The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/19/the-eternal-divide-history-and-international-relations/

GEORGE LAWSON, MAY 19 2013

Like most long-running interdisciplinary relationships, the liaison between International Relations (IR) and history has taken many turns. In some respects, history has always been a core feature of the international imagination. On both sides of the Atlantic, leading figures in the discipline such as E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Martin Wight and Stanley Hoffman employed history as a means of illuminating their research. Although seemingly banished to the margins of the discipline by the rise of neo-positivism, history never really went away as an important feature of IR's toolkit. Rather, history became part of a broader tug of war between approaches that retained history as their central locomotive and IR's laboriticians, who saw history as providing the main ammunition for their experiments. History has been employed, albeit unevenly, throughout the discipline (Hobson and Lawson, 2008; Lawson 2012).

However, there is a tension that remains unresolved in the relationship between history and IR, one which is long-standing and which reappears with regularity, even in those texts that explicitly bestride the IR-history frontier. The issue is revealed in a passage from one of the best known of these texts (Elman and Elman, 2001: 7):

Political scientists are more likely to look to the past as a way of supporting or discrediting theoretical hypothesis, while historians are more likely to be interested in past international events for their own sake. Although political scientists might turn to the distant past, the study of 'deep' history is relevant to their research objectives only insofar as it enables them to generate, test or refine theory. By contrast, for the historian, the goal of theory building and testing is secondary – the past interests for itself.

Later in the book, the authors make this distinction even more starkly (Elman and Elman, 2001: 35),

Political scientists are not historians, nor should they be. There are real and enduring epistemological and methodological differences that divide the two groups, and there is great value in recognising, maintaining and honouring these distinctions.

These passages point the way to a division of labour between theory-building political scientists and chronicling historians, a first-order demarcation on which other contributors to *Bridges and Boundaries* overlay a number of second-order distinctions: methods (a focus on secondary sources vs. primary sources); aims (identification of regularities and continuities vs. the highlighting of contingency and change); orientation (nomothetic vs. idiographic); sensibility (parsimony vs. complexity); scope conditions (analytic vs. temporal); notions of causation (transhistorical vs. context specific); levels of analysis (structure vs. agency), and so on. A list of essential differences are formed in which one discipline (IR/political science) acts as binary opposite for and, more often than not, coloniser of the other (history). Table 1 outlines this division of labour.

Table 1: The Eternal Divide

POLITICAL SCIENCE/IR

HISTORY

METHODS

The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations
Written by George Lawson

Secondary sources

Primary sources

AIMS

Regularities, continuities

Contingencies, change

ORIENTATION

Nomothetic

Idiographic

SENSIBILITY

Parsimony

Complexity

SCOPE CONDITIONS

Analytic

Temporal

CAUSATION

Transhistorical

Context specific

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

Structure

Agency

This essay questions the construction of this 'eternal divide' between history and political science/IR. The argument presented is straightforward: much IR scholarship is predicated on a view of history caught between two equally unsatisfactory stools. On the one hand, history becomes a pre-determined site for the empirical verification of abstract claims. In this understanding, history serves as 'scripture': the application of timeless 'lessons' removed from their context and applied to ill-fitting situations: the 'lessons of appeasement' become a shorthand for the necessity of confronting dictatorial regimes across time and place; the US retreat from Vietnam is invoked to halt talk of withdrawal in Iraq; the Reagan years are employed to support the idea that ultimate victory in the 'war on terror' rests on the deployment of overwhelming US military power married to the promotion – by force if necessary – of democratic ideals around the world. In this understanding, history is an uncontested background narrative to be coded within pre-existing theoretical categories (Lustick, 1996). As such, this approach is little more than ahistoricism by other means.

