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The Role of History in International Relations

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We were very pleased to be asked by the editors of *Millennium* to participate in this forum on the role of history in International Relations. Roughly 10 years have passed since we first engaged this issue, and we were delighted to have the opportunity to return to this topic in such good company. The current forum goes well beyond that earlier discussion, not least in taking an explicitly transatlantic view. In addition, we are pleased to have the opportunity in this article to update some of our earlier observations, and to mention some of the considerable developments in how historiography is being integrated into our discipline's ways-of-knowing.

The earlier conversation, culminating in the publication of *Bridges and Boundaries*, involved a group of international historians and political scientists discussing disciplinary synergies and disconnects, and the prospects for further intellectual engagements across the disciplinary 'boundaries'. Scholars in the group had enough in common to avoid a failure to engage, but were sufficiently diverse to allow for a meaningful conversation. Comprised of (mostly) diplomatic historians and qualitative IR scholars, the two groups were very sympathetic to each other. Historians, studying statecraft, military strategy and international relations, and political scientists, primarily from the American academy, who studied international security using case study methods, started with a shared subject matter, often exhibited very similar methodological leanings, and held mutual beliefs that their respective scholarly communities were underappreciated in their own disciplines. Both groups also rejected the common stereotypes of the atheoretical historian and the ahistorical political scientist. Participants in the journal symposium, conference and subsequent edited volume noted that IR theorists were often immersed in history, and that international historians were rarely 'storytellers' offering unstructured narratives.[1] Like the authors in this *Millennium* forum, participants also pointed to areas

1. See Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, 'Diplomatic History and International Relations Theory: Respecting Difference and Crossing

of convergence, notably with neoclassical realist research, constructivist approaches and the English school.

That said, the international historians and political scientists in *Bridges and Boundaries* also reflected on several major differences in epistemology and method. For example, several participants acknowledged that, despite the 'historical turn' in IR, the subfield continued to reward work that situated particular pieces of history within the context of larger patterns and trends. Political science placed a premium on scholarship that was theoretically innovative, generalisable, and parsimonious. These 'guild rules,' and their attendant disciplinary rewards, shaped how most political scientists engaged the past. Historical episodes tended to be represented as interchangeable with others that bear similar features, and were employed to either corroborate or disconfirm theoretical propositions. It was thus standard practice in IR, even for those scholars who were avowedly deeply interested in particular historical episodes, to package history into case study chapters sandwiched between theoritical introductions and conclusions. Since the goal of historical research was to use evidence to support or undermine an explicitly stated and separate causal argument, historical narratives were divided up and parceled out into distinct chapters. The work of international historians, by contrast, simply looked and read differently. Causal arguments were embedded within narratives. Unlike in the work of political scientists, those arguments were far less likely to float freely to other historical contexts. The upshot was that instead of belaboring the claim that IR theorists produce work devoid of history and that international historians merely cull archival materials for a descriptively complete narrative, it made more sense to see scholars from both disciplines as using history and theory differently. Political scientists aimed to identify recurring patterns of state and sub-state behavior, and to make generalisations about why such classes of events reoccur. A particular war, crisis, or alliance was likely to be read as an instance of a larger phenomenon. Indeed, unlike international historians, who did not expect explanations for a particular historical episode to be consistent with arguments for other events, political scientists assumed that particular historical outcomes and processes could be treated as examples of a larger phenomenon. While political scientists were often concerned with explaining why an event unfolded as it did in a particular instance, they also tended to view historical cases as comparable.

In similar mode to the earlier conversation, the articles in this current *Millennium* forum grapple with the central questions of how history relates to the study of international relations. It is not surprising that several of the findings parallel the central themes of the earlier

