

Robert Frank and the History of International Relations. Reappraisal and manifesto

Robert Frank e a História das Relações Internacionais. Balanço e manifesto

Robert Frank y la Historia de las Relaciones Internacionales. Inventario y manifiesto

Robert Frank et l'histoire des relations internationales. Bilan et manifeste

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FRANK, Robert (org.). *Pour l'histoire des relations internationales*. Paris: PUF, 2012. 776 p.

When Pierre Renouvin and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle published *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales* (Paris, A. Colin), in 1964, the French school of History of International Relations (HIR) was far from taking its first steps. In fact, the *Introduction* brought a review of a historical discipline undergoing renovation, as did issues 41 and 42 of the Franco-Swiss journal *Relations Internationales* in 1985, under the direction of René Girault.

Seriously injured during the First World War, Renouvin had been searching since then for more relevant and more complex explanations for the tragedy he had seen and experienced. The trauma — the young historian lost one of his arms during combat — as well as the fairly vague and too broad answers he was given by Diplomatic History (after all, could it all be simply explained by the existence of great alliances?) were not able to eliminate his great feeling of perplexity after one of the most tenebrous episodes experienced in Europe. Mainly concerned with the interests of States and focused on the actions and practices of diplomats themselves, the discipline addressing international relations since the end of the 19th century — still thoroughly influenced by Positivism — was not enough to calm Renouvin's mind as to the carnage that took place in 1914–1918. The horizons of the Diplomatic History were “too limited” for him, and he believed they needed overhaul.¹

In 1931, while publishing his first conclusions, the French historian would state that one should understand “the different forces shaking the world”² and go beyond acts and facts reported in diplomatic documents. Eighty years later and after a long maturation process, a new review reexamines the current state

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¹Pierre Renouvin, “Introduction Générale”, In: ____ (org.), *Histoire des Relations Internationales*, vol. 1, Paris, Hachette, 1994 (originally published in 1953), p. 8.

²*Idem*, “La publication des documents diplomatiques français, 1871-1914”, *Revue historique*, n. CLXVI, 1931, p. 10.

of the research on these “forces” in a 776-page book organized by Professor Robert Frank, successor of Renouvin, Duroselle and Girault at Sorbonne.

In the moment in which other national schools provide reflections on the state of the discipline by referring to French contributions,³ Frank points out the need for Renouvin ‘heirs’ to reflect on the state of their research and to “cultivate their own gardens” (p. XIV) in order not to get outdated.

If the epistemological revolution caused by the ascent of HIR had shown how short-sighted it was from the standpoint of Diplomatic History, the discipline would still further develop as it became clear that not only the relations of statesmen with society and its deep forces (“forces profondes”) should be given importance to, but also the international dynamics of economic, geo-strategic and cultural factors, as well as the societal mentalities (“mentalités collectives”), inside and outside governments.

The renewal brought about by Renouvin and Duroselle when establishing that the relations between peoples “can rarely be dissociated from those established between States” — which would, in turn, become the “core of international relations” —,⁴ had still some obstacles to overcome. Clearly moved by the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and by the unfolding of Arab Spring and the operations developing in Libya, Frank chose democracy, among other topics, to organize the chapters and to show that mankind has become, for historians of International Relations, the essential perspective when dealing with the subject (p. XII, p. 57, p. 211, p. 687-696).

Divided into five parts (with 30 chapters in total), the book addresses at first, in an introductory manner, the state of the art in several HIR national schools and then, in the second part, it brings an updated discussion on how historians should deal with the analysis of the different levels of human relations in the contemporary era taking place beyond boundaries: from national to transnational and international levels. The third part revisits the concept of “forces profondes” by Renouvin so as to investigate why and how they are dealt with in French historiography nowadays. The fourth part refers to the reflections remarked by Duroselle in the second part of *Introduction* (1964) to emphasize the timeless character of studies about decision-making processes in foreign policy. Finally, revealing not only the political but also the historiographical reality of the continent since it has been absorbing much of the effort exerted by French historians since the 1980s, the fifth part of the book addresses Europe, specific issues regarding both inter-European relations and the ascent of the European Union.

Unfortunately, the reflection I hereby propose must be maintained within the limits of a book review. These few lines could hardly summarize such a long

³We cite, among others, the works by Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006; by Ennio Di Nolfo, *Prima lezione di storia delle relazioni internazionali*, Firenze, Editori Laterza, 2006 or *Concepts Histories and Theories of International Relations for the 21st Century. Regional and National Approaches*, directed by José Flávio Sombra Saraiva, Brasília, IBRI, 2009.
⁴Pierre Renouvin; Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales*, 4. ed., Paris, A. Colin, 1991 (originally published in 1964), p. 1.

and dense work, constituted of almost 800 pages, a piece which can truly substitute the *Introduction*. Unable to escape the risk of arbitrary choices, some chapters were chosen over others for this analysis because they can best illustrate the development of the discipline. They address new topics and revisit others in order to instigate a deep exploration of the whole work by the reader.

