘meaningful a guide to the behavior of states today as when it was written in the fifth century BC’. Working against the limits of this form of tempocentrism, a mere turn to constructivism is seen as inadequate. Much like the critique of the sociological turn articulated by the first wave of historical sociology, constructivism in IR is criticized for its lack of interest in the historical specificity of contemporary social structures and the important role that history plays in shaping those structures. Historical sociology is therefore needed as a corrective, which opens up ‘new ways of theorising and explaining the emergence and development of the modern international system/society in its multiple dimensions’ (Hobson, 2002: 20). The insights of constructivism can thus be combined with a deeper historical awareness of how and why we ended up with the ‘state’ and the ‘international’ as the dominant categories for thinking about contemporary political life in the first place. The combination of history and sociology, it is argued, allows for a more sophisticated examination of the origins and becoming of the sovereign state,² as well as of the origins and becoming of the international system.³ In a similar way to Anthony Giddens’s theory of ‘structuration’, which seeks to find a solution to the agency–structure debate by prioritizing neither structure nor agency (Giddens, 1979), or Alexander Wendt’s attempt to resolve the agency–structure conundrum in IR by drawing on the same solution (Wendt, 1987), historical sociology expresses an Aristotelian desire for a ‘perfect middle’, which prioritizes neither history nor structure, but gives equal weight to both.

Another of Cox's criteria for 'critical theory' is that it must:

become clearly aware of the perspective which gives rise to theorizing, and its relation to other perspectives ... and to open up the possibility of choosing a different valid perspective from which the problematic becomes one of creating an alternative world. (Cox, 1986: 208)

For Hobden, while it would be difficult to characterize the first wave of historical sociology as 'critical' in this respect, there is nevertheless great critical potential in historical sociology. Referring to the work of Andrew Linklater, he notes that historical sociology can be used not only for tracing the historical origins of the state and its borders, but also for providing 'insights for the ways in which they [state borders] can be transcended' (Hobden, 1999: 405). This more explicit 'normative' dimension of historical sociology is clearly articulated in Linklater's recent work, which seeks to combine English School theorizing with Elias's sociological investigations into modern civilizing processes (Linklater, 2004: 23–24). Instead of the tragic realist view of power politics, Linklater's approach to historical sociology offers a more optimistic outlook that emphasizes the potential for radical transformation and new forms of political community.⁴ Taking into account this more explicit normative strand of historical sociology, it seems that historical sociology can be used not only for analysing the historical origins and emergence of the state and the international, but also for developing visions of how to transcend the limits of these categories and construct a different world order. In this way, historical sociology also seems to fulfil Cox's requirements of 'critical theory'. However, there is a but.

While much important work has been done to advance historical sociology as a 'critical' approach to IR, there is a curious lack of critical reflection in this literature on the general assumptions underlying the notion of a separate 'ground' on which 'history' and 'sociology' can coexist — assumptions about *how* this 'ground' can be found, *where* it is to be found and *who* has the legitimate authority to determine its presence and meaning. Instead of questioning the presence of this 'ground', the literature on HSIR merely seems to presuppose it. In an attempt to respond to this lack of critical reflection, this article engages critically with the notion of a common 'ground' on which history and sociology can successfully be combined. This critical engagement takes its inspiration from previous works exploring the limits of 'history' and 'historical sociology' as particular modes of knowledge.

For example, in his book *The Limits of History* (Fasolt, 2004), Constantin Fasolt examines 'history' as a particular form of knowledge based on a practice of actively inscribing borders between the past, on the one hand, and the present and the future, on the other. The temporal borders of history, he suggests, play a central role in 'modern' practices of sovereign authority, which enable the sovereign state to take charge of time, break free from a past that is declared dead and buried, and, on that basis, declare the conditions for the future that lies ahead (Fasolt, 2004: 12). Along similar lines, Kathleen Davis (2008) notes how 'history' and 'historical periodization' are based on practices of making temporal distinctions, which reaffirm particular ideas about who we currently are in the 'modern' present. With the help of historical periodization, it is possible to distinguish the modern 'self' from its pre-modern 'others': 'medievalism' and 'feudalism' in particular. Even though a precise line between these supposedly separate periods is never to be found, the inscription of this line has a performative role to play in that it

actively participates in the reproduction of a modern 'self' by separating it from its temporal 'others'.⁵ The political, as well as violent, implications of the temporal borders of history and historical periodization are illustrated especially well in the postcolonial literature, which has demonstrated how a particular Western-centric concept of history has been employed to provide a supposedly 'universal history' or 'world history'.⁶ Moreover, this literature has highlighted practices of inclusion/exclusion in the writing of history, practices that participate in a sovereign politics of time seeking to determine who has the right to belong to the so-called 'modern' and 'Western' world. The 'non-Western', in this framework, is that which has not yet reached the time of the 'modern' and remains somewhere in the past, on the other side of a temporal border.⁷ As Kimberly Hutchings (2008, 2011) has pointed out, theories of world politics can be seen as part of this tendency as they tend to rely on conceptions of time that reproduce a particular form of parochialism, which is maintained and reproduced by disciplinary practices separating the 'modern' state/states-system from anything that might threaten its continuous existence. Whether this parochialism plays out in realist terms emphasizing a strict delineation between the state and the international, or along cosmopolitan lines aspiring towards a common identity beyond the state, it is a parochialism that enables the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. It enables a double process of inclusion/exclusion that, following R.B.J. Walker (2010: 211), seeks to bring 'the world into the world of the modern while excluding all other worlds'.

