1 Introduction: 'Deep history' for understanding world politics

The present book proposes a framework for understanding long-term change in world politics in terms of social evolution. 'Change' deliberately includes the very emergence of world politics as a recognizable realm in its own right within the social world and its constant transformation thereafter. In order to provide such a framework, this book offers a condensed, yet quite far-reaching, reading of what it means to understand change in the social, and therefore also the political, world in terms of evolution, as well as several empirical applications from the realm of world politics. It is written on the premise that understanding social evolutionary processes is central to understanding historical change. Yet, there is a difference between the historical and sociological approaches to social evolution. While we maintain that the approaches do not necessarily stand in mutually exclusive opposition to each other, evolutionary accounts are *not* compatible with some understandings of history, particularly those, based on a philosophy of history, that assign meaning to history itself (and therefore come with, for example, underlying eschatological or teleological motives).

Understanding long-term change in world politics in terms of social evolution is, in one respect, a rather simple exercise: it allows historical change to be reconstructed in accordance with the sequence that underlies *all* kinds of evolution (i.e., not only social but also natural evolution): variation, selection and restabilization. In another respect, though, it makes this reconstruction extremely complex. It obliges one to see change in a broad societal context, accounting for various timescales, taking the contingency of change

and of social structures fully into account and emphasizing the non-synchronized evolution of linked, but at the same time diverse, social systems. It requires one, in other words, to ensure that due attention is paid to both the indeterminacy inherent in evolution and its ontological openness. In such a perspective, it makes little sense to posit that something like an 'international system' exists, only to then ask how that system evolves independently. Rather, although specific systems, fields, milieus and other realms within the social world have to be analysed according to their individual characteristics, which can only be asserted and observed on the basis of some specific delimitation from the rest of the social world, 'delimitation' here does not mean outright separation. It points instead to the fact that there is an ongoing and historically very specific process that produces distinctiveness through a continuous delineation of differences. It is in this broad sense that we use the notion of 'world politics', thus underlining the fact that politics-between-polities is a social realm that has the directly or indirectly accessible social world of each era as its spatial 'horizon', and its imaginaries of pasts, presents and futures as its temporal horizons. As a result, we always need to account for how – in historically changing ways – world politics changes while being embedded in a wider social environment that constitutes the spatial and temporal boundary condition for its evolution; and this embedding, in turn, requires that the way in which cross-polity politics came to appear as a distinct realm within that environment (with, for example, specific underlying notions of power and specific forms of organizing political authority) should be accounted for. While every analysis necessarily contains a reduction of the world's complexity, we posit that it might very possibly be an excessive decomplexification of the different evolutionary trajectories of different systems operating on different timescales and at different speeds. This led, at least in part, to the temporal 'presentism' and conceptual 'Eurocentrism' in the academic field of International Relations (IR), a decomplexification that, not least, may have expressed itself in the wholesale state of 'being surprised' by things like the end of the Cold War or the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine War – thus not taking sufficient account of

both the historicity of world politics (its temporal dimension) and its already always global conceptual anchoring.

While we will address this point in more detail later, it is important to highlight here that this present study is certainly not the first to try and use evolutionary theory in the analysis of world politics broadly understood. However, it is deliberately set apart from most other such attempts, which, more often than not, are built on a category mistake: it is simply and plainly wrong to take theories of natural evolution and apply them directly to the analysis of change in the social world. The fundamental form of evolution needs to be read and 'filtered' through theories of society/sociological theories if it is to be able to account both for the specific conditions of social evolution (for example, that the evolving units in this case are not genes but, as we highlight below, communications) and for some of the features specific to evolution in the social world, in particular the possibilities of evolutionary learning (and unlearning). All this happens in the world beyond genes, which is a world in which natural evolution takes not place.[1] We thus define society as being constituted by and through communications (and whatever is linked to them, discourse, etc.). Communication as sense-making signals (including non-verbal communication) are what distinguishes human society from other realms of evolution (nature, other species, etc). Natural evolution or events in the non-social world (e.g. in animal societies) in that sense coevolve with social evolution, e.g. when a new virus pops up (and people deal with a pandemic), dogs and cats make themselves at home (and are turned into pets), ice sheets melt (forcing people to move from coastal regions), or asteroids are passing

---

1   As we will discuss further below, the situation with cognitive evolution (i.e., the evolution of individual psychological meaning-processing systems – viz. consciousness – as prominently applied by Adler (2019) to the world of IR) is a bit more complex. In another respect, although we are aware of discussions about possible cultural evolution in a cosmic context (i.e., one not limited to planet Earth), we only deal with theories of social evolution in what thus far empirically has remained a world society limited to this planet (cf. Dick and Lupisella 2009; Deudney 2020).

by Earth (prompting doomsday scenarios and interception experiments), but they are not themselves part of a communication-based social world and its distinct realms, such as world politics.