Yet in the second chapter, dealing with the relations between HIR and political theories, Robert Frank reminds us of the importance of the 1964's work to consolidate the relevance of the historical discipline in the field of studies of international relations. In a thorough analysis, Frank does not forget to mention the controversies between historians and political scientists on the value or relative effectiveness of quantitative methods, theoretical abstractions or mathematical language as opposed to the so-called qualitative approaches, which base themselves almost exclusively on empirical analyses. One of the few works from the French school translated into Portuguese, *Tout Empire Périra. Vision théorique des relations internationales*, by Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, was an important record of the above-mentioned controversy over the last 50 years.⁵

As Duroselle dedicated himself to the odd task of finding means of dialogue between both disciplines, even though with a lot of hesitation and care, he claimed the primacy of the historical method over “artificially built” theories which, according to him, were unable to cover human complexity and irrationality and excluded the existing historiography. His intention was, then, to reaffirm the role of History as the core of studies in contemporary international relations, an initiative that had its merits, but was not free from criticism.⁶

Although Frank may have been legitimately prudent with the uncritical use of theories and has equally recognized the difficulty of historians with their “theoretical eclecticism” in handling with abstract concepts,⁷ he defends them as a “precious” tool for historical research. The author not only advocates an “empirical-explicative” approach of HIR, but also defends that “concepts, more than theories, are the greatest assets that historians can find in other social sciences” (p. 16, p. 41). However, when using them, he continues, one cannot set aside the specificity of their *métier*: to preserve empirical research supported by archives⁸ and to verify “the validity of concepts considering the reality and perceptions of each time” (p. 82).

Later on, in Chapter 15, Frank gives the reader the opportunity to reflect on a theme which in 1964 was far from being considered by Renouvin and Duroselle as a shaping factor of HIR “forces profondes”: the public opinion. Back then, the so-called “expressions of opinion” were considered to be purely

⁵Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1981. The second edition (Paris, A. Colin, 1992) was translated into Portuguese by the UnB Publishing House and the Official Press of the State of São Paulo in 2000 entitled *Todo Império Perecerá*.

⁶Marcel Merle, “La problématique de l’étude des relations internationales en France”, *Revue française de science politique*, year 3, 1983, p. 403-427.

⁷The author even cites his own proposition, published in 2003, of a “dialectical or historical real-idealism” as a means of analyzing matters of “war and peace” (Robert Frank, “Penser historiquement les relations internationales,” In *Annuaire français de relations internationales*, vol. 4, 2003, p. 42-65).

⁸Chapter 3, by Jean-Claude Allain, is entirely devoted to “the sources of historians”.

a reflection of demographic conditions, economic or financial interests. Only trends in societal mentality were supposed to be the subject of studies.⁹ The examples chosen by Duroselle himself at the time to support his arguments dated from before the development of mass media,¹⁰ foreshadowing how fast this interpretation would become outdated.

Frank actually shows how technical progress has changed the role of the press and the public opinion leverage over decision-making processes throughout the 20th century. Even before turning to the challenges imposed by the internet, the historian started by analyzing questions raised by the radio, the newspaper and the television — all hitherto set aside by the discipline.¹¹ The tools historians have built since then, helped by other Human Sciences, enabled a fresh look into notions of “representations, imaginary, identities and cultures” so as to, finally, analyze the role of “mentalities” in International Relations (p. 346). The refinement of concepts forming the societal mentality — firstly with “stable mental attitudes” and “transitory mental attitudes”, (p. 322-355), then with “representations” and “social imaginary” (p.355-370) — allowed HIR to understand not just that resorting to information in order to maintain or achieve power was

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formerly an obvious strategy, but also that nowadays it has become a rather systematic one. *Voilà* all the importance of the topic!

Two chapters ahead, Frank further deepens the analysis of a topic that has certainly arisen to add complexity to the “forces profondes” concept by Renouvin, especially with regard to cultural relations: sports’ internationalization and the diplomacy of sport. As efforts had been spent on the topic since the 1980s,¹² this “cultural reflection of geopolitical forces and international life”, as Frank names it, gained political momentum as a soft power tool

⁹Pierre Renouvin; Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales*, 4. ed., Paris, A. Colin, 1991 (originally published in 1964), p. 3.

¹⁰*Ibidem*, p. 401 *et seq.*

¹¹Note the diffusion of meetings about the theme such as the seminar *Jean d'Arcy. La communication au service des droits de l'homme, 1913-1983*, addressing the appearance of TV in the country and its importance for international relations (Paris, 2012, with Robert Frank as scientific counselor), as well as the importance of exploring archives such as those from the French National Audiovisual Institute.