A sovereign politics of time is something that seems to elude much of the HSIR literature. While claiming to offer a more sophisticated understanding of the historical conditions shaping the emergence of the state and the international, this literature, especially in its early development, seems to reaffirm rather than challenge the disciplinary limits of history as a particular form of knowledge for thinking about the past and its relationship to the present and the future. Although this 'history' might be investigated in different ways, for example, proceeding along the lines of constructivist, Marxist or more traditional structuralist modes of investigation, historical sociology is ultimately used in order to trace different chains of events. These chains might be said to consist primarily of 'ideational' factors (as in the case of constructivism) or 'material' factors (as in the case of Marxism and much of the neo-Weberianism). However, while approaches to historical sociology may differ in certain key respects, they all seek to explain 'change' by weaving together a series of events to produce coherent patterns of history. In doing so, approaches to historical sociology do not necessarily contradict mainstream IR theories such as neorealism and neoliberalism. Indeed, according to Steve Smith, much of the historical sociology literature can be said to reaffirm the ontological presence of states that neorealism and neoliberalism merely presuppose, thereby providing 'the theory of the state required by neorealism and neoliberalism' (Smith, 2002: 242). Even the 'exception' to this rule that Smith pointed to in the context of the Hobden and Hobson (2002) edited volume — that of Christian Reus-Smit's (2002) critical constructivist chapter — seems to prove the rule given that it identifies causal processes just as much as the other approaches, even if these are ideational rather than materialist forces. Moreover, causal processes are fundamental to Reus-Smit's (2013) most recent book, *Individual Rights and the Making of the International System*. As Nick Vaughan-Williams (2005: 136) has noted, in searching for ultimate causes, approaches to history and historical sociology tend to ignore the general

‘problem of history’, a problem that relates ‘to the impossibility of arriving at a closed interpretation of the meaning of history in any given context even when attempts at such closure are made’. Rather than providing a solution to this problem, the notion of a middle ground between history and sociology risks deepening the illusion that some sort of superior ‘ground’ for the study of history can, indeed, be found.

In a similar way to these previous critical engagements with history and historical sociology, this article is not concerned with trying to offer a better or more accurate understanding of the historical origins of the modern sovereign state and the modern system of states. As was stated in the introduction, the primary aim of this article is to question the constitutive limits of historical sociology and especially the notion of a ‘middle ground’ on which history and sociology are supposed to coexist. To do so, the next section turns to Derrida’s deconstructive critique of the history–structure dichotomy in Western thought.

From the ground to the grounding of history

A confusion of value and existence, and more generally, of all types of realities
and all types of idealities is sheltered beneath the equivocal category
of the historical. (Derrida, 2005b: 202)

The philosophy of Jacques Derrida has played a central role in articulating some of the most well-known poststructuralist critiques of IR theory and discourses of the sovereign state/system of states (see, esp., Ashley, 1988, 1989; Campbell, 1998a, 1998b; Doty, 1997; Edkins, 1999; Zehfuss, 2002). Much of this work draws on the ‘quasi-method’ of ‘deconstruction’, which Derrida develops through a close reading of Western philosophy. In brief, deconstruction focuses on how a particular discourse is enabled and produced by a series of dichotomies — for example, presence–absence and identity–difference. While appearing to be mutually exclusive, Derrida argues that the two terms of these dichotomies are, in fact, mutually interdependent; hence, one term cannot exist without the other. Moreover, these dichotomies are organized hierarchically so that one term is privileged over another. Thus, throughout the history of Western philosophy and metaphysics, presence is privileged over absence and identity over difference. Rather than merely studying the ‘construction’ of such hierarchical dichotomies, deconstruction ultimately aims at decentring and displacing them. It does this by looking for the gaps and silences that are necessary for any dichotomy to ‘work’ — silences and gaps that threaten to expose the illusory ‘ground’ on which a dichotomy is supposed to be based, for example, the ground of a pure ‘presence’ or a fully coherent ‘identity’. To disrupt and displace such a ‘ground’, deconstruction points to how the privileged term of a dichotomy paradoxically relies on that which has to be excluded in order for it to exist — in this case, ‘absence’ and ‘difference’. While the exclusion of ‘absence’ and ‘difference’ conditions the possibility of ‘presence’ and ‘identity’, the former can never fully disappear; they always remain as traces that constantly haunt and threaten to displace notions of ‘presence’ and ‘identity’. That which conditions the *possibility* of ‘presence’ and ‘identity’ can, in this sense, also be said to condition their *impossibility*.

In IR, the double reading of the possibility and impossibility of presence and absence, identity and difference, has, for example, been used to deconstruct and ultimately disrupt and displace the ‘presence’ of the sovereign state (Ashley, 1988), the ‘identity’ of states in discourses of foreign policy (Campbell, 1998b) and the ‘presence’ of ‘structures’, ‘agents’ and ‘subjects’ (Doty, 1997). Here, I will focus on how deconstruction can be used to disrupt and displace two other concepts and especially the notion of common ‘ground’ on which they are supposed to coexist according to historical sociology: ‘history’ and ‘structure’. To do this, it is necessary to go back to Derrida’s early work on the philosophy of German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl.⁸ For Derrida, Husserl’s philosophy is particularly interesting because he was trying to find a solution to a fundamental problem in Western thought: the problem of combining an investigation into the origins of phenomena with a structural account that can connect all possible experience within the same overarching logic. In addressing this problem, Husserl was also trying to reconcile the Humean and Kantian philosophical traditions. While his main critique of the former was linked to its overemphasis on individual experience, which reduces all phenomena to mere psychologism, his critique of the latter had to do with an overemphasis on the *structure* of experience, which obscures the real origins or genesis of experience. In a similar way to historical sociology, neither history nor structure can *in itself* offer a satisfactory solution to the problem of knowledge. As Derrida (2005b: 199) puts it:

Neither the idea of structure, which isolates the different spheres of objective signification with respect for their static originality, nor the idea of genesis, which effects abusive transitions from one region to another, appears adequate to clarify the problem which is already Husserl’s, that is, the problem of *the foundation of objectivity* [emphasis in original].

