5 Social evolution and knowing world politics

In the interest of furthering our understanding of world politics, this book has presented an ambitious assemblage of theories. However, it has not presented a theory of world or international politics – at least not in the conventional senses in which 'IR theory' is understood in the discipline of International Relations. It has rather argued that social evolutionary theory provides an extremely powerful tool for understanding world politics in a wider societal and long-term historical context. In fact, we have argued that social evolutionary theorizing only makes sense if set in the context of comprehensive theories of society that contain within them a basic trajectory of social evolutionary analysis. In our case, that primarily meant the theories of Foucault, Habermas and Luhmann. It also means that social evolutionary analysis can be applied to any part of the social world (say rock music, religious belief systems, scientific theories, forms of organizing the economy, social etiquette and so on), and not merely to world politics. However, given the state in which we found theorizing in IR, we have to conclude that much work remains to be done. There is a glaring lack of studies of deep historical change within the discipline, particularly when it comes to studies of deep historical change that are actually informed by comprehensive social theories (and thus draw on the body of systematic work associated with the theory in question, rather than on the work of any particular fashionable thinker). Notable philosophical and anthropological knowledge bases that are readily available have, as of now, simply not been put to use.

We have addressed this lack of deep history and social theory in most approaches to evolutionary thinking in IR in the preceding chapters and have, more importantly, presented our own take on it, combining (continental European) social theory with an empirical reflection on the evolution of axial ages. By way of summarizing our main line of argument we now turn the spotlight on the three principal areas in which our thinking has unfolded.

Firstly, as far as deep history is concerned, we have delved into Karl Jaspers' philosophical and Jan Assmann's empirical-archaeological notion of the Axial Age and transformed it into a reading of the coevolution of social evolutionary theories and social structure. Within that conjoined context we have identified four stages that could be read from an evolutionary standpoint in terms of their hierarchical complexity. The first of these comprises a pre-Axial age (of classical segmentary, presedentary societies) and first Axial Age (of the first city-states and script-based cultures) that, very much in contrast to the common view of them as unrelated to modern civilization, appeared as large-scale social laboratories in which a basic idea of humanity and social contracts between humans prospered. Taking our cue from the work of Christopher Boehm, we identified the notion of cultural learning and the institutionalization of 're-verse dominance hierarchy' as the defining and enduring feature of myths (i.e. proto-theories of evolution) and social structures built on egalitarianism and freedom – evolutionary groundwork for millennia to come.

The Second Axial Age ('*the* Axial Age' for Jaspers and Assmann) then set in with the selection and restabilization of hierarchical societies, stratified within and taking the form of (imperial) centres and peripheries in inter-polity relations. On the level of myths and proto-social theory, the memory of egalitarianism and fundamental freedom allowed people to conceive of counter-present change, as evident in core texts such as the *Odyssey* and Exodus and also prevalent in the Eastern tradition from Zoroastrian thought to Buddhism. Over time, and notably in early Christianity, counter-present theorizing challenged hierarchical societies by providing an alternative master image, one based on a memory of universalism reaching back far into the (pre-script) past. These counter-present and largely tran-

scendent notions of equality, visible inter alia in Axial Age spiritual and textual traditions as well as in early Christianity, then turned immanent in what we have termed the Third Axial Age. In the Papal Revolutions of the eleventh century – as well as in parallel processes such as in early Islamic polities – change was theorized as an inner-worldly possibility that needed to be rationally and legally organized. This, then, was the age of proto-functional differentiation in the Western Christian realm, but also in the Califates. In contemporary terminology it witnessed the codification of norms and ideas that revolved around a principle of human-made law and based the social contract on legal relations of (at least theoretical) equality between subjects or souls. This kick-off period of functional differentiation then evolved into the Fourth Axial Age of global constitutionalism, which is planetary in scale. In line with world society theories we can, at this stage, only speculate as to the extent to which the, at first sporadic and then permanent, interpenetration and entanglement of people and cultures across the entire globe, with all the forms of inequality, violence and hierarchy that involved, shaped this process. There is a heightened possibility of observing differences in equality. One example concerns ideas about 'equality' and 'freedom' in what we referred to as the Fourth Axial Age of global constitutionalism in section 2. These range from the Nakaz written in Russia by Catherine the Great in 1767 to the French Revolution. The whole range stands in contrast to a widespread perception that freedom and universalism travels from West to East, for by the time of the French revolution the Nakaz was well known in France too. More broadly, there existed global patterns of observation and inspiration that shaped the Atlantic revolutions from the USA to France and Haiti (and back). These might have been evolutionary preconditions for unleashing the evolutionary selection of functional differentiation visible in the increasing autonomization of various social spheres of what is today termed global modernity. Self-legislation in terms of positive law, constitutionalism and an increasingly complex and self-referential legal sphere and the self-representation visible in democratic, semi-democratic and authoritarian forms of political rule based on ideas of self-determination, progress and citizenship are the defining feature of this evolutionary stage.