¹²Frank reminds us of the special issue 38 of *Relations Internationales*, from 1984, organized by Pierre Milza and entitled “Sports and International Relations”, but also the Conference bearing the same title, organized in Metz in 1993, whose proceedings were published by Pierre Arnaud and Alfred Wahl, and finally the issues 111 and 112 of *Relations Internationales*, from 2002, named “Olympic Movement and International Relations.”

and as a means of approaching peoples once it became part of the mass culture and was internationalized (p. 387-388).

In many aspects, the French historian relies on lessons taught by Pierre Milza¹³ to remind us that sports' history has always been associated with great geopolitical issues, imperialism, perpetual peace aspirations, birth of nationalisms, mass cultures, symbols, rituals, and tensions. Hence, he states that the topic could suit new generations of historians well as the reflex of international relations in the 20th century; after all, who would nowadays contest the existence of international political issues in the Olympic Games of 1936, 1972, 1980 or 1984 (p. 391-396), or in the British Commonwealth Games (p. 400-403)?

A true manifesto for the discipline, the book does not aim to establish limits for further research, but recognizes that unexplored fields may appear and that some enduring problems may be belittle in the future. His main purpose is to propose reappraisals and a review. Renouvin and Duroselle encouraged historians to embark on studies about contemporary international relations, but the quick evolution of the international system modified many aspects of their reality. Different problems had their nature changed, power relations had their composition transformed, and the number of actors increased. Nowadays, we cannot expect one to support HIR only considering acts and decisions by statesmen or strictly nationalist perspectives of international relations.

And even though Renouvin had already stated that a State-centered approach would be insufficient, Frank emphasizes that the precursor to the discipline very few times fully complied with his arguments, which led Marc Bloch and the generations influenced by the *Annales* not to completely accept the idea that HIR could be renewing facing earlier Diplomatic History.

In an attempt to maintain the French school at the forefront of the discipline and to show that it struggles not to lose its élan,¹⁴ Robert Frank not only fostered a series of reflections on the subject with his work (especially in the second part, entitled "The National, the International and the Transnational"), but also simultaneously launched the Journal *Monde(s)*,¹⁵ providing his French colleagues with the opportunity to dialogue with the Global History¹⁶ and the Transnational History. The latter, according to Frank,

by favoring the analyses of 'transferences' and 'circulations' beyond boundaries [...], values a series of social dynamics that

¹³Pierre Milza, "Sport et relations internationales," *Relations Internationales*, n. 38, 1984, p. 155-174.

¹⁴Norma Breda dos Santos, "História das Relações Internacionais no Brasil: esboço de uma avaliação sobre a área", *História*, vol. 24, n. 1, São Paulo, 2005, p. 17.

¹⁵Note the effort of the scientific committee (formed by Frederik Cooper, Matthew Connelly, Emma Rothschild, Odd Arne Westad and others) to change a reality according to which French historians were internationalists, but rarely (and controversially) wrote as such (*Monde(s)*, *Histoire*, *Espaces*, *Relations*. *Nouvelle revue d'histoire globale et lieu d'expression pour les tendances neuves de l'histoire internationale*, published by A. Colin, ISSN 1234-1234).

¹⁶Note the impact on France (p. 278) caused by the text by Thomas Zeiler, "Just Do It! Globalization for Diplomatic Historians", published in v. 25, n. 4, in 2001, *Diplomatic History*.

have been transforming national systems for a long time and, for three or four decades, have been even putting them to the test. (p. 105-106).

So a new channel for communication was 'born': the French Journal of Global History, aimed to "put into a historical perspective connections and interferences between societies".¹⁷ It was a clear effort to retrieve the production and historical perspectives from Eurocentrism or methodological nationalism (symbolically — a rare case in the country —, the publication accepts articles in English, recognized as "the global language").¹⁸

In view of the inherent dynamics underlying periodical publications, what enables them to correct their courses in life, *Monde(s)* intends to turn an enduring Eurocentrism into a more relative one, which, despite efforts, has made itself present even in some parts of Frank's work. In fact, it can be noted not only in bibliographical references of the book, but also in the historical explanation he gives about the evolution of "international democracy" using solely European benchmarks, thus leaving the inter-American experience on the sidelines (p. 690). In another passage of his work — remarkable for Brazilians —, he forgets to mention the Brazilian delegation reservations during the debate of the Resolution 1973 of UN Security Council on Libya, pointing out the German hesitations as the only ones amongst "democratic countries" voting (p. 692).

In spite of these issues, it is hard not to recognize the work as a reliable tool for methodological and epistemological reflections for both students and professors, and a means for better knowing the academic works developed in France in the early 21st century. By bringing about new topics, Frank opens new paths and presents new fields of research while giving valuable lessons about scientific accuracy for those who dare to explore it.

¹⁷Robert Frank, "Avant-propos - Pourquoi une nouvelle revue?", *Monde(s)*, n. 1, may 2012, p. 8.

¹⁸*Ibidem*, p. 9.