Thus, at the heart of Husserl’s attempts to deal with the history–structure conundrum is ‘the problem of *the foundation of objectivity*’. In order to solve this problem, neither the ‘structuralist demand’ nor the ‘historicist’ or ‘genetic demand’ can be ignored. *Both* must, in some sense, be satisfied if an answer to the problem of the foundation of objectivity is to be found. The crucial task — again, very similar to historical sociology — must therefore be to find a way of reconciling:

the *structuralist* demand (which leads to the comprehensive description of a totality, of a form or a function organized according to an internal legality in which elements have meaning only in the solidarity of their correlation or their opposition), with the *genetic* demand (that is the search for the origin and foundation of the structure) [emphases in original]. (Derrida, 2005b: 197)

In order to reconcile history and structure, Husserl developed a form of ‘transcendental reductionism’, the main purpose of which is to reduce genesis to the origins of sense, intuition and experience. As John Leavey (1989: 11) notes, this reductionism ‘operates on the level of sense and is related to the problems of language, ideality, truth, and humankind in its Living Present — the source of all sense and history’. For Derrida, however, one of the main problems with this ‘transcendental reductionism’ relates to the question of what the ‘Living Present’ is actually supposed to refer to. It seems that the only possible answer to this question is to be found in a metaphysical assumption of something already

constituted, which can help explain the genesis of all phenomena, that is, the process of the *constituting*. This assumption can be seen as ‘necessary’ insofar as it provides genesis with *unity* and *telos* — something that can guide the experiencing subject closer and closer to the real origins of idealized forms, or to what Husserl in one essay referred to as ‘the origins of geometry’. In this way, as Derrida (2003a: 25) notes, ‘The sense of the unit/unity must be already present to start the genesis up and to steer it.’

Following Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Husserl’s phenomenology, the search for the true origins of idealized forms will never succeed. This is because the ‘thing’ or the ‘object’, the origins of which are sought for in the idealized forms of all possible experience, ‘always escapes’ (Derrida, 2003a: 104). It escapes into the abyss of time and through the constant differing and deferral of all presence. Husserl’s search for the true origins of geometry can, in this sense, be analysed as an expression of a certain desire to hold on to the full presence of something that has already been lost. In order to recover the lost object, a return to structure becomes inevitable. This ‘return’ expresses something deeply nostalgic: a nostalgic temptation to fix the presence of a thing that has already disappeared into the abyss of time. The sense of nostalgia permeating a return to structure is also evident in attempts to fix the impossible presence of origins, a move that stands in stark contrast to Nietzsche’s joyous affirmation of the absence of a stable ground on which the presence of origins can be fixed:

Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation [emphases in original]. (Derrida, 2005a: 369)

In this light, the return to structure can also be seen as a move that is far from objective or neutral. It expresses a deeply held normative view of the necessity of securing our belief in the impossible presence of absent origins. However, the return to structure cannot provide full closure to history. Structure, just like history, is an *aporia*, the possibility of which relies on a simultaneous impossibility: the impossibility of a closed structure without an opening or a void. For Derrida (2005b: 201), there is always ‘something like an *opening* which will frustrate the structuralist project. What I can never understand, in a structure, is that by means of which it is not closed [emphasis in original]’.

Just like history, structure expresses an idealistic and normative commitment to what has already been lost, a desperate attempt to hold on to the impossible presence of things. In this way, Husserl’s search for an autonomous foundation of objectivity also becomes deeply problematic. Instead of actually reaching a stable ground on which the historicist demand can be satisfied side by side with the structuralist demand, such a ‘ground’ can only ever be temporarily inscribed or produced. It has to be inscribed or produced, moreover, on the basis of an underlying normative commitment, whereby history and structure are combined for a particular purpose. As Derrida (1989: 145) puts it in his analysis of the interaction between history and the structure of ‘Reason’ in Husserl’s phenomenology:

If Reason is but the essential structure of the transcendental *ego* and the transcendental *we*, it *is*, like them, historical through and through. Conversely, historicity, as such, *is* rational through and through. But *being*, which articulates Reason and History in relation to each other, is a ‘sense’, a teleological ought-to-be which constitutes being as movement [emphases in original].

The search for a stable ‘ground’ on which history can be tied to structure, and structure anchored in history, thus results in a grounding normativity, illustrated in Husserl’s philosophy by the ‘teleological ought-to-be’ that constitutes the sense of being. The attempt to satisfy *both* a historicist *and* a structuralist demand expresses a certain idealism, which seeks to hold on to the *unity*, as well as the *telos*, of the Living Present. As such, this attempt can also be analysed in a more political light. In brief, it highlights a *politics of inscribing or producing the presence of a ground against the backdrop of its simultaneous absence*. The next section of this article explores some of the possible implications of thinking about historical sociology in relation to this politics of grounding.