The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations
Written by George Lawson

A second, equally prominent, tendency in IR scholarship is to see history as the 'if only' realm of uncertainty (Versailles less punitive, Bin Laden assassinated before 9/11, Pearl Harbour never taken place): a 'butterfly' of contingent hiccups upon which IR theorists provide ill-fitting maps. In this understanding, history is so contingent as to be unrepeatable and tides of history are turned on the minutest of details: the crux of Cleopatra's nose; a monkey's bite on King Alexander of Greece; Trotsky's fever contracted while shooting ducks in 1923 during the midst of a struggle with Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev over the direction of the Bolshevik revolution.[1] Curiously, despite a sense in which this approach seeks to foster a kind of 'pure history', it is also ahistorical in that it fetishizes the particular, failing to see how historical events are part of broader sequences that provide a shape within historical development. The result of the 'if only' approach to history is a reduction of the past to a 'pick and mix' sweet shop that is raided in order to satisfy the tastes of the researcher.

These two forms of ahistoricism – history as 'scripture' and as 'butterfly' – are forged by the working practices of IR scholarship itself. Most mainstream approaches adopt a form of 'history as scripture', using history in order to code findings, mine data or as a source of *post factum* explanations (Smith, 1999; Isacoff, 2002; Lawson, 2012). Most post-positivist approaches assume a form of the latter, using history as a means of disrupting prevalent power-knowledge nexuses (e.g. Walker, 1988; Vaughan-Williams, 2005). Few IR scholars spend sufficient time asking what it is we mean when we talk about history. Indeed, both neo-positivists and post-positivists have generated an artificial divide in which second-order noise has substituted for first-order enquiry.

History and Social Science

Interestingly, the 'eternal divide' constructed between IR theories and history is one replicated more generally in the social sciences. For example, a number of historians also see their enterprise as a kind of 'butterfly' – many are suspicious, even hostile, to attempts at theorising history. As John Lewis Gaddis (2001: 302) notes, 'when theories are right, they generally confirm the obvious. When they move beyond the obvious, they are usually wrong.' If historians do seek to generate broad findings out of their archival burrowing and associated practices, it is argued, they form only the most approximate of representations – the ordering of historical complexity into some kind of rational mess. Many historians are keen to emphasise that a central difference between their work and that of social scientists is that they do not seek to bend reality in order to confirm to pre-existing theoretical scripts. As such, if historical theory appears, it is embedded within overarching narratives rather than serving as a means to confirm pre-existing theoretical dispositions. In this understanding, history is yoked to the particular and the contingent – the butterflies that take historical development down one path and not another.

Yet, even if some historians see their enterprise as inhospitable to grand theory, there have been no shortage of historians who have sought to make bold general statements, whether this be Thucydides' (1972) record of the Peloponnesian Wars, which he hoped would stand as a 'possession for all time', Arnold Toynbee's (1934) conception of the *telos* of world history as governed by the rise and fall of great civilisations, or David Christian's (2004) work on 'big history', which constructs a 'theory of everything' grounded on the human propensity for collective learning. A substantial subset of the historical profession is engaged with 'world history', establishing large-scale narratives of periodization and causation (e.g. McNeill, 2003), while a number of scholars who explicitly straddle the social science-history divide, such as Charles Tilly and Michael Mann, often describe their work as 'macro-history' (e.g. Tilly, 1984). The Annales School of French historians, amongst them Fernand Braudel and Marc Bloch, were less concerned with the *événéments* of historical detail than with the impact of large-scale conjunctural forces and, on an even bigger scale, the movement of environmental changes that took place over the *longue-durée*. As such, it is not possible to generate a hard-and-fast distinction between theorists and historians when it comes to issues of scale. Nor is it the case that historians should be seen primarily as butterfly-collectors. Just as social science breaks down into macro and micro research, and those concerned with long-term patterns and short-term contingencies, so history is home to a variety of approaches and sensibilities. In short: history is not a single thing.

There is an equally influential – and equally pernicious – understanding of the distinctiveness of social science told from the other side of the 'eternal divide'. Witness, for example, a statement on the subject made by William Robinson (2003), a prominent macro-sociologist. Robinson opens his book on transnational conflicts with a story of the author gazing upon a mural in a major city in Latin America. For Robinson, the 'real mural' only becomes

The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations
Written by George Lawson

apparent from the 'proper perspective' – the other side of street. At this point, Robinson claims, the array of squiggles, colour and mess begins to take on a coherent form, first into recognisable patterns (half way across the street) and finally into a 'big picture' (the macro-structural whole). Using this story as a metaphor for conducting his history-from-on-high of transnational conflicts in Latin America, Robinson argues (2003: 1), perhaps fairly startlingly, that 'the greater the level of abstraction in our analysis, the greater the historical explanation we will provide.'

