

“Social vs. Material Ways of Seeing the Political World” by Jeremy Pressman¹
January 6, 2015

Let us assume for a moment that we are interested in understanding why things happen in politics. We may have general questions. What drives globalization? What started that war? Why did those two countries form an alliance? Or, we may have specific ones: Why did the government of Cuba and the United States seek to re-establish normal diplomatic relations in 2014? What caused the Syrian civil war? Why did the Pakistani Taliban attack a school in Peshawar?

As we try to tackle these kinds of political questions, one initial problem is that each question has many possible answers. To put it another way, there are many relevant factors, or relevant *variables* as political scientists like to say, as we look for the explanations. That forces us to try to sort the variables and select the ones upon which we want to focus and, thus, the ones upon which we do not want to focus.

If we are looking for broad groupings, one easy – or at least it might appear easy – difference is between **social** variables and **material** variables.²

Material variables tend to be concrete and quantifiable; they are counted and measured. Or, to put it differently, they can be directly apprehended by our senses. In the military arena, we count up how many soldiers, tanks, rockets, nuclear weapons, and planes are on each side.³ We might consider economic indicators like the poverty level, unemployment rate, or Gross Domestic Product. In a related sense, you may think of economics as a rational, quantifiable discipline. We might look at demographic or topographic features beyond human control. Ever heard that the fact that the United States was separated from most great powers by two oceans affected the development of US foreign policy? Nobody can change the fact that the United States is squeezed between the Atlantic and the Pacific, no matter how much they might try.⁴

¹ My thanks to Stephen B. Dyson, Fred Lee, and Brent Sasley for comments on earlier drafts.

² Instead of social vs. material, some might prefer subjective vs. objective or idealist/ideational vs. materialist. But for international relations in academia, I think social and material are the common terms.

³ For examples, see the work of SIPRI, or the book entitled *The Middle East Military Balance*. On nuclear weapons, see the tables compiled by the NRDC, e.g. <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab19.asp>

⁴ To play devil’s advocate: the United States has had many territorial definitions, starting with just thirteen states on the Atlantic side. In 1800, the United States was not surrounded by two oceans; it did not border the Pacific Ocean. So the idea of what constitutes the United States has varied greatly over the course of history.

Most material factors would be thought of as more objective factors.⁵

In contrast, social variables are ideas, beliefs, perceptions, and emotions.⁶ We cannot exactly see them or touch them, though we may be able to see or touch things that represent those ideas, beliefs, and perceptions. For example, the United States touts the fact that it is a democracy where its citizens have certain political rights. There is no single, concrete thing that is “democracy” or “free speech,” though we can point to a piece of paper (the US constitution) where some of these rights are written down or we can note the buildings that house the key organs of US democracy, e.g. the Capitol, the White House, the Supreme Court building.⁷

So why do we call these ideas, beliefs, and perceptions *social* variables? One explanation is that they arise due to relationships between human beings. In other words, social interactions lead to their formation, adoption, spread, and maintenance. On a basic level, we talk and write about these ideas. We debate them. Those social interactions give meaning and substance to these ideas, beliefs, and perceptions. (As an aside, we could be talking about interactions between people but we could also talk about interactions and relationships between states, governments, and/or organizations. In short, collective entities have social relationships too.)

Thinking about social will come up again when we talk about constructivist IR theory, or the social construction of reality.⁸

You might loosely think of social variables as more subjective. We may, for example, witness or experience the exact same event but yet come away with very different *perceptions* of what happened.⁹ We will see this later in the course when we talk about the security dilemma and the way in which a government that takes steps to defend itself may inadvertently create the perception in a rival capital that it is building up

⁵ I am not a huge fan of the terms objective and subjective.

⁶ Social and political psychologists tend to talk about perceptions and misperceptions. Constructivists tend to talk about norms, ideas, and identity. I would argue they may be talking about beliefs held by individuals or by some collective entity (a people, a country).

⁷ This raises an interesting question about ideas: Do they exist absent any material manifestation? Must there inevitably be some concrete manifestations of such ideas?

⁸ Alexander Wendt, a key early constructivist, has a well-known book called *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999).

⁹ For an example of how the same event triggers many different memories of it, listen to the first season of the podcast *Serial* about a murder case and what all the witnesses and interested parties remember. For another example, listen to Radio Lab's episode “Outside Westgate,” November 29, 2014, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/outside-westgate/>.

for aggressive action, thereby triggering the second state to launch its own ‘defensive’ buildup. So the same event, say me buying 100 new tanks, is cast in a defensive light in my planning reports and public statements but in an offensive light in your top-level security briefings about your neighbor’s dangerous tank escalation. The physical act is one in the same but the perceptions and interpretations of it vary immensely.