Our book can draw from a distinct intellectual tradition here. In varying forms – and most often refraining from use of the term 'evolution' though engaging in evolution-related thinking nonetheless – such a social evolutionary understanding of change is present in much of the 'classical' tradition of sociology broadly conceived, from Spencer via Marx to Durkheim and Weber. Even more than that, as we show in detail below, it has figured prominently in reflections on the human social condition since time immemorial and shaped intellectual preoccupations with the course of history and the possibilities and conditions of change since at least the major 'philosophical' revolution of the Second Axial Age. For the coiner of the phrase, Karl Jaspers (1949), that was actually the First Axial Age, a concept further developed from a social science perspective by Assmann (2018). However, as we will come back to below, when Jaspers was writing in the 1940s, much less was known about social life in the fourth and third millennia BCE than we know now. We shall therefore have to revise Jaspers slightly by postulating that a First Axial Age took place at that time.

Going back to modernity and what sociological classics have argued, we built our argument in particular on the observation that social evolution is also a noticeable component (now through explicit references) in some of the major comprehensive social theories of the twentieth century, namely Foucault's, Habermas's and Luhmann's readings of society – three theoretical perspectives that we draw on in particular in this book when setting out our sociological understanding of social evolution. We use these theories in a decidedly eclectic fashion in order to devise an analytical 'core' for analysing change in world politics in social evolutionary terms. By doing so, we also bring a cross-disciplinary perspective to the field of IR, the discipline that has traditionally claimed prime responsibility for analysing world politics. In addition, we bring to that discipline literatures, as well as readings of some literatures, that it has thus far chosen to ignore almost totally, even while actively engaging with some of the authors in question (in particular, Habermas and

Foucault, both of whom are widely, and we would argue wrongly, not understood to be evolution-theory scholars) or with different concepts of evolution. In fact, we find this ignorance to be so remarkable in what it says about the knowledge structure of IR as a discipline that we explicitly address it in the concluding chapter.

1.1   Long-term change in IR

Needless to say, even before it comes to social evolution, there is no denying that an important part of IR's remit is to account for long-term change and that this underpins the recent surge in historically oriented studies of world politics, or international systems more generally, during the nineteenth century, for instance, early modernity or even before the modern era.[2] This has helped to challenge the often sterile character of major IR theories presented in a specific post–World War II American tradition that aims to render similar the social and the natural worlds on the basis of quasi-objective laws. This focus on change pertains to all levels of the political, from relations between the rulers and the ruled (authority), via practices such as those pertaining to conflict, to institutions such as law and diplomacy (which are empirical applications that we tackle in the final quarter of the book). With the conspicuous exception of the neorealists, who see IR as a separate and transhistorical realm cut off from the social, most IR scholars would perceive ongoing long-term change as a characteristic of international systems. Given continuing large-scale changes in the natural preconditions for social and political life (e.g. the climate crisis) as well as in the structural

---

2   This recent 'surge' in historically oriented studies of world politics, very often (but not always) under the rubric of historical political sociology, arguably appears as a surge mainly because, for many years, an increasingly US-focused discipline took part in the widespread dehistoricization entailed by a 'mainstream' discursive field structured by the two 'neo'-poles (i.e., neorealism and neo-institutionalism) that displaced the more historically sensitive strands in the early (e.g. 'classical' realist) or non-U.S. (e.g. 'English School', continental) traditions of IR.

16

principles on which social and political life rests (e.g. the technological change underpinning contemporary globalization), analyses of long-term change are particularly apposite today.

While specific IR literatures exist that attempt to answer such questions, perhaps most pertinently theories of hegemonic change (e.g. Gilpin 1981; Thompson 2001) and comparative systems studies (e.g. Phillips and Sharman 2015), IR has been at one with other social sciences in turning to evolutionary theory for support in analysing long-term change. In its most basic – and also most problematic – form, this has involved scholars attempting to apply the principles of natural evolution directly to the social realm in a simple and effortless way (Johnson 2015; Thayer 2009). Given that there are no social equivalents to the two basic mechanisms on which natural evolution rests – natural selection that sees species adapt to specific biotopic niches, and sexual selection that sees evolutionary patterns grow out of patterns based on the choice of mating partners – such attempts are mistaken and bound to fail. Independently of how natural and how sexy world politics might appear to some observers, these are not the factors that shape this social system's evolution.