The reproduction of the ‘modern’ political present

How can Derrida’s deconstructive critique of the history–structure dichotomy help us in the task of engaging more critically with historical sociology and the notion of a common ‘ground’ on which history and sociology are supposed to be combined and used for studying the state and the international? As was noted in the previous section, for Derrida, there can be no ground that exists independently of the processes of producing or inscribing such a ground. The ‘ground’, therefore, is inseparable from a process of ‘grounding’. This process can also be said to play a key role in HSIR, especially in its early development. In seeking to advance a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between history and structure, HSIR *has* to rely on the notion of an already-constituted ground. It is only on the basis of such a ground that the long-term processes and large-scale patterns of history can be established and the origins of the ‘modern’ political present and its relationship to the past, as well as the future, can be traced.

To think of historical sociology in relation to a process of grounding is a useful way of analysing the deep sense of anthropocentrism underpinning this particular form of knowledge production. As pointed out by a range of prominent figures in the fields of intellectual history and the history of ideas — including Ernst Cassirer (1944), Karl Löwith (1949), Michael Allen Gillespie (1984) and David Roberts (1995) — historical modes of investigation have always, in one way or another, relied on the image of ‘modern man’ as someone who continuously seeks to progress, move forward and become more enlightened. In this sense, ‘history’ can also be seen as a solution to the problem of providing ‘modern man’ with a sense of purpose, meaning and direction, which, in Hegelian terms, can guide him closer and closer to the spirit’s full self-realization. In the so-called ‘modern’ world, neither Nature nor God, neither natural law nor theological doctrines, can function as a secure ‘ground’ for knowledge and meaning. ‘Man’ must learn to trust his own reasoning powers that will help him move forward, improve and *progress*. ‘History’ plays a particular role and fills a specific purpose in this task, which is to take the individual subject from the past and into the future. As ‘moderns’, then: we are all *free* to think about our historical origins and the relationship between past,

present and future; we are *free* to reconstruct the historical past and imagine how the past has made us into what we supposedly are; and we are *free* to think about how this connection between the past and the present can help us in the task of finding our way into the future. For Jakob Burckhardt (1818–1897), one of the pioneers of the ‘modern’ concept of history, freedom lies at the very heart of the historical imagination. It is the freedom to become aware of our ‘universal bondage’ as individual human subjects *without* being limited by prior social, political, economic and physical necessities that makes history into a distinctively ‘modern’ enterprise. Just like literature and poetry, history plays an important part in creating an awareness of ourselves as human individuals with a specific purpose and meaning.⁹ As Cassirer (1944: 206) puts it: ‘History as well as poetry is an organon of our self-knowledge, an indispensable instrument for building up our human universe.’

It is possible to find clear traces of the anthropocentric and emancipatory project that characterizes history as a ‘modern’ form of knowledge in the HSIR literature. Perhaps the clearest expression of this is to be found in Linklater’s attempt to combine Eliasian historical sociology and English School IR, which was referred to in the first section of this article. In a similar vein, Fred Halliday (2002: 264) has argued that:

Historical sociology is, above all, a part of the attempt by human beings to take mastery of their own surroundings, their past and their present, to better to emancipate themselves from it and determine, within the constraints of structure of course, their future.

Or, following Lawson (2007: 361): ‘Historical sociology takes human relations and their articulation and crystallization in real historical conditions as its central calling. Above all else, historical sociology promises the study of “we” rather than “they”, or “it”.’ Even constructivism, which some would claim offers the most radical approach to historical sociology (see Smith, 2002: 224), appears to fall back on a ‘modern’ belief in the ability of humans to progress and become more enlightened. Thus, for example, to return to Reus-Smit (2008: 398) once more, he argues that ‘The study of history is ... linked to the constructivist project of reintroducing to International Relations the idea that humans have politically consequential capacities as moral agents and that the future is not an “iron cage”.’ While Reus-Smit’s constructivist approach demonstrates a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between agency and structure as mutually constituted, it is nevertheless caught up in a ‘modern’ understanding of history as it emphasizes the centrality of the human in creating or *constructing* the world. As such, it also illustrates the limits of historical sociology as a critical approach to historicizing the human subject. Crucially, historical sociology cannot fall back on a ‘pure’ or ‘radical’ historicism since that would imply calling into question not only the moral agency of human beings, but also the role of the historical sociologist as someone who can connect individual events to long-term processes and large-scale patterns. Indeed, one of the main strengths of historical sociology, it is often pointed out, lies precisely in the ability of the historical sociologist to identify the larger patterns of history, or to connect ‘contingent historical events’ to the ‘broader interrelations, sequences, plots and concatenations which provide a shape — however difficult to discern — within historical development’ (Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 428).

The relationship between history and the search for individual autonomy and freedom is intimately linked to a sovereign politics of time, which makes it possible to decide on the proper passage of time and the relationship between past, present and future. It is linked, moreover, to sovereign practices of inscribing temporal borders between a past that is declared dead and buried, a present that is simply taken to mean what and where we are 'now', and a future that is seen as desirable and worthy of being aspired towards. These are the borders that enable the very concept of the 'modern' to be produced in the first place, and these are the borders that enable practices of sovereign authority to take charge of time, decide on how to break free from the past, claim freedom and autonomy in the present, and guide us into the future (Fasolt, 2004: 7). In this context, 'sociology' plays a particularly important role as it provides 'history' with a firmer structure that can be used to organize time in accordance with a clear trajectory of long-term historical change. Individual events can thus be subordinated to the latter in ways that help explain the origins and becoming of the 'modern' political present, the 'modern' state and the 'modern' states-system.

