

International Relations' founding conceptual structure: communicating disciplinary status, challenging outbound communication

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Given the main theme proposed for the 2014 annual conference of the History of Concepts Group, an academic initiative of “interdisciplinary exchange on the problems and practice in the history of concepts”, one undoubtedly important issue to be investigated is the challenges to the interdisciplinary communication that may be risen by the very conceptual structures of disciplinary specialization. These languages are not simply about scientific efficiency. They involve the struggle for the disciplinary status among other academic units of specialization, and ultimately, for the very common sense of daily life.

The discipline of International Relations seems a particularly interesting case to be investigated. Its Anglo-American core had been originally organized as an interdisciplinary effort. Through the years, though, it has developed its own special language – something common to any discipline – to organize the field and ensure communication between its many thematic areas of interest, while promoting itself as a coherent initiative to the external public, academic and political. In that sense, the main founding concept of the field and still the main theoretical reference today is the concept of “realism”, the understanding of international relations as the arena of power politics. Be it as the standpoint for specialized analysis, or the counterpoint against which to argue, realism remains the main feature of IR specialized language and of its identity as an autonomous discipline.

The goal of this paper is to investigate the conceptual history of “realism” in IR. It will do so by tracking the articulation and diffusion of that concept by two authors where are widely perceived as fathers of the discipline. Through these authors and onwards, it became clear how “realism” has both qualified the discipline of IR as its most coherent discourse and at the same time isolated it from contributing to outer academic debates. This situation must be included in the self-criticisms made by contemporary disciplinary historians of IR in reflecting about the failure state of IR. The little interdisciplinary and political relevance of the field, felt in the communication flow running an uncomfortable deficit to the field has to be linked with this particular rhetorical and shallow conceptual structure promoted in IR theory. Conceptual history can help to identify the temporal-spatial parochiality of that structure and to find ways to reconstruct IR language in terms of the novelty of the necessities and their own social-conceptual contexts.

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