Boundaries,' *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 5–21, and Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds, *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

symposium. For example, several authors note that the discussion is about central disciplinary tendencies, not hermetically sealed borders. It is not always easy to identify historians and political scientists, or to tell the two camps apart – some political science reads very much like history, with its attendant focus on contingency, agency, historically circumscribed causal arguments and particularist explanation and the narrative mode; some history reads quite like political science in its adoption of the scientific method and bold, sweeping theoretical claims. As Edward Keene reminds us in his article, 'new' history moved beyond 'the chronological sequence of events and the working together of those events into a coherent story with a meaning' toward an analytic approach that looks and reads quite similar to (most) political science.[2] Second, the authors here reinforce, as we did, that mainstream IR views history primarily as a tool for theory testing. There is no such thing as a 'history-less U.S. mainstream.' As John M. Hobson and George Lawson put it: 'Rather than marginal historical voices facing an ahistorical mainstream, perhaps we are all, and have always been, historians after all' (420). Yet, like several of the contributors to the earlier volume, the authors here largely agree that much of mainstream IR is fixed on the notion that international relations is repetitive, timeless, and cyclical. Moreover, the authors here suggest that it is difficult to do good history if the sole purpose of the analysis is to produce generaliseable theory. For example, Hobson and Lawson and Christian Reus-Smit note the problematic nature of some forms of IR theory where the lessons gleaned from past historical situations are used as 'shorthand' for informing contemporary policy debates or educating current policy makers. They emphasise that history should not be reduced to confirming empirical regularities about international relations.[3] Reus-Smit, Hobson and Lawson, and Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach all emphasise that an analysis of topics such as

2. Political scientists who focus on IR, however, are also embracing different kinds of narrative. Compare, for example, the debate between two political scientists on the origins of the First World War. See William R. Thompson, 'A Streetcar Named Sarajevo: Catalysts, Multiple Causation Chains, and Rivalry Structures', *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2003): 453–74; Richard Ned Lebow, 'A Data Set Named Desire: A Reply to William R. Thompson', *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2003): 475–8; and Richard Ned Lebow, 'Contingency, Catalysts, and International System Change', *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 4 (2000–1): 591–616.

3. Ferguson and Mansbach usefully acknowledge, however, that the past can provide guidance for the present. As they note, 'a more rigorous examination of the past might reveal that what we sense as new really is not, and that some "traditional" features are far more complex than we think.' For example, as they note, contemporary international relations exhibit characteristics that international historians would recognise from earlier historical periods, such as overlapping patterns of political authority, a lack of a monopoly on the use of force, the declining role of sovereignty and territoriality, and the central role

sovereignty, the balance of power, democracy, non-intervention, or hegemony cannot be done outside of history – there are no timeless, universal facts of international relations.[4] Reus-Smit puts it well: 'if one believes that the purpose of theorising about international relations is to generate law-like propositions about relations between sovereign states, then continuity and repetition are privileged over change and variation. History is thus reduced to a single monotone story, one with little to teach us once its law-like lessons have been distilled' (395).

Perhaps the most notable difference between the earlier and current conversation is the much broader scope adopted by the editors of *Millennium*. The authors in this collection move beyond a focus on political scientists in the American academy, and their close cousins in diplomatic and military history. In the articles that follow, contributors consider the role of history in European IR as well as the synergy between postmodernist IR and international history. Hobson and Lawson suggest that a historical sociological approach, rather than a traditional historical approach, is likely to offer the greatest room for dialogue between IR theorists and international historians. Edward Keene suggests that the English school, by not pursuing a turn toward social and cultural history that has been central to the 'new history,' has remained true to the traditions and methods of older historiographical writing in diplomatic history. It can thus provide an important bridge between IR theory and history. In particular, Keene notes that the English school enables theorising about how changes in the nature of the diplomatic community have helped to reshape the norms and values by which international relations are conducted – it facilitates viewing diplomatic professionals as agents of change in modern international relations. By contrast, Reus-Smit sees less value in traditional historiography. He argues that constructivist IR is more akin to social and cultural history which rejects the notion of a single, knowable history. In his view, constructivist IR, with its commitment to multiple historical truths, the scholar's role in constructing and interpreting the past, and the ways in which actors (including both the powerful and powerless) shape the contours of international relations over time, does

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of religion and culture, but that IR theorists typically conceive of as new and 'alien.'