The 'structure' of history that sociology provides can also be analysed as a *narrative* structure that shapes our experience of time and temporality in particular ways. Perhaps most of all, the narrative structures of history help us deal with the profound mysteries of time and the uncertainty of singular events, which, without these structures, would open up to an endless series of questions and puzzles with no obvious answers. Following Paul Ricoeur (1988: 241–274), one of the main functions of the narrative is precisely to deal with the 'inscrutability' and 'unrepresentability' of time. While never succeeding in fully capturing the latter, narrative representation and narrative identity come closest to refiguring temporal experience and thereby responding to the mysteries or *aporias* of time.

The structure of the narrative and the temporal borders of history both reflect and help reproduce the idea that some sort of magic line can be discovered between a historical 'past' and a contemporary 'present'. This line is of utmost importance because it determines how *we*, as 'modern' political subjects and members of one common international order, identify ourselves with a certain trajectory that takes us from a moment in the past to what and where we currently are *now*. Almost exclusively, when trying to explain the emergence of an international order of sovereign states, at least in the disciplinary context of IR, this line is drawn between a 'pre-modern' past and a 'modern' present, a line commonly traced back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. One of the main strengths of the HSIR literature has been to call this precise line or distinction into question by painting a much more complex picture of the historical origins of the modern states-system (see Teschke, 2003). While doing so, however, it has failed to take seriously the politics underlying the very *practice* of drawing lines between the 'past' and the 'present'. This practice plays a crucial role, especially in more traditional approaches to history, as it maintains the parochialism of the 'modern' political present. Draw a line between past and present, push someone over the edge and claim to speak with the authoritative voice of the historian, the voice that effectively determines who belongs to the past and who is fitted for the contemporary present, ready to join us on our journey into the future. With the help of the temporal borders of history, it is possible to declare the conditions under which modern political subjects and modern sovereign states can claim their freedom in time, as well as in space.

History and sociology, origin and nostalgia

The combination of 'history' and 'sociology', it can be argued, offers a particularly useful method for reaffirming a commitment to anything that is considered 'modern'. On the one hand, this combination provides a secure ground on which to study the origins of 'modern' states and the 'modern' international. On the other, this ground can also be used in order to tie these origins to long-term processes and large-scale patterns. Indeed, the combination of history and sociology seems to offer an ideal combination of historicist and structuralist modes of explanation — a combination that makes it possible to study the origins of structure, as well as the structure of origins. Following Derrida's deconstructive critique, however, any attempt to resolve the history–structure dichotomy by prioritizing neither history nor structure, but, rather, giving equal weight to both, rests on the illusion that some sort of 'ground' can, indeed, be found *beyond* the limits of these two categories. In other words, it rests on the metaphysical assumption of a separate and already-constituted ground, which exists independently of the process of *grounding*.

Why, then, is there a need to rely on the notion of a separate 'ground' or a perfect 'middle' somewhere in-between 'history' and 'structure'? There are different ways of addressing this question. One way of doing so is to think of historical sociology as an expression of a certain desire to hold on to an ontological commitment. As was noted in the first section of this article, the basis of historical sociology, irrespective of the theoretical direction in which it is taken, has to do with tracing different chains of events. Even constructivist HSIR seeks to study such chains when tracing how an idea, belief or value led to another within a particular context or structure of events (see Reus-Smit, 2008: 406). Thus, while there appears to be a clear difference between, for example, Reus-Smit's focus on ideational structures and Alex Callinicos's emphasis on material capitalist structures (see Callinicos, 2007), *both* rely on the assumption that *there is* a structure, a structure that can be used in order to explain or understand a particular chain of events. Without the existence of such a structure, their interpretations or explanations of individual cases or events would not make any sense. The structure makes it possible to determine, along constructivist or Marxist lines, how the present is an effect of past events. It enables, moreover, a stronger sense of ontological certainty about *who we really are* in the contemporary present. A structure, whether material or ideational, has the magical quality of subordinating all those uncertain points that would otherwise seem totally random and meaningless. The structure gives the points meaning and transforms them into points of origins, which are indispensable when trying to establish how we became what we supposedly are.

The chains of events that historical sociology is concerned with are, thus, ontological 'chains of being'. The chains of being rely on the existence of chains of events, which, in turn, are inseparable from a deep sense of nostalgia permeating any attempt to hold on to the lost presence of absent origins. As soon as a chain is broken, there is an urge to fix it. The contingent must be resolved and made into a necessity, a necessary link in a chain that continues to be built whenever the cause of one event is linked to the effect of another (see Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 429). A nostalgic memory of the past is required in order to keep this chain alive, and to fix it as soon as a disruption threatens its continuous development — threatens the horizon of a particular form of knowledge that relies

on the continuous reproduction of a 'ground' on which meaningful knowledge can be built and stories about our past, present and future can be told and retold, over and over again. We reach into the past, reconstruct the past in the present and construct visions of our collective future. We master time with the sovereign voice of reason, a voice that belongs to the historian, as well as the sociologist, a voice that enables us to structure time in ways that can satisfy what seems like a never-ending desire to determine who we really are and who we wish to become as we leave the past behind and enter the future.

Questioning the Eurocentrism of the 'modern' political present

Following the argument made thus far, in seeking to provide a middle ground between history and structure, historical sociology reproduces rather than challenges the notion of a 'modern' political present. It does this through the inscription of temporal borders separating the 'past' from the 'present' and the 'future'. These borders play a key role in the historical sociological project, which is also an anthropocentric project, designed to reaffirm the ontological presence of human individuals by guiding them with the help of the sovereign voice of history and reason. This voice has the capacity not only to determine the connections between individual events and thereby show how we became what we are, but also to shape the future that lies ahead.

