

Use of Conceptual History in the Study of International Relations

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The paper scrutinizes the possibilities of using conceptual history in the study of International Relations (IR). Although there are many notable exceptions, in general, the field of IR is characterized by a historical use of concepts and is largely bereft of any serious attempt at studying the origin, multiple meanings and contextual changes of its central concepts. The ambiguities brought about by translations and conceptual re-descriptions are usually not emphasised. The fulcrum of my study is the acknowledgement of conceptual change and its usefulness for studying IR. I argue that the so-called linguistic turn that has affected many social sciences deeply, has not reached IR in its full extent and that it would be incumbent on us to do more thorough conceptual/linguistic research in IR. Against this backdrop, the paper outlines some methodological concerns for an interdisciplinary research programme more suitable for the study of heterogeneous practices and contesting formulations, as well as alterations and transformations within the concepts. Firstly, the paper addresses the question why there has not been this kind of research focus in IR. An argument is made that even the more historically oriented approaches to IR (like the so-called English school of International Relations) are not linguistically sensitive enough. Secondly, the approach known as conceptual history is presented and its suitability for the study of International Relations is scrutinized. Thirdly, the relatively recent approach known as Comparative Political Theory (CPT) is also presented, and its usefulness considered from the perspective of concepts and language. The paper concludes by listing the pros and cons of carrying out research of this nature. As a result, the paper proposes a methodology that would be more linguistically sensitive than most studies in IR, more comparatively and widely oriented than most conceptual histories, and more strictly focused on concepts than comparative political theory.

Keywords: Concepts, Language, International Relations, Conceptual history, Comparative political theory