IR also sports a small but lively literature on cognitive evolution (e.g. Adler 2019; McDermott and Hatemi 2018). However, by focusing on cognition, which is by definition individual rather than social in nature, this literature deals with social change only indirectly, via the individual level (but see Mercer 2017). Cognitive evolutionary approaches are, therefore, at one with natural evolutionary approaches in trying to explain *social* change in terms of *non-social* factors. While this is methodologically dubious with respect to the practical analysis of specific problems where both cognitive and social learning play a role, analyses of social and cognitive evolution might usefully complement one other (see below, 3.2).

In this book we will present an alternative to these approaches. Building on a broad but somewhat subterranean tradition of social evolution in (mostly) continental European social theory, we will forge a social evolutionary approach to the study of IR, one that is self-reflexive in the sense that it includes the evolution of its own subject matter in its account. Our basic move is to take neither agents nor structures as the central unit of evolution, but to focus

on relations between agents, relations forged and shaped by communication signals (Emirbayer 1997). In this, we have been preceded by such luminaries as Foucault, Habermas and Luhmann, all of whose analyses flowed from a focus on relations – initially brought to the social sciences by Simmel – or, as we will show in greater detail below, units of communication and discourses in which such relations are embedded. In addition to the general methodological soundness of starting analyses of the social from 'social stuff' rather than biology, psychology or methodological individualism in the social sciences, such an approach has two further distinct advantages. Firstly, it allows for a direct focus on learning and unlearning, again at all levels of social life. What is in question here is not some unidirectional process that produces ever better goal-oriented action, but change, often radical change, affecting the practices and institutions of social life. This includes the distinct possibility of unlearning as well as learning: evolution is not inherently 'progressive' in accordance with some kind of normative criterion available from outside evolution (as would be the case if, for example, history was seen to move inevitably towards salvation). Social evolution can be judged as progressive (or regressive, for that matter) against normative criteria of what constitutes progress over a certain period of time – but then those normative criteria themselves need to be analysed in terms of their social evolution as temporary boundary conditions, conditioning the likelihoods of certain selections being made.

Secondly, the approach maintains a certain openness. We do not take for granted that certain agents (say states), structures (say anarchy) or even levels of analysis (say the international system) should be privileged a priori, but remain sensitive to how these factors change across time and space.

We see social evolution as a process that plays out in three phases, reflecting the formal sequencing of *all* evolution, social, natural or cognitive. At some point, a certain practice, institution or system will be characterized by fairly stable characteristics. Then (1) variation between these, born of resistance to the dominant way of doing things (a 'no' in the communication theory perspective we draw from) will be in evidence. This variation triggered by negations may grow, until (2) a selection of one variant occurs and something changes. There

will then be (3) a restabilization of the practice, institution or entire system around the chosen variant, until change again sets in.

It will make a difference which of these levels the process plays out on. Relations between coexisting evolutionary sequences of variation, selection and restabilization are also important if we want to analyse the trajectory of any one sequence. Finally, such processes will have different inherent temporalities and involve different constellations of variants; these may vary in number and depth of difference. An analysis of all these three factors taken together has the potential to account for long-term change both on the micro and macro levels and across phenomena.

1.2   Plan of the book

In this book we deliberately take the longer route to introducing the evolution of social evolution and theories of social evolution. We purposely avoid any shortcuts here in order to emphasize that social evolution is not something that can be reduced to some kind of specific modern or contemporary theory. The structural evolution of society/societies and the resultant emergence of (proto-)theories of social evolution are a pervasive feature of the history of humankind, and need to be deliberately reflected on in this context. Taking this longer way around is important for two reasons: firstly, it demonstrates how social evolution takes a separate path from natural evolution early on (in terms of human civilization); secondly, it shows that social evolution is a central motive within, and permeating much of, philosophical, theological, and later social scientific thought well before, and later alongside and after, the discovery of the figure of evolution. In such a broad perspective and long-term historical view, the evolution of evolutionary theory – from implicit accounts of social evolution theories *avant la lettre* to their modern self-reflexive equivalents – can roughly be divided into five phases in each of which quite a lot is happening, so to speak, in the evolution of evolutionary theory: the age of egalitarian (segmentary) societies (ca. 100,000-10,000 BCE); the First Axial Age, that of the first city-states (ca. 3500 BCE); the Second Axial Age, that of stratified/imperial class societies (ca.