Now one could use this to think about seemingly trivial things. Is a tomato always a tomato? Ever had a tomato (or a strawberry, for that matter) that you purchased at a regular (not high end) supermarket in Connecticut in the month of January or February? Physically, everything says tomato. It is red; it is shaped like other tomatoes I have seen. But then I taste it and often times it tastes like, to use a technical term, crap. Or it has no taste at all; it certainly does not taste like a tomato I buy in July or August. Does taste matter to my personal judgment as to whether I have just consumed a tomato? After all, the label on the package says it is a tomato so someone is clearly trying to create the perception that this tasteless red spherical object is a tomato.

One problem I want to mention from the beginning is that the line between the material and the social is fuzzy. It is a lot messier than it might first appear. Take population. Demographic factors seem concrete. We may count how many people live in a given territory, right?

But if we actually did a census, we would have to make decisions all along the way. Those decisions would reflect the *ideas* we have about how to count and those ideas might not all be in synch. In order to get to a material variable, social interactions might determine the definition and parameters of that material variable. For example, in the US census, someone decided to count by race but not by occupation.

If the University of Connecticut were a country, how would we count the people? Would we count only undergraduate students or also graduate students, staff, and faculty? Would we count everyone or only people who live on campus or in the immediate area? Would adjunct faculty who might only be here for a semester count? Would a part-time student count? Should we count people who attend UConn at smaller campuses such as Stamford or Avery Point or through on-line courses?¹⁰ I think you may quickly see how defining a material variable is easier said than done; it

¹⁰ Real countries face only slightly different versions of these same questions. For example, do we count only citizens or undocumented residents as well? Do guest workers count? Do we count citizens who have moved abroad, some permanently?

might require a lot of discussions where different ideas are debated about who to count and how to count.

I wanted to introduce that problem, but let's set it aside for now and move on as if we have two discrete categories, social and material variables.¹¹

How does this social-material divide affect our study of international affairs?

Or, to put it another way, what does the social/material divide mean in practice? Can we see these categories in action in real questions about international affairs? I think we can. This divide is, I think, the definition of two categories that will help us think about how the world works, not just an academic distinction of interest to professors.

Example #1: Mass killing in Sudan

In the early 2000s, activists sought to draw attention to the mass killing occurring in the Darfur region of Sudan. They called it genocide. But the George W. Bush administration stayed away from the word genocide, perhaps because Bush officials wanted to avoid the treaty obligations that come with admitting genocide is going on somewhere in the world.¹² Did what was happening in Darfur only become a genocide if people were willing to call it that? Or did the physical act of killing masses of people determine that it was a case of genocide regardless of what US or other international leaders called it?

¹¹ I am not going to into great depth, or really any depth at all, about Hegel and Marx, but I just want to flag that this social/material question has a deeper intellectual history. Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) argued for the primacy of the social over the material variable; he was an idealist. Yet to Marxists, Hegel wrongly conflated the logical process (philosophy) and the history of the world. Along came Karl Marx (1818-1883) and argued that the material drove world politics; Hegel's ideas, or what in this essay I am calling social factors, were just a reflection of the underlying material realities. One analogy was the base (or foundation) and the superstructure (the frame built on top of the base). The "base" was determined or shaped by material factors, the means of economic production (and who controlled them). The superstructure, the laws and rhetoric used to define and justify that set of social and political relations around production, is temporary or epi-phenomenal; if the base changes, the superstructure built on top of it will collapse. All that said, it gets more confusing because the material factors cannot be understood without social relations, *relations* of production. To quote Prof. Fred Lee, "the social organization of the production process is more important than its technological implements. And [Marx] insisted that this social organization was directly 'material (as opposed to based on ideas/ideals)." What this essay refers to as social would, in Marxist thinking, be considered ideas or ideational, but that is a difference between how words are used in political theory and IR theory. We will come to Marxist IR Theory in a few weeks.

¹² For example, see the "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide."

My main focus in this brief essay is not on language, but I want to quickly flag that language, or discourse, is central for understanding social factors and processes. What terms we choose and how we use them is important.