On one level, Robinson may be right that, from a distance, we can see the whole of the mural: its patterns, its contours and its overarching shape. But what do we miss? To some extent, everything. Mostly we miss the details: the mural's shapes, colours and textures. But these details are not just mess, at least not like that of a teenager's room or an academic's office. There are enormous complexities, contingencies and excesses that Robinson's approach *necessarily* leaves out, a point raised evocatively by Robert Nisbet (1969: 240-241):

History in any substantive sense is plural. It is diverse, multiple, and particular. There have been innumerable histories since the first history of the first human group began … not only are there many histories, there are many chronologies, many times … many histories, many areas, many times! The mind boggles at the task of encapsulating such diversity within any empirically clear formula or synthesis. It cannot be done.

As Nisbet makes clear, the disorder presented by a deep immersion in history is a barrier to theorising along the lines suggested by Robinson. So what represents a better way to bridge the eternal divide?

Beyond the Eternal Divide

This essay has argued that both social scientists and historians have played their part in fostering a divide based on apparently eternal distinctions about levels of analysis, modes of explanation, and other such issues. However, the argument of this essay is that the eternal divide is more imagined than real. Indeed, there are various tools that can help to construct an alternative understanding of the relationship between social science and history.

Context

As E.H. Carr (1967) argued half a century ago, the construction of historical knowledge is a *social* process rooted in interrogation of the multiple contexts within which historical knowledge is produced. Carr saw historical research as the adjudication of rival interpretations based on an open conversation between facts, sources and scholarship. As such, he favoured immersion in the 'knowledge cultures', modes of thinking and reasoning practices that emerged in specific contexts and that translated historical materials into social facts. In this understanding, history is always viewed from the vantage point of the present – we are, as Friedrich Kratochwil (2006) acknowledges, 'historical beings' in that we are situated in broader milieus within which we conduct a dialogue between past and present times. This, in turn, lends itself towards the generation of 'working truths' and 'situational certainties' bound by time and space contexts (Kratochwil, 2006).

Although this point may seem obvious, it involves a substantial reorientation of (some) IR theory away from a view of science as equivalent to physics or mathematics and towards 'historical sciences' such as biology or geology that are more suited to the contextual complexities of world politics. Although biology and geology work within overarching paradigms – natural selection and plate tectonics respectively – it is only through comparative analysis in which processes are traced, patterns deduced and taxonomies constructed that knowledge is seen to accumulate. In this way, historical sciences knot together initial causes, environmental niches, local conditions and nonlinear interactions into 'impressionistic pictures', which connect chains of contingencies both logically and consistency (Lebow, 2010). These 'plotlines', in turn, act as a means for generating debate about contextually oriented interpretations (Bernstein et al, 2007; Lebow, 2010). Such a move represents a shift away from IR research as the filling-in of general abstractions towards explanation of specific historical processes, building from identification of processes that take place *within* particular contexts towards establishing how comparable processes occur in *alternative* milieus (Lawson, 2012; for an application, see Lawson, forthcoming).

Eventfulness

The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations

Written by George Lawson

Historians, it is often claimed, are process tracers *par excellence*, seeking to establish the ways in which events become sequenced in broader configurations. Although, as William Sewell (2005) notes, historians often begin from baseline assumptions about contingency and causal heterogeneity, few make the case that there is no significance to the sequence within which events take place, or that the context within which events occur is insignificant. In other words, accepting the contingency of events does not preclude these being placed in broader analytical narratives. In this way, events are theorisable categories, components of broader sequences that reproduce and transform existing patterns of social relations. Sewell uses the example of the fall of the Bastille to illustrate his point. The importance of the storming of the Bastille in 1789 was that it was imbued with significance 'beyond itself'. The event reconstructed categories of meaning, amongst them notions of 'people' and 'revolution'. It is not difficult to find contemporaneous events that contain comparable effect: 1989, 9/11 and more. In this way, an 'eventful' approach allows researchers to see how *historical* events enable *social* formations to emerge, reproduce, transform and, potentially, break down. In turn, history is seen as containing a *social* logic, a process of 'eventing' in which moments in time take on relatively stable shapes drawn from the interaction between events and the repertoires of meaning brought to bear on them (Jackson, 2006).