4. Hobson and Lawson argue against universal categories, claiming for example that hegemony must be understood in terms of 'American hegemony.' Their claim should not be read, however, as eschewing comparative analysis in favor of single case studies. It is possible to study hegemony (or imperialism, military intervention, suicide terrorism, or any other phenomenon) from a comparative perspective that recognises historical contingency and agency. As Hobson and Lawson recognise, 'accepting the radical contingency of events does not preclude these being placed in broader causal narratives, for example via studying the ways in which certain practices emerge and become enduring.'

history differently than traditional diplomatic historians who offer a necessarily truncated and limiting conception of history.[5]

In recent years IR theorists working from diverse perspectives have become more open to history. This was partly due to the influence of events. As Reus-Smit notes, this trend began years ago with the end of the Cold War. It has been reinforced by the events of 9/11. Much like the break-up of the Soviet Union and the demise of bipolarity, 9/11 has compelled IR scholars to rethink central paradigmatic claims. Post-9/11 scholarship has challenged the secular, Western-based foundations of mainstream IR theories and approaches. Just as its inability to anticipate the end of the Cold War forced the field to become more self-conscious of its theoretical limitations, so too the events of 9/11 required a fresh stock-taking, one which brought renewed interest in the historical development of the discipline and of its 'Westphalian interpretation of international relations.' We thus now find neoclassical realists, political psychologists, liberal institutionalists, and constructivists engaging international history, and paying careful attention to what can be gleaned in newly accessible archives. This is not to say that traditional concerns about conflict have been forgotten. In the post-9/11 scholarly environment, both political scientists who study international politics using qualitative methods and international historians who focus on diplomacy and interstate relations have benefited from a renewed interest in the role of diplomacy and statecraft in preventing conflict and the historical counterparts to contemporary war fighting, such as previous preventive wars and counterinsurgencies. The long-standing concerns of both fields with power, war, states, and decision makers are of great relevance in the post-Cold War era. Yet today the focus has broadened to include political, social, economic, and religious factors, as well as substate and supra-state forces. Both groups have also moved somewhat closer to the central concerns of their respective disciplines – new work by both IR theorists and international historians now focuses greater attention on gender, ideology, domestic politics, culture, human rights and religion.[6]

Other promising avenues have also opened up, perhaps most notably with the discipline's turn (or perhaps return) to qualitative research methods. Encompassing a wide range of empirical approaches, including archival and field research, the hallmark of qualitative research is thick analysis, where scholars engage their material closely

5. For useful overviews of established historical traditions and international/diplomatic history's reliance on them, see Patrick Finney, 'Still "Marking Time"? Text, Discourse and Truth in International History', *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001): 291–308.

6. For an extended discussion, see Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, 'International History and International Relations Theory: A Dialogue Beyond the Cold War', *International Affairs* 76, no. 4 (October 2000): 741–54.

and in great detail.[7] Qualitative approaches are currently enjoying an extraordinary popularity and vitality in the IR subfield.[8] The renaissance in qualitative methods has clarified their procedures, grounded them more firmly in the contemporary philosophy of science, illuminated their comparative advantages relative to quantitative and formal methods, and expanded the repertoire of qualitative techniques on conceptualisation and measurement, within-case analysis, comparative case studies, case selection, typological theorising and counterfactual analysis.[9] Many political scientists are now also more comfortable taking a causes-of-effects rather than an effect-of-causes approach to causation. The conventional quantitative view is often viewed as taking an effects-of-causes approach, which systematically infers how much a cause contributes on average to an outcome within a given population. Mainstream qualitative researchers, by contrast, fit more

7. David Collier and Colin Elman, 'Qualitative and Multi-method Research: Organizations, Publication, and Reflections on Integration', in *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, eds Janet M. Box-Stefffensmeier, Henry E. Brady, and David Collier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). The new qualitative methods literature is extensive and includes: Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds, *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Criterial Framework* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Gary Goertz, *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2006); James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Charles Ragin, *Fuzzy Set Social Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

8. See Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, 'Case Study Methods in the Study of International Relations', in *Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, eds Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, 'Qualitative Methods: The View from the Subfields', *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 2007): 111–21. This renaissance is mirrored in the Comparative Politics subfield, but has not been fully reflected in contemporary studies of American politics, which continue to emphasise statistical analysis and formal modeling. See Andrew Bennett, Aharon Barth, and Kenneth Rutherford, 'Do We Preach What We Practice? A Survey of Methods in Journals and Graduate Curricula', *PS: Political Science and Politics* (July 2003): 373–78; Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, 'Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield', *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 2007): 170–95; James Mahoney, 'Qualitative Methodology and Comparative Politics', *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 2007): 122–44; and Paul Pierson, 'The Costs of Marginalization: Qualitative Methods in the Study of American Politics', *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 2007): 145–69.