Example #2: The West Bank

In the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, often called the Six Day War, Israel captured several territories, including the West Bank that had been part of Jordan.¹³ In the ensuing years, Israel built small towns and cities, known as settlements, in the occupied West Bank. Palestinians and most of the international community viewed these settlements as illegal and demanded that they be dismantled. They wanted Israel to close down its settlements and withdraw from the West Bank. The West Bank could then form the territorial basis for a new state of Palestine alongside Israel. This solution was called the two-state solution, Israel and Palestine.

In the 1980s, a debate started about whether a two-state solution was still possible. Meron Benvenisti, an Israeli and former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, said it was no longer possible. Israeli settlements and the economic, military, and transport infrastructure that went along with them had forever changed the West Bank. Israel was too entangled now in a physical sense. Removing the settlements was akin to the notion of putting two scrambled eggs each back into their original shells. Even if one had a different idea about how to organize the West Bank – as part of a new State of Palestine rather than under Israeli occupation – it was too late to change the material reality of the Israeli settlements and related infrastructure.

Ian S. Lustick, an American academic, took a different view. He argued that settlements were based on the *idea* that Israel had a right and duty to settle the West Bank. If Israelis were persuaded that that idea was wrong or unnecessary or needed to be revised in the name of a compromise such as a two-state solution, Israel could still withdraw and thus a two-state solution was viable. If you changed the idea, people would be willing and able to change the physical manifestation (the settlements) of the old idea.¹⁴

¹³ Well, it was sort of part of Jordan. In 1950, Jordan annexed the West Bank but only two other countries recognized that annexation.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the Benvenisti and Lustick viewpoints, see James Ron, “Palestine, the UN and the One-State Solution,” *Middle East Policy* 18:4, Winter 2011, pp. 59-67. See also Ian S. Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank-Gaza* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Example #3: Nuclear Weapons

The United Kingdom and North Korea both have nuclear weapons. The United States sees the first one as an ally. In fact, the US and UK even talk about a special relationship. But the United States would like North Korea to get rid of its nuclear weapons. North Korea's weapons are seen as a threat. North Korea is an enemy. Same physical object, nuclear bombs, but perceived very differently by the United States government.¹⁵

What does it matter? Or, how do you view the world?

I started this essay by suggesting that these two categories, social and material, help us, at a very basic level, group possible explanations or causes for international events or outcomes that interest us. Categorization, or bringing structure to political inquiry, is one reason why I think the social-material divide might be useful.

But there is a second reason this question interests us as well. How much influence do we have on the world around us? How much of what happens is due to material factors beyond our individual control? And how much, in contrast, is about how we think about things? If the latter, then we have space to change how we think about things. New ideas could breed a new reality. Can we change the world around us by changing how we talk about the world around us? A focus on social factors seems to make this possible.

Can a cancer patient have a higher survival rate by talking about the illness in a positive way? (I'm gonna beat this; I'm a fighter etc) Well, is cancer and its treatment a material reality – it unfolds bio-medically? Or, does it also have a perceptual element where emotion and morale influence the course of the disease?

In late 2014, after the Democratic Party took a drubbing in the 2014 elections, is President Barack Obama a lame duck by default? Or is he only a lame duck if everyone says he is a lame duck, the media treats him as a lame duck, and he himself acts like a lame duck? Does something, perhaps a bad mid-term Congressional election in your second term, make you a lame duck president automatically or is lame duck status an idea that has to get passed around, accepted, and internalized?

¹⁵ Alexander Wendt, "Constructing international politics," *International Security* 20 (1995), pp. 71-81 at 73.

In 2011-2014, much of the Western media analysis about the situation in Syria and Iraq focuses on the question of sectarianism. I think this could be an example of a case where the more we talk about Iraq and Syria in the context of sectarianism, the more we miss some of the core sources of the fighting. Some people have argued that in fact the source of what is going on is political grievances against President Assad in Syria¹⁶ and against the Shia-dominated government in Iraq under former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. But if we just talked about the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant in sectarian terms – Sunni vs. Shia – it makes it seem like this is some kind of inevitable clash instead of a political problem about dictatorship and the lack of political support and participation options for the general public.

In turn, which understanding we use could affect policy solutions such as the propensity of outsiders to support military intervention in, say, the Syrian civil war. If it is seen as a war based on sectarianism, people might think that it has been going on for centuries or millennia and the potential effectiveness of external intervention might be very low. If instead it is seen as a situation where people are rising up against the dictatorship and trying to create political openings and political reform, outsiders might relate to that and be more willing to intervene.

¹⁶ See Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Stop Trying to Make Syria’s War Into a Sectarian Conflict,” *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/lp4xfpe>