Does this critique mean, then, that historical sociology is futile and has nothing to offer a 'critical' engagement with IR and the main categories of this discipline: the state and the international? When answering this question, care must be taken not to ignore the differences within the historical sociology literature. It is particularly important here to consider the more recent literature seeking to problematize and move beyond 'Eurocentric' conceptions of world politics. Much of this literature draws on Trotsky's notion of uneven and combined development (U&CD), sometimes also referred to as the 'third wave' of historical sociology.¹⁰

At the heart of the literature on U&CD lies the task of challenging, as well as going beyond the limits of, a Western/Eurocentric conception of the 'international'. While the latter is commonly referred to as a system of sovereign states originating in early-modern Europe, U&CD seeks to provide a more 'universal' concept of the international, which contextualizes the European states-system *within* a larger trans-historical framework. On the basis of the latter, U&CD focuses primarily on inter-societal rather than interstate relations in order to explain how different societies have emerged in relation to one another on the basis of their different levels of development. It does this, moreover, by rejecting a linear notion of time, emphasizing instead the non-linear or multi-linear dimension that characterizes 'the interactive multiplicity of societies' (Rosenberg, 2013: 583). The 'international' should, thus, not be reserved for a Eurocentric explanation of the modern states-system. According to Justin Rosenberg (2013: 572), what is needed is an approach 'that neither reifies nor downplays the international but instead grasps it as a sociologically intelligible dimension of the human world'. He argues, moreover, that 'the distinguishing mark of such an approach ... must be its ability to identify aspects of social causality deriving specifically from the fact of societal multiplicity' (Rosenberg, 2013: 572). In this way, the 'international'

is transformed into an analytical category that goes *beyond* the limits of a particular Eurocentric context and opens up to a more 'universal' perspective, one primarily concerned with 'heterogeneity' and 'alterity' rather than 'homogeneity'. As Kamran Matin (2011: 368) puts it:

in the idea of uneven and combined development, the conception of the universal is not the a priori property of an immanently conceived homogeneous entity. Rather, it is a universally operational causal context whose ontic fabric is heterogeneous and radically open to, in fact constantly shaped and reshaped by, alterity, which generates emergent forms that overdetermine their own context of emergence.

Here, however, it is also possible to detect a weakness in the U&CD approach. While a linear notion of time is rejected, inter-societal change must still be grasped *within* 'a universally operational causal context'. Thus, the task for the historical sociologist remains to establish causal chains of events that can explain the 'origins' of social phenomena and tie singular events to long-term/large-scale processes and patterns. Hence, the general assumption of a common 'ground' between history and structure also remains very close to the previous waves of historical sociology. Although U&CD demonstrates a more critical attitude towards the Eurocentrism that often underpins this 'ground' (see, e.g., Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2013; Matin, 2013; cf. Hobson, 2011), it does not question the general assumption that there *is*, indeed, a middle ground to be found somewhere in-between historicist and structuralist modes of explanation, a ground on which meaningful knowledge can be built.

Furthermore, while the critical intentions of U&CD to problematize claims about the universality of a Eurocentric understanding of the international are praiseworthy, part of the problem with this approach lies in how it seeks to provide a counter-narrative that is supposedly more accurate, adequate, true or objective. The problem relates, more precisely, to how this approach continues to rely on the sovereign voice of reason that is located outside and independently of the narratives that this voice is trying to master. Rather than standing outside these narratives, it can be argued that the narrating subject is always and inevitably a part of them, defined by the same boundaries that the narrative form imposes on our ability to think about time, temporality and events. The inseparability of the narrating subject and the limits of the narrative is something that poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida and Michel Foucault are acutely aware of. They demonstrate greater awareness of how any claim to knowledge is always already part of a particular context or 'intertext' from which the investigating subject can never fully escape.¹¹ There is simply no place 'outside' or 'beyond' from which the narrating subject can safely observe a course of events, irrespective of whether this course is seen as 'linear' or 'multi-linear'. As soon as the narrating subject assumes that a complete mastery of such a course is possible, we return to the problem of the sovereign voice of reason. We return, in the words of Richard Ashley (1989: 309), to 'the problem of the inscription of man as a sovereign figure, a paradigmatic center of history's truth and meaning'.

Reaffirming history's truth and meaning plays an important role *even* in many critical engagements with IR seeking to question the parochialism of the 'modern' political present. Another good example of such an engagement is Hobson's (2012) recent book *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*. By providing a historical narrative of the

Eurocentric underpinnings of international theory, Hobson delivers a forceful critique of the imperialist and racist dimensions of international theory as a Western science, which often pretends to be 'universal'. One of the main problems with this critique, however, has to do with the 'non-Eurocentric lens' through which Hobson repeatedly claims to develop his analysis (Hobson, 2012: 18–20). In referring to this 'lens', Hobson's analysis relies on the idea of stepping outside the boundaries of the particular Eurocentric perspective and embracing, just like U&CD, a more all-encompassing and universal perspective. His critique is thus based on the assumption that a successful move beyond the limits of that which is being questioned — a 'modern', 'Western' and 'Eurocentric' understanding of the international — has already been made.