Narrative

As Hidemi Suganami (1999) notes, historical accounts tend to contain three dimensions: chance (contingency), agency (volition) and mechanisms (causation). Although social scientists usually focus on mechanisms and historians on agency and chance, this does not make the social world beyond the comprehension of either set of researchers. In fact, both historians and social scientists are concerned with establishing 'causal narratives', structured stories that explain events and make them intelligible to others. This focus on the ordering of events into intelligible narratives provides the third way in which social science and history are co-implicated. Regardless of stark disagreements over epistemology, subject matter and sensibility, most historians see one of their core tasks as 'emplotment' – the process by which events are given a sense of order and hierarchy. To put this simply, historians tell stories, but most consider their stories to be superior to others (Goodin and Tilly, 2006). At the same time, social science involves the simplification of empirical reality into structured narratives that emphasize one line of enquiry and downplay others (Lawson, 2012). This shared focus on 'superior stories' illustrates that history and IR are not distinct enterprises, but linked through their shared focus on the construction of convincing narratives.

Ideal-typification

Most social science and history, therefore, represent attempts to derive connections within historical events. One way of approaching this task is through the construction of what Max Weber (1949) called 'thought pictures' (*Gedankenbilder*), ideal-types that serve as tools by which to organize history into internally consistent, logical constructs. Researchers adopting this tool 'trace and map how particular configurations of ideal-typified factors come together to generate historically specific outcomes in particular cases' (Jackson, 2010: ch. 5). Ideal-typical research isolates the main features of historical events and processes, highlights their most important features and, in turn, examines their salience in alternative arenas. Importantly, ideal-types are not meant to represent 'actual history'; rather, they simplify history in order to highlight causal configurations. The result of this method, Weber argued, was a means of tacking effectively between empirical material, conceptual abstractions and causal explanations, as Michael Mann (1986) puts it, 'carrying out a constant conversation between the evidence and one's theory'. In short: ideal-typical research sees history and social science as inexorably conjoined. Examples of this form of research are many, ranging from Michael Mann's (1986) sweeping account of world historical development to IR studies of the global genesis of the modern states-system (Hobson, 2004). These accounts are sensitive to historical particularity and complexity, while retaining a social scientific commitment to 'systematic inquiry designed to produce factual knowledge' (Jackson, 2010). They are exemplars of what could be called 'rich parsimony' (Hobson, Lawson and Rosenberg 2012).

Beyond the Eternal Divide

To date, both sides of the imaginary, but powerfully constructed, 'eternal divide' have been reticent at engaging fully with the other. As a result, a number of unhelpful, often false dichotomies have been established. Although history

The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations

Written by George Lawson

and social science are necessarily co-implicated, this relationship is occluded by a focus on supposed differences of method, scale and sensibility. Much of the time, these differences are elevated into insurmountable barriers. The argument in this essay is that history and social science should be seen as a common enterprise. By focusing on events, by ordering and sequencing these events into intelligible narratives, recognising how people act within certain contexts, contexts that can only be discerned from the vantage points of researchers' historically situated positions, history does not abhor social science – rather, it requires it. As such, the choice is not one between a historical enterprise that can do with or without theory, but acceptance of the fact that history *is* a social science. It is an approach that emplots, narrates and analyses causal stories. History is an indispensable part of the social sciences just as IR is one amongst many story-telling disciplines

This analysis means that history does not belong to a single theoretical approach in IR; rather, history comes in plural modes rather than singular form (Hobson and Lawson, 2008; Lawson, 2012). Indeed, history is, in many ways, the lowest common denominator of theoretical approaches within the discipline. As such, it is particularly important to establish what we mean by 'history in IR' – choices of historical sensibility are, in turn, constitutive of the ways in which the international realm is theorized. Accordingly, if we are all historians, at least on some level, we are differentiated not simply by our choice of theory but also by our selection of a particular historical mode of explanation. In developing this selection, it should be clear that social science and history form part of a single intellectual journey, one in which both are permanently in view and in which neither serves as the coloniser of the other.