800–200 BCE); the Third Axial Age, that of functional differentiation and the turn to immanence (ca. 1000–present); and the Fourth Axial Age (ca. 1750–present), which we call the planetary age of global constitutionalism.

Following this deliberately extended introduction to the evolution of evolutionary theory, we focus more concretely on the role that social evolutionary thinking plays in modern social theory. The starting point here is to highlight the fact that social evolutionary thinking is not in any way a novelty. On the contrary, it has not only been deeply engrained in thinking about the social world since antiquity (as addressed in the previous section), but has been articulated as explicit evolutionary theory since the inception of sociology as a discipline during the nineteenth century. In fact, it is as pervasive in many 'classical' theories of society as in many of the 'big' theories of the late twentieth century. However, no single theory of social evolution exists. What does exist is a core of perspectives on social evolution in the works of thinkers as different as, for example, Foucault and Luhmann. We do not identify this core as a basis of our further analyses by distilling an imagined common ground. Rather, our approach is a deliberately eclectic one – that is to say that we assemble a core of social evolutionary thought from pieces taken from the various theories in the full conviction that, when it comes to social theorizing on the basis of many social theories, eclecticism is the most productive way to go about it (so long, that is, as the eclecticism is based on a profound command of the theories in question, rather than on superficial and partial readings only). On this basis, we will proceed to briefly explicate the categorical difference between different forms of evolution, particularly between social and cognitive evolution, and the associated differences regarding the possibilities of cognitive and normative learning and unlearning. Processes of social learning and unlearning provide a key to understanding the long-term historical evolution of complex societies, or parts thereof. While they will always be linked to cognitive learning processes, they cannot be reduced to them, nor can they be deduced from them. This insight also leads us to a research programme of a general ontological openness when it comes to analysing social evolution. To paraphrase Luhmann, it is evolution

that evolves: behind and beyond that, nothing is fixed. The three evolutionary 'core' concepts that lead us into, and will provide us with some guidance for, our empirical applications are then identified as autonomization, hierarchical complexity and coevolution. Before we turn to those applications, however, we will visit some of the extant applications of evolutionary thought in the discipline of International Relations. While we argue that Adler's concept of cognitive evolution in particular may ultimately be conjoined with a social evolution approach when it comes to specific analytical questions, the categorical distinction between social and cognitive evolution remains in place here. There exists quite a lot of, often implicit, evolutionary thought in IR, but many of the more explicit attempts to apply evolutionary theory have not been satisfactory.

We will then present applications of a social evolutionary perspective to the study of world politics/IR broadly understood. Their purpose is not to provide fully-fledged case studies, but rather to demonstrate, in a condensed form, what the analysis of long-term change looks like when seen from the perspective of social evolutionary theory. In fact, making a compact case for the usefulness of such a perspective is the aim of this entire book – longer elaborations of these applications are to be found in (extant or forthcoming) publications by its individual authors.[3]

The first application deals with the evolution of a system of world politics understood in terms of different forms of organizing political authority; the second with reading (violent) conflicts and peace-building as evolving contexts; the third with the evolution of diplomacy as a practice and institution. While all these applications can easily be identified as 'core' subjects in the study of world politics both within IR and from various interdisciplinary angles (IR Theory, IR/Peace and Conflict Studies, Diplomatic Theory/History), it is the unique charm of a social evolutionary take on them that it, in fact,

---

3   Although it is necessary to point out that, given the by now almost decade-long history of conversations on the present book, it is not entirely fair to describe it as a condensed amalgamation of previously existing individual contributions; contrariwise, in fact, many of those individual studies benefitted from the conversations in question.

requires no ontological fixation. By being empirically and theoretically open to accommodating the evolution of, most notably, structures, processes and practices, the social evolutionary perspective is broad and inclusive. In this context, it can also be read as an invitation to reflect on how different literatures on, for example, international structures and international practices relate to one another.

A short conclusion summarizes the potential benefit of a social evolutionary perspective for the understanding of world politics in terms of long-term historical change and addresses the challenges that our perspective poses for disciplinary studies on world politics. It is time to rectify what we hold to be a rather parochial reception of social and evolutionary theories on the part of IR, a reception that would be well worth exploring as a process of social evolution in its own right.