Secondly, social structure and social theory coevolve and, as a result, it probably comes as no surprise that as part of an autonomization of science in the context of functional differentiation explicitly evolutionary theories emerged, first in the natural sciences but then also, as we have shown, in the social sciences. Central to our argument is, however, that the two should be clearly separated. Theories of natural evolution do not explain social evolution. Social evolution involves, but is not driven by, cognitive evolution. To substantiate this argument, we have identified and elaborated on a complementarity in social evolutionary thinking in the social theories of Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann – also hoping to end the persistent misperception, not least in IR, that these social theories fundamentally differ. Of course, there are differences between these writers, just as there are differences in the evolution of each of these writers' individual thoughts over time. The shared paradigm between them that we have identified, however, rests on two pillars central to modern social evolutionary thinking and unique to social, as opposed to both natural and cognitive, evolution. On the one hand, communication (discourse, etc.) is identified, from a constructivist point of view, as what evolves in social evolution in the first place; on the other hand, its complexity is expressed in the triad of variation, selection and restabilization, the fundamental sequence of all forms of evolution including social evolution. Moreover, we then identified three structural effects of social evolution which we defined as autonomization (in particular of social spheres), hierarchical complexity (between and within social spheres) and coevolution (between social spheres).

Thirdly, we regard this identification of how evolution shapes social structures and social theories not as a dry, detached theoretical affair but as a highly relevant means of moving IR theorizing onto new territory. We have no wish to repeat what we have already argued in relation to the emergence of the modern system of world politics, peacebuilding and diplomacy. The key point is simply that the story told above could be told by looking at different elements of the system of world politics, as we did in section 4 or, instead, by identifying core features of evolutionary theory and how they play out in world politics. Doing the latter

- shows how autonomization figures in the internal differenti- ation of world politics, with the selection and restabilization of a distinct international (sub)system of world politics based on the communicative marker of balance of power. But it also includes the internal differentiation of this system in which, for example, an ideal of non-violence functions as a trigger for the internal autonomization of peacebuilding as a distinct sphere of action and the (functional) necessity of establishing perma- nent communicative structures leads to the selection of modern diplomacy as an antecedent to a fully-fledged system of world politics.
- shapes hierarchical complexity in relation to the three cases dis- cussed in section 4, to wit, the struggle over hegemonic forms of organizing political authority in which nation-states – some of them possessing great power/imperial capacities – took prece- dence. Other variations, however, set in too, in particular with the establishment of international organizations as arenas of authority. This becomes visible when we look at the hierarchical complexity involved in the evolution of the notions of liberal peace prevalent since the nineteenth century and the fluctuation between old and new diplomacy.
- and finally reveals how coevolution, in particular with (interna- tional) law, was central to all three empirical illustrations, from 'classical' international law, to humanitarian law, human rights law and diplomatic protocol as well as, let us not forget, the co- evolution between these changes in the political world, on the one hand, and their academic and scientific observation, on the other. Without an autonomization of a system of world politics there would be no IR and no IR theory. Peace and Conflict Studies developed in relation to ongoing political endeavours to engage with political structures linked to an ideal of non-violence. And, although this is a little speculative, the social scientific study of diplomacy is driven by an increasing complexity regarding who exactly is involved in diplomacy, from states, international orga- nizations, NGOs to individuals. However, this is not to suggest a relationship that goes in one direction only, in the sense that the evolution of world politics shapes the evolution of the (social)

sciences. Rather, both conservative and critical approaches to the very setup of world politics – say from the realist angle on the one hand to the post-colonial on the other (and at times even from that of an odd geopolitical mélange of the two) – wander from classrooms into official jargon, foreign ministries, think tanks, military academies and 'popular' beliefs about what world politics is all about. Notions of negative and positive peace have become standardized and translated into political concepts, while functional theories of interdependence arguably render the establishment of international organizations plausible as well as a greater say for substate actors in world politics – and once they are around, it is a short step to theorizing their actorhood as an invitation to enrich prevailing notions of diplomacy.

What follows from this seems to be quite simple. In order to understand world politics, three things need to be done together: to look into deep history; to muster the theory required to do so; and to refrain from reinventing the wheel by drawing instead on extant studies from other disciplines. We have also proposed a way in which this can be done by applying social evolutionary theory. Of course, we ultimately leave it to readers to judge how inspiring they find this approach in general, and as a tool for their own research in particular. However, what should also be noted is that deeply embedded in the current project lies a programmatic statement on a scientific undertaking as well as on disciplinary politics. We argue that understanding world politics ultimately will not thrive by the academic discipline of International Relations integrating theories, approaches and thinkers into its own orbit and the fields of its self-referential theoretical 'campfires'. Such pastimes are very selective and tend to lead nowhere. What is needed is, rather, a broader understanding of how world politics requires bringing the knowledge base of International Relations *together* with those of other fields and disciplines. A transdisciplinarity of this kind would be intellectually and analytically rewarding, even though it would be an extremely demanding and difficult exercise. Compared to such a Herculean task, what we have presented in this book is simply a charting of the waters. Still, we are convinced that pursuing such

a transdisciplinary approach, however imperfectly, has only been possible because, as individual authors working in IR, sociology, anthropology, (international) law, area studies and philosophy (and the various interstices between these disciplines and others, most notably history), we have been wandering off the most well-trodden paths of intradisciplinary debates peculiar to IR for quite some time already, only to then bring together the results of these individual and quite diverse wanderings in what has been a long and stimulating cowriting and discussion process. We should emphasize that this process has been going on for a decade and that, although never planned in this way, it has turned out to be very much a 'framework process' where the discussions condensed in the present book both informed and benefitted from work that its individual authors had been doing over these years, and how our own thinking on evolution evolved in that process. It is in this sense that we understand this book to be not only a proposal for the use of social evolutionary theory for understanding world politics, but also as an argument for the benefits of in-depth, if demanding, cross-disciplinary engagement. We regard it as an appreciation of this kind of coevolving cooperation.