—

George Lawson *is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at LSE (http://www2.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/people/bios/lawsonGeorge.aspx). His research focuses on the interface between International Relations and historical sociology (www.historical-sociology.org), and on processes of radical change, most notably revolutions. He is the author of Negotiated Revolutions (2005) and Anatomies of Revolution (2014), and the editor of The Global 1989 (2010).*

References

Carr, E.H. (1967), *What is History?* (London: Vintage).

Christian, David (2004), *Maps of Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Elman, Colin and Miriam Fendius Elman (2001), 'Introduction: Negotiating International History and Politics,' in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.), *Bridges and Boundaries*, pp. 1-36 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

Gaddis, John Lewis (2001), 'In Defence of Particular Generalization', in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.), *Bridges and Boundaries*, pp. 301-326 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

Goodin, Robert and Charles Tilly (2006), 'It Depends', in Robert Goodin and Charles Tilly (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, pp. 3-34 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Hobson, John (2004), *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Hobson, John and George Lawson (2008), 'What is History in International Relations?' *Millennium* 37(2): 415–435.

Hobson, John, George Lawson and Justin Rosenberg (2010), 'Historical Sociology', in: Robert Denemark et al (eds.), *The International Studies Encyclopaedia* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 3357–3375.

Kratochwil, Friedrich (2006), 'History, Action and Identity', *European Journal of International Relations* 12(1): 5-29.

Isacoff, Jonathon B. (2002), 'On the Historical Imagination of International Relations', *Millennium* 31(3): 603-626.

The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations
Written by George Lawson

Jackson, Patrick (2006), 'The Present as History', in Robert Goodin and Charles Tilly (eds.),*The Oxford Handbook on Contextual Political Analysis*, pp. 490-505 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Jackson, Patrick (2010), *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* (London: Routledge).

Lawson, George (2012), 'The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations',*European Journal of International Relations* 18(2): 203–226.

Lawson, George (Forthcoming), *Anatomies of Revolution* (Book Manuscript).

Lebow, Richard Ned (2010), *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Lustick, Ian (1996), 'History, Historiography and Political Science', *American Political Science Review* 90(3): 605-618.

Mann, Michael (1986), *The Sources of Social Power, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

McNeill, William (2003), *The Human Web* (New York: W.W. Norton).

Nisbet, Robert (1969), *Social Change and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Robinson, William (2003), *Transnational Conflicts* (London: Verso).

Sewell, William (2005), *Logics of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Smith, Thomas (1999), *History and International Relations* (London: Routledge).

Suganami, Hidemi (1999), 'Agents, Structures, Narratives', *European Journal of International Relations* 5(3): 365-386.

Thucydides (1972), *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* (London: Penguin).

Tilly, Charles (1984), *Big Processes, Large Structures, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage).

Toynbee, Arnold (1934), *A Study of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Vaughan-Williams, Nick (2005), 'International Relations and the "Problem of History"', *Millennium* 34(1): 115-136.

Walker, Rob (1988), 'History and Structure in the Theory of International Relations', *Millennium* 18(2): 163-182.

[1] Bertrand Russell takes this point to the extreme by arguing that the existence of the United States depended on the liaison between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. Had this not happened, Russell argued, England would have remained Catholic and accepted the Papal ruling on the New World, leaving North America to the Spanish. On these examples, see Carr (1967).

About the author:

George Lawson is Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at LSE. He is the author of *Anatomies of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2019) and *Negotiated Revolutions* (Routledge, 2005), co-author (with Barry

The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations
Written by George Lawson

Buzan) of *The Global Transformation* (Cambridge, 2015), and co-editor (with Julian Go) of *Global Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 2017) and (with Chris Armbruster and Mick Cox) *The Global 1989* (Cambridge, 2010).