The problem of identifying a position outside the discourses that the historian is trying to master highlights, once again, the limits of historical sociology as a 'critical' approach to IR. Irrespective of the thoroughness of the particular historical-sociological investigation, the very basis of this approach cannot escape the 'modern' idea of establishing chains of events and tracing the origins of our being and becoming as 'modern' political subjects. Even Hobson's critique of international theory contains clear elements of this 'modern' idea. These elements are also to be found in the underlying emancipatory goal of freeing us from the violence of the Western gaze, which Hobson articulates at the very end of his book as a task to 'work out how a non-Eurocentric foundation for IR theory might be reconstructed' (Hobson, 2012: 344). Hobson thus seeks to counter the violence of Eurocentrism with the reconstruction of a non-Eurocentric foundation. In order to make this emancipatory move, we need borders in time that can clearly separate the 'past' from the 'present' and the 'future'. The problem, however, is that there can be no pre-given answers to *how* these borders should be inscribed, or how we should interrupt the continuous flow of time by declaring the end of one period and the birth of another. As both Fasolt and Davis have demonstrated, this is why 'history' and 'periodization' cannot escape practices of 'modern' sovereign authority. The very idea of interrupting time with the help of history and periodization rests on 'modern' notions of sovereign decision-making and the sovereign voice of reason. Such notions are integral even to Hobson's vision of creating a non-Eurocentric foundation. Thus, despite Hobson's impressive critique of international theory, its underlying assumptions and goals — to study history through a 'non-Eurocentric lens' and to reconstruct a 'non-Eurocentric foundation' — make it vulnerable to the claim that it ultimately rests on a 'modern' sovereign politics of time.

Disrupting the 'modern' political present

The problem of trying to move beyond the narrow Eurocentric conception of the international demonstrates the difficulty of stepping outside the underlying assumptions guiding the 'modern' idea of history and the sovereign voice of reason. An alternative form of critique, which U&CD would probably object to due to its lack of universalizing ambitions, is to *disrupt* the 'modern' political present. By highlighting what Homi Bhabha (1994: 342) refers to as the 'ambivalent temporality of modernity', it is possible not only to examine the continuous reproduction of the modern as 'modern', but also to examine political moments of rupture that disturb the universalizing pretensions of this sign. To do this, we cannot put our trust in cause and effect. Nor can we rely on the grand narratives

that tie singular events to the long-term processes and large-scale patterns that historical sociology is concerned with. In order to take seriously moments of rupture, attention should be given to the *singular* event, which lacks reference to an overarching structure. The singular event cannot be repeated or re-presented since it does not 'belong' to a system or structure of meaning (Derrida, 1982: 326). As a singularity, the event is impersonal and pre-individual, eluding the grasp of the sovereign voice of reason. The singular event has no name and lacks presence, meaning and identity; it cannot 'be awaited *as such*, or recognized in advance [emphasis in original]' (Derrida, 2006: 82). The singular event is not, therefore, an event that can be placed in a chain or narrative structure of events. It can only emerge as something absolutely singular, other and incomprehensible, which does not fit any particular system of knowledge, representation and anticipation (Derrida, 2003b: 90). As such, the singular event also highlights the limits of any attempt to grasp or 'comprehend' the event through, for example, long-term processes and large-scale patterns. It points, moreover, to our inability to 'anticipate' the future. The passing of time and the coming of the event cannot be calculated or predicted on the basis of what *has* happened in the past or what *is* happening in the present. It breaks with any and all explanatory/interpretive frameworks, renders structures ('ideational' as well as 'material') open and necessarily incomplete, and disrupts the 'present' in which the autonomous subject of history and reason is supposed to stand (Derrida, 2002: 96).

Before the movements of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon became '9/11', before they received their name and date, and before they were placed in a larger historical context and narrative structure, they were singular events, just like the movements of people running, buildings collapsing and debris falling to the ground. These singular events eluded frameworks of representation and highlighted something wholly other and incomprehensible, which *disrupted* the 'modern' present and the sovereign voice of reason trying to make sense of the precise content and meaning of what had happened. Crucially, however, this disruption did not automatically imply that the 'modern' present was successfully transcended. Rather, in accordance with the subsequent discourse on '9/11' as a starting point of the 'War on Terror', these singular events were folded into a violent politics of response, based on sovereign exceptionalism. Rather than taking us beyond the 'modern' present, these singular events were closed down through a 'modern' politics of time, which transformed the trauma of 9/11 into a history of '9/11'.¹²

While there can be no guarantees that singular events liberate us from the 'modern' political present, they do, nevertheless, open up to a radical critique of the contingent 'ground(ing)' on which anything related to the 'modern' rests. More precisely, they highlight the violence of interpretation that marks any parochial efforts masquerading as 'universal' to grasp '9/11' as a particular moment in history, separating a world 'before' from a world 'after'. Thus, in a similar way to the more critical strand of historical sociology, we may speak of a certain 'myth of 9/11' (cf. Teschke, 2003). In contrast to historical sociology, however, the busting of this myth from a poststructuralist perspective does not depend on providing an alternative account based on long-term processes and large-scale patterns. Nor does it depend on a theoretical/methodological 'middle-grounding' between history and structure. Rather, a poststructuralist critique implies breaking open, disrupting and ultimately deconstructing the relationship between history and

structure, with the aim of demonstrating that there can be no stable 'ground' to fall back on when interpreting the significance of events, only a highly contingent process, practice and politics of grounding. Examining this politics of grounding, rather than trying to articulate an alternative 'ground', is what separates poststructuralism from historical sociology when addressing the question of the event. Due to this difference, these two approaches are also destined to disagree on how to study and analyse the production of various 'myths'. While proponents of the latter are likely to accuse the former of being too deconstructive and not sufficiently reconstructive, those in favour of the former will point to how the latter approach runs the risk of reifying what it seeks to problematize: the 'modern' political present and the sovereign voice of history and reason.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that while approaches to historical sociology have done much important work in problematizing prevailing assumptions about the ahistorical meaning of anarchy and the eternal laws of interstate politics, these approaches have failed to reflect critically on the notion of a common 'ground' on which 'history' and 'sociology' are supposed to coexist. Like so many other attempts to articulate a more 'critical' alternative to mainstream IR theory, the historical sociology literature seems to have fallen into the trap of assuming that more 'history' will make theory more 'critical'. This assumption is reflected especially well in Cox's distinction between 'critical theory' and 'problem-solving theory': 'Critical theory is theory of history in the sense of being concerned not just with the past but with a continuing process of historical change. Problem-solving theory is nonhistorical or ahistorical, since it, in effect, posits a continuing present' (Cox, 1986: 209).

Yet, for all its promises and critical potential, 'history' does not provide an easy escape from or automatic solution to the limits of structure. The study of history, just like the study of structure, requires the notion of a prior ground on which meaningful knowledge can be built. Hence, the study of history, as well as of structure, cannot be separated from certain assumptions about the nature of this ground, what it consists of and who has the legitimate authority to stand on it and claim its presence and meaning. Greater historical sophistication does not bring us out of the *politics* of relying on such a ground; rather, it can be said to conceal this politics in a more sophisticated way. This is why this article sought to engage critically with attempts to develop a more nuanced understanding of the historical dimension of IR and its main categories: the state and the international. What this article turned against, more precisely, has to do with the ways in which such attempts claim to offer a solution to the history–structure puzzle *without* problematizing the notion of a separate 'ground' on which this solution is supposed to be based.

Rather than using it as a secure 'ground', historical sociology, especially in its first two waves, should be encountered for what it is: a disciplinary practice of constituting a 'ground' against the backdrop of its simultaneous absence. Understood as such, historical sociology inevitably runs the risk of reaffirming rather than challenging the limits of a 'modern' political present and the 'modern' state/states-system. In order to avoid such reification, it is important to demonstrate greater awareness of the limits of historical sociology as a particular mode of knowledge for studying and trying to make sense of the

world. It is especially important to investigate the inextricable links between this mode of knowledge and the sovereign voice of reason underpinning the so-called 'modern' world of 'modern' secular subjectivity, 'modern' sovereign states and a 'modern' international system of states. When further exploring these links, we might encounter even more severe limits in attempts to explain the 'present' in relation to the 'past' and the 'future', limits that increase the risk of reification and make it even harder to challenge the 'modern' political present. If so, it is important to remember that there are other ways of engaging critically with time and events. One such way, which was elaborated on in this article, is to study the disruption of the 'modern' political present.

In order to study the disruption of the 'modern' political present, it is necessary to think of time, temporality and especially the event beyond narrative structures and causal chains of events. Crucially, in order to move beyond the latter, the event cannot be placed under the control of an autonomous subject, who is assumed to master the event by filling it with a certain content and meaning. The event must be grasped in its singularity, as something that emerges and exists only insofar as it does *not* rely on the interpretation and explanation of a pre-given autonomous subject. The event, in its non-historical existence, is singular, impersonal and pre-individual. To think of events along these lines opens up a different perspective on time and politics. It opens up not only a strong critique of the narrative structures that subordinate the mysteries of time to specific notions of historical change, but also disrupts previous notions of what is possible and impossible. It opens up to the radically other, which does not fit previous models of interpretation and explanation. It highlights ruptures in time that cannot be categorized, named or placed within a narrative structure, but only emerge as something wholly other, which is yet to receive a name and be responded to by a narrating and historicizing subject. What the implications of such ruptures are can never be known in advance. No structures or histories can help us here, and especially not a sovereign voice claiming to stand on a separate 'ground' somewhere in-between these histories and structures. The implications of the singular event can only be linked to a future that is radically open, radically unknown and always potentially disruptive of what and where we think we are now, in the 'modern' political present.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank John M. Hobson, Petter Narby, Nick Vaughan-Williams, two anonymous reviewers and the Editors of *EJIR* for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Funding

Research for this article was made possible by the generous support of the Swedish Research Council (VR).

Notes

1. See, especially, Derrida (2005a). A deconstructive analysis of the history–structure dichotomy can, in many respects, be said to mirror a deconstructive analysis of the agency–structure debate. For an example of the latter, see Doty (1997).
2. For an example of using the state as the primary object of investigation in historical sociology and IR, see Hobson (2000).

3. For more explicit engagements in historical sociology with the categories of the 'international' and the 'states-system', see Rosenberg (2006) and Buzan and Little (2000).
4. See also Linklater (1998).
5. This way of thinking about the constitutive dimension of a temporal 'other' is also a familiar theme in critical approaches to anthropology. See, especially, the groundbreaking work of Fabian (1983).
6. For postcolonial critiques of such attempts, see, especially, Chakrabarty (2008) and Guha (2002).
7. For an analysis of such forms of practice, which also draws on Fasolt's work, see Hindess (2007).
8. See Derrida (1973, 1989, 2003a).
9. On the relationship between history, poetry and imaginations, see, especially, White (1975: 6–7). For a critical discussion of 'mainstream international history', which draws on White, among others, see Finney (2001).
10. See, for example, Hobson (2011), Matin (2011), Rosenberg (2013) and Shilliam (2009).
11. For insightful discussions of this poststructuralist critique of the 'subject', especially as it relates to the disciplinary context of IR, see Ashley (1989) and Edkins (1999).
12. I analyse this transformation in greater detail in Lundborg (2012).

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