9. Bennett and Elman, 'Case Study Methods'.

comfortably into a causes-of-effects template, in particular explaining the outcome of a particular case or a few cases.[10] They do not look for the net effect of a cause over a large number of cases, but rather at how causes interact in the context of a particular case, or a few cases, to produce an outcome. This causes-of-effects approach is often married to the belief that the social world is complex, characterised by path dependence, tipping points, interaction effects, strategic interaction, two-directional causality or feedback loops, equifinality (many different paths to the same outcome) and multifinality (depending on context, many different outcomes from the same value of an independent variable).[11] It is not hard to see why a causes-of-effects view of causation, together with a belief in social complexity, makes qualitative research ripe for integrating historical approaches.

Qualitative methods have also become more deeply institutionalised than in prior periods. In 2003 the American Political Science Association (APSA) formed the Qualitative Methods section. Subsequently renamed Qualitative and Multi-method Research, it is now the third largest of APSA's 37 sections.[12] In addition, the Consortium for Qualitative Research Methods (CQRM) was founded in 2001, and now has roughly 50 member departments and research institutes. By January 2008 it had co-organised seven Institutes for Qualitative and Multi-method Research, training 630 graduate students and faculty in state-of-the-art qualitative methods.[13] The institutes cover a wide spectrum of qualitative/multi-method tools, while emphasising their complementarity with alternative approaches.[14] During the same time period, other venues have also offered relevant training to political and other social scientists. Perhaps most notably, since 2003 the Summer Institute on Conducting Archival Research (SICAR) has been held at George Washington University, offering PhD students intensive training in conducting archival work. The upshot of this turn to qualitative methods, and the institutional developments that went with it, is that there are

10. James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, 'A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research', *Political Analysis* 14, no. 3 (2006): 227–49. See also Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, 'Qualitative Research: Recent Developments in Case Study Methods', *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006): 455–76.

11. Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, 'Complex Causal Relations and Case Study Methods: The Example of Path Dependence', *Political Analysis* 14, no. 3 (2006): 250–67.

12. There are several other organised sections in the American Political Science Association which welcome historical research, most notably the International History and Politics section and the Politics and History section.

13. In 2007 the institute name was changed from the 'Institute for Qualitative Research Methods', and in academic year 2008–9 it moved to the Maxwell School at Syracuse University.

14. Collier and Elman, 'Qualitative and Multi-method Research'.

probably more young political scientists in the American academy who are sympathetic to taking history seriously than at any time in the last 30 years.

We should be clear, however, that we do not anticipate that the qualitative turn is likely to develop into a disciplinary fusion with history. While political science in the American academy is becoming more methodologically pluralist, it remains anchored in theory. As the recent debate on the origins of the First World War makes clear, even political scientists deeply engaged with the details of a single case have not lost their overriding interest in using specific historical contexts to help them substantiate or disconfirm broad theoretical premises about the way states interact.[15] For political scientists, history will continue to remain, as Ferguson and Mansbach put it, 'absolutely central to theory construction' (366). Thus, political scientists will continue to value historical studies on the Cold War and other international conflicts that can be used to develop and evaluate social science theory. However, an explicit focus on causes-of-effects, the more self-conscious and sophisticated use of within-case techniques such as process tracing and the more ready acknowledgment of causal complexity all mean that political scientists' theoretical concerns can now be played out in the context of a single or a few cases. The distance between political science and history will not disappear, but the gap is closing.

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15. Jack Snyder and Kier A. Lieber, 'Correspondence: Defensive Realism and the "New" History of World War I', *International Security* 33, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 174–94.