Soraya Sidani, Intégration et déviance au sein du système international
(Integration and deviance within the international system)

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The political sociology of international relations is no longer marginal in the field of International Relations (IR). The notion that world politics operates through the same kinds of social processes as any other realm of interaction does not shock anymore. In setting this academic trend, several French scholars were key trailblazers, building on a particularly strong tradition of sociological thinking dating back to Durkheim and Mauss, through Crozier, Foucault and Bourdieu, all the way to Latour and Boltanski – to name but a few. In fact, harnessing the analytical tools of political sociology to make sense of global politics flows almost naturally in today’s French academia, and this is arguably much to the service of the rest of the discipline.

Soraya Sidani’s book, Intégration et déviance au sein du système international, clearly belongs to this tradition. The author sets out to explain why certain states seem to operate, willingly or not, on the margins of international society. In Emile Durkheim’s tradition, she terms this phenomenon “deviance,” that is, “transgressive behaviour on the international scale” (p. 18). To set the stage of her study, the author argues that international society is increasingly integrated (or ‘solidarist,’ as she puts it perhaps a little optimistically, see below). The drivers of this evolution are, first and foremost, the rise of transnational actors as well as the multifaceted work performed by international organisations, especially the United Nations (UN), over the past few decades.

Sidani identifies two main forms of deviance: the first one is passive and endured (posture subie) whereas the latter is active and deliberately sought after (conduite délibérée). This distinction is crucial to the argument because it points to two radically different sources of deviance: the first source concerns structural oppression and ostracisation by the group, while the latter deals in self-marginalisation and voluntary distanciation by the actor. Even though one could legitimately ask extent to which these two rather distinct processes actually belong to the same phenomenon, Sidani tries to capture both under the same empirical indicators. In fact, the author might have gone even further, here, and observe that most cases of international deviance actually fit under both patterns: so-called ‘rogue states,’ for instance, are certainly
ostracised by the group, but they also often make use of their peripheral position to their advantage.¹

In order to measure deviance, Sidani constructs a quantifiable indicator: the number of UN-sponsored multilateral conventions to which a given country is party. As a result, marginality is studied in the form of normative deviance, that is, the distance from mainstream international law (p. 20). Thanks to this dataset, the author is able quantitatively to map a number of empirical patterns. By Sidani’s measure, we find that European countries are, by a wide margin, the most integrated countries in the world; that richer states tend to be better multilateral players, as in fact are democracies; and that so-called ‘middle Powers’ are the most actively embedded in the normative structure. While none of these results sound particularly surprising, the book also illuminates a number of intriguing trends. Perhaps the most puzzling finding comes at the end of the book: somewhat paradoxically, those countries that contest most actively the current international order – Iran, Venezuela – also happen to be very well integrated in the normative legal structure (pp. 197–198).

In Chapter 2, Sidani then goes on to identify four ‘indicators’ of marginalisation on the world scale: regional integration, socioeconomic and political development, political regime and state capacities. While the logic around which this list was drawn up is not entirely clear (a number of alternative factors are left out without further discussion), in chapter 3 the author then goes on to identify interesting causal mechanisms, including for instance dynamics of mimesis at the regional level and reputation effects. She also adds a few more characteristics of the least integrated countries in the world: failed states, small islands, autocratic regimes – all of which essentially lack the capacities for international integration.

Along the way, the book also offers a number of promising insights, some of which might have deserved a little more unpacking: for instance, that power renders iterated games superfluous in obtaining cooperation (p. 26); that integration sometimes amounts to a rational response to incoming aid flows (p. 117); or that democracy is the new name of the game of international integration (pp. 130 passim). Perhaps a deeper analysis of the ‘social fabric’ of the current international society would have thrown more light on the dynamics of deviance.

One strength of this book is its theoretical eclecticism. In explaining deviance, Sidani resorts to both rational choice theory and constructivism or sociological institutionalism. On the one hand, stigma is the result of a social structure; but on the other, self-marginalisation is a deliberate strategy by some countries, motivated either through a logic of power politics or one of group differentiation (pp. 149–150). For instance, the American hegemon frees itself from unnecessary constraints by free-riding from a sizeable portion of UN-sponsored multilateral arrangements. For their part, countries such as Iran and Venezuela deliberately contest the order so that they can exploit their peripheral position in international society. Their capacity for nuisance then becomes a source of leverage in negotiations (p. 193).

Identifying the dual nature of deviance – group-induced and self-inflicted – is also an interesting contribution of this book. Finally, the efforts at statistical operationalisation deserve to be underscored. In this reviewer’s view, there is no justification for the paucity of quantitative (and primarily descriptive) methods

in existing political sociology of IR literatures, and Sidani begins to redress this situation. Her measure of deviance may be imperfect in nature, but it allows her to identify macro-patterns of interest.

On the other hand, the book encounters two principal problems. First, parts of the research design seem to be a little mixed up. It is perplexing, for instance, that Sidani calls “indicators” (pp. 55, 58, passim) what really look like drivers, that is, causal factors, of international marginalisation. After all, regional integration, socioeconomic and political development, political regime and state capacities would seem to determine a country’s level of integration, more than reveal it (the latter being what indicators are for). In a similar logic, the statistical analysis isolates variables that are obviously interactive and redundant: for instance, the best integrated countries are European, rich, democratic, and middle Powers. The reader is left begging for further analysis in order to know how these overlapping characteristics actually combine together, or not.

Finally, the book would have tremendously benefited from engaging with a substantial existing IR literature that looks into very germane subject matters. Most strikingly, the study of deviance has received significant attention in IR lately. Examples include Ann Town’s study of how international norms create hierarchies, in part by defining the “new normal”2; Rebecca Adler-Nissen’s works on stigma management both on the international stage as well as within the European Union3; as well as Ayse Zarakol’s book about the management of difference and ostracisation by the non-Western world.4 These are but three examples of IR scholars who not only deal with the same issue as Sidani, but also build on the very same sociological tradition of Goffman, among others. More broadly, the book might have built on seminal studies of reputation in international politics5, social influence in international organisations6, or status competition on the world stage.7

In building more consistently on existing literature, Sidani would have not only reinforced her case, but also made her contribution more specific. What is more, she might have had to deal with what remains the main objection to her treatment of deviance: the very real possibility that international ‘solidarity’ is much shallower than she portrays it to be. Indeed, one of the strengths of the cited literature is in showing that, contrary to Sidani’s ‘solidarist’ argument, global normative integration primarily rests on ‘public conformity without private acceptance,’ as Johnstone puts it. Sending and Neumann show very well, for instance, that countries often comply with international norms not so much because they truly adhere to them, but primarily because they form the entry point to the international stage.8 In other words,

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deviance, status, roles, and other social dynamics do not reflect an international culture internalised at Wendt’s ‘third degree’ of legitimacy,⁹ but rather a Goffmanian process of impression management by which states seek to play